

MIDA MALENA

STEPS THROUGH INDONESIA

VOLUME I

~ When Bali Touches Your Soul ~

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Steps Through INDONESIA: When Bali Touches Your Soul

MIDA MALENA
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**„Life is thoughts.
And in every thought, I choose – sometimes myself, sometimes
others.
But every time, I learn who I am.”**

Mida Malena

From the Heart of Vietnam to the Magic of Bali

I blinked for a second, and my thoughts started flying, like wild birds released from their cage. Fatigue and sleepless hours weighed heavily on my shoulders, but now, all of that was just an insignificant detail.

I was living in the midst of my own dream, reliving every moment in a carousel of memories. It was as if a film was playing before my eyes – a film so vivid that reality seemed to merge with magic.

A whole month in Vietnam...

With the backpack on my back, carrying my memories like fragile treasures from one place to another.

Memories that flowed like a mountain river, clear and free: places, people, conversations intertwined with moments of excitement, melancholy and, yes, even pain. Ah, the pain... now a diffuse shadow, like a dream scattered at dawn.

Each chapter of that journey came back to me, like a book read breathlessly: *Hanoi*, where the rain greeted me like an old friend, with a disarming force, as if it wanted to tell me: 'Here you will never know boredom.'

Then, that frantic rush through the city, like a dance of discovery – to see, to feel, to taste every delight that came my way. However, every beauty came with challenges.

My laptop, my faithful companion, almost abandoned me on the first day. For a moment, I thought that all the thoughts and words waiting to be written might be lost forever.

But no.

Vietnam also brought me people – characters who would mark my path: Tom, with his mischievous laugh, like an echo of lost childhood, Huy, Vhu and her mother – like fragile butterflies that slowly but surely entered my story.

Ha Long Bay, with its rocks sculpted by gods, reminds me of that moment that changed my trajectory. And him... enigmatic, a presence that rewrote my life more than I anticipated. But Vietnam has many stories, and some are meant to remain hidden. Until you want to discover them...

I followed the road to Sapa – a journey into the heart of pure nature, where the mountains seemed to reveal their ancient secrets, whispered among the rays of sunshine. Every corner pulsed with life and mystery, and the views that opened up before me filled my soul with a deep tranquillity, but also with an inexplicable longing, as if I belonged there.

I continued to follow the signs, like a traveller guided by the stars, and headed towards Ha Giang – a motorcycle adventure that I will always cherish, along with Zen and his meaningful silence. He was more than a travelling companion; he was like a presence that reminded you to listen to the silence.

The nights spent with Sarah, the endless laughter of the Spaniards and the ‘happy water’ that flowed into glasses as easily as the moments... There, I brought to the surface those forgotten ‘pieces’, deeply buried, without which I could not go on.

I let myself be carried away and, at every turn, I shed a layer of myself, as if I were throwing away clothes that were too heavy for this journey. Every kilometre travelled was a return to my origins, and the rain cleared my vision, making me see with new clarity.

Then I realised: *it was only the beginning.*

Ninh Binh revealed the 'old man' to me, with his deep gaze and measured steps, who seemed to watch over my soul, like an invisible guardian of tranquillity. The city brought me *Lisa*, *Oscar*, *Trang*, but also the monk with his divine music.

Phong Nha was like a forgotten chapter in a book, a tiny town where I shouldn't have ended up, but where I met the mysterious *Luong*... he remains a mystery even now, but a mystery that still whispers something in my mind.

Each place, each face patiently polished my story. It was as if my steps were carving an invisible map, a path of the soul, from one memory to another.

Hue, with its heavy, painful tears; *Da Nang*, with its wild sea and escape into childhood; *Hoi An*, with its famous 'Phongs' and enchanted lanterns. The Romanians I met in that little, hidden restaurant brought unexpected warmth to the middle of a magical land.

There was no time to waste. I left behind every wonder, every marvel, because time showed me that I still had a lot to see. I climbed mountains, dived into seas, stepped into temples and castles, and talked to people who seemed to come straight out of the virtual universe of TikTok, that world that stole every trace of energy, leaving me with only an endless echo.

The sea... Ah, the blue sea, welcoming me into its foamy waves, and the clouds gathering like silent witnesses to my journey. The heat and the taxi drivers, who seemed to me like a separate species in this fascinating universe.

Nha Trang, with its bohemian air and vivid contrasts, and *Dalat*, where the piercing cold revealed my hidden vulnerabilities. The colourful gardens and the vibrant chaos of the night created a spectacle that seemed improvised just for me.

Without the internet, I felt lost, like a ship without a compass, floating towards *Ho Chi Minh City*. Frustration overwhelmed me, but

that was when I met *Trang* – the girl with the warm smile and gentle voice. It was as if we knew each other from another life.

She became the beacon that lit my way through the darkness.

We let ourselves be carried away by the rain in Saigon, dancing frantically to its rhythms, as if each drop of water revived my memories, imprinting that moment in my flesh and soul, a moment that would remain forever. In those moments, I was part of a symphony, a duet between man and nature.

There I met *Andrea*, *Moon*, *Darren* and *Queen* – new faces, but somehow familiar, like fragments of an old story intertwined with my own.

And then came the pain... Ah, the pain, always present, like a shadow that would never leave me, but which taught me to truly feel. The tightening in my stomach was like a reminder, like a final ‘test’ of my journey through Vietnam – a reminder that even in paradise, there are thorns. A dizzying game of feelings colliding inside me.

And yet, every step, every fall, every rise found meaning in my story, weaving me into a stronger and freer version of myself.

When Irina's message reached me: ‘Hey, you can come. The anti-COVID restrictions have been lifted,’ it was like a green light from the Universe, an approval that my path was clear.

Essra's morning message, like a guiding star, reminded me, even the day before my flight to Indonesia, that his existence was not a mere whim of fate, but a lesson that called me, once again, not to forget. It was as if a ghost from the past had waved its veil in front of my eyes, bringing me back to life and making me understand: ‘Nothing is random.’

And so, I began to shed each worry, one by one, like old layers of skin that no longer belonged to me. I left them behind me, on the soil of Vietnam, until I felt light, like a butterfly released from its chrysalis.

And yes, now I smile.

I look at my life as a vibrant ‘film,’ full of vivid colours and intense moments, as if every step, every encounter, every tear was

a brushstroke that contributed to the creation of this painting of my existence.

Can a month really change you?

Without a doubt, the answer is YES.

More than ever, I embrace the unknown, I let myself be cared for by the Universe, because why not? I am flying towards my dream, and I feel that reality is intertwined with fantasy in a bittersweet embrace.

Everything is so real that I wonder if there can be anything more intense than what I am experiencing right now.

Vietnam has shaped me, taught me to love the unpredictable and the moments that take your breath away. It has prepared me to embrace the unknown and see the magic in chaos. I have learned to view my pain as a teacher.

The shadows of my past – those things buried deep, that I didn't even want to bring to light – followed me everywhere, from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. But between torrential rains and the laughter of strangers, I began to see them differently. I haven't completely overcome them, but I've learned to dance with them.

But I know... his story isn't over.

Not yet.

Suddenly, I wake up, as if shaken from a dream. My gaze clears, and I notice the people around me, agitated and restless, as if unable to settle into their own lives. The noise of the plane envelops me, but I remain calm.

And then I remember...

Vietnam prepared me for something bigger, more intense!

Today, my soul is open, ready to discover the greatness of Indonesia.

But I wonder: will Bali give me answers to questions I haven't even asked yet? Or will it bring me new questions, harder, deeper ones?

What's next? I don't know. But that's what makes the story worthwhile.

And yet, when the plane's wheels touch the runway... I understand.

That story was the beginning.

Now comes the answer.

Or another question.

Travelling Towards Nothing: Bali and the Fascination of the Unknown

There is a moment, somewhere between dream and reality, when you 'feel' that the road chooses you. We never know if the path of our life is already written, like a secret map in the stars, or if we draw it ourselves, with every step, every choice, every mistake. But somewhere deep inside, we like to believe that we have a role to play in this story.

It's as if I were sending myself mysterious signs – encrypted messages that only I can understand, only I can decipher, as I chart my already chosen path. But do we really know what is written in the stars? Or are we just puppets manipulated by an invisible hand?

Perhaps it's all just a game of chance, and we move forward, blinded by the intense light of life – like moths flying towards the flame, convinced that we are the masters of our own destiny. But are we? Or do we carry, without knowing it, unseen burdens – heavy bags full of fears and desires, which we carry without ever asking what is hidden inside?

Why are these thoughts echoing in my mind now? Perhaps they are just echoes of old questions, stirred up by the paths we have chosen. Perhaps it doesn't even matter. But everything leads somewhere. Every path, whether clear or chaotic, converges at a mysterious point – a point that calls to us.

In my mind, everything seems to boil down to one simple truth: 'Life doesn't end until we've lived everything we need to live.'

Every moment is a piece of a huge puzzle, a Matrix of billions of intersecting paths. Perhaps the meaning of this labyrinth exists only in my mind.

But these questions about destiny and chance have intensified with every path I have travelled, seeking not only answers, but above all, experiences. And so, one day, I left. I didn't leave with a specific goal. I left to lose myself – leaving behind everything I knew, everything I was, everything the world told me I 'had' to be.

And so, I travelled across Vietnam from one end to the other, lost in its mysterious corners, until, in a way I still cannot explain, I ended up exactly where I was meant to be.

Where? You already know.

Bali.

Finally, on this long-dreamed-of island – the famous BALI – desired, coveted, awaited like a promise. For me, Bali was more than a destination. It was a calling. A mirage I had been chasing for months, a dream I carried within me like a child who can't take his eyes off a toy on a shop shelf. I cried for it, I planned and hoped, until the entire force of the Universe seemed to conspire to bring me here.

And here I am now, on June 20th, 2023, when the Universe finally opened the door wide in front of me, whispering:

'Here you are, young lady, your dream is here!'

I was that stubborn child who didn't give up until she got what she wanted. Bali was the 'toy' of my dreams – and now, here I am, holding it in my hands.

My perseverance, that constant drop of insistence, brought me here. Perhaps this is the essence of our evolution: to dream, to insist, to fall and to continue. Step by step.

Since I left Romania, I have replaced routine with spontaneity and left comfort behind for the unknown. Bali is the beginning of a new chapter.

Before me lies the 'Famous Island' in the heart of Indonesia – the island of sunshine, contagious energy, thousands of tourists coming

and going, the island of peaceful Balinese people with smiles on their faces, of love and contrasts.

Here I found a place where the sunsets take your breath away and every corner whispers a story.

But why Bali?

That's the question I get asked most often. Sometimes I ask myself the same thing. I don't have a clear answer. But deep down, I know. To many, it seemed crazy that I wanted to move here.

'Why go so far away? What will you do there? How will you make a living? Aren't you fine here, where you have everything you need?' The questions came like autumn rain, one after another, but none of them managed to stop me.

And yet, why Bali?

Perhaps because it is the manifestation of my own beautiful madness. Of the desire to live authentically. To follow my own path, no matter how strange it may seem to others.

Bali is not just a destination.

It is a choice.

It is a leap into the unknown.

Today, I am here, living this 'DREAM' written in capital letters.

I have learned that a dream is not a distant fantasy – it is a plan, a direction, a reality waiting to be built step by step, kilometre by kilometre.

I don't remember exactly when this dream began. Maybe it doesn't matter. What matters is that I am here, that I have arrived and that I have gained a moment of respite to spread my wings.

The road does not end here. Bali is just another stop on this journey into the unknown.

Recently, someone asked me:

'What are you looking for, actually?'

I replied simply, with a smile:

'Nothing.'

Because if I knew what I was looking for, would I still be here?

The fascination of the unknown is overwhelming.

Bali is just the next chapter in my story.

So I invite you, dear reader, to sit back, relax, and join me on this adventure. Let the magic envelop you.

Let's discover together the joy of living and searching.

Because, without knowing it, you are already part of my story.

And **I thank you** for that.

1

Dancing with Destiny

Thursday, 20th July 2023

Ngurah Rai International Airport, Denpasar – Bali, Indonesia

At 7:55, the plane took off from Ho Chi Minh City, carrying me, as if in a dream, to Denpasar, Bali – the destination I had dreamed of so many times. The four hours between heaven and earth were a dance between lucidity and dream. Beyond the window, the sky was a watercolour canvas, and the clouds unfolded at the edge of the horizon, wandering my thoughts in a silent dance.

The captain's echo announcing turbulence floated among the clouds, but I sat motionless, like a wax doll, immune to the noise and commotion around me.

The cold air froze my tired body, but inside me pulsed impatience – a silent thrill that pushed me forward. Bali seemed like a forgotten song, a refrain I knew but couldn't yet hum.

I knew this road was one-way, and my heart skipped a beat with every image of the island.

At the immigration counter, I answered decisively, without a trace of hesitation. I was no longer the insecure woman who got lost in airports. Something inside me had changed. A silent force told me clearly: *'You are exactly where you need to be.'*

"Welcome to Bali," the officer said, handing me my passport with a smile. I felt light, as if I had just received the key to a new universe.

'How simple it was... and how good it feels...' I said to myself, feeling joy permeate every fibre of my being.

At the checkpoint, the officer asked me for a QR code. I looked, confused, at the panel in front of me. A friendly employee came to my aid, so I scanned the code and followed the instructions. A few minutes later, the problem was solved. I sighed with relief and returned to the checkpoint.

"There you go, you're in Bali," the guy at the checkpoint said with a smile, and in my mind I heard a triumphant 'Yesss!', like a silent cry of victory. My passport felt like a talisman. A small object that opened the door to this moment for me. The euphoria was complete, and nothing could disturb it.

I made my way through the maze of faces and luggage, the bright lights of the shops and billboards dazzling me at every turn. They called out to me, tempting me to stop and get lost among their offers, but I had no time for distractions. I had to get to Circle K to find a fixed point in this vibrant airport. Each step was a mixture of hope and impatience that pushed me forward.

I asked an airport employee, who pointed me in the direction with a quick gesture: "After the information desk."

I set off confidently, impatience running through my veins like a wave of enthusiasm breaking into thousands of droplets inside. Energy danced through my body, as if someone had put 'Lambada' on repeat, and every fibre responded to the rhythm. It didn't even cross my mind to check my phone for Wi-Fi. All that mattered was finding Gusti.

I stepped outside and was hit by a wall of suffocating heat that clung to my skin like an invisible veil. The roar of voices, horns and laughter mingled with the hurried patter of footsteps in an orchestrated chaos – unbearable and fascinating at the same time.

In front of me, a crowd of people was lined up behind a barrier, holding signs in their hands. *'It's like a movie,'* I said to myself, with a smile on my lips.

My eyes scanned the names clumsily written on the signs – nothing familiar. It was like an emotional roulette, every second amplifying the crowd's excitement and the feeling that I was alone.

Had he forgotten me? Or maybe he hadn't come at all?

I ran my hand through my hair, trying to control my breathing. Still no sign of Gusti. The crowd continued to move, dimming my hope with every passing second. The wait turned into a game of imagination.

What if he doesn't come? What if Irina's messages were wrong? Or maybe... maybe he left me to fend for myself.

My mind raced wildly, clinging to chaotic scenarios. In an instant, Bali, which had seemed like a destination full of promise, had become a maze of uncertainty. And yet, somewhere deep inside me, a thin thread of confidence refused to give way: *'Bali didn't bring me here to abandon me.'*

I took out my phone. No Wi-Fi. Roaming refused to cooperate, leaving me shrouded in the chaos of doubt. I felt the confusion creeping deeper and deeper into me. I glanced in all directions, hoping for a miracle, a sign to guide me.

I realise I know nothing about Gusti – I don't know what he looks like, I don't know who he is. He's just a name and a price, an invisible character in my story, like a ghost I'm trying to find in the crowd.

The phone has abandoned me, and Irina's advice now seems like useless echoes. My mind races, frantically searching for a solution that refuses to appear. I see the Circle K building in the distance, but no sign of Gusti.

'Why doesn't he turn up? Why isn't he coming?' I ask myself, as thirst and heat push me over the edge. Beads of perspiration trickle down my back, and the air gets heavier. I'd take my shirt off, but stop myself. It's that strange feeling that now is not the time to give up. That maybe, just maybe, the solution will turn up at the last moment.

A taxi driver in red, with a reassuring smile, approaches. With a simple gesture, he offers me Wi-Fi and, unhurriedly, calls Gusti for me.

“Stay here, here comes Gusti,” he says calmly.

And then, out of the bustling crowd, he appeared: a man with brown eyes that glistened like damp earth after rain. He wore a white T-shirt and sandals, and his calmness contrasted sharply with the surrounding din.

“Yda?” he asked, and I answered immediately. With a natural gesture, he grabbed my backpack, as if he knew I needed a helping hand, and led me towards a black car. When he opened the door, it was as if he was extending a bridge to heaven.

The interior was simple, discreetly scented with lavender. On the dashboard, a small statuette of Ganesha watched over the journey, and a strand of dried flowers hung from the rear-view mirror – probably left there after a Balinese ceremony. Every detail told a story of tradition, spirituality and a life lived without haste.

“Santai, santai,” he said with a laugh, holding up a hand, as if to dispel my unease in the air. “Take your time, time slows down in Bali.”

His infectious laughter started in his eyes, and his strong hands gesticulated naturally, as if his stories also needed air to come alive.

I laughed too, feeling his presence chase away my nervousness. Every word, every intonation told me to let the rhythm of this place carry me away.

As the car drove on, Gusti pushed his glasses up his nose and, like a fairy-tale narrator, began to tell me about the island I had just discovered.

“First time in Bali?” he asked, smiling with genuine curiosity.

“Yeah... and I think it's my lifelong dream,” I replied, letting the words slip out like a secret released.

“Hmm,” he muttered, sending me a brief glance in the rear-view mirror. “You're not just in Bali. Bali's already in you.”

His words caught me off guard. I fell silent, feeling them settling in me, slowly, like a revelation.

"In Bali, nothing is random," Gusti continued, looking at me with a mixture of curiosity and certainty, as if he had seen more than just a tourist. "Fate has its own timetable here."

His smile seemed to whisper, '*Hey, we already know each other.*'

We both laughed, and the car weaved through island traffic. Small offerings – palm-leaf squares filled with flowers, grains of rice and crackers – were laid out on the pavements in front of each shop. The smoke from the scented chopsticks drifted lazily skyward, like a mute conversation with the island gods.

"In Bali, traffic is a kind of test. If you can withstand it, you can withstand anything," said Gusti, as a motorbike passed us, almost glued to the car.

It amused me, but there was a subtle truth in his words. Everything here was chaos – but a living chaos that seemed to dance to a rhythm of its own.

'YOUR DREAM IS REAL NOW, YDA,' I whispered to myself.
'YOU'RE IN BALI!'

Casananta Hotel, Seminyak – Bali

Pfff... I haven't written anything about my first days in Bali. Why do we tend to ignore the moments that matter, only to regret them later? It's been almost seven months since then... who can remember exactly what they did seven months ago?

But I have no choice. I have to piece my story together piece by piece. Fortunately, I have the messages – my Ariadne's thread through the maze of memories.

Today's challenge? To piece together this puzzle of the past.
So...

