A Very Bad Day

SANDY BROWN

The old woman held the chicken tightly by the feet. Its beak scraped the ground, and it looked up at Annie with a gaze of reptilian acceptance. I know how you feel, Annie thought. You are tonight’s dinner, but I am going to Bali with my mother. In her seventeen years of life with her mother, Annie had learned to tell the good days from bad. And today was a very bad day.

Her mother’s attention was intently focused on a novel that featured a bosomy woman embraced by a shirtless pirate on the cover. Unnoticed, Annie scrutinized her mother’s miniskirt and heels. Her mother’s eyes like mascara-streaked buttons skipped across the frisky pages. Annie’s heart experienced a sudden and sharp lurch. ‘Oh no,’ she thought. ‘Here we go again.’

Her mother was an electric eel living life on the edge, her massive Nikon at the ready. She dodged dragons in Komodo, leaped out of planes held together with string, and asked cannibals if they would like a taste. She then plummeted into Marianas-like trenches of despair, to depths where no sonar of solace could reach. Episodes Annie missed during her boarding school terms were written in lines on her father’s worn face. “For God’s sake, take your medicine,” he would plead, but the bottles of pills the psychiatrist prescribed remained forlornly untouched on the shelf.

Annie wished she could talk to her remote father about anything at all. Perhaps her resemblance to her mother was just too much for him to take, she reflected sadly. This morning he had given her a brief, awkward hug. “University in just two weeks! I’ll miss you when you’re
in the States. Work hard.” A smile, then he fled into his presidential-sized suite, the door closing with a definitive click. He spent endless hours at his Consulate office in Jakarta, and her mother flew off on her mad adventures with Annie or alone. Annie was grateful that boarding schools throughout the world had saved her from the worst of it, though the shattering glass and jaw-snapping slammed doors gave way to courteous words that glinted like ice. Their home shivered with the silence of unspoken words. Yet, last night, as she had huddled in bed, faint voices crawled onto her pillow from the open vent.

“Do you have to go to Bali now? Can’t you stay here?”

“I’m bored... have to do something...” The sound of a missile - a vase? – smashing into the wall. Then, again, deafening silence.

Annie reached into her purse, where the acceptance letter from Columbia glowed bright like a grail. Just two more weeks, she thought, and her heart lifted in hope. I can forget her then. I will be free.

Annie’s mother’s black leather skirt rode high on her legs and, beneath the Nikon D4 slung around her neck, her top was two sizes too tight. “Mom, people don’t dress like that in Bali and you borrowed my shirt.”

“It’s lucky we’re both the same size.” Her mother turned to a khaki-clad tourist and smiled. “I’m Madge Atherton, and you’ve been staring at me for an hour. Do I really look all that good?”

A blush suffused the man’s florid face. “My name is Geld, from Germany. I did not mean to stare, I am sorry.” Tortoiseshell glasses slipped down his nose from the sweat, and he awkwardly pushed them back up. He glanced from Annie to her mother, and back again. “Could you two possibly be sisters?”

Madge’s smile was a little too wide. “We might be.
What brings you to Bali?”

He leaned forward, eager to please. “Today is Gunangan, Bali’s most sacred holiday. All of the gods descend upon Bali tonight, and the island goes completely mad to prepare for their arrival. My convention begins tomorrow, but tonight I will visit a village the tourists do not know. The ceremony is authentic, and blood sacrifices are offered to Rangda, the witch.””

“The gods must be with us too.” Madge’s eyes gleamed with green lights in their depths, and she patted his knee. “You showed up just when Bali seemed dull. Take us with you.”

A mallet split Annie’s forehead in two, and she clutched it to hold everything in. I can do this, she told herself fiercely. In two weeks she would reach Columbia University, where she would find an apartment with a roommate and a cat, and finally be on her own. She could endure just one more crazy trip while her mother flirted outrageously with a stranger.

Annie’s cheesecloth blouse was glued to the torn vinyl seat, and beneath it her cotton bra was drenched. Beside her, a man with a mustache pressed in close. He slid a kretek cigarette back and forth through his fingers and flashed her an insolent smile. The sharp smoke scorched her throat and made her cough. He moved in close, the heat of his thigh burning her leg. She hugged herself and moved against the wall. He enveloped her in an acrid haze of cheap cologne, rancid hair oil and sweat.

The walls of the bus bulged at the seams. Men clung to the windows outside, their feet skittering overhead like rats as they swayed to stay on the roof. Inside, they stood wedged in the aisles or sat, legs indolently spread beneath their sarongs, and tiny children stared fixedly at Annie’s unfamiliar white skin with bold chocolate eyes.

Annie watched the bus staring small cars into submission. Bikes, pedestrians, ox carts, and dogs leaped
out of the way. Tiny Vespas darted like dragonflies, some with entire families on back, with not a helmet in sight. The bus screeched to avoid an abandoned truck that had dropped dead in the road, and careened around uniformed schoolchildren sauntering slowly through traffic. She leaned forward to watch Surabaya’s sweaty urban sprawl give way to tiny villages. The glistening tin roof tops welcomed her by burned her retinas. Sunlight sparkled on emerald mosaics of rice paddies that spiraled up to ice cream cone mountains, their tips puffing smoke like cigars.

“After the performance, we can visit the clubs,” Madge said suddenly. “In Bali the bars are open all night long.”

“You two can go. I don’t like to drink all that much.” Annie concluded.

“You won’t fit in at the University until you learn. By your age I’d been around the world four times with a backpack and I drank anything that fit in a bottle.”

Annie ignored her. She stared out the window, where the setting sun dripped cinnabar streaks through the palms. Tight hairpin curves led to the outskirts of Banyangwangi, where the bus slowed to a near stop. It crawled forward through the traffic, inch by inch. Headlamps splashed their frosty glare across a crumpled motorbike and the young rider who lay still upon the asphalt, his pallid face encircled by a crimson halo.

She closed her eyes and let the night enfold her in its steaming embrace; it was the easiest way to make eight hours speed by. The bus staggered through the ferry and finally disgorged its tired passengers at last in Denpasar, Bali’s capital city. Annie groggily led the way to the tour office counter littered with hotel brochures and flagged down a taxi, her mother following unsteadily on sharply clicking heels.

The hotel was bedecked with coconut frond arches and the altars were heavy with riotous flower offerings.
Starlight reflected in a limpid pool where petals bobbed like confetti.

“Bali is crowded for the festival. We were lucky to find a room.” Annie shared while unpacking her suitcases, as the gods would soon be unpacking their own. The window opened to a lush garden where a jeweled temple dreamed in the distance.

“The prices will be cheaper, since the shop owners will want to give money to the temples. See my new bathing suit?” Madge’s bikini looked like dental floss on a diet. “Do you think my new friend Geld will like it?”

“He’s disgusting, mom.”

Madge’s smile had a feral glint. “He’s a useful contact, and he speaks fluent Indonesian; I’ve never bothered to learn. We’re meeting him on the beach. It will be easy to find him, since most tourists are afraid of the dark.”

The night air was languid with the scent of hibiscus and frangipani, and firelit statues of deities twinkled on street corners. They walked to the empty expanse of Kuta Beach where, in the daylight, well-oiled tourists basked like Thanksgiving turkeys on sugary sand. The empty ivory expanse of beach curved into the horizon, and the night thundered with the slap of waves with whipped cream tips. Annie wiggled her feet in the sand, and wavelets hissed and tickled her toes.

“Oh, damn,” Madge said irritably. “I forgot my purse in the room. Would you please go back to the room and get it?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave you alone here.”

“I’ll be right here. Geld is meeting us in twenty minutes to bring us to the dance performance. I hope I can get close enough to get some good shots in the firelight.”
Madge gushed.

Annie hurried to the hotel and slipped into their room, where a mint green gecko watched her from the wall. Her mother’s pink Kate Spade purse lay alone on the bed, and inside it a cell phone was ringing.

Annie pulled open the purse and took out the phone. It’s dad, she thought, relief flooding her in a wave, and she eagerly raised the phone to her ear. “Hi,” she began.

“Madge, don’t say anything. let me talk.” His distant voice crackled with alcohol and despair. “It’s all been too much. Lynn and I. Well, we’re together. I’m so sorry.” A harsh sob.

“Dad?”

“Oh, God, Annie!”

She shut off the phone and threw it down hard, and it quivered like a scorpion on the bed. She wiped her hands on her jeans, shivering. Numb, she snatched up the purse and walked back to the beach. Two more weeks, the waves sang. Don’t think about anything else. Two more weeks, two more weeks, two more weeks.

Her mother and Geld waited impatiently by the beach. “The dance begins soon,” Geld urged. “Get into the taxi now. Hurry!”

Annie stared sightlessly through the glass as the driver wove his way through Denpasar and into the shadowy countryside. She heard his words through a haze of blue smoke. “The dance you will see depicts a war between evil and good.” He sucked hard on a cigarette, then tossed it out the window where it fell in a bright, spiraling arc. “Rangda, the white witch, represents evil.”

The taxi stopped in a village square. Desperate to get away, Annie pushed her way through the eager crowd. Her head throbbed in time with the music, and her
stomach churned like a washing machine. Two Balinese dancers were moving slowly, as if underwater, and torch light flickered on their tall golden headdresses and the whites of their eyes. Slim arms decorated with dozens of bracelets undulated accompanied by narrow bare feet that glided with exquisite grace. The crowd leaned in and held its breath in anticipation. The gamelan orchestra beat their silvery gongs and drums. In the distance, a flute wailed.

A camera bumped her from behind, and she turned. Her mother put her lips to Annie’s ear. “I couldn’t wait any longer to tell you. I have a surprise!” Her eyes shone with the luminescence of a jungle creature at night. “When you fly to New York, I’m coming with you. I have the ticket already. We can have even more adventures together!”

Something inhuman screamed like a baby from hell, shuddering and slicing the air like a blade. Annie jumped. A monster emerged from the shadows, in a tangle of white hair and wild goggling eyes. Giant claws raked the air, and a blood-red tongue slid down through razor-sharp teeth. “Rangda, the White Witch,” Geld whispered. “This dancer symbolizes evil. It is time for the sacrifice.”

From the shadows an old woman emerged and bowed down to the witch. She lifted a chicken and raised a knife high.

Annie closed her eyes and hugged herself tight. In her seventeen years, she had learned to tell the good days from bad. And today was a very bad day.