

Finding Home

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Creative Nonfiction

I woke up on April 17, 2013, howling and twisting in pain as if an alien was bursting out of my abdomen. As I arrived at the hospital, I couldn't believe that something serious was happening to me just two days before my trip to Bali, Indonesia in celebration of my 30th trip around the sun. I had hoped the distance and the much-needed change of scenery on my first-ever solo trip would help me determine whether or not to quit my high-paying paper-pushing job and go to school to follow my dream of becoming a fiction writer.

After hours of tests and morphine shots, the doctor told me I had a kidney stone and made me sign a form that advised me not to travel until the stone passed. I wasn't willing to lose all my non-refundable reservations, and, as the doctor stated that the pain could be prevented with medication, I went to my family doctor the next day to get a prescription for Percocet. I had no time to check the rules for carrying prescribed medication into Indonesia—a nation that has the death penalty for carrying drugs—so off I went to Bali with a bottle of opiates in my carry-on.

In a bathroom at the Vancouver airport, I noticed something similar to a grain of sand on a piece of toilet paper and realized I had just passed the stone. I felt relieved to have followed my instincts, but still numb as the morphine took everything away but the stars in my eyes.

When I arrived in Denpasar, the capital of Bali and gateway to the island, the humid afternoon big-city air dampened my clothes and hair, and the greenery on the side of the road leading to the Uluwatu coast reminded me of my hometown in Brazil. During the forty-minute cab ride to my eight-room family-run hotel, I enjoyed seeing the dogs, chickens, cows and scooters crossing from all sides of the road and was able to stay awake until I arrived at the hotel. The twenty-six-hour trip with three different flights, the fifteen hours' time difference, plus the morphine and jet lag finally caught up to me. I crashed for the next sixteen hours.

The next morning, I went down to the hotel's eating area that opened onto the road and munched on *nasi goreng*, a delicious, typical Indonesian breakfast combination of fragrant fried rice, eggs and vegetables. While I was sitting there, a young woman wearing braided long black hair and a simple dress with a name tag written "Winnie" approached me to explain how it was "Easy, easy" to get around the island on a scooter. I had never ridden a scooter before, but my morphine-dazed self thought it was a good idea, so I rented one from the hotel. After breakfast, I put on a pink helmet, rode off opposite from the side that I'm used to in North and South America, down a tree-lined road concealing the area's rice plantations from view, around a curve, and straight into a V-shaped concrete ditch.

I hit my legs on one side of the rough concrete surface and my arms and face on the other. Two locals appeared right after and helped me walk up the hill, back to the hotel where three generations and what looked like every member of the family-owned business ran out to meet us. There were around fifteen people there, and my two rescuers started talking to some of them as I pushed the bike forward to the spot where all the rental bikes were parked. A tall angry man who was Winnie's brother-in-law and spoke English better than all the others marched towards me and yanked the scooter from my hands.

"You could damage the bike! You rich girl? You have money to pay for new bike?" He continued to berate me for a few minutes as I stood in in silence with my arms limp at my sides. After all, I was in the wrong for the accident and almost damaging their bike.

After he established that the bike survived the crash, I announced to whoever cared to hear that I was going to my room to get cleaned up.

Alone in my room, as the adrenaline left my system, I sat down on the edge of the bed, my breathing shallow and rapid. As I looked down at the blood streaming out of my elbows and

knees, I finally felt something after days of numbness: fear. Fear that my femur was broken as my upper thigh was turning from purple to black; fear that I had ruined my trip on the first day; fear of not getting the medical attention I might need. I texted a friend who had broken his leg a couple of times, asking how I could tell if my leg was broken or not. He replied saying that if I could hop on the leg, it wasn't broken. I decided to hop—terrified that my bone could rip out of my leg—as I didn't know what else to do. I hopped, and then I hopped again. Although my leg hurt, I could bear the pain, so I sighed in relief that I wouldn't have to return home for surgery and that I would have the time to find the answers I was searching for. Now that I knew my leg wasn't broken, I bawled for thirty minutes straight, feeling all the pain, despair, fear, and sadness rushing through me in all its strength, and realized I had two options: I could let all the challenges stop me from enjoying my trip, or I could make this the best adventure of my life.

Getting up in one swift motion, I got washed and limped back down to the lobby. A short hunchbacked matriarch held a little bottle between her hands and motioned for me to sit beside her while Winnie pointed to the bottle and said, "It hurts, but it good." Winnie held my hand while holding her small child in her lap as the matriarch applied the concoction with a comforting mother's smile. The liquid burned like fire, so both of them blew on my skin to help cool the raw pieces of flesh.

"So sorry. This my hotel now. Husband die and I no English," she said.

"You're running this place by yourself?" I asked in shock.

"Family helps."

"When did he die?"

"Two weeks," she said and motioned to the back with her hand, implying "ago."

I stood in awe of this young widow, who still had the strength to smile and the kindness to treat her guests well. My situation could have ended in tragedy, but unlike the gone-too-soon husband and father of a small child, I had been lucky. There was something to learn from the courage of his widow: I should remember all the struggles I had overcome in my own life as a third-world immigrant and tap into the intuition and resilience installed deep within my soul. I should also connect to my spiritual self before making any more bad decisions, and fully trust my inner voice and guidance from now on.

Winnie arranged for a family member to bring me to the next stop on my itinerary, Pecatu. He dropped me off and returned to the hotel while I had to limp down a concrete staircase to hell with no railing and an 80-degree incline to arrive at the hidden cave in Suluban Beach. The tide was high and only good for surfing, so I hopped back up, flinching with each step as my leg kept throbbing. I saw some taxis parked at the top and took one to Padang Padang Beach—the most famous beach in all of Bali as it’s where *Eat, Pray, Love* was filmed. The beach was beautiful except for the sand, which had me sinking and losing balance with each step, but I powered on and entered the clear water limping and cursing when the line of shells on the sand poked my feet and the salt made my wounds sting. After a few hours, I took another cab back to the hotel and hired a cheerful young driver nicknamed T who took me to Jimbaran Beach in the evening. Jimbaran has many restaurants on the beach, so I sat at a table right beside the ocean and watched dance performances and fireworks. As I listened to the sound of waves crashing, I sighed in relief to have survived such an eventful day.

I stopped taking Percocet to maintain a clear mind and toured the Uluwatu coast with T for the next three days. At Bingin Beach, I was alarmed to find power cables hanging right beside the path to the beach. I went down the 188 handmade dirt and stone steps while T

(impressed with my determination) just kept repeating, “You a crazy girl!” A couple of hours after, I was in awe of Dreamland Beach’s beautiful entrance with its huge statues, but it’s a hard place for swimming as the waves break right at the sand. I opted instead for one of the local “four hand massages” where two ladies massage you at the same time for one hour for only ten dollars. Balangan Beach was my favourite beach for the inexplicable energy and sense of déjà vu I felt there, but T was impatient, and we had to leave sooner than I would have wanted. On my last day at the Uluwatu coast, I watched a Kecak Dance performance about the story of Sita and Ram—my favourite Hindu Gods—and it was worth every penny and the sore muscles from sitting squeezed in a tight spot among hundreds of people.

I went to the mountain city of Ubud to spend four days, and Wayan, my second driver, dressed in typical Balinese men’s clothing (sari, cloth belt, and white shirt) to inspire me as I told him I wanted more of a spiritual journey than a touristic one. I stayed in a hotel one block from downtown Ubud, so I woke up every day to the sweet woody scent of incense and flowers as the residents lined the streets with offerings to their Hindu gods and ancestors. I saw a cremation ritual in passing on the side of the road; it’s a local custom to burn the dead on top of foliage placed on makeshift tables in front of their houses, and I felt a mix of cultural shock and awe as it looked more natural than how it’s done in the Americas.

I visited rice fields and ate homemade local food in banana leaf plates while looking at more shades of green than my brain could fathom. At different temples by lakes or the ocean, the energy around me increased in the serene yet stunning settings, and chills went up and down my spine when Wayan started singing a mantra into a cave that echoed his voice like it was coming from a different dimension.

Still, while experiencing all of these blessings during the day, my evenings were lonely at the hotel or exploring downtown Ubud on foot, and I wavered from feeling frightened to delighted about the whole travelling alone experience. I spoke with Wayan for a part of each day, but it was more about the places we were visiting and their history rather than more intimate topics like my feelings or the decisions I came to Bali to make. I asked Wayan if he knew of a “guru” or “spiritual healer” that could help me, and he brought me to a blind healer who lived in a small community outside of town. He warned me that this specific healer had an odd technique to get insight into one’s life, but that he had a great reputation among locals. As I hadn’t had any insights about my decision to go back to school and other personal matters that were bugging me for a while, I went with an open mind.

The complex where the healer lived looked larger than the others I had visited so far (probably because it was in a rural area), and large trees, flowers and chickens paved our way down to the middle of the complex. The healer sat inside the typical open abode that locals use as porches with his back resting against numerous colourful pillows. I had never seen someone who looked so old in person before, so when Wayan told me to sit down in front of the him, I obeyed without question. The healer put his right hand inside my bra as soon as he said some prayers. As he talked and Wayan translated, I had to hold my laughter as he twisted my nipples to one side and then another as if trying to tune into the spiritual world. The healer advised Wayan to take me to a waterfall that only locals knew about the next day for a cleansing ritual, so we adjusted my itinerary for the next day.

Wayan picked me up early in the morning with his magnetic, cheerful attitude. He warned me I would attract lots of attention from locals as outsiders rarely go there, but that I would be safe with him. As we climbed down the steps to the small waterfall, I felt like a

blinking billboard that people can't help but look at, but I powered on down with purpose. There, I witnessed exorcisms and rituals being performed all around me, and, although I felt somewhat afraid to see all the screaming, eye-rolling-to-back-of-heads, and guttural sounds, I decided to go in the water anyway. Under the waterfall, I performed a simple ritual of washing myself while imagining poison leaving my body. As I sat down on the small temple grounds, with rice stuck to my forehead by one of the elders, a beautiful shift in my energy happened. In that moment, I felt more present in my body and more aware of my beautiful surroundings.

The next day, the chirping sounds of birds seemed louder than before, and the taste of the *bubur* (sweet rice porridge sometimes wrapped in banana leaves) that Wayan brought to my hotel seemed more flavourful than before as we watched monkeys swing from the trees around us. My peaceful feeling heightened while I stared at water lilies at the entrance to the temples and I was less bothered by the smiles and looks of concern when people noticed my injuries on the street. Also, the look of glee on the face of Jakartan tourists (easy to spot as they were covered from head to toe in black clothes) around Ubud when asking to take pictures with me brought me extreme joy. I felt connected to the entire universe and to my true spiritual being as never before.

I put down my camera and made a point of appreciating my surroundings with my eyes, taking it all in through my five (or maybe even six) senses, and started enjoying my own company rather than focusing on my loneliness. My forced and now appreciated solitude created a form of meditation during my journey that helped me decide about my career. Once I quieted all the outside noise and focused on my inside world, I noticed signs like a flyer advertising a yearly book convention for fiction writers in Ubud. That same night, after taking a shower in a bathroom with no ceiling, I decided to write my resignation letter and go to university.



After what I interpret as my first real life awakening, I bid Wayan farewell and spent four days on Gili Trawangan island. I loved being able to walk around the whole island in a single day, eat my meals ocean-side, and rest from all the touring and overthinking I did before.

As my return flight took off the next day, I looked out the window towards the green landscape I had come to love, and I bawled. Not from pain, or fear, or loneliness now, but from the feeling of finally finding home. How I found home in a place I had never been before I cannot explain. Maybe I am meant to make a home there one day, or maybe I found a home inside my body rather than in a physical outside location. Who knows? I did not get arrested for taking prescribed opiates into Indonesia, but I became a prisoner of the island anyway. I left Bali, but Bali has never left me.