There I was with Gusti in his black car, a no-name shell wearing a discreet lavender scent, thanks to a little bauble hanging from the rear-view mirror. We chatted like two friends reunited after years, though we hardly knew each other.

Gusti was here thanks to Irina, the Romanian I had discovered a few months earlier. An invisible hand had led me to her, and her advice had become my guide through this journey.

I had met her by chance... or maybe not. Who can really know? After the failure of my departure with Freya, the idea of going to Bali obsessed me. It was like a siren's song calling to me, and Irina seemed like the siren to lead the way.

She had contacted me before I left, and our conversations helped me to feel the energy of the island, to understand its vibes, and to understand why everyone was so passionate about Bali.

When I finally learnt that the borders had reopened and the restrictions lifted, I felt like the Universe was whispering to me, '*Now is your moment.*'

"Yeee... I'm coming in a month! I'm going to Vietnam first, I'm flying tomorrow..." I wrote to Irina impatiently, as if my whole life had been turned upside down by that simple sentence.

But do we really realise the value of the moments that happen to us every day? I often wonder whether I found the solutions or they found me. When I got into Gusti's car, I realised how tangible my dream had become.

And now I was there, on my way to Seminyak City, the place where my island adventure was to begin. Gusti, a simple Balinese driver, had become more than that – he was a guide, a storyteller of this first step into my new universe.

And, of course, he didn't miss the opportunity to quiz me, as anyone curious to find out what's happening on their island does.

"Who are you, where are you from, what are your plans? Why are you travelling alone?" The questions flowed one after the other, like an inexhaustible spring, and I struggled to find my words in English,

while my thoughts ran chaotically through all the languages I didn't know.

Then, suddenly, Gusti turned into the narrator of my own story:

"The famous Yda arrives on the island of Bali, a magical place like she had never seen before. She meets Gusti, an extraordinary local who will guide her into this new world..." And so on, dictating with the earnestness of a director who seemed convinced he was acting in the film of his life.

I burst out laughing, trying to contain my mirth, as I watched Gusti, his face focused and serious, as if he himself had decided my destiny on this island.

I don't remember all his exact words – it's been seven months since then – but I know we both laughed. And in that car, in the middle of unimaginable traffic, I had the revelation that sometimes the people we meet are portals to new Universes.

And Bali had just opened its portal for me.

I stopped at a currency exchange – the first step towards anchoring myself in the reality of this place. I needed local money to pay Gusti for the fare.

The seemingly never-ending journey flowed slowly, like a lazy river caught in the grip of time flowing by its own rules. Here on this tropical island, nothing seemed in a hurry.

When I arrived in front of the hotel, Gusti looked at me with a sincere smile, charged with a warmth that was hard to explain.

"Have the most marvellous stay of your life," he wished me, and for a moment, his words hung in the air, as if he had uttered a prophecy.

The setting sun reflected in his eyes, giving them a special glow. I had the feeling he saw something in me that I had not yet discovered. And somehow I knew magic was about to happen.

Getting out of the car, I looked around. Bali greeted me with an energy I could feel in every breeze, in the rustle of the palm leaves, in the dense heat of the afternoon. With each step, the barriers between past and present dissolved and I merged with the place.

'I'll never again say I forgot something...' I whispered to myself, like a vow to myself. Because when it's needed, when the time is right, the past whispers everything we need to know. It shows us the way, even when we think we've lost it.

Gusti winked at me, with that gleam of wisdom that only those who have seen much carry in their eyes. Perhaps each traveller he met had a destiny that he intuited, but let it unfold at its own pace.

He started the car and drove away slowly, as if not wanting to break the spell of the moment. I stood still, following him with my eyes, until the silhouette of the car merged with the chaos of Balinese traffic.

I looked up at the blue sky, where the clouds drew ephemeral shapes, like a canvas painted by an invisible artist.

I took a deep breath.

A promise hung in the air.

The promise that this journey would not be a mere sojourn, but an encounter with myself – with every version of myself scattered in the whirlwind of life.

The roads through Vietnam, the chaotic choices, the seemingly random decisions – all had brought me here, like unseen threads woven by fate. Bali was not just an island; it was a realm where reality and dream began to merge.

Then I felt that Bali was already inside me. I felt its quiver, its call, its desire to live and discover. It was like a smouldering fire, waiting to be lit, and I was ready to be engulfed in its flames. And in that moment, the thought struck me:

'Maybe it wasn't just me who had come to discover Bali. Maybe the island was discovering me.'

Then, in response to everything I was feeling, I heard it – a muffled drumbeat, an ancestral chant that seemed to rise straight from the heart of the earth. An age-old calling.

I smiled to myself and took the first step towards the hotel doors. I knew a whole world awaited me beyond them. And for the first time in a long time, I felt my wings spreading. Ready to fly. To really fly.

I stepped through that door, feeling like I was stepping through a portal into a new, mysterious Universe.

Happy, I entered the hotel, dragging my backpack – the sweet burden of my journey. ‘How cool is this hotel!’ I caught myself thinking, looking at it with a curious child's eyes. The pictures on Agoda had failed to capture the magic of the place – in reality, the hotel was pulsing with life and colour, like a painting changing hues with the light.

Downstairs, the reception and restaurant merged into an open, welcoming space that seemed to breathe with me. I checked in, and the guy at the front desk handed me the key with the number 109 and the Wi-Fi password – the small gift of civilization.

My room was on the first floor. I walked up the stairs with my phone in my hand, trying to catch up on every lost moment away from the world. Messages flowed on the screen, but I walked on, not looking, feeling the hallway stretch out like an endless tunnel, full of doors hiding other stories.

When I entered the room, I felt like I had arrived... home.

The huge mirror on the wall reflected not just my face, but all the roads that had brought me here. The rays of the sun, filtered through the curtain, danced on the walls like silent whispers, enveloping me in a peace I hadn't felt for a long time.

I became euphoric and began to dance with the rays. To the music in my head, to rhythms only I could hear, I swirled like a lost but shining star.

Bali poured its magic over me, embracing me with a warm, mystical energy, whispering to me like a wandering daughter, ‘Welcome, my dear Yda.’

I was awakened from that reverie by the sound of a message. Mone.

“Have you arrived in Bali?”

“Yes, yes. I'm at the hotel.”

“Is everything okay? Airport? Was there a queue?”

“No, it was ok. I just didn't have internet, the Romanian card didn't work, but I managed.”

I smiled as I replied. Every word reconfirmed that I was really here. It wasn't a dream. It was reality.

But my stomach reminded me of more earthly needs. I'm hungry. Of course... when am I not hungry?

I took a quick shower, but once out of the hotel, the tropical heat hit me like an unplanned avalanche. The ‘hot stove’ sensation I accepted as a new island challenge.

I set off in search of a warung – those little local restaurants that seem to belong to another world. Bali had its own personality, and I was determined not to let it overwhelm me. So I went ahead, ignoring every hesitation, every thought that tried to tell me ‘no’.

The warung I'd chosen was simple, with small wooden tables and plastic chairs, shrouded in a heavy air saturated with smells – barbecue smoke, spices and something sweet, almost nauseatingly sweet. Above the open kitchen, on a narrow shelf, sat a small altar, decorated with yellow flowers and a perfumed chopstick that smoked slowly, as if trying to mask the lingering aroma of hot oil.

I chose grilled fish – a simple choice, perfect for my first day in Bali. The woman who brought my plate smiled knowingly, as if she knew something I didn't.

“Ikan bakar,” she said proudly. “Sambal – very tasty.”

I returned her smile and bent over the food, not knowing what was in store for me.

The fish looked good, perfectly fried, with crispy skin. But from the first mouthful, I could feel how all the saltiness of the ocean seemed to have been absorbed into its flesh. It was so salty, my mouth instantly tightened.

I just touched the sambal – fatal mistake. Pure fire. I drank all the water. It was all for nothing.

As I struggled with the intensity of the fish and the burn of the sambal sauce, I looked up at the family in the corner of the terrace. They were laughing and eating with gusto, as if the food was exactly as it should be. A little girl, her hair in two pigtails, gave me a curious look and started laughing, hiding her face in her mother's arms.

‘What if it's just my reflection?’ I said to myself. ‘Maybe it's a lesson in letting go of preconceptions and accepting things as they are.’ Or maybe the fish was simply too salty.

I tried to eat the tofu, but its soft texture and slightly rancid flavour made my stomach protest mutely. I looked down at my plate and, for a second, I felt like a child grimacing at the food and pushing the plate away.

I looked again at the family in the corner. Mum was smiling at the girl, and she was giggling through the spoonfuls of rice. They didn't seem to be feeling the heat or thinking about how salty the fish was. In their eyes, everything was exactly as it should be. Maybe they knew something I was just beginning to realise: that life doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful. I realised it wasn't about food. It was about leaving all the ‘pretences’ behind.

‘Bali is not here to indulge my whims,’ I told myself. ‘Bali is here to teach me how to live.’

I got up with a sigh, hungry and a little disappointed. Was this what my first meal in Bali was supposed to look like? I had expected exotic flavours that would open my soul to new horizons, but I found myself with a plate that tested the limits of my patience and taste buds.

Maybe it was my fault for coming with such high expectations. Or maybe it was just a lesson – that not all new experiences are perfect. Some are just clumsy beginnings.

Back on the street, the traffic pulsed like a living organism – attracting and repelling me at the same time. Motorbikes whizzed

past cars, horns honked like lost birds. Here, no one waited at traffic lights, and time seemed to flow in waves.

I was caught in the midst of all this bustle like a small, vulnerable island, but strangely, I didn't feel overwhelmed. There was a raw energy pulsing through every corner of the city, a strange quiver that whispered to me: *you're here, live!*

I was hungry. But not just a little bit hungry, but with that emptiness in my stomach that emphasises every second of hunger, and I was thirsty as if someone had shoved a desert in my mouth. That fish seemed to drain all the moisture from my body.

I found a card shop on the other side of the street and, with a sigh, slipped between the motorbikes. Inside, as I was activating my card, I suddenly heard Romanian – a young man was talking on the phone, nervously, gesticulating widely. For a moment, I felt teleported home, but I didn't intervene. I smiled to myself and let the moment pass. In Bali, Romanians crossed each other unknowingly, like invisible threads in a larger web.

After paying for my shopping, I wandered around a bit more, trying to take it all in. But it was all too much. The exhaustion of the day, the interminable flight from Vietnam, the overwhelming heat that gripped me like a spider's web... it was all piling up, pushing me to the edge of endurance.

A strange headache began to press down on me, like a glass bell slowly descending over me, and I knew I couldn't go on.

I returned to my accommodation. The fan in the room brought a gentle breeze, like a whisper telling me to stop running. Maybe I finally didn't have to look for anything. Maybe what I was and what I dreamt were meeting here under the same stars.

I wrote to Irina: "Hello, I'm at the hotel, ready. I've got my Bali number, but it gave me a glitch and I can't connect it for the next 24 hours. I'll sort it out tomorrow with the guy at the shop. Until then, we'll keep in touch on the Romanian number. I got here safely, I'm going to rest today, I'm knackered."

Her answer came quickly, a simple “Ok.” That was it. And that was enough. It was comforting to know that she was there, on the other end of the screen – a fixed point in this ever-moving world.

I laid on the bed and let the thoughts flow. I wasn't just a traveller ticking off a new destination on the map. I was a woman searching for her own centre. I let my fatigue take over, feeling the vibrant pulse of the island mingling with my heartbeat. Bali didn't have to tell me anything. I felt it with every inhale and exhale.

Gusti's words came back to my mind, like a song that only makes sense after you listen to it several times: ‘Bali is already inside you.’ But what if it was true? What if Bali was not a place for me to conquer or discover, but just a place to return to myself?

His smile, his calm – maybe he knew something I was just beginning to feel. Maybe Bali wasn't going to give me answers. Maybe he was just asking me to listen. To learn to be.

In the gentle breeze of the room fan and the stillness that had replaced the traffic noise, I realised something: *maybe all the versions of myself lost on the road hadn't wandered off, but were just waiting for me here.*

Yes... Bali, my dream, wasn't just perfect beaches and fiery sunsets. It was also the sweltering heat, the traffic chaos and the overly salty flavour of the fish. But perhaps it was precisely these imperfections that gave it its glamour – like a painting with uneven brushstrokes that captivates you precisely because it's not perfect.

My body relaxed, and slowly my thoughts sank into darkness. I could feel Bali seeping into my soul, intertwining the tranquillity with the island's lively bustle.

And in that moment, I knew: Bali wasn't just a destination. It was the dance of destiny, and I was learning its steps. The sea was not just before me, it was awakening in me – an old call with a new voice.

And with each breath, I felt that I was not only dancing with Bali, but Bali was dancing with me.

And maybe, just maybe, I have never been so close to myself. My first night in Bali, I fell asleep thinking of the sea. The sea in front of me. And the sea inside me.

“Travelling is the only form of transformation in which we truly learn to know ourselves.” – Razvan Exarhu

2

Map of My Own World

Friday, 21st July 2023

It's my first morning in Bali, and the island welcomes me with open arms, like an old friend. The air is sweet, and the morning light floods my room. In the mirror, I smile at myself, as if I've found myself again. It is not a forced smile, but a pure one, coming from deep within me. The whole world whispers to me: *live!*

I slip on my flip-flops and go downstairs, my blue dress dancing around me. The small restaurant at the Casananta Hotel looks like something out of a tropical dream – tables decorated with flowers and a golden light that bathes everything in warmth. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee invades my senses, sweet and intense, like a promise of good things to come.

I order an omelette and a cappuccino, letting myself be carried away by the moment and savouring every sip. The sound of the spoon touching the edge of the delicate cup mingles with the aroma of coffee – warm, inviting, with a touch of vanilla and new promises. Everything tastes different here – a taste of new beginnings and courage.

I think about what to do today. I have no fixed plans, but I know I want to go to the seaside... I have to send pictures to everyone who is waiting. Irina hasn't given any sign yet. Should I write to her? Maybe she's busy... so I decide to wait. She'll get in touch when she has time. In the meantime, I let myself be carried away by the moment and

smile at everyone in the restaurant – it's as if I'm sharing pieces of my joy.

'What a life!' I say to myself, feeling like a princess lost in an exotic paradise. Maybe that's how people see me. Or maybe I just like to think so. But right now, I am my own queen – and nothing else matters.

It was almost 11:00 when I finally left the coolness of the hotel. I threw myself straight into the traffic. The symphony of engines, horns and laughter enveloped me, and the sun, strong and burning, pushed me forward like an invisible force. I opened the map and set my destination: Double Six Beach. The name sounded exotic, almost mystical.

The Grab app refused to cooperate, but I didn't mind. A taxi driver stopped next to me, offering me a quick ride, but I declined. Today I wanted to walk, to pace myself with each moment.

Along the way, vibrant colours and exotic scents seduced me at every turn. I stopped to touch brightly coloured dresses and felt the energy of the place seeping into every choice. I picked up a green scarf and a beach bag, continuing on my way, savouring every step.

The narrow streets were dotted with colourful fruit stalls, and quiet temples, steeped in stories, were hidden among the trees. Everything seemed to whisper to me, without haste, that here in Bali, time flows differently.

After two hours of walking, the beach revealed itself like a promise fulfilled: golden sand stretching to the horizon and waves dancing under a cloudless sky. Everything seemed like something out of another world. I took off my sandals and stepped onto the sand – hot and soft, like a whisper of fire.

I sat down on a deckchair, lost in the vastness of the ocean. The water was a breathtaking blue, as if the sky had melted into the depths. I closed my eyes and let the sound of the waves envelop me. It was more than a beach; it was a place where my soul seemed to find a comfort it didn't even know it was looking for. The waves washed

away more than just the sand – they washed away the lies I had told myself. Every breeze whispered forgotten truths.

I came here to escape – but from what, I didn't know exactly. Maybe from myself, from routine, or just from the noise of the world. In Bali, I hoped to find peace, but also something I had lost in the turmoil of existence: *the courage to be authentic*.

After a break to catch my breath, I got up and couldn't stop taking picture after picture. Each image seemed like a capsule of happiness that I wanted to keep forever. I sent a few photos to my friends and imagined their smiles when they received them.

I lay back again, letting the ocean fill my gaze. The sound of the sea was louder than the murmur of the people around me – like a lullaby for my soul. The sea was my silent confidant, calling me to let go of all the walls I had built. The waves seemed to tell me stories of courage, surrender and a sincere dance with the unknown.

The surfers begin their dance on the waves, some with natural grace, others struggling, just starting out. I watch them, fascinated, imagining myself floating above the water. It's not my time yet. Maybe one day. Until then, I enjoy the view.

When I finally dare to enter the water, anticipating the thrill of the coolness, the waves surprise me with their gentle and delicate warmth, like a tender embrace. Each wave seems to carry a silent lesson – about the courage to let yourself be carried away, about the beauty of the unknown. The sea asks nothing of me, only to be. And, for the first time, I am ready to listen.

“How's the hotel? How are you settling in?” Irina. Finally, she shows signs of life.

“Hey, Irina. The hotel is great. I went out into town today and now I'm at the beach. What are you up to?”

And, without even realising it, our conversation flows as naturally as the waves. We talk about massages, dancing, the places I'm going to explore, accommodation and the sunset that awaits us.

“Or... maybe I should come and meet you, and we can watch the sunset together.”

My heart skips a beat. Irina, my friend from Bali, wants to share this magical moment with me.

“Oooooo... that would be great!” I reply, unable to hide my enthusiasm.

“Yes. After the massage,” she replies.

“Okay. Let's watch the sunset.”

The wait plays tricks on me. Each minute seems longer than the last, and the sun slowly descends, colouring the sky in a spectacle of pink and orange. The Bali sky seems to be composing a special painting for us. My heart leaps at every passing silhouette.

What will I say to her? What will it be like to meet her in real life, beyond the screens?

The sea breeze caresses my skin, calling me to stay in this moment, to let myself be carried away by its tranquillity. I run my fingers through the sand, letting the grains slip through them. It is a delicate touch, as if the earth were caressing my soul with silent grace.

I reflexively pick up my phone and mindlessly tap away, lost between reality and the virtual flow. I open TikTok – whispers of strangers, waves of messages, but nothing fills the void inside me. I am like a window through which the world looks without seeing.

I close the app, smiling slightly. It was my last live broadcast – and that's okay. Real life is now giving me the most beautiful show: no audience, no applause, and no special effects.

What I was looking for there – attention, confirmation, the touch of another heart – is already here: in the air, in the light, in the sound of the waves.

Life cannot be broadcast live. It must be lived, felt, tasted with all the senses. And today, the waves dance just for me, telling me stories that cannot fit on screens.

Today, I am not here just for myself. I am waiting for her. The woman behind the screen. My friend. A mystery that takes shape in the light of sunset.

The minutes pass, and I oscillate between impatience and the silent fear that reality will not be as easy as a written message. My thoughts roll like the ocean in front of me, but I calm myself with a simple truth: sometimes, the magic lies precisely in the unknown.

I see her, and for a moment, the world seems to recede into a blurry background. I feel both joyful and vulnerable, as if something new and mysterious is entering my soul. My body vibrates imperceptibly, but Irina's warm and sincere smile reassures me that all those months of conversation were more than just words.

In her sunlit eyes, I see a mirror – a version of myself that I am only now rediscovering. A moment later, we were both laughing – a sincere, liberating laugh, as if the whole world didn't matter. Two Romanian women on a beach in Seminyak. Who would have thought?

'This doesn't just happen in films, it's life,' I tell myself.

Irina was my anchor in an ocean of uncertainty. And now, seeing her in front of me, hearing her voice, it was as if a missing piece of the puzzle of my life had found its place.

We sit down on the sand and start talking. The virtual world disappears, and now we try to get to know each other differently, beyond the screens. Irina's voice fills my ears, and her intonations reveal things that no message could ever capture. The way her lips move when she tells her story, her slightly awkward gestures, her eyes shining when she remembers something dear to her, and the little pauses between words – all of these are so vivid, so real.

For the first time, I see Irina beyond the screen – whole, real. No screen in the world can convey that. There is something profound about being face-to-face with someone, breathing the same air, feeling the vibration of a voice that touches your soul. Here, in Bali, everything seems clear, sincere. And then I understand: the

connection between us was never just in words. It was there, waiting to become reality.

“I have to admit, I wondered if this moment would be as special as I imagined it would be...” says Irina, with disarming sincerity.

“Me too...” I reply, feeling a relief that warms my heart.

In that second, I realise that I like Irina. She has a special warmth, a way of expressing herself that attracts me. She speaks correctly, with a pleasant and calm intonation, and her eyes seem to carry untold stories, images that only she can see. Sometimes she looks me straight in the eye; other times, she gazes at the horizon, as if reliving moments she has left behind. It's a strange but comforting feeling – as if I've found a sister I never knew.

Her white, immaculate skin seems carefully protected from the sun's rays, and that fascinates me.

I, on the other hand, love having that bronzed glow on my skin, that Creole colour that makes me feel like I'm truly alive, like the sun is kissing me every day.

Irina gently shakes the sand off her feet, then looks out to sea and sighs.

“Look, it feels like home here,” she said, pointing to the horizon, which was beginning to fade into incredible colours.

Above us, the clouds seemed to glide lazily across the sky, and the shadows of the palm trees stretched across the golden sand. The sea whispered at the shore, an endless murmur of life, flowing without stopping.

After a while, I tell Irina that I'm hungry. She smiles and suggests we go somewhere else. The sky is coloured in shades of yellow, orange and pink, as if an invisible artist had left his mark on the canvas of the sky. It is my first sunset in Bali – one that colours not only the sky, but also my soul. I am grateful that I can share this moment with her.

We walk barefoot through the sand, and each step we take is a small touch of happiness. We head towards a white terrace by the

sea. Here, on this island, I feel that names don't matter. It's more than just a place – it's a state of mind.

We stop to watch the surfers dancing on the waves. It is a lively dance, each jump on the crest of the waves seeming like an act of courage.

We continue to talk, unravelling the threads of our lives, like intersecting films. The idea that my lessons are not about the places I see, but about the people I meet along the way, becomes stronger and stronger in my mind.

As we talk, Irina brushes her hair out of her eyes, and I, almost instinctively, do the same. We both notice the movement and smile. A simple gesture, but one that makes me feel that we are on the same wavelength, as if an invisible thread connects us. A connection that needs no explanation.

I order something to eat, and Irina chooses mango sticky rice. We continue to talk and laugh, and at one point, my phone vibrates. Mone asks me if I've sorted out the Bali number.

"It's not working yet," I reply. We exchange a few messages, but my attention remains on Irina and the sun gradually sinking into the sea.

The evening slowly fades away, and after we've had our fill of stories and admiration, we walk towards the city centre. I feel like every step opens a new chapter.

We part ways at a street corner, under the night lights dancing on our faces. I don't know exactly where I am anymore, but it doesn't matter. I walk towards the hotel, letting myself be carried away by the hustle and bustle of the city, the streets still alive, the faces of the people, their gestures.

Once in my room, I collapse on the bed. My body is heavy, but my mind is racing, full of images and sensations. I long for a moment of pampering, so I write to Nian, the masseuse Irina told me about. I want to surrender all my tension to her skilled hands, to feel every muscle yield under her calm touch. She responds quickly,

professionally, and confirms that she can come tomorrow. Browsing through her list of offers, in a burst of generosity towards myself, I add a cosmetic treatment. 'It's my first time in Bali,' I say to myself with a smile, as if I needed an excuse to pamper myself.

I end the conversation and let the silence of the room embrace me. I look at the spider web in the corner of the ceiling. It stretches out, fragile yet resilient. I see it as a map of my life – the knots are the choices, the detours are the hesitations, and the threads are the dreams that are still waiting to be woven. Some threads seem to end abruptly, but others continue, stretching into the unknown. Perhaps there, in the unknown, lies my true story.

In Bali, I feel that things are starting to change. With every step I take on this island, with every wave that touches me today, I find myself closer to myself than ever before. I am vulnerable, but also strong, as if I were on the edge of a precipice. And yet, I am not afraid to fall. I let myself be caressed by the wind, like a whisper reminding me that I don't have to have all the answers.

Outside the window, the shadows of palm trees stretch across the hotel wall, reminding me that I am still here, in the land of the unknown.

I close my eyes. I hear the sea. I feel its power. I ask myself, 'Will I have the courage to let myself be carried by the waves, without knowing where I will end up?' To be alive is to dance with the unknown, without trying to tame it.

'Bali,' I whisper in the darkness, 'be gentle with me, but teach me to stop being gentle with myself.'

On the ceiling, the spider's web glows faintly in the yellow light of the lamp. It is delicate yet stubborn. Like me, it is not afraid of imperfections. Perhaps the map of my life will never be perfect, but every unfinished thread or hesitant knot tells a story. And today, here in Bali, I have started weaving again – without fear.

I let myself fall asleep, knowing that tomorrow morning will find me different. Braver, more at peace. Bali showed me today that I don't need to know everything in advance.

All I need is the courage to take another step – on hot sand, in gentle water or in a dream without contours.

Tomorrow I will embrace the unknown with an open heart.

Finally, I am ready to live.

“Life begins where your comfort zone ends.” – Neale Donald Walsch

3

The Magic of Nadir: The Story of an Evening at the Palace

Saturday, 22nd July 2023

My second day in Bali is more than just a morning – it feels like an invitation to rediscover. I'm still here, but I find myself pulling myself out of bed before 9:00 a.m. to catch breakfast. Part of me wants to stay nestled under the covers until noon, but this place whispers something else to me – as if the day already has a plan for me.

I stretch lazily, like a cat sleeping in the sun, and smile. I dream that one day I will lose count and become part of this place, like the sand in the sea or the wind blowing through the palm trees.

However, a small, curious voice creeps into my thoughts:

‘What are you actually doing here? Why do you feel that every step pushes you towards something greater?’

Perhaps Bali is not just a destination, but a riddle waiting to be deciphered.

I sleepily get out of bed and head for the shower. The powerful jet of water awakens my senses, chasing away the last shadows of dreams that remained stuck to my eyelids. I begin to come to life, like a flower opening its petals under the first ray of light.

I follow my morning routine, step by step. The mirror reflects a slightly more polished version of myself. I give myself a knowing look: there's no one to admire me, so... someone has to do it!

On the ground floor of the hotel, the small restaurant welcomes me with the enticing aroma of toast and hot coffee. The tables are

carefully set, the cutlery glistening in the morning light. But instead of yesterday's smiling girls, today I find two boys quietly going about their work, exuding a relaxed air.

I start my day with a little disappointment: it seems that cappuccino is no longer included in breakfast, only coffee with milk or... instant coffee.

"No, I don't want Nesscaffè, thank you," I say, trying to mask my disappointment with a polite smile. "Yesterday the girls gave me a cappuccino," I add, hoping that this detail might change things.

The boys give me an impassive look, and one of them says calmly:

"It's not included, but you can choose a tea."

Wonderful. Seriously, Bali, is this how you treat your guests? Yesterday I was a queen, today a mere mortal without a cappuccino? I wish I were the kind of person who accepts this gracefully, but the truth is that I feel like someone has stolen my little morning joy.

"Fine, then I'll have coffee with milk," I murmur resignedly, like a child who has lost a minor battle. Inside, however, I repeat to myself that nothing compares to that cappuccino – that magical cup that transforms every mundane morning into a promising start, full of possibilities.

It's already 2:30 p.m. when I hear a soft knock on the door, like a delicate whisper on the wood. It's Nian. I like punctuality – it's as if it says, without words, that it respects your time. I open the door and motion for her to come in, smiling.

The home massage experience is always different, because each person brings their own energy, a special vibration that changes the whole moment. There is something calm about the way Nian moves, as if the air around her becomes smoother, gentler.

I am already wrapped in a towel, fresh out of the shower. Why get dressed when I'm about to have a massage? The towel becomes the uniform of relaxation, and today I don't want to stray from this unwritten rule.

Nian enters timidly, with a delicacy that mirrors her shy knock. She apologises for something – perhaps for being too cautious, perhaps for being nervous – but I don't insist. I look at her closely: small in stature, with long hair tied in a ponytail, she smiles gently. Her hands seem to be sculpted from a finer material, contrasting with the strength I sense in them. 'How can such a fragile body knead bodies and soothe souls?' I wonder, fascinated by her silent contrasts.

Nian carefully spreads a large, colourful cloth on the hotel bed, and the bottles of aromatic oils find their place in a calm, almost ritualistic order.

We start talking. She asks me questions – about Irina, how old I am, whether I am married or have children. She tells me about her one-year-old son and the house she is building with her husband. A simple house, but full of hope, a dream that takes them far away from the hustle and bustle of a large family. There is a light in her voice, like a place where silence will replace noise.

Nian's hands melt away my tension muscle by muscle, like snow melting under the warm sun. The aroma of the oils and the discreet music create a cocoon of peace around me. I lose myself in a tranquillity I have rarely encountered.

I close my eyes. Time dissolves, and each touch tells me a forgotten story.

My thoughts scatter like a river carrying memories of happiness and sadness, drifting away into the endless ocean of time. On this dream island, I feel part of something without beginning or end. My thoughts fly free, without boundaries, without burden.

'It's so easy to be here,' I whisper to myself, letting the silence envelop my soul like a diaphanous wave. Outside, the noise of the city reaches me only as a vague shadow of a dream, but it does not touch me. All that matters is this moment – mine, of silence, of truth.

I remember the clouds on the beach, the grains of sand sticking to my skin, the warmth of the sun on my body and the gentle touch of

the waves. Now, every detail of that day seems like part of a painting in which I am a character, not a viewer.

As the massage continues, I start to feel hungry, but I choose to ignore it. I breathe deeply, feeling my body completely relaxed. Nian's breathing mixes with mine in silent rhythms. I hear her moving gracefully, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, like a panther following her ritual. Her warm hands carry a soothing energy, as if each touch would dispel a worry, a fear.

Suddenly, the short sound of the phone snaps me out of my reverie. I open one eye slowly, but I don't rush to check. The thought passes, dissolves, and when Nian's gentle voice brings me back to the present, I blink, as if awakening from a light trance.

"The massage is over," she says gently.

I reply without thinking:

"Already?"

An hour has passed without me even noticing, enveloped in perfumes and scents. Between the warm touch of Nian's hands and the tranquillity that enveloped my mind, I lost all sense of reality. But now, with a warm smile, Nian tells me that she is going to prepare my creams for the cosmetic treatment.

This day really seemed to be dedicated to 'me'.

Nian delicately opens small jars, and the air fills with sweet scents: lavender, roses, oranges – a mixture that floats like an invisible veil over my senses. I close my eyes and let myself go, once again, in her hands, forgetting all thoughts.

Each movement is like a silky touch, and the creams spread over my skin like fine veils. I feel like a canvas on which a fresher and brighter version of myself is taking shape. I had long dreamed of such a treatment, but it is only here, on this island of dreams, that everything falls into place.

As Nian continues, I feel time slow down, giving me a rare respite. Her hands become instruments of an ancient ritual, and I surrender to its spell.

When it's over, I hardly know where the time has gone – it was like a fine line between magic and reality.

My face felt lighter, as if all traces of fatigue and worry had been erased, leaving behind a purer version of myself. Nian quietly gathered her tools, and I remained lying down, trying to hold on to the echo of that state of peace and renewal.

I paid her 500,000 IDR (~30 euros) for the two hours of pampering, feeling it was a small price to pay for how far she had taken me.

As a gesture of gratitude, she gave me a small bottle of essential oil – small, brown, with a golden cap that shone discreetly in the light.

“A souvenir of this day,” she said. I held it in my palm, knowing that it was not just a gift, but a symbol of my journey.

We took a photo together, and Nian smiled warmly, politely asking me to leave a review if I was satisfied with her services. She then left as shyly as she had arrived, dragging her bag behind her, as if she were carrying part of the weight of the world in it.

I closed the door and remained in the silence of the room, listening for a moment to the echo of Nian's energy lingering in the air. I sat down at the edge of the bed and touched my face – I could feel my skin glowing, as if all the fatigue, all the dust gathered on the roads of Vietnam, had been washed away by her magical hands.

My gaze fell on the bottle of oil, shining discreetly on the bedside table. It wasn't just a simple essential oil – it was a piece of Bali, a memory of the moment when I found myself.

‘I am in Bali and the days no longer need to be counted.’

I remain suspended in thought, listening to the silence and feeling that I finally belong to my story. Perhaps this is the real gift I received today – not just relaxation, but a state of presence, of belonging. But my intuition whispered that the day was not over yet, that something else was waiting to be discovered.

I remembered Nian's words about homestays: ‘A room here costs about 20 euros a night...’ Almost like at Casananta. Suddenly, my hotel

didn't seem so expensive, especially since breakfast was included and the place was already familiar to me.

I got up and walked around the room. Hmmm. Maybe I should stay here longer and not worry about moving. Anyway, I like the hotel – it's not right next to the beach, but who's complaining about a little exercise? 'Exercise makes for beautiful legs, right?' I say to myself, amused, taking a few steps.

I check my phone and resume my conversation with Sawa:

"Grab doesn't work here at all. I've been walking for two days!" I write, slightly frustrated.

"Of course it doesn't work," he replies immediately. "They use GoJek there, not Grab. Install the app."

Pfff. 'So that's why,' I think to myself, quickly installing the app. I watch the download circle dance on the screen – a small symbol of my adaptation to the island.

"Yeah, I had no idea. How did you survive here?" I ask, chuckling.

"I got a scooter," he replies. "50 euros for a month. Great deal!"

I quickly type: "I'd definitely crash in the first two seconds. These guys ride on the pavements as if they were made especially for them."

"Yes, it's chaos, but you get used to it. You know how it is: when you're there, you learn the rules of the jungle," he writes, his joking tone bringing me a moment of amusement.

"Hmm, maybe I should learn too, so I'm not just a spectator," I write, feeling challenged by the thought of integrating into island life.

We move from jokes to recommendations, and Sawa quickly sends me a few places not to be missed.

"Have you heard of Signature Al Jazerah? It's a really cool place, but if you want real dancing, go to Red Ruby."

I look at the message and already feel like I'm there – the music vibrating under my feet, my body moving to the rhythm. I feel a little thrill of excitement at the thought of dancing today.

I ask him, somewhat awkwardly: "By the way, is it awkward for a boy to dance with a girl who doesn't know the steps?"

The answer comes quickly, with a virtual laugh: “No problem, we’ll adapt. That’s how you learn.”

I end the conversation with plans already made. Tonight is made for dancing.

Hunger was starting to make itself felt, so I got up decisively, pulling my flowing dress over my shoulders. It was time to go out into the world again, to explore, to feel the hustle and bustle of the city and to discover a place where I could enjoy a real meal.

On one of the most beautiful islands in the world, everything seemed to be calling me to savour every moment.

I took the essential oil from the bottle and touched my wrists, inhaling the delicate aroma. It was as if I were taking a piece of tranquillity with me, an amulet of the moment I had just experienced.

I left the room, leaving the silence behind and setting off in search of a new place, a corner of the world that would bring me another story. Bali was waiting for me, and I was ready to answer its call.

I step out onto the street – the same mix of revving engines, laughter and voices intertwining in a continuous flow. Everything seems alive, like an unusual orchestra conducted by the rhythm of Bali.

I feel small and yet connected to something bigger, to the energy that flows non-stop around me. I let my steps settle into the rhythm of the street, absorbing the unique pulse of this place.

I walk without a clear destination, letting myself be guided by instinct, until something catches my eye – a shop window bathed in colours, which seems to call me like a magnet. It’s a pastry shop. The cakes, perfectly arranged, wink at me from behind the glass. I can almost feel myself being pulled inside, like an invisible force whispering to me to take a sweet moment.

I look for an excuse for my cravings, but I can’t find one. In a few minutes, I leave with five cakes to go. Five – because I couldn’t choose.

I hold them in my arms like a trophy, breathing in their sweet aroma. A childish smile spreads across my lips. Sometimes, a few

cakes are all you need to remember to enjoy life – without waiting for anyone's permission.

Later, I come across a small, modest warung with just a few wooden tables and plastic chairs arranged randomly. The atmosphere seems improvised but authentic, with a special charm – as if time has stopped to celebrate the simplicity of life.

Light bulbs hang carelessly over empty tables, and the inviting smell of freshly cooked food tickles my senses. In the background, unfamiliar voices mingle in a gentle murmur, bringing me a subtle peace.

I sit down at a table near the wall, where a fan provides a pleasant breeze. I order slow-cooked chicken bathed in an aromatic sauce, accompanied by mushrooms, broccoli and a serving of rice. The iced tea is a refreshing treat. I look around, letting myself be enveloped by the vibe of the place, the pleasant hustle and bustle of people coming and going, the daily rhythm of Bali.

The dishes are simple but incredibly tasty – every bite fills my taste buds with intense flavours, and the combination of spices makes me smile. Each ingredient seems to have been carefully chosen, and in the taste of each bite, I can feel the hands of those who cooked it. The bill – 40,000 IDR (~2.5 euros) – leaves me with a feeling of gratitude for the small joys that life offers.

When I step back out onto the street, the night has changed everything. The city now pulsates with warm lights and playful shadows, a spectacle that keeps your eyes raised. The buildings dance in the reflection of the roads, and the scooters that criss-cross the streets seem part of a spontaneous but perfectly synchronised choreography.

‘A fascinating dance of travellers on two wheels,’ I say to myself, thinking of the Ha Giang Loop and letting a dreamy smile escape me. In the light of the city, every moment is an invitation to freedom, to discovery.

Back in my room, I am faced with the eternal question of women: 'What should I wear?'

I rummage through my luggage, taking out every piece of clothing. Slightly wrinkled T-shirts, attractive shorts, a few flowing dresses... but nothing seems to be 'that' perfect outfit for the evening ahead.

Finally, my hands stop on the green dress – the one I wore to the party in Saigon. I chose it without hesitation. It's light, comfortable, perfect for an evening when I want to dance until I drop. Fragments of the Vietnamese night touch my skin like a breeze, and a smile blossoms on my lips.

I open the GoJek app and order a scooter. When I see the price – less than 1 euro – I can't help but smile. I get on and we venture through the traffic. At night, Bali changes its pulse – faster, wilder, more hypnotic. Street lights, lanterns and colourful advertisements blend into a vibrant spectacle.

On the road, traffic flows smoothly, between buildings and people, like in a dream. The atmosphere is electric, as if the city itself were dancing. It's like I've landed in the middle of a carnival – vivid colours, invisible music in the air, an energy that grabs you and won't let go.

Bali pulsates with life, and I let myself be carried away by the energy of this place. Everything seems to be taken from a script that is being written before my eyes.

I arrive in front of Signature Al Jazerah Seminyak, and the image stops me in my tracks. The building, imposing and gently lit, seems to tell a story in every carved detail. The first reaction that comes to mind is simple: wow!

The marble steps stretch wide towards an entrance bathed in the evening light, like a silent invitation. I walk slowly, feeling that I am entering a world where time flows differently, where everything is refined. When I enter the main hall, silence envelops me. It is a silence that does not make you uncomfortable, but envelops you.

Two girls in black uniforms with gold inserts smile politely at me from the reception desk. I ask them about the dance class, and one of them replies in a calm voice, matching the decor:

“Go up the stairs to the second floor, walk down the long hallway to the end, then turn left, and after a few steps, you will find the salon on your right.”

I bow my head, thank her and head for the stairs. I feel my heart beating faster with anticipation. I pass by chandeliers that illuminate the walls decorated with traditional motifs. With each step, I let myself be caught up in the atmosphere of this place, which seems to have come out of an oriental story, but I feel a smouldering hesitation. I walk down the long corridors, as if the place itself were a metaphor for my thoughts – wandering, but searching for a destination.

I stop. I look around. I'm lost. I smile – naturally. How else? I take a few more steps and accidentally enter a bathroom. The mosaic-tiled walls and gold-framed mirrors reflect a diffused light that makes you feel good for no reason. Finally, I reach the end of the corridor and turn left, as the receptionist told me to. The door to the dance hall is in front of me. I stop for a second, take a deep breath, and gently press the handle.

When the door opens, I am struck by another world. Sensual kizomba music floats in the air, and the discreetly lit room has a special charm. In the middle of the dance floor, a few couples move slowly, in a perfect balance between elegance and passion. The carefully arranged tables with upholstered chairs create an intimate and welcoming space.

I take another breath and step inside. The energy of the place envelops me – calm but vibrant. It's not just a dance hall, it's a sanctuary. Although I feel slightly intimidated, I can't help but smile. I know I'm exactly where I need to be.

I sit down at a table near the entrance, far enough away from the dance floor, but close enough.

In the middle of the ring, a small man. He wears a white shirt and a pair of blue jeans. His body is not perfect, but he has a special charm. His dance... has a grace that defies time and gravity. His movements are slow, confident, full of a forgotten elegance. An ancient and secret language that everyone feels, but no one can understand. The dim light outlines his features, and every gaze in the room gravitates towards him.

People greet him, admire him, but he remains calm, focused, as if he were carrying a secret of his own. 'Who could he be?' I wonder, fascinated. My fingers tremble slightly, as if waiting for a silent call, written in dance steps.

Then I hear one of the waiters whispering to another guest:

"It's Nadir."

Nadir. The name has something mysterious about it, like something out of a story. I repeat it in my mind, and each syllable seems to have its own vibration. Like an echo from another life. I continue to watch him. Everyone knows him, but for me, tonight, he is an enigma.

After a few moments, a girl approaches me. Her warm but professional smile pulls me out of my thoughts.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asks in a pleasant voice.

"No, not now," I reply politely, slightly embarrassed that she caught me so lost in contemplation.

Suddenly, Nadir turns his gaze towards me. His black eyes are an abyss in which time ceases to flow, and for a moment, I feel seen in a way that unsettles me. Before I realise it, he is in front of me and holds out his hand.

"Would you like to dance?" he asks in a calm, almost hypnotic voice.

I freeze, feeling all eyes in the room on me. For a second, I hesitate. The reflex to run away runs through me like a cold current, but it's already too late. Something in his gaze tells me that refusal is not an option.

“Yes,” I reply without thinking too much and let my hand slip into his.

On the dance floor, my movements are clumsy, but Nadir seems to sense every hesitation and turns it into something fluid. He doesn't talk much, but his every gesture is a silent guide, an encouragement.

“It doesn't have to be perfect,” he whispers, his low, calm voice blending with the rhythm of the music. “Just let yourself go with the moment.”

“That's easy to say,” I reply, trying to hide my shyness. “But I feel like I have two left feet.”

He laughs briefly, sincerely, and squeezes my hand gently, as if to convey a message.

“Trust me.”

Then I let go. My feet stop searching for safety, and my body finally begins to listen to the music. Slowly, our rhythm becomes harmonious, and the world around us disappears. It is just the music, Nadir, and the unexpected calm that arises within me.

When the dance ends, I remain motionless for a moment, as if the whole world had stopped with the music. *‘Life is not about being perfect. It's about having the courage to be yourself,’* he had said.

“Thank you,” I say, and he nods slightly before walking away.

Nadir disappears among the dancers, like smoke that dissipates before you can catch it.

I take a deep breath. The music continues, but it no longer has the same intensity for me. I know now: it's not about the music, nor about Nadir. It's about me.

Another man, with a broad smile, invites me to dance. I hesitate for a second, but then I reach out my hand. On the dance floor, I'm no longer looking for perfection. I'm there, present, light, free.

Throughout the evening, I dance with other partners – an elegant Frenchman, a passionate Australian. But I know that the moment with Nadir was complete, whole, unique.

In the mirror, I catch my reflection and remember his words: 'Life is not about being perfect. It's about having the courage to be yourself.'

That evening, I didn't just dance with Nadir. I danced with myself. Life doesn't demand perfection. It only demands courage. And now, I feel I have the courage to be myself.

When I get up to leave, I feel a new lightness within me. Not just because I danced, but because I found myself. Nadir's gaze hid a truth that was difficult to decipher, but his magic was not in his dance steps – it was in the way he made you feel: *seen, enough, free*.

I leave Signature Al Jazerah with small steps, savouring the last details. The chandeliers, the shadows and the sober elegance seem to whisper to me to stay, but I feel that the evening has already told its story.

I walk down the stairs, letting my thoughts drift freely. 'Will I ever come back here?' I wonder, but I'm not looking for an answer. Some moments are meant to be unique, experienced only once, but cherished for a lifetime.

In the car park, I take out my phone and order a scooter through GoJek. In a few minutes, a friendly-looking boy arrives to pick me up. I smile at him gratefully and climb onto the scooter. The warm night wind caresses my face, and the city seems quieter now, as if the intense pulse of the evening has subsided.

The ride to the hotel passes too quickly, as if the night is rushing to leave me alone with my thoughts. My body is on the scooter, but my soul is still dancing in the lounge, lost in rhythms that I can still feel in my chest.

I see Nadir again, taking those simple steps, but charged with an energy that is impossible to describe. I am not just thinking about him, but about the feeling he left behind – that quiet confidence, that unspoken message that I don't have to rush to be someone else.

When I get to my room, I don't feel physically tired, but something inside me craves some peace and quietness. I go straight into

the shower. I close my eyes, letting myself be enveloped by the comforting sensation of the water.

My emotions are still vibrating in my chest.

I lie down on the bed, open Netflix and try to lose myself in an episode, but the letters on the screen become just a silent background. I can't concentrate. Nadir's gaze comes back to me, and the smile that seemed to say that I already have everything I need to move forward.

'Fears,' I whisper to myself. 'Yes, that's why I'm here – to face my fears, one by one.'

Perhaps today's lesson was the first step: *to have the courage to be imperfect, but present.*

I close my eyes and, after an eternity of inner struggle, I feel that I have nothing left to prove. Perhaps healing is not about fighting the pain, but letting it go – like a wave slowly receding from the shore, erasing the traces of heavy footsteps and leaving the sand smooth, ready for new beginnings.

“We dance for laughter, we dance for tears, we dance for madness, we dance for fears, we dance for hopes, we dance for screams, we are the dancers, we create the dreams.” – Albert Einstein

4

Unexpected Rhythms in Bali

Sunday, 23rd July 2023

The morning in Bali seemed promisingly peaceful. The sun's rays penetrated the curtains, casting playful shadows on the walls, and the light, fresh air caressed my skin.

I felt liberated from complicated dreams and unsettling thoughts. After the chaos of last night's emotions, today was just Yda – without the pressure of perfection. 'Fresh as a cloud bathed in sunshine,' I smile at myself in the mirror, no longer looking for flaws.

At breakfast, the aroma of plain coffee reminds me that I won't be getting a cappuccino. But today, that doesn't bother me as much. 'Progress,' I tell myself, taking my first sip.

On my phone screen, Sawa's 'must-see' list jumps out at me. Among the places and suggestions, one word brightens my day: chocolate. A traditional chocolate factory, a few kilometres away. Why not? I catch myself smiling at the thought of a sweet day – literally.

I tie my hair in a loose bun, put on shorts and a tank top, and in a few minutes, I'm already on my scooter, letting the city envelop me. The horns, the loud advertisements and the mixed smells – sweet and pungent – flood my senses. I feel part of the island's vitality, like a grain of sand lost in the whirlwind of life.

Paradoxically, I find unexpected peace in the chaos around me. The foreign voices become a meaningless background, and for the

first time, I listen only to the silence within me. I feel that this place offers me a space where I can simply be present.

As I approach my destination, I remember that life is not always about the big moments. Sometimes, it's about the little joys that make a day worthwhile. And today... It's about chocolate and silence.

We arrive on a narrow street. The houses seem to lean on each other, and the driver stops in front of a building with shuttered windows and a massive grille, locked with a large padlock.

"But is it closed?" I ask, surprised. I check the address on my phone again, as if a magical refresh would change reality.

The driver shrugs and points to the building:

"Yes, it looks like no one is here..."

As I try to understand what is happening, a neighbour walks down the street carrying a large basket of fruit. The driver stops him, and the two exchange a few quick words in Balinese. Their tone is so gentle that I forget my disappointment for a moment.

"What did he say?" I ask curiously.

"It's Sunday," the driver replies, embarrassed. "Maybe it's a day off."

The truth hits me: I didn't even think for a second that today might be a day when the factory would be closed.

"You can call the owners," he suggests, trying to be helpful.

I let out an ironic smile. How could I call someone on their day off just for me? What am I, the Queen of England?

"No, I'm not calling them," I reply firmly.

The neighbour continues to stare at me, as if waiting for me to make a move, and the laughter of children playing on the side of the street brings me a ray of light. What's the point of getting upset?

"So, what do you want to do now?" asks the driver, raising his eyebrows.

I close my eyes for a moment. I feel the warm sun on my skin and the gentle breeze caressing my face. I make a simple decision:

"I want to take a walk."

I lose myself in the narrow streets, with no clear destination. People look at me with amused curiosity, but behind my sunglasses, I feel invisible, part of the landscape. In this anonymity, I find a new freedom.

When a huge ice cream advertisement catches my eye, I stop without hesitation. The ice cream parlour welcomes me with a sweet, childhood smell, and without thinking too much, I choose vanilla ice cream. The first bite is like being transported back to simpler times.

I sit at a small table in the corner, letting the sweetness invade my senses. My phone vibrates, but I choose to ignore it. Maybe today is not about lists or ticking off tourist attractions. Maybe today is about being.

There is something magical about the island air. Life should be like this ice cream, sweet but simple. I like this new state of being – a tranquillity I have never known before. I lack nothing, I desire nothing. I am here, authentic, without burdensome thoughts, without desires that push me forward or pull me back.

‘I follow life!’ I remember Essra's words, which now echo like a melody, like a whisper from beyond the horizon.

There is a sense of freedom in the island air that fills my soul. I feel life in every fibre of my being, with no preconceived plans, just the intensity of each moment.

‘I will do what my heart tells me,’ I say to myself, letting the moment carry me forward.

Before I leave, I stop in front of the mirror. My reflection smiles at me – relaxed, calm, perhaps even younger. I run my hand through my hair, feeling that familiar desire. ‘A change,’ I say to myself. Yes, now is the time.

With this thought, I step out onto the street. I let myself be guided by instinct, without haste, wandering among the shop windows full of hidden jewels and brightly coloured clothes. Everything seems to pulsate around me, and my heart beats at a rapid pace, as if waiting for something important.

When I see the colourful window of a salon, something draws me to it. 'Charlotta' is written on the window. The entrance greets me with a decor that seems to dance – colours, laughter and an atmosphere that makes you dream.

"How can we help you?" asks a woman with a warm smile.

"I'd like some African braids," I say, almost whispering, as if I were talking only to myself.

The woman shows me a catalogue full of spectacular options, but the price stops me. I hesitate, feeling my boldness wane. Maybe not today...

The woman seems to sense my hesitation and looks at me with empathetic kindness: "How about something simpler? Two classic braids, easy to maintain."

"Yes," I accept, without thinking too much about it.

Sitting in the chair, the desire rises to the surface like an impulse I can no longer ignore. "Change of plan. Let's do the pigtails from the catalogue."

The woman smiles. "Are you sure?"

"More sure than ever."

I close my eyes, letting the process become a ritual. The braids take shape, and each movement feels like a decision made, one more step towards who I really am.

When I open my eyes, the reflection in the mirror leaves me speechless. The change is more than physical – it's as if I'm looking at a side of myself I've never seen before.

"You look like a queen," says the hairdresser, and I can hear the sincerity in her voice.

I reach out towards the mirror, as if wanting to touch that image.

"Maybe even more than that," I reply with a smile.

I pay the 800,000 IDR and leave without saying another word. The street greets me with a fresh breeze, and the shop windows reflect a new Yda – more confident, more alive.

Two blonde girls stop next to me, looking at me admiringly.

“Where did you get them done?” one of them asks me enthusiastically.

“At Charlotta,” I reply, feeling my vanity blossom to the tips of my pigtails. “It was magical.”

At that moment, I realise that it's not just a style. It's a sign that I'm starting to choose myself.

I check Google Maps and discover that I'm going in the wrong direction. The hotel is now further away than before. But I smile – if I hadn't gotten lost, I wouldn't have found the ‘Charlotta’ salon and the moment that just transformed my day. ‘Wrong turns sometimes take you exactly where you need to be,’ I tell myself, amused.

I walk on, unhurried, guided only by curiosity. I wander among the same tempting shop windows. I go into a shop and try on a blue top that fits me perfectly. Then a little red dress that hugs my curves with enviable simplicity. But I don't buy anything. Not today...

I return to the street, and my gaze falls on a huge poster. A traditional Balinese show, Sunday evening, with dancers dressed in bright costumes and fluid movements that tell stories without words. The poster seems to glow in front of me, like an invitation.

Before I can process the thought, a man appears out of nowhere. He is young, with bright eyes and an open smile.

“Are you interested in the show?” he asks me enthusiastically, pointing to the poster.

He tells me about traditional dance, about the magical energy of Balinese stories, and his words are almost hypnotic.

“It would be a shame to miss it,” he says, leaving a warm echo in the air.

I smile slightly, but my stomach pulls me in another direction. I realise I'm hungry, so I thank him and move on. Maybe later...

Soon, I find an elegant restaurant. The place is empty, but the atmosphere has the charm of a dream taking shape at dusk. It smells of burnt wood and sea salt, and the unmistakable voice of UB40 floats

discreetly from the speakers. I sit down at a table by the window and order an avocado and tuna salad, along with a bottle of cold water.

While I wait for my salad, my phone vibrates on the table. It's Sawa:

"Hey... how was the party yesterday?"

I smile and reply:

"Hey. It was good... I stayed until around 11:00 p.m. and then left."

I let my gaze wander over the elegant decor around me – walls covered in warm shades, candles flickering on empty tables, and a familiar melody lulling the silence.

"You have to go to Ruby Red. You have an hour left," Sawa writes, always joking. "It starts at 8:00 p.m."

"It's only 5:40 p.m. here. I still have time," I reply, arranging my napkin on my lap.

"Nah, two hours then... hehe. Were there many people at the dance last night?"

I feel like laughing at his impatience.

"Yes. The hall was full at one point."

"Wow! Did you like it? Was it worth going?" he insists.

I dig my fork into the first piece of avocado in the salad that has just arrived and write, almost without thinking:

"Yeah, definitely. That location is straight out of a fairy tale."

"That's right!" he texts me immediately, and I leave my phone on the table, savouring another bite.

This dinner has the charm of a scene from a film, and every detail makes me smile. It cost me a little, but it gave me a lot – a moment that seems like something out of a dream.

I get up, pay, and slowly walk back to the hotel. On the way, the air is warm, but a light breeze caresses my skin. I absentmindedly play with the ends of my braids, smiling at my own forgetfulness: how could I have forgotten about the party?

But maybe tonight is not about dancing or parties. Maybe today is about simple moments and the joy of letting yourself be carried away by life, without plans and without pressure.

Back in my room, the dilemma of the evening greets me: what to wear? I scan my luggage again, looking for something different... and my fingers stop on the red dress – the dress I never dared to wear in Asia. I look at it for a second, hesitating. It's bold, intense, maybe too much.

But then I smile. I gently pull it out of my suitcase, caressing the fine fabric with my fingers. 'Yes, it's a winner,' I whisper, letting the dress embrace my body.

When I look in the mirror, I see a transformed Yda – confident, radiant, ready to conquer the world. 'Ruby Red, I'm coming now!' I hum, giggling. I throw my denim shirt over the dress, keeping a relaxed look for the scooter ride.

I go down to the lobby, and the receptionist looks at me with wide eyes:

"Wow! You look great!"

I thank her with a big smile, feeling her words boost my energy. The taxi arrives quickly, and the scooter glides smoothly between the cars. The breeze lifts the hem of my dress more than I would have liked, but I don't care. I tilt my head back for a second, feeling the wind of freedom on my skin. There is no room for hesitation. Not today.

I arrive at Ruby Red with a sense of change. I enter without a trace of shyness, as if the place had been waiting for me forever. The music pulsates, the lights dance among the shadows, and the atmosphere is like a dream. I feel part of the story and, for the first time, the stares around me do not bother me.

I sit down at a small table in front of the bar and take off my shirt, revealing the dress that makes me feel like a true diva. Two bartenders smile at me, and for a moment I wonder what they see in me – a mysterious stranger or a woman who radiates confidence?

The music grabs me immediately. The Latin rhythms penetrate my body, releasing all my inhibitions. Every step on the dance floor becomes a declaration of freedom. My movements are no longer just movements. They are a language. A silent conversation with life itself.

I dance with different partners – some uncertain, others so talented that the music becomes magic. With some, it feels like I'm floating; with others, I bump into their stiffness. But nothing matters. I'm here for the dance, for the vibe of the moment.

With every step, I remember Nadir's lesson: 'Dancing doesn't have to be perfect. Perfection is an illusion. The important thing is to dance.' Every clumsy move is a step forward. And I dance. With all my heart, without fear and without restraint.

At one point, an enigmatic man catches my eye and approaches me. He has an elegant posture, and his eyes are a mixture of warmth and mystery.

"Would you like to dance?" he asks in a warm voice.

I answer without hesitation:

"Sure."

On the dance floor, our dance has no beginning and no end. It is a continuous flow, and in that flow, I feel that time stands still.

"You know how to lose yourself in the music," he says to me, and his words are more than a compliment. They are an echo of my inner state. For the first time, I lose myself completely. But, paradoxically, I find myself again.

Every step is born from the vibration of the drums, every movement is like an echo of my heart. The music becomes part of me – a call I cannot and do not want to resist.

The party continues, and I dance to the rhythm of the music. I am not just dancing on the dance floor, but through life itself.

When I finally decide to leave, I feel like I have experienced a night like never before. As I leave Ruby Red, the night air envelops me in its warmth. I feel like Cinderella leaving before the spell wears off.

The island breeze caresses my face, and the world feels more alive, more full of possibilities. It's not about conquering the world, but about having the courage to dance in it. On the way to the hotel, my thoughts fly free – the music, the smell of the night and the sensation of each dance step blend into a sweet euphoria.

Back in my room, I look at myself in the mirror: my braids, my faded lipstick, and on my skin, a mixture of masculine perfumes – the memory of different partners, those who left their mark in passing, like a whisper. I no longer seek plans, I no longer chase perfection. I live in the moment.

'Today's Yda,' I whisper to myself, 'no longer counts islands. She lives them.'

Every moment of the evening seems to have melted into me, leaving behind a vibration that still burns, still shines, still warms my soul. As if life, for a moment, is no longer about moving forward or backwards. It is just a continuous flow, flowing without end.

My phone vibrates on the bedside table, waking me from my semi-reverie. I pick up the screen and smile broadly. It's Sawa, always curious, always connected:

"Hey, explorer! How was the party?" he jokes, his relaxed tone reminding me how well we get along.

"Hey... more than perfect, I'd say." I type quickly, and my smile widens. Ruby Red gave me more than a night of dancing. It was a night of transformation, a new chapter written on the dance floor.

I look at the flyers I collected today from the makeshift stand on the street and remember that I haven't studied them yet. I take advantage of the conversation and ask for his help:

"Can you help me with these, please?" I sent him, attaching a photo of the offers.

"Yes, wait a minute, adventurer! You know I love being your trusted guide," he replies immediately.

After a few minutes, the answer comes: "But which package do you want? There are several here."

I look at the long list of options and realise that I have no idea. I reply honestly:

“Yes, yes. That's the dilemma... I don't know.”

“My advice is not to buy from these guys, their prices are way too high,” he writes.

I leave the message unread, but I no longer feel the energy to make a decision tonight. It's too much. Too many islands, too many offers, too many dreams to get lost in.

I put my phone down and lie on my back. I stare at the white ceiling of the room. The spider web is in the same place...

Sawa continues to send me suggestions, and I respond mechanically. My mind wanders somewhere between island tours and moments on the dance floor. The conversation flows smoothly, but my soul remains caught up in the rhythms of the evening at Ruby Red.

“Aren't you sleepy? It's already 1:00 a.m. there,” he asks, more curious than concerned.

“Not yet. But in the morning, I have to drag myself out of bed,” I reply with a chuckle. I run my hand through my braided pigtails and remember how spontaneous today's decision was. “Did you see the haircut I got?”

“It looks great on you!” he replies enthusiastically.

“Thanks,” I quickly write, delighted by his confirmation. I tell him how much it cost, and he exclaims:

“Wow! That's pretty expensive.”

“I know. It's just a simple whim that cost 50 euros!” I reply, laughing to myself.

“But it's cool!” he adds immediately.

And at that moment, I feel that he approves of me, that he understands why I did it. Yes, it was worth every penny. I stroke my blonde pigtails, feeling that this change is more than just a look. ‘It's not about pigtails or nights of dancing, it's about the courage to live every moment as I am.’

I close my eyes, and the rhythms of Ruby Red are still dancing in my veins, reminding me that in every imperfect step there is the beauty of being alive.

After ending the conversation, I check my remaining notifications. An unexpected message from Sully appears on my screen: "Are you still alone, my love?"

His question makes me raise an eyebrow. It's childish and funny. I had almost forgotten he existed. For a moment, I feel a strange thrill, as if part of me wants to respond. But I remember that there is no place for him in my story anymore.

I look at the message without typing anything. I haven't replied to him since he turned every conversation into an absurd theatre of imaginary jealousy. 'Still alone,' I reply in my mind, but I don't touch the keyboard. I give him a "seen" without regret. If he knew how little place the past has in my story... maybe he would stop writing.

What could I say to him? Maybe I'm not alone, but exactly where I need to be. But it's not worth the effort to explain it to him.

For him, loneliness means absence.

For me, it's freedom.

A freedom I won't sacrifice for someone who sees ghosts where there are none. It's my chance to discover myself without losing myself in someone else. If the universe decides to send me someone, it will be at the right time. Until then, I belong only to myself.

I put my phone aside and open TikTok. I lose myself in videos without realising how time is passing. Images of paradise islands appear on my screen – Penida, Gili, Lombok... all floating like mirages. I know I want to touch them, to feel them under my feet. One day.

I close my eyes and let myself be carried away by the fantasy of an endless journey, as if I were already there, on a deserted beach, with the waves breaking at my feet. My feet are still throbbing from dancing, as if refusing to accept that the night is over.

I smile to myself. I remember every step, every touch, every glance exchanged on the dance floor. I feel like I've lived a lifetime

in a single evening. And that, for a moment, I allowed myself to be everything I want to be.

It is past 3:00 a.m. when sleep finally overtakes me. But before the night completely envelops me, a thought crosses my mind, like a whisper: 'How many islands are waiting to be discovered within me?'

If this night has taught me anything, it is that none of them reveal themselves except at their own pace.

All I can do is dance – with life, with myself.

I fall asleep enveloped in the magic of a night that seems endless, with the silent promise that morning will bring another adventure, another discovery.

“Don't move as fear pushes you. Move as joy urges you.” – Osho

5

Rituals, Friends and Sunsets in Bali

Monday, 24th July 2023

I woke up five minutes before my alarm went off, as if this morning was waiting for me, not the other way around. I felt like the day already knew my steps before I took them. Maybe that's what it means to live without plans – to let yourself be carried away, like a leaf in a gentle spring breeze.

Last night, I had decided to extend my stay at Casananta. This decision – spontaneous, but somehow natural – gave me the impression that all the pieces of my life were falling into place, like a cosmic puzzle. On Thursday, I was going to leave with Irina for Ubud, an idea that came up on the spur of the moment, but which gave me a sense of direction. It was as if life were weaving an invisible thread, and neither I nor Irina dared to unravel it.

At breakfast, while absentmindedly sipping my latte, my curious fingers opened the Agoda app. The first offer that caught my eye was Casananta – 14 euros per night, breakfast included. I was paying 24 euros. Was it a joke? Without wasting a second, I pressed the booking button. I felt a small personal victory, as if I had just cheated the game of life. I walked to the reception with a smile that told me everything was under control.

“I want to stay in the same room, I don't want to pack and unpack again.” The receptionist nodded, but her discreet smile seemed to tell me that she had already guessed my little trick.

That same evening, while I was burning off energy on the dance floor, dancing until I was exhausted with some nice guys, Alin's manuscript landed in my inbox.

Again. 'The manuscript...'

I couldn't believe he was still following me. Every time I think I've escaped, it comes back, like a refrain I can't get out of my head. It's as if my life is a carousel, and this book is the song that keeps it spinning non-stop.

It seems absurd to me that, while I feel like I'm reinventing myself, I have to correct a story that no longer resembles anything I know.

It's Monday, the beginning of the week, and instead of relaxing on the beach, 270 pages are waiting for me, calling out to me, begging for my attention. I sigh, feeling the weight of each page pulling me back to reality. 'When will it end?' I ask myself. And then I laugh at myself – as if my life could be devoid of stories.

Irina still hasn't given any sign of life, so I immerse myself in work, losing myself in words, phrases and corrections. After a few hours, however, the lines start dancing on the laptop screen, and I realise I need a break.

I went out to grab a quick bite to eat – kebabs and chips. The familiar flavours brought me a moment of comfort, but my thoughts were already elsewhere – on what I was about to discover. I quickly returned to my room, convinced that I would finish at least half of the book today.

But fatigue soon enveloped me, and the words began to play tricks on me. The letters on the screen mixed together like leaves carried by the wind, and my mind slipped into a dreamlike state. I closed my laptop and abandoned myself to silence. In the quiet of that afternoon, a familiar thought came back to me: 'How can I make money without working?'

I knew how crazy the question sounded, but something inside me couldn't ignore it. It was the kind of question that comes to you when you're standing on the edge of a cliff, looking into the unknown. Why

not? What if? I let these words float through my mind, like waves coming and going, without realising whether they were bringing me closer to or further away from an answer.

I smile involuntarily, letting my thoughts travel back over everything I've done so far. So many hours of work, so many compromises, so many dreams postponed... and all for what? To earn the right to a few days' holiday, only to return to the same endless cycle? Maybe I never just wanted a holiday. Maybe I wanted a life that felt like a holiday – continuous, endless, meaningful.

I remember that the same questions haunted me in Vietnam. Maybe even then, I wasn't just looking for new landscapes, but for an answer that would calm my soul. But even though I wandered through every city in that country, I found nothing clear. And now, here in Bali, the questions seem to dance around me, like old whispers that refuse to be silenced.

'Maybe my path is to make money by writing,' I tell myself, as the idea takes shape. Writing has always saved me. I find myself in words, and through stories, life seems easier, more beautiful. Maybe this could be the solution – to weave dreams with reality, to live from what I love.

Another bold idea crosses my mind: 'Should I pose for money?' It amuses me, but I don't completely reject it. Something tells me that change is possible. My new African hairstyle seems to symbolise this. It's as if something inside me has been unlocked – an invisible door, a small but important mechanism that makes me see the world through different eyes. Perhaps every day is a chance to discover a new dream, a new beginning.

But the truth is, I don't have any answers. And maybe I shouldn't be looking for them so desperately. I set out on this journey with only my savings, big dreams and small plans. I know that one day I will need a source of income. But today is not that day. Today, I allow myself not to know.

My phone vibrates on the table, pulling me out of my thoughts. I pick up the screen and see Mone's message.

"Did it take you three hours to do that hairstyle?" he asks, with the sceptical tone of an older brother who has just caught you with a new whim.

"Something like that," I reply quickly. "But I love it! I've wanted this for years."

"You're going to get a headache..." he writes, as if he's just predicted my future.

I can't help but laugh and immediately type: "Whims are essential... but I don't expect you to understand my feminine side." Then I have an idea: "And you know what, some girls stopped me on the street to tell me how cool my haircut is. One even asked me where I got it done."

Mone sends me an emoji with the eyes rolled back. "Cool. But wait until I see you in a week. You'll be pulling it out by the roots."

"You know I'm resilient. Plus, if I can't handle it, I'll just take it out, and that's that. But until then... I love my haircut. It's my new Bali look," I reply triumphantly, letting a new smile blossom on my lips.

"Okay, but how do you wash your hair?" he asks, and his reply makes me giggle.

"I wash it somehow, I manage. I'm not going to tell you all my secrets, Mone," I write. "But know that it's worth every second spent in the salon."

"Okay, okay. Just don't let me see you cutting your hair short," he adds, in a tone that seems to be trying to prevent a possible identity crisis.

I laugh to myself and end the conversation, looking at my reflection in the mirror for a few seconds. The new haircut really does have an unexpected effect. It changes something in my attitude, in the way I behave, in the way I look at myself. It's like a silent statement, a symbol of the transformation happening inside me.

It seems that it's not just new ideas that attract this haircut, but also humorous conversations with old friends. And who knows? Maybe the answers I'm looking for aren't that important. Maybe the transformation I'm going through now, however small, is enough.

Around 4:00 p.m., my phone vibrates again, pulling me out of my thoughts. It's Irina.

"See you after 5:00 p.m., near the shop on the corner of my street. What do you say?" she writes.

I abandon the manuscript – which, to be honest, was already starting to feel like a chore – and get up from the table. I don't have time for corrections now, so I scroll through the clothes in my backpack, trying to make a quick decision.

In less than an hour, I'm already there, punctual as always. At 4:55 p.m., I wait for her in front of the shop. I feel a light breeze caressing my skin, and the scent of freshly sprayed flowers floats in the air.

Irina appears shortly after, with her wide smile and a flowing dress that seems to dance in the breeze.

We stroll through the lively streets, talking about everything that comes to mind – from small things, such as the weather, to dreams and plans for the future.

We pass dozens of stalls, each laden with all kinds of objects – small islands of colour that seem to pulsate in the sunset light. The air is heavy with the scent of handmade soaps, the sweet aroma of tropical fruits and the soft sound of traditional drums playing somewhere in the distance.

"Look how beautiful these bracelets are!" I exclaim, stopping at a stall selling handmade jewellery.

Irina bends down to study them too. "You can buy one to remind you of Bali," she says, touching a white bracelet with shells with her delicate fingers.

"Maybe later. For now, I just want to take memories with me," I reply, leaving the stall behind.

In the distance, the waves of the sea can be heard lapping lazily against the shore. The sun begins to set, losing its harsh glare and bathing the sky in a warm shade of orange.

"Let's go to that terrace over there," Irina says, pointing to a place with wooden tables, simply arranged but with a perfect view of the sea. "They say you can see the most beautiful sunset here."

We sit down at a small table facing the ocean. The wind plays with my hair, and the waves seem to be the perfect accompaniment to our conversation. The golden light of the sun reflected in the water makes me feel like I'm part of a painting.

"Every time I come to the sea, I realise that sunsets are nature's way of saying goodbye in the most beautiful way possible," I tell her.

Irina smiles, and her eyes confirm that she feels the same way. "I'd say Bali really knows how to say goodbye properly."

The moment is so simple and yet so meaningful. A pleasant silence descends upon us, as if we don't need words to understand the beauty of the moment.

"I'll have jasmine tea and a salad," she says, absentmindedly leafing through the menu.

"Hmm... I'll go for a schnitzel with French fries and a mango smoothie," I say, putting the menu aside.

She raises her eyebrows, looking slightly amused. "Really? Schnitzel? Is that what you came to Bali to eat?"

I laugh. "Sometimes simplicity is the answer. I couldn't find anything like this in Vietnam. So I have to seize the moment."

The silence that follows is not at all oppressive. It's the kind of silence that comes when words are no longer necessary. The sun begins to slowly descend towards the horizon, leaving long streaks of golden light on the surface of the water.

"You know," Irina says, breaking the silence, "children in Bali are seen as reincarnated souls. Have you ever heard that?"

I look up from my smoothie. "Reincarnated? What do you mean?"

Irina rests her chin in her palm, her eyes fixed somewhere in the distance, towards the waves. “They believe that every child carries with them a part of the karma of a past life. That's why they treat them like little gods. They are sacred. A blessing.”

Their children, treated like ‘little gods,’ are a symbol of harmony. I see them laughing in the street, without expensive toys, without screens. Irina is right – everything about them is connected. I study her expression – her voice has a hint of fascination and respect.

“That explains why they are so friendly with tourists' children,” I say, thinking of the broad smiles and affectionate gestures I had seen in recent days.

Irina nods. “Exactly. Everything about them is connected. Children are pure souls, and adults try to earn a better place in their future karma through the way they treat them. They are people who live with gratitude for each day.”

I remember the small offerings on the streets – those delicate boxes made of leaves, filled with flowers, rice and scented sticks. I had seen them everywhere, but now they seemed much more meaningful.

“And all these offerings... they're part of their daily ritual, aren't they?”

“Yes. It's their way of saying thank you to the divine. Every morning begins with them, and every sunset ends with them,” she replies, smiling. “Do you understand now why they are so calm? Their life is a ceremony in itself.”

Sipping my mango smoothie, I think about how different their lives are from ours, who are used to chasing after something invisible. “It's as if their lives were a dance. No rush, no fear. Just rhythm and gratitude,” I say quietly, almost to myself.

Irina nods, her gaze lost once again in the ocean. “That's right. And you know what? I think that's one of the most beautiful lessons we can take away from here.”

Until the food arrives, we continue to discuss the differences between our lives and theirs. I feel that with every word Irina says

and every observation she makes, I begin to think more deeply about my own life.

After we finish eating, Irina tells me about a photographer friend of hers named Luke.

"He's the kind of person who can turn anything into art. He took some beautiful photos for my company. I'm sure he could do something memorable for you too," she says enthusiastically.

"Really? Do you think you could put me in touch with him?" I ask, feeling the idea light up my mind.

"Sure. I'll send you his number later."

Then Irina suggests a trip. "How about visiting an old temple? There's one I haven't seen yet, even though I've been here for two years," she says, her tone suggesting she can't wait to discover it.

"Sounds perfect! I want to go."

"Then ask Gusti, maybe he can take us on Tuesday or Wednesday," I call him right away, but his reply comes with a bit of uncertainty.

"I have an important client, but I'll try to make it work," he tells us on the phone, with the calm voice typical of Balinese people.

Irina laughs softly. "We'll see what he can do. If not, we'll find another solution." Then we completely forget about him.

The sun sinks completely into the ocean, and the terrace is lit up by the warm lights of the lanterns. The atmosphere has a special charm – that unique moment of the day when everything seems to breathe more slowly. I try to capture the beauty of that moment with my camera, but it's difficult.

"You should have an exhibition of your photos," Irina teases me, her tone challenging.

"Yes, maybe I'll do that one day," I reply, seizing on the idea.

On the way home, Irina suggests we get some artisanal ice cream. I choose mango and mint, while she opts for biscuits and caramel.

"So, how is it?" she asks me with a big smile.

"It's the best ice cream I've ever had!" I exclaim, savouring every spoonful.

"I told you you'd like it," she says, her lips slightly stained with ice cream.

We pass other stalls and shops buzzing with life, but despite the hustle and bustle, I feel a deep calm inside me. We part ways at a street corner, promising to meet again for the temple tour.

On the way to the hotel, my steps feel light, almost dancing on the pavement. My thoughts float, as if Bali has given me a moment of perfect balance. In the quiet of the room, the thoughts of the day return, floating gently over my tired body. Sometimes the most beautiful moments are the simple ones – conversations, laughter, sunsets.

The echoes of the day still dance through my mind. I lie down on the bed and, for no apparent reason, my thoughts turn to Freya. I begin to wonder what would have changed if I had come here with her, if my destiny would have been different, or if Bali would have had the same charm in her presence.

I wish I could call her, tell her about the sunset that took my breath away, about the sound of the waves that seemed to sing just for me, about how I lose myself every day in the sweet, carefree rhythm of the island.

But I already know what she would say: 'I'm sorry, Yda. I still can't.'

Freya is a shadow I carry with me. Sometimes I barely feel her; other times, she becomes a burden. But today she is just a breeze – a memory whispering to me that I am here for both of us.

Perhaps only by living these moments alone can I better understand what it means to be present – to be complete. And maybe one day I'll tell her about all this.

I slowly get out of bed and walk over to the mirror. My reflection greets me with a tired but contented smile. I look at my braided pigtails, that impeccable braid, feeling the subtle change that has begun to creep into me.

'Freya, even if you're not here, part of you is with me,' I say to her in my mind, as if she could hear me.

My body feels light, as if every cell has been recharged with the energy that only Bali can offer. The beauty of an endless journey lies not in certainties, but in the way it opens doors to the unknown – to yourself.

That night, I told myself that some journeys are more precious precisely because we travel them in our own silence. Bali is not just an island – it is a space where you discover the most hidden corners of your soul, even those you didn't know you were looking for.

And the adventure called 'Bali' is meant to be mine alone.

I close my eyes and slowly fall asleep.

“Some journeys we take with others, but the most profound ones we take alone.” – Anaïs Nin

6

Between Waves and Dreams: Desires, Regrets and Rebirths

Tuesday, 25th July 2023

I woke up with the feeling that this day was going to be special, without knowing why yet. When I sat down for breakfast, my phone started vibrating on the table, jumping slightly as if it wanted to get my attention. I smiled. ‘Messages again, at this hour? Who could it be?’ I wondered as I leaned over to see the notifications.

The message was from Irina, of course. Always organised and efficient, she had already managed to solve one of my dilemmas for the day.

“Hey. I talked to my photographer friend. You can find him on Instagram. I sent you the link. I told him about you, and he agreed to pick you up from the hotel on his scooter and take you wherever you want to go for photos. You have his account from me, so don't hesitate to text him directly.”

“Wow,” I said to myself as I read the message, trying to imagine what this ‘Son.of.sunset’ looked like. Maybe it was just another fancy nickname, but it sounded so exotic and promising. His name instantly promised me a mixture of warm colours, magnificent sunsets and adventures immortalised in perfect frames.

I quickly opened Instagram, my heart beating a little faster. When I found his profile, I was hit by a wave of emotion: incredible photos, snapshots that seemed to capture the pure essence of the island, shots of girls who looked like they had stepped out of fashion films,

magical places, wild landscapes and everything I could have wanted for a memorable day. 'So this is what Bali looks like when captured by the right eye,' I murmured, feeling my excitement grow with every image I reviewed.

I didn't think twice and wrote him a message directly: "Hi, Luke! I'm Yda, Irina's friend. She told me about you, and I'd love to take some photos together."

I left my phone on the table and tried to recover from the spell that the digital universe had cast on me. How cool would it be to have photos like that? To capture everything I was experiencing here, to capture the essence of these days of freedom, of transformation. After all, isn't that what Bali is? A collection of moments, colours and dreams?

I was so caught up in the idea of creating something beautiful with Luke, of turning my dreams into images, that my immediate reality seemed to dissolve, to disappear somewhere in the background.

The phone buzzes. It's Irina again: "Hey, I just found out that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, the workers have to come here to the villa to finish something. That means I can't come to the temple. I'll text you later with the schedule for Thursday, what time we'll leave for Ubud, depending on the workers."

I took a sip of my hot coffee and, as I was getting ready to reply, I received Luke's reply: "Hey, Yda! Irina has already told me about you. Shall we meet tomorrow morning at 9.30? I'll pick you up from the hotel. I'll show you some beautiful places. The price for one day is 1,000,000 IDR."

I couldn't help but smile, maybe a little too broadly. This was it! This was my chance to live exactly what I had been dreaming of. But the price... "1,000,000 IDR? That's a considerable amount, 60 euros," I think to myself for a moment. But as quickly as this thought appeared, I dismissed it. 'Nothing is worth more than feeling alive, experiencing moments like these,' I whisper to myself, and reply briefly and concisely: "Okay, tomorrow at 9:30 a.m. at Casananta."

Enthusiasm completely overwhelms me. I start daydreaming about the waterfall, the temple, that huge 700-year-old tree, whose roots seem to encompass the entire history of the island. I don't even notice how time flies, but I feel, for the first time in a long time, my heart beating in time with my dreams. 'It's going to be fantastic!' I say to myself, already lost in my imagination.

In my mind, the session with Luke wasn't just about pictures. It was about seeing myself as I had never seen myself before. Beautiful, free, completely alive. It seemed to me that each frame would capture not only images, but also parts of my soul – those that only open up here, in Bali. And how could I not want that? How could I not chase after a bolder, brighter version of myself?

I couldn't resist writing to Irina to tell her how excited I was. "Irina, I can't believe it! Luke seems to be a great photographer! Have you seen the pictures he takes?!"

I could almost hear her laughing. "Yes, yes, I told you. I knew you'd like him. I can't wait to see the photos you'll take. It'll be amazing!"

"But honestly, how did you find him so quickly? It's like you have superpowers," I say, grateful.

"Well, you know how it is... Sometimes you just have to let your desires fly and the Universe will take care of them for you."

"I think you're right," I reply, still trying to calm my excitement. I went up to my room, but my mind was already on tomorrow, dreaming of all the moments I would experience, the moments Luke would capture. 'Yes, tomorrow will be an unforgettable day,' I tell myself, convinced that I have made the best choice. 'It's time to go with the flow.'

I was so overwhelmed with excitement that it didn't even occur to me to tell Gusti that we weren't going with him to that temple anymore. My whole universe seemed to have been reduced to the vibration of Irina's message, and any responsibility to inform Gusti evaporated into the warm morning air. I didn't bother to ask if Irina had told him in turn – simply, the moment I read that message, the

subject was closed for me. In my mind, the action was sealed. In fact, this sequence, so trivial for some, became a dead end for me. I already had plans with Luke, and the thought of going to another temple didn't even occur to me. I wanted to be with Luke. Always with Luke! Anyway, I wouldn't have gone anywhere without Irina. But how could Gusti guess that? How could he imagine that he had simply been 'forgotten'?

The effects of this unannounced decision later fell on me, hitting with unexpected force, like a wave that knocks you over when you think you're safe on the shore.

The rest of the day was another tropical dream, spent at the beach, a decadent indulgence. I rented a sun lounger for 100,000 IDR – a bit pricey, admittedly, about 6 euros, but I consoled myself that it was worth it. It was right in front of the sea, in the front row, and I let myself be embraced by the warmth of the sun, without moving.

Everything seemed like something out of an exotic story, and I enjoyed the privilege of doing absolutely nothing. That's the life of a princess! I listened to music on my headphones, entered my zen state and lived the dream of a perfect day in paradise.

I opened my laptop with the intention of working on my manuscript, but closed it just as quickly. It was as if the whole essence of the world had been compressed into that silence of the waves.

Then came the message from Gusti, like an unannounced bomb, hitting me with incredible force. My Zen evaporated instantly, disappearing like the vapours of a dream at the first rays of reality.

"I'll come for you at 3:00 p.m. tomorrow, and then we'll go after Irina." My heart skipped a beat.

"What do you mean?" I wrote, panicked. "Didn't Irina tell you we're not going anymore?"

I waited anxiously for his reply, aware that the truth of the blow was approaching. And when it finally came, I felt the blood drain from my cheeks.

"No! I didn't talk to Irina today, I just wrote to you."

I felt the ground being pulled out from under my feet. Everything around me ceased to exist: the beach, the sea, the people... How could I not think of him? How could I have forgotten to tell him? I had already made comfortable plans with the photographer for tomorrow. Irina had her work to do with the workers. And Gusti? Well, he was left out, completely in the dark. Whose fault was it? Mine? Hers? The question haunted me, but the answer was already clear: it was my fault. I had been given a simple task and had neglected it with astonishing carelessness.

I could picture him sitting in front of the phone, trying to hide his disappointment as he formulated a polite response. Perhaps he felt humiliated, but too respectful to say so to my face. That hurt me even more.

He asks me for an explanation, asks me why I didn't let him know earlier. I sigh deeply and try to tell him that Irina told me in the morning that she couldn't come. That I don't know any other details. I try to cover it up with words, but I feel every word hitting his silence like a cold wall.

"But do you still want to go to Ubud on Thursday?" he asks, as if trying to salvage a shred of hope.

"Yes, I think so. You'll have to talk to Irina more. I don't know the details."

I felt shame invading me, infiltrating every cell of my body. It was as if I had betrayed this man, who had always been an example of patience and kindness. Without wanting to, without meaning to, I had led him on.

I could almost feel his gaze lost on a crowded street. Maybe he was wringing his hands on the phone, wondering whether to call me again. Or maybe he had given up, thinking he had simply been overlooked – a guide too quiet for a tourist too busy. In the imaginary silence of the moment, I could feel his sadness, a strange mixture of shame and dignity that crushed me.

After talking to him, I felt myself sinking into a pit of thoughts. I was falling from that *Zen* state into one of anxiety, as if someone had suddenly pulled the curtain from my paradise. And that wasn't all. I was about to receive a message... from Irina.

I turned off my phone and gathered my things in silence.

I don't even know how I got to my room. I threw myself onto the bed, exhausted, trying to figure out how I could have completely ignored this responsibility. I was bombarded with questions, regrets, and imaginary apologies. 'How could I have been so caught up in the excitement of meeting Luke that I completely forgot about the rest of the world?' But... it was too late. The deed was done, and the consequences were taking their toll. All the charm of paradise dissolved in that cloud of guilt.

When Irina's message arrived, I waited for it like a final verdict:

"Yda... Don't do this again! You're making Gusti the driver call me to ask about the temple. I wrote to you this morning that I can't because I'm busy."

The words were powerful and hit home. They were painful, agonising.

Irina's words were not just a rebuke – they seemed to bring to light that old insecurity, that feeling that no matter how hard I tried, my mistakes would always outweigh my successes. It wasn't just about Gusti, or even the temple. It was about me, about my constant struggle to be good enough for others.

I tried to respond calmly, to explain that it wasn't my intention. But I knew that the truth was already irrelevant, that all that mattered was that I had made a mistake.

"I don't know what he understood. I'm sorry. Honestly..." And it was true, I felt regret in every fibre of my body. Too late, though, for apologies. Far too late.

Irina was always the organised one, and I knew she expected more from me, but today I hadn't been able to give her that 'more'.

Irina didn't answer. I knew she was upset; I could feel it, even though I was far away from her. I felt the coldness of her words hitting me and awakening all those old emotions, those insecurities that had been haunting me for years. I was in paradise, but I felt the coldness of reality freezing me from the inside.

For a while, I paced around the bed like a caged lion until I was exhausted from thinking so much. I collapsed onto the mattress, trying to free my mind from the chaos I had created. But no matter how hard I tried, the thoughts clung to me like stubborn shadows. 'You can't change the past, Yda,' I repeated to myself. And yet, how I wished I could! Today, in my tropical paradise, I felt lost in my own insecurities.

Lying on the bed, I listened to the distant hum of the city. The sound was hypnotic, but at the same time, every car horn or engine roar seemed to remind me of the mistakes I had made. My body felt heavy, as if all these emotions had turned into stones tied to my soul. The thought of Gusti and how I had left him out of the picture haunted me. I tried to lie to myself that it was just a misunderstanding, a trivial incident, but the truth was that I had completely ignored him. My arrogance, or perhaps just my recklessness, had turned him into a collateral victim of my enthusiasm for meeting Luke.

'How could I have been so selfish?' I asked myself. The more I tried to detach myself from this thought, the deeper it seemed to dig into my mind, like a thorn in my flesh. I imagined Gusti's disappointed expression, that mixture of confusion and sadness that people feel when they realise they have been ignored. And it hurt me. Because, in fact, all I want is to be the person who brings joy to those around me, not disappointment.

I was caught up in this inner struggle, like in a whirlpool, when I felt my phone vibrate – it was Marty. It was like a lifeline thrown into a stormy sea. I clung to him, in our conversation about nothing and everything, to escape the weight of my own guilt. But as we talked, I

realised that Marty was, in fact, just another reflection of my escape from myself. Another escape, another attempt not to really look in the mirror.

Talking to Marty is like an empty room where I can lie down on the floor and just breathe. No questions, no explanations. As I laughed at his jokes, I felt a relief I didn't even know I was looking for. But somewhere in the back of my mind, I realised that laughter was just an escape. I always feel lighter with Marty, but never completely free. It was just a break, a moment when I allowed myself to be childish before returning to my responsibilities.

'Marty, how do you manage to never feel suffocated by your own mistakes?' I wanted to ask him, but the words stuck in my throat. It was easier to keep the conversations superficial – not to dig too deep into myself or others.

And yet, he helped me. He had given me that little escape hatch through which I was able to breathe again. He made me laugh, he made me stop struggling, even if only for a few moments. Strangely, talking to him reminded me that life is full of fleeting moments, that sometimes people appear in our lives to save us from ourselves, at least for a moment.

And maybe that's the beauty of life – learning to forgive myself, accepting that I will make mistakes, that I will disappoint people, that I will leave things unfinished. That sometimes, I will be so absorbed in my own happiness that I will forget about others. And yet, that does not completely define me. It is not the mistake itself that is the problem, but my inability to come to terms with it, to ask for forgiveness, to move on with an open heart.

I turned over to the other side, trying to find a more comfortable position, both in bed and in my mind. I thought about the beach I had left behind, the waves that washed away my footprints, and the sun that had warmed me today. I imagined how each wave took away a part of my guilt, carrying it far away, out to sea, where perhaps I would no longer feel its burden. And just as sand always remains

under water, I knew that my regrets would not disappear completely. But the waves promised me something more important: *that I could start again, each time, with a clean shore.*

Today I learned that it's not enough to chase your own dreams; *you have to make sure you don't trample on the dreams of others along the way.* And yet, I also understood that guilt doesn't change anything – only actions can.

Maybe I can't fix everything I did wrong today, but I can try to make tomorrow a better day.

And that was all I could ask of myself.

And even if tomorrow brings other challenges, other mistakes, I've decided to believe that I can start again. 'Tomorrow, Yda,' I whispered to myself, 'tomorrow you'll be you again. And today... Today, you're just a version of yourself in the process of learning.'

Marty, Gusti, Irina, Luke, the beach, the waves, they were all pieces of a bigger puzzle, of a story I was still writing and which, like any good story, also needed moments of doubt and mistakes. Before falling asleep, I accepted that I cannot change the past, but I can choose what kind of future I will create from it.

“Life is what we make of it.” – Goethe

The True Pulse of Adventure

Wednesday, 26th July 2023

Today is Luke's day.

This thought lifts me out of bed before the alarm has a chance to do its job. The night was short and restless, but I decided not to let my mind wander through the labyrinths of yesterday.

I pressed that imaginary 'delete' button and promised myself I wouldn't look back. Today is a new page, an adventure waiting to be written.

I go down for breakfast, and every sip of coffee awakens my senses, flooding my being with the energy I need for the day ahead. My thoughts race ahead of time, imagining all the moments I will experience with him.

At 9:20, I receive a message: "I'm on my way, stopping at the petrol station, and then I'll be there."

I like Luke's almost Germanic punctuality. In a chaotic, uncertain world, the fact that he keeps his word gives me a comforting feeling, like a point of support in the middle of a storm.

My hands feel slightly sweaty with excitement, as if I'm back on my first day of school. Meeting Luke isn't just a photo shoot; it's a challenge for me – to see myself through someone else's eyes, to let my guard down.

I go downstairs and finally see him. The 'surprise of the day' – Luke, the renowned photographer who seems to defy everything. I wasn't expecting anything, but watching him waiting by his scooter,

with his unruly hair and curls that seem to dance in the breeze, I realise he's more than I could have imagined.

He has that mysterious air of an artist, an irresistible charisma, a rare combination of a boy's fragility and a man's confidence. He's not at all the typical type you'd find on the streets of Bali.

No, he seems to have stepped out of an exotic story, like a character who stubbornly remains alive in the reader's imagination.

On the scooter, behind him, I feel free. The 35-minute drive passes in the blink of an eye. The vibrations of the engine run through every fibre of my body, and the wind frees all the thoughts that were trapped in yesterday.

I feel everything becoming clearer, more alive, as if the very essence of this island is filtering through my veins. 'Yes, this is Bali,' I say to myself, 'this is the feeling I've dreamed of so many times.'

Taman Ayun Temple

The first stop of the day is Taman Ayun Temple, a place that seems to exude a mystical aura, an ancient and profound energy, almost palpable.

At the entrance, the gatekeeper gives me an appraising look and tells me that my outfit is not suitable for entry. But I am not bothered at all; on the contrary, I was already aware of these strict rules, and I respect their culture.

With a quiet smile, I take the green scarf out of my backpack, prepared especially for such moments. I gracefully wrap it around me, turning it into an improvised dress, with an elegant knot at the back of my neck. I feel as if I am performing a small ritual of adaptation, a small gesture towards the sacredness of this place.

After receiving the gatekeeper's approval and paying the entrance fee, I step inside and feel the silence of the temple flood my senses. The air is heavy with the scent of incense sticks, and the lush green of the gardens seems more vivid than any colour I have ever seen.

Luke follows me closely, and in his gaze I sense an almost reverential attention to the place. Every step I take seems to bring me closer to a hidden world, as if I were invited to discover a well-kept secret.

We stop in front of one of the temples, and Luke begins to do his job as a photographer with disarming naturalness. He shows me the perfect spots, guiding me patiently, telling me how to position my body, how to look up at the sky or stretch out my arms.

I feel his warm presence behind me and, although he doesn't say much, his every gesture gives me a sense of security and confidence.

I feel like we are part of the same dance.

Standing there, surrounded by the silence of the temple, with my green scarf fluttering gently in the breeze, I feel like I am becoming part of a living painting.

Everything seems to be taken from another world, from a story thousands of years old. Luke's gaze captures every detail – my African-style braids, the improvised knot of my scarf, the contrast between my tanned skin and the stones of the temple.

The photos turn out incredible, a true reflection of the magical moment we are experiencing. It's as if, for a few moments, I have become the main character in a legend.

"You have a special way of making your mark on the landscape," says Luke, his voice gentle, as if he were making an observation rather than a compliment. I respond with a smile, feeling a wave of gratitude.

At that moment, I feel connected not only to the temple, but also to myself, to my authentic, purely feminine essence, without masks, without worries.

As I watch his precise movements, I feel an invisible thread forming between us. It's an admiration that goes beyond his talent – it's something deeper, but still undefined. What does that calm smile hide?

We circle around the temple, feeling its energy, capturing the best angles. Today, the temple is closed to the public. I gaze at it for a long time while Luke does his job, capturing the last images.

‘Some things are more beautiful when they remain closed, mysterious,’ I whisper to myself.

A wave of peace washes over me, and I suddenly understand that the temple's gift has already been given to me. It wasn't something visible, but a deep tranquillity that stays with me.

Then we leave for our next destination. I sit quietly on the scooter, absorbing all the beauty around me, and my thoughts fly to the efforts I made to get here.

‘This island is really beautiful,’ I whisper to myself, unaware of the hidden truth of simple whispers. At that moment, nothing else matters.

Banyan Ancient Tree

The second stop is in front of a silent giant: the Banyan Ancient Tree, a colossus that seems to stretch its roots into the very essence of the earth.

An ancient presence, radiating wisdom and strength, as if it had seen entire worlds pass by it over the course of its 700 years of existence. I feel tiny in front of it, like a grain of sand in front of a mountain, and yet, at the same time, I feel that I belong to it, that I am part of its legend.

I touch its bark, and its rough, whitish texture sends shivers down my spine. It seems that every crack tells a story, every knot in the wood represents a lesson.

Luke explains the history of the tree to me, telling me how it represents the cycle of life and death, about the belief that the spirits of ancestors dwell in it, and about the spiritual energy it emanates. Each of his words seems to dissolve into the air charged with mystery, merging with the trembling leaves of the tree.

I change my outfit, putting a denim shirt over my tank top, as if each photo shoot were a new chapter to be written. I am so full of energy, so alive, that I feel like jumping and dancing around Luke.

"You feel part of it, don't you?" Luke asks, and I nod, unable to put into words that feeling of connection, of belonging. It's as if, in front of this tree, all my anxieties dissolve, become irrelevant, and I turn into a thread of energy, an extension of the branches that seem to touch the sky. Luke looks at me as if he sees something I don't see yet.

I run my fingers over the rough bark again, and for a moment I wonder: 'If Banyan has endured 700 years, through storms and droughts, can I at least endure the storm within myself? Is that the key – to stretch your roots deep and accept that the winds will come anyway?'

At one point, the wind starts to blow harder, and the leaves of the tree rustle, as if trying to whisper a secret to me. I find myself enveloped in a reverie, where time expands and contracts endlessly, and I feel transported to another reality, one where all that matters is this moment.

"This is a place where people seek peace," Luke tells me, and I realise that, in fact, I was seeking it too. And maybe, for a moment, in the arms of this tree, I found it.

We take a selfie before leaving, and his charming smile is reflected in the camera lens. "You look like my male version," I say, laughing. I can't help but marvel at how well we fit together.

As we walk away, I look back at the Banyan, grateful for this encounter. It's not just a tree. It's a teacher, a protector, a symbol of eternity in an ever-changing world.

And maybe today I learned an important lesson too – that true power doesn't come from strength, but from the ability to stay anchored in your essence, no matter what winds blow around you.

We are back on the scooter, and the silence that surrounds us feels like a silent embrace. Behind Luke, I feel safe, as if the steady

rhythm of the engine is synchronised with my heartbeat. I notice how quiet he is – he doesn't speak unless asked, and he doesn't try to fill the space with unnecessary words.

He seems like the kind of person who prefers to listen, to absorb every detail of the world around him. I realise that I am attracted to him precisely because he lets me be myself, without feeling pressured to offer him more than I am.

Lake Lake Waterfall

Our final destination is Lake Lake waterfall. The road there is long, but the landscape seems to open up before us like a vibrant tapestry of greenery, a palette of colours that floods my gaze.

The moment we pull into a car park, I already feel disconnected from the world and ready to immerse myself in this corner of paradise.

I enter the small bar with tables and politely decline the girls' offer of a refreshing drink. I don't want anything that will slow my pulse; I want to stay present in the moment.

I pay the entrance fee, change out of my swimsuit in the nearby toilet, letting the green scarf fall over my shoulders in a careless but natural gesture. 'That's what a model does, she changes her outfit according to the location, right?' I think to myself and can't help but smile. If there's one thing I've learned so far, it's that life itself is a series of changes of scenery.

Luke warns me that we have a 15-minute descent down a steep path ahead of us. I look at my flip-flops and smile – I am far from being equipped for the jungle. Luke, with his trainers, seems much more prepared for adventure.

We descend together, passing through the dense forest, and the rustling of the leaves and the sound of water in the distance give me the feeling that I am entering a magical world, one where anything is possible.

We cross a bamboo bridge and finally arrive at the waterfall that reveals itself before us.

Looking at it, I am speechless. It is exactly as I had seen it in pictures, but reality has a power of its own, one that takes your breath away. The water crashes down with force, and the cold spray reaches me, awakening every cell in my body.

'I'm here, right here,' I say to myself, almost unable to believe it. For a few minutes, it's just the two of us, the waterfall and its almost hypnotic roar.

"Are you ready?" Luke asks me, and I nod enthusiastically. We start the photo session, each frame looking like something out of a dream. Every angle, every smile, every moment becomes a memorable memory. We then climb a small path to get another angle, and from there, the view is truly magnificent.

The sound of the waterfall becomes a song of nature, and I feel like I could stay here forever.

In another universe, maybe I would stay here, in this corner of paradise, without thinking about anything else.

Suddenly, a female voice interrupts my reverie: "There's a snake behind you!"

"What?" And in the next moment, everything moves too fast – I jump back onto a large rock and feel Luke's arm around me, holding me tightly, like a protective shield. Only when I calm down do I realise that it was just a baby snake that quickly retreated into the bushes.

I look at Luke and notice that he is a little pale. He looks up at me, and his expression betrays a sincere concern that warms my heart. But the adrenaline of the moment makes me laugh.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his eyes wide open, sparkling with concern.

"Yes, I'm fine!" I reply, as my laughter becomes louder and more liberating.

This experience – authentic, unexpected – has made the waterfall one of my favourite destinations. Perhaps it was the danger that made

me feel more acutely that I am alive, that every second counts, that the moments that take your breath away are the ones worth living.

“Do you want to take more pictures?” he asks me, and I nod, this time with a little more restraint. But I feel that the moment has already been captured in my soul.

I realised then how fragile the seconds that connect us to a safe world are. A single gesture, a wrong move, and everything could change. In Luke's hand, I felt protected for the first time in a long time, but also ashamed of my own carelessness.

For a moment, I realised that my fragility – which had so often made me feel vulnerable – was also what connected me deeply to the world around me. It was both a weakness and a strength.

We got ready to leave, and I realised that Luke had kept his promise – he had shown me three unique places, each more surprising than the last. Now it was time to go back.

“Have we really come this far?” I ask, checking my phone and discovering that we have a 75-minute journey back ahead of us. But distances lose their meaning when you live life to the full. Time becomes elastic – it expands, contracts, changing shape depending on how alive you feel in each moment.

I ask Luke if he can take some pictures of me on the scooter when we get to the hotel. He looks in the rear-view mirror and smiles at me:

“Good thing you told me now, I know the perfect place for pictures. We won't take them at the hotel.”

We deviate from the route, and I find myself in a field with rice paddies and palm trees, a landscape so beautiful it looks like something out of an impressionist painting. Here, Luke shows his true mastery as a photographer, capturing every detail of my silhouette, the scooter, the palm leaves swaying in the wind. I simply feel like a true goddess of nature.

“Let's make a video with the scooter on this narrow path,” Luke says, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“Really?” I ask, my heart beating faster. But how could I refuse such a challenge? So we set off on that little winding road, and my heart skips a beat every time the scooter's wheel seems to slide dangerously close to the edge of the stream.

We reach the end, laughing like two children who have just done something naughty. But when we check the footage, we discover that Luke forgot to press ‘record’.

“I can't believe it,” he says, amazed, but then he smiles again: “Let's do it again, in reverse!”

And so we did, reliving the same adventure, even more intensely this time. Our smiles, the sparkle in our eyes, the rustling of the leaves – everything was more vivid, more real than anything we had ever experienced before.

When we finally got back to the hotel, I felt like I had lived a whole life in a single day. I gratefully hand him the money, and he puts it in his pocket without counting it.

“Aren't you going to check it?” I ask him.

“I trust you,” he says, smiling. And at that moment, I feel that everything that today has meant – the experience, the adventure, the bond created between us – is worth more than anything else.

I thank him for everything and, watching him leave, I think that although our paths may never cross again, the memory of this day will remain forever alive in my heart.

I arrive in my room, tired but happy, with a smile lighting up my face. The hot water from the shower gently caresses my skin. I close my eyes and hum a tune, letting myself be enveloped by the warmth that relaxes my muscles.

I am happy. A pure, simple happiness, as if the whole world had gathered around me in a silent embrace.

After my shower, I lie down on the bed, my hair wet and my mind still agitated by the events of the day.

My phone screen lights up, revealing several messages from Irina. I feel a pang of guilt – caught up with Luke, I completely forgot about the rest of the world: my plans for tomorrow, Gusti, everything.

And yet, in a way, perhaps for the first time, I managed to truly live in the ‘now.’ Without thinking about what’s next, without remembering that there is anything other than the present moment. Just me, the day that has passed, and the quiet of this moment.

My phone screen vibrates, bringing me back to the reality of tomorrow. I open the messages:

“Hey. Tomorrow at 4:00 p.m. we’re leaving for Ubud.”

“Great. Are we leaving from your place?”

“Yes. Gusti’s brother will take us. The price is 125,000 IDR per person.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow.”

I close my phone and stare at the ceiling for a few moments, listening to my heartbeat and my own breathing. I realise that I was so caught up in the beauty of today’s moments that I forgot to worry, to fret, to doubt myself.

Maybe that’s what it means to be truly alive – to be present in every second, without letting your mind race forward or backwards.

I’m hungry, so I go out to eat. I come back with the intention of working on my manuscript and open my laptop, but the words blur before my tired eyes, losing their meaning.

I abandon the idea, feeling that today is not a day for corrections and effort. Today is a day just for me – to breathe, to lose myself in time and find myself again.

I open the photo gallery and lose myself in the images Luke sent me. Each photo tells a story – a moment captured in a second, a fragment of eternity. I look at them with a smile on my face, proud of the places I discovered and the emotions I experienced.

I send a few photos to my friends, sharing my joy, and soon I start receiving messages back. Among them is a message from Ralu:

“What an incredible day you had!” she writes, and the enthusiasm in her words reminds me how special these moments were. It's nice to know that your joy can resonate with others.

I don't continue the conversation; I let it float away into nothingness, but one thought remains: modelling. It's like a flame flickering somewhere deep inside, impossible to extinguish. Part of me still dreams of big, bold things, and that flame whispers to me that my journey is not over.

I lie down on the bed and close my eyes, but my mind refuses to be quiet. I return to the moments of the day: Luke's smile, the tranquillity of the temple, the power of the Banyan tree, the beauty of the waterfall and the adrenaline rush when I felt the snake at my feet. They all mix together in a kaleidoscope of emotions that dance frantically.

‘What if?’ I ask myself. “What if I became a model? What if I continued to travel, to pose, to live every day with this intensity?” A smile blossoms on my lips in the darkness. I may not have all the answers, but today I allow myself to dream.

Closing my eyes, my thoughts turn to tomorrow. What surprises does this island have in store for me? And will I be ready to receive them, to live them as I lived today? I only know that I don't want to be the same anymore – every breath must change me.

Late at night, I fall asleep with an image in my mind: me, posing on a tropical island, surrounded by turquoise waters, with the sun's rays caressing my skin. And as sleep overtakes me, I understand that the most beautiful dreams are the ones we begin to live before we fall asleep.

And today I learned that happiness comes from simple but lively moments. And for the first time, I no longer feel the fear of believing that anything is possible.

“It doesn't matter how slowly you go, as long as you don't stop.” – Confucius

8

The Last Embrace of the Past

Thursday, 27th July 2023

I woke up light as a feather, as if all the worries of the past had melted away in the warm morning air. A smile appeared on my lips before I even opened my eyes, and I let myself be overwhelmed by this feeling of freedom.

After my usual ritual – shower, moisturising, morning dance – I went down to the same breakfast at Casananta. The fluffy omelette and coffee with milk warm my soul.

My phone is silent; there are no messages, nothing to disturb my peace. I smile at everyone around me – the staff, the sleepy-faced tourists – people who seem lost in their thoughts.

Today is a new day, and I feel in every cell of my body that another unknown adventure awaits me.

Returning to my room, I realise that I should wax – natural, feminine details that you can't hide from, even in Bali. I take care of that while my thoughts fly in all directions, lost among my memories and plans.

Time passes slowly, but I'm in no hurry. I pack all my things, hand in my room key at around 11:00 a.m. and ask the receptionist to keep my luggage until tonight. She places it in a room next to the reception and locks the door behind her with great care, as if guarding a treasure.

I smile – there's nothing valuable in there, just clothes, cosmetics, beautiful memories wrapped in fabric. But there's no point in telling her that. Everyone has their own security rituals, their own fears.

Another girl carefully checks the room I left behind, making sure everything is in order, that I haven't left any trace of my presence there.

I keep my laptop and retreat to the first-floor lobby, where I had seen a comfortable sofa that I had always wanted to take advantage of but never found the time. Now I do. The hours between me and my meeting with Irina stretch out before me like a blank canvas, and I decide to fill them, to be productive.

I open my laptop and try to immerse myself in the manuscript. It's a silent battle, a struggle between the desire to create and the resistance of a text that seems to refuse to come to life. 'Why is this book so difficult to reveal?' I ask myself as I correct sentence after sentence.

I receive a message from Irina: our departure for Ubud has been postponed until 5:00 p.m. I smile – I have even more time to spend with the pages of this little undiscovered treasure.

Determined not to waste my day, I decide to eat at the hotel restaurant, without going out into the stifling heat outside. I order garlic bruschetta and a mango shake – a little treat.

Turning around, I discover a charming terrace decorated with statuettes and small trees. A corner of the world I didn't even know existed, hidden in plain sight. I sit there for a few moments, but the noise of the street disturbs my concentration. I return to the hall on the first floor; I am filled with the desire to finish my manuscript.

I look at the text in front of me and realise that it is riddled with mistakes – the letters danced chaotically, leaving incoherent, indecipherable marks. I try to put them in order, to bring meaning to their world. 'Why is it so difficult?' I ask myself, but I continue, driven by a kind of stubborn determination.

At 4:20 p.m., I call a taxi, retrieve my luggage from the darkroom and head to Irina's. I wait for her in front of the shop – I arrived too early, but she shows up pretty quickly. We look at each other and smile, without mentioning anything about the 'miracle phase' of the past few days. It's as if that moment never happened – both of us silently want to leave the past behind.

The driver, Gusti's brother, is late, so Irina takes advantage of this time to withdraw money from a nearby ATM, while I stay behind to watch the luggage. When our car finally arrives, we load all the luggage into the boot and wait for Irina to return. We set off. I settle comfortably into the back seat and lose myself in the surrounding landscape.

The car moves slowly, as if we were advancing through an ocean of people and vehicles. 'Two hours,' the GPS tells me. But in Asia, distances are always illusions.

I chat with Irina – trivialities, banalities – until the driver asks us for the address where he is to drop us off in Ubud. Irina, who is sitting to his left, explains where he needs to drop her off and where he needs to drop me off. Then everything changes.

"It will cost 50,000 IDR extra on top of the agreed price if I don't drop you both off at the same place," he announces curtly.

In an instant, Irina is furious, and I feel the energy in the car become very tense. Again, the same communication problem, it seems. We argue, we try to explain, but he remains unmoved, clinging to his version of the truth.

'Who's to blame now?' I ask myself, but my inner voice is silent. It really doesn't matter anymore. I offer to pay the difference, feeling that maybe this way I can redeem myself for my old mistake, the one with Gusti. Irina is upset, asks me if I'm sure, then finally accepts my decision. Deep down, I know it's just a futile battle – what's the point of fighting someone who is convinced they are right? You just waste energy.

Our journey has turned into an endless trip, lasting over two and a half hours, much longer than the GPS had promised. It feels as if every kilometre stretches like elastic, stretching beyond all patience. We made a short stop to drop Irina off near her house, on a narrow street, swallowed up by an unnatural darkness. Everything seemed so quiet, as if the darkness itself had absorbed every sound.

I got out of the car and hugged her. At that moment, it felt like a farewell hug, but I didn't know then that it was the last time I would see her... for a long time. She gave me 130,000 IDR, more than we had agreed, and simply told me to cover the rest.

After Irina disappeared into the darkness, the driver continued to drive in silence for another twenty minutes or so, even though the GPS told me I was only 3 kilometres from my destination. Maybe he wanted to stall for time, to do his calculations, wondering if I understood that his fee was going to increase now that Irina had left and left the money with me. Or maybe his silence was simply a reflection of my own silence.

What is certain is that the silence had become a heavy, oppressive burden. I could feel it weighing on my shoulders, becoming harder to bear with every kilometre that passed.

'In the end, it's just money,' I told myself, trying to calm down. Life is full of such unexpected lessons. And sometimes, the most important lessons come with a cost you didn't anticipate. *'But the most effective ones are the ones you pay for,'* I whisper to myself, aware that next time I will know better.

I run my fingers over my African braids in a reflexive gesture and take a deep breath, letting the experience of the day sink in. I learned something today, another piece of wisdom that I add to my story. And somehow, I feel stronger, more at peace with myself.

Perhaps, in the end, every day is just a stage in the search for meaning, and the journey continues. Money? It's just the price we have to pay to learn our lessons.

'Everything has a price,' I murmur softly in the silence of the night.

Argasoka Bungalow Resort, Ubud – Bali

Finally, I arrived in front of my resort. The driver stopped the car, and I felt my heart drain of fatigue as the engine stopped. I got out, retrieved my backpack from the boot and handed him the 300,000 IDR.

18 euros – without another word. An unintelligible murmur escaped his lips; he nodded in greeting, then left.

Only then did I look around me – I was on the famous Monkey Street, where everything was unimaginable, pulsating with life and colour, but I felt small, a lost soul, floating above everyone else.

The resort – Argasoka Bungalow – a tiny, barely visible entrance, like a keyhole to another world. I walked down the slope to the reception, where a woman greeted me with a warm smile, but she too seemed as detached from the world as I felt at that moment.

Amused, I realised that my expectations for a bungalow in the jungle had been completely wrong. Without checking beforehand, I found myself right in the middle of the urban hustle and bustle, in the heart of Ubud.

I received the key with the number 102 and, as she led me to my cottage, the woman cheerfully told me about the ‘attractions’ of the area – the monkeys that skilfully steal anything that catches their eye.

“You have to be careful,” she told me, and for a moment I felt that she was referring not only to the monkeys, but to the world around me in general. As her words echoed in my mind, I found myself picking up a few brochures, thinking about the ‘real attractions’ of Ubud.

The room was... simple, nothing special.

The furniture looked tired, just like me, and the smell of staleness was more than just a presence – it was like a past frozen in damp wood and dirty walls. I smiled bitterly at the sink in the room, with ‘guts’ hanging everywhere – another sign that the space was more

functional than welcoming. The bathroom, smaller than I expected, so that I almost hit my head on the ceiling, only had cold water. But... it didn't matter. I was in the heart of the most expensive city in Bali, and complaints had no place here.

My stomach growled loudly, like a rusty mechanism. A kind of protest against the long day that had passed. I left my luggage in a corner and went out into the street with no plan in mind – just looking for something to eat. Fatigue weighed on my temples like a millstone, and my legs felt heavy. I moved slowly, as if walking in a never-ending dream. I reluctantly chose a terrace overlooking the brightly lit street, drawn by the spectacle of the night.

The menu was an enigma – the letters seemed to dance on the page, indecisive, and I didn't understand much. I ordered, however, a fish soup which, after the first sip, turned out to be a bitter and salty broth, like a mistake you can't correct. 'Probably the sides,' I thought to myself, feeling myself sinking deeper and deeper into disappointment. The pineapple juice wasn't any better – it was more melted ice than fruit, and its excessive sweetness left a strange sensation on my lips. I left the terrace with a feeling of unfulfillment, paying for my meal without looking back.

I bought a vanilla croissant from a mini-market and started eating it on the way, as if it were the only thing that could anchor me to reality. Once back in my room, fatigue overwhelmed me, but something kept me awake. I went out onto the terrace and sat down to work on my manuscript, as if those pages were the only refuge I needed to feel alive.

I fell asleep late, but woke up at 4:00 a.m. for no apparent reason. It felt as if an internal clock had set off an alarm. A feeling of unease tightened my chest, and my wide eyes stared at the phone screen, searching for an answer to the unspoken question that was boiling in my mind. And then, at that moment, the message arrived.

“Are you asleep?”

“No,” was my prompt reply. As if he had been waiting his whole life for that ‘No,’ Marty called me instantly.

“Hey, I’m sorry if I woke you up,” he said in an uncertain voice, but one so familiar that it almost gave me chills. “But I missed hearing your voice.”

I wanted to reply, ‘Me too...’ but I remained silent. The sound of his voice made me feel different. Every time he called me, I felt like I was coming home to a world that no longer exists, but which I still carry within me. And yet, it wasn’t him I missed. I missed the idea – the idea of having someone who would text you at 4:00 in the morning to tell you they missed you. Not Marty. Not him. Just *someone*.

But... maybe we all cling to fragile illusions, just to find a shred of security in a world that never promises us perfection.

It only lasted two minutes, but those moments felt like an eternity. Hanging up the phone, I fell into a deep sleep, as if embraced by those words. ‘Was it a dream?’ I wondered. But maybe it didn’t matter if it was real or a dream. Sometimes even a memory can have the power of truth. And somewhere between reality and dream, the answer lay hidden like an unsolved mystery.

“We are all travellers in the wilderness of this world, and the best we can find in our travels is a sincere friend.” – Robert Louis Stevenson

9

The Pilgrimage of the Soul: Between Dream and Reality

Friday, 28th July 2023

I woke up enveloped in suffocating heat, sweat dripping down my temples, as if my whole body had been caught up in an invisible struggle. Suddenly, I remembered Marty. It was like a flash of lightning that lit up my mind for a moment.

I rushed to the phone, my heart pounding in my ears. Yes, the video call from 4:04 a.m. was there, confirmation that I hadn't been crazy.

That call, however brief, had left a strange mark on me. A door ajar to something I couldn't define, but which awakened a need in me – to look at people more closely, to listen to them, to be present.

Reality unfolded beyond the limits of sleep and dreams. It was now 10:20 a.m. I couldn't believe how long I had slept. The silence in the room was so deep that I wondered if time had been suspended during those hours.

I knew that breakfast wasn't included here, so I could lounge in bed as long as I wanted. My phone had become a silent companion, my fingers moving aimlessly across the screen, until a message from Irina shook me out of my torpor:

“Hi. Look, this is the scooter driver who can take you anywhere, his name is Ketut; and this is the car driver, Arika. How are you? Have you settled in?”

Her words were like a breath of fresh air in a closed room. I replied that everything was going according to plan, thanked her for the contacts she had given me and added, perhaps too casually, that I would like to go out for a chat when she had time. Perhaps, in a way, I was hoping that she would be the key to the unknown, that something that would pull me out of the numbness I couldn't find a way out of.

I felt as if every cell in my body was begging for energy, so I dragged myself out of bed and went straight to the shower, letting the cold water wash away my sleepiness. I tried to pull myself together, to wake up my body with a few exercises, the same promises I always made to myself. With my laptop under my arm, I went out into the street. The sun hit me with its power, blinding and merciless. I put on my sunglasses, letting the light slip through my thoughts. My gaze wandered around, instinctively searching for a direction.

I remembered a café I had noticed the night before, so I headed in that direction. A display case full of cakes smiled ostentatiously at me, like a sweet dream. My eyes wandered lazily over each colourful piece, wondering what to choose. I wanted to taste each one – a moment of pleasure. A woman appeared beside me with a formal smile.

“I'll have a coffee,” I said, and she motioned for me to sit down at a table. But I didn't sit down, I felt the whole café calling me to discover it. Drawn like a magnet, I looked at the green garden in the back, inviting and mysterious. That's where I needed to be.

The garden unfolded before me like a secret discovered by chance, but so necessary. It was that place where natural beauty seemed to hide answers, the ones you seek without knowing you are seeking them.

I slipped between the tables, as if I were in a maze of dreams, until I reached that fountain. The music from the speakers was delicate, calm, as if whispering stories just for me. It was a small paradise hidden from the eyes of the world, and it was... empty. I sat down at a Turkish-style table – with fluffy, brightly coloured cushions – and

took a deep breath of the scent of scented sticks. I closed my eyes and, for a moment, I felt like I was “home”. That feeling of belonging was like a thrill running down my spine, making me feel “alive”.

I was brought out of my reverie by a waitress who left the menu on the table with a thud. I ordered a cappuccino, an apple tart and a ‘Vitamin C’ juice from the menu. I needed that coffee to get back to myself, to be able to think. I opened my laptop, but my mind was still in the garden full of exotic leaves and flowers. I had to reset myself to be able to continue...

I worked passionately, lost in the corrections of the manuscript. It was as if every word was lining up, settling inside me. Later, when I looked up, I realised that all the tables around me were full of people. I hadn't even noticed when the place had filled up, as if I had been absorbed into a temporal vortex.

At 2 p.m., I sent the manuscript to the agency, giving Alin the final instructions. My legs were numb, my body was heavy, but my soul was light. I got up and left with a sigh. After so many hours spent in that little paradise, I had forgotten I was in Bali.

Back at my accommodation, I decided to reward myself. I had finished the manuscript, and I was proud of myself. The pool was waiting for me, and the garden looked like a painting bathed in sunlight. The gardener tended to the leaves with almost ritualistic attention, touching each blade of grass as if it were sacred. He greeted me with a bow, and I smiled as I walked past him.

A boy was lying alone on a sun lounger. He seemed immersed in his own universe, headphones glued to his ears, the sun bathing his body like a wave of light. He was enclosed in his own bubble of thoughts, and I moved slowly so as not to break that invisible membrane of tranquillity.

I left my things at the other end of the pool and entered the water. It was so cold, as if I had just stepped into the middle of an autumn morning. I submerged myself up to my shoulders, feeling every cell in my body tremble in protest. I swam, trying to warm myself up, to

chase away the cold that was invading me, but it all seemed futile. Finally, I got out and laid down on a sun lounger, feeling the sun drawing trails of warmth on my skin, evaporating every drop of cold water.

A few noisy girls appeared, showing off their fresh tans, laughing, taking pictures, then leaving just as quickly, like ephemeral ghosts who had only passed through my life to leave a trace of excitement. I wondered for a moment what drove them to live their lives like that, at that pace... until my attention was captured by the boy on the sun lounger. He had got up and gone into the water. I watched him swim with smooth movements, like a fish in a huge aquarium, until he sat down on the edge at the other end of the pool. He seemed to be immersed in his own thoughts, just like me.

Then the silence was broken.

Suddenly, they appeared... the monkeys.

They came in groups, small and large, as if they had been invited to a wedding, invading our private space without any shame. I had talked about them last night, but I didn't expect to see them – not here and now. I tried to get up slowly, so as not to scare them, while I took out my phone to record everything. One of them approached the boy and almost bit him, aggressive, with an unforgiving look. I felt a rush of adrenaline hit my chest. 'So much nervousness,' I said to myself, my heart beating wildly. In those moments, it seemed to me that time had stopped and that I was suspended in a strange world where laws no longer mattered.

I felt fear...

The monkeys passed by me, so close that I could smell them, that mixture of wild nature and untamed curiosity. I found myself clutching my phone to my chest, as if it were my only connection to reality, my only weapon against them.

'What if they attack me now?' The thought flashed through my mind, uninvited, and I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. But after a few minutes, just as suddenly as they had appeared, the monkeys left,

allowing me to catch my breath and realise how fragile I am in the face of natural forces. For a few moments, I felt exposed and vulnerable, as if my existence were at their mercy.

I laid back down on the sun lounger while the boy gathered his things and left without a word, as if he had been nothing more than an illusion, a shadow that had passed by. I was left alone, listening to the silence, and I began to map out my journey through the island in my mind. Since arriving in Bali, I felt that each day touched my soul in a new way, unearthing memories and sensations that I thought I had long since buried. Irina, with her presence, had been nothing more than a catalyst, opening doors that I had locked so carefully.

'You can't bury your emotions, Yda, because they will always find a way to find you.'

It was as if I had learned to control my inner storms, to look at them without fear, instead of hiding them. With each passing day, I needed to bring to light something deeply buried within me, a treasure trove of forgotten feelings that were now crying out to be recognised.

I don't know when or how I got to the bungalow, as if my steps had been carried by an invisible force. The powerful jet of the shower washed away my thoughts, but it couldn't erase them completely. I went out onto the terrace, opened my laptop and tried to put my thoughts in order. This place had a familiar feel to it, as if it were my mother's garden, a safe space where I could be myself. Rummaging through my backpack, I found the bag of mint chocolate bars, partially crushed, that I had left over from Seminyak. Their smell was enticing...

I was writing, lost in my own thoughts, when suddenly she appeared – a monkey, like a ghost who had made her way into my world, uninvited. Our eyes met and, for a moment, I felt her looking straight into my soul. Then, without hesitation, she scanned the table, grabbed the bag of bars and ran away. I was paralysed. When I came out of my shock, I saw the packaging thrown on the alley and her,

satisfied, with her belly full of chocolate. She was looking at me from a distance, from the terrace of the little house at the other end of the alley; a defiant and cheeky look..

'You're acting like a monkey,' I shouted at her, looking at her... even though she didn't understand a thing. But the truth was that they weren't imitating us; we were their mirror.

Quickly, I gathered my things from the table, zipped up my backpack, making sure there was nothing vulnerable left in front of these little thieves. Soon, another monkey appeared. It looked at me intently, with a strange curiosity, then disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. So quietly... Life has taught them this skill, to sneak around without being noticed.

They reminded me of something much more intense and profound: *the fragility of life*. How we constantly chase after everything we think will make us happy. The reality is that true paradise is within us, in every moment we choose to live to the fullest. No matter what happens to us.

My stomach snapped me out of my reverie with a strange sound, reminding me that too much time had passed without feeding it. My energy was teetering on the edge between being and not being. 'How can I maintain a balance?' I whispered to myself, as if the answer was there, somewhere inside me, but refusing to be discovered.

I went out and ordered a pizza, which I chewed slowly, savouring every flavour. A little culinary treat. A jasmine tea completed the menu. Its warmth invaded my senses. I smiled, looking at the high prices – much higher than in Seminyak. But it didn't matter... I wanted to discover more of Ubud's charm, to let myself be carried away by the stories of the place. I felt that I 'had to'. Marty called me, as he had promised. For a while, I was absorbed in his stories. Some words say more than they mean to say...

I had received the programme of dance clubs and their themes from Sawa, and the temptation was huge. Dancing had always been my release, the moment when I felt most alive. As Irina hadn't given

any sign, I felt that the evening belonged to me and I was going to dance.

Around 8:00 p.m., I started getting ready for the party: a white jumpsuit with blue flowers, black trainers. Something chic and comfortable at the same time, the combination for a perfect evening. I still hadn't decided where I wanted to go. The nearest club? CP Lounge Club was only 450 metres from Argasoka. 'An evening stroll,' I said to myself, glad that, once again, the universe had decided for me.

I walked decisively down the alley a few minutes before the official start time, when the party was still a dream waiting to happen. At the entrance, no fewer than ten men dressed in black – the club's bodyguards – stood lined up like a private army, greeting me almost in unison. I felt their eyes fixed on me, a mixture of curiosity and professionalism. One of them politely informed me that the entrance fee was 100,000 IDR (about 6 euros) and that it included a drink. The fact that I was alone seemed to cause murmurs among them. I smiled at them and paid the fee, feeling as if I had just stepped into a film noir where I was the mysterious character.

I found a table for two right in front of the stage, the perfect place to observe everything. The instruments waited silently – guitars, drums, speakers and other musical mysteries ready to bring this night to life. The whole room had an intimate feel, with dim lights dancing around me, colouring the shadows of the people who were beginning to arrive. A girl came to take my order, and I simply asked for a pineapple juice.

Meanwhile, the band members appeared on stage and the audience began to take their seats – couples of all ages and nationalities, noisy groups of young people, and a few single people like me. The atmosphere was electric, and I looked up at the sky. 'If they turned off all the lights, we would probably see the stars,' I thought to myself, realising that here, under this open sky, we were on the border between reality and magic.

At 9:00 p.m., the band announced that it would be a live salsa and bachata evening. The music started to flow, and the rhythm came to life, making its way through my body. Some people had already gotten up to dance, while others waited patiently to feel the beat that would call them. I watched those women dancing, moving with such grace that it seemed they weren't touching the floor, but floating. I looked at my sneakers, then my eyes rose to their elegant sandals – with or without them, my dancing would have remained the same.

Several men asked me to dance. Being right in front of the stage, I was an easy target for them. I let myself be absorbed by the atmosphere around me, by the vibrations of the music. At one point, a woman dressed in a little red dress appeared next to me, smiling with the naturalness of an old friend.

“Can I sit at your table?” she asked. I motioned to the empty chair.

“Yes, of course, have a seat.” I was visibly surprised by how easily she seemed to make her way into my world, as if we knew each other. We started talking like two souls who had found each other after years of searching.

She was Esther, the surprise of the evening.

“You know how the universe sometimes conspires to bring you exactly what you need?” she said to me later, as if she had a revelation ready for me. “That's how it was with us.”

Esther, a solo traveller from the Netherlands, was 53 years old and, like me, was just beginning her exploration of the island. Her story captivated me, and I soon remembered that, in this world, encounters are never random. Perhaps, like Esther, every person we meet teaches us something about ourselves. And perhaps that is how we find out what we are really looking for.

She had arrived in Ubud just the day before, straight from the airport. She told me about the salsa festival in Singapore, where she had volunteered for a few days, and how the world of dance was, in fact, a whole universe that she carried in her soul. For a moment, I

felt that discord between us – me, still searching for my own rhythm, and her already mastering her steps.

Around 11:00 p.m., the band announced that their programme was over and that dance music to famous songs would follow. We got up and danced together, enjoying the moment like two teenagers. Esther was an accomplished dancer, and I felt like a child, but one who was truly enjoying the moment. I was impressed by how we connected, this energy that had brought us to the same table without warning.

'The universe will never ask you if you want it,' I thought to myself as I watched Esther elegantly untie the dancing sandals she had in her bag.

I left before midnight, leaving her there, still dancing, with a smile on her lips and her eyes shining in the spotlight. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to meet again for coffee while we were both in Ubud. When she told me she didn't know where she was going after Ubud and that maybe we could explore the island together, I felt a thrill of excitement, but I didn't respond.

The boys at the entrance wished me good night, smiling at me with that insolence typical of those trying to make an impression. I greeted them and walked slowly towards Argasoka, letting myself be carried away by the brightly lit streets still full of people. *'In paradise, do people never sleep?'* I wondered, feeling a fresh energy flowing through my veins. I smiled and continued on my way, walking slowly under that sky sprinkled with hidden stars.

I wasn't sleepy. I was vibrating with that energy. I took a quick shower, did some exercises and sat down in front of my laptop. Finally, I started writing. After the turmoil of the last few days, I felt that Ubud had finally given me that much sought-after harmony, that well-deserved break. And finally, I could put my thoughts on paper... in peace.

But, as I was soon to find out, this peace would not last long. I remembered my visa and sent an email to Immigration, hoping to

find out how I could extend it. The long messages with Sawa were not encouraging...

Late at night, I was overcome with tiredness and closed my laptop. I put my phone on silent mode, determined not to be disturbed by anyone. I needed to sleep, to let my soul rest.

Somewhere, deep in my mind, I knew that the dance of life would continue. Now, I just wanted to stop thinking...

“There are no paths to happiness. Happiness is the path.” – Lao Tzu

10

Life is Made of Thoughts

Saturday, 29th July 2023

It was 10:00 a.m. when I opened my eyes, and my thoughts were already racing ahead of me. They seemed to have been waiting for me to wake up so they could resume their show. A question, like a ray of light slipping through a half-open window, caught my mind: ‘What does it really mean to live your thoughts?’

I wanted to stay in bed, to indulge in the sweet hesitations of the morning. But my body had other plans, and the need to go to the bathroom forced me to get up.

On the short walk from my bed to the sink, the same automatic morning gestures revealed a familiar monotony. Combing my hair, brushing my teeth – everything unfolded like a ritual in which there was no room for consciousness. And yet, today, something was different.

A thought struck me unexpectedly, like a spark falling on dry ground. It was not just a passing thought, but a revelation. An understanding that made me feel that the air around me had become denser, harder to breathe.

It all started with Marty. I don't know exactly when, but at some point, his words began to function like beams of light. They penetrated the dark corners of my mind, places where there had been no light for a long time. They revealed answers to questions I didn't even know I had.

It was as if Marty had appeared from beyond the horizon of my thoughts, like an unexpected sunrise. He didn't give me the whole answer, just a direction. A flame to show me that there was a way, even if I didn't know where it led. I had been waiting for a sign for a long time, and now, it seemed, it had come.

The revelation? We are made of temptations – those flashes of light that always draw us beyond what we love most. And we cannot escape.

Even next to the person of your dreams, the one you fought for and consider perfection incarnate, there is always a look, a gesture, a touch that disturbs the peace of your heart. That 'something else' appears like an unexpected storm, takes your breath away and leaves you speechless.

It becomes an obsession. That thought remains anchored in you, growing like a poisonous plant. The more you try to ignore it, the more you cling to it. You know you have everything you need. You know your life is complete.

But still, that 'something else' – impossible, forbidden – makes your heart beat faster. Not because you need it. But because you can't have it.

I try to figure out the workings of a man's mind. It's a mystery. Every man has fantasies, desires and impulses. He follows them, gets them, then starts all over again. His desires are endless, and passionate beginnings always attract him.

But wait a minute, aren't we all the same? Women have the same desires, perhaps expressed in a more poetic, colourful way, but we're in the same boat.

I was sitting in front of my laptop, my hands hovering over the keyboard, ready to leave my room in Bali on a beautiful July morning. But I couldn't leave yet. 'If I don't write these thoughts down now, they will disappear forever,' I said to myself.

And, for the first time, I realised how many ideas, moments and revelations we lose every day. Thoughts are ephemeral – they fade away like shooting stars before we can fully grasp them.

Why are they so fragile? Perhaps we humans are just vessels through which thoughts pass – without ever belonging to us.

I had read somewhere that we have around 50,000 thoughts a day. At first, it seemed impossible to me. But now, with all the questions crowding my mind, the number seemed small.

I imagined for a moment what it would be like to remember them all. Perhaps it would be overwhelming. Perhaps I would discover a version of myself that I am not ready to know.

Statistics say that 70% of our thoughts are negative. I refuse to believe that. ‘It can’t be true,’ I said to myself as my fingers finally touched the keyboard. But maybe it doesn’t matter. Not everything we think is worth remembering.

‘Where do thoughts come from?’ I wondered, staring blankly at my laptop screen. The universe is full of them, but what if we could see them, if we could touch them?

Marty’s words still echo in the hidden corners of my mind, challenging me to step into a forbidden world. It’s like a test of my own will, of my limits. But now I knew the truth – and I didn’t want to be there. He had confessed to me that he was in a relationship.

Marty’s words still had the power of an echo that I couldn’t stop. I know I shouldn’t. And yet... some thoughts thrive on contradictions. Precisely because they are forbidden, they become impossible to ignore.

‘Why do we always want something we can’t have?’

The thought pierced my mind with cruel clarity. We cling to illusions that forget reality, but it is precisely these illusions that awaken us from our numbness.

And then, like a flash of light, I realised:

“Life is thoughts.”

A simple but dizzying truth that crossed my mind like lightning.

At that moment, all I could do was take a deep breath and let it settle within me. The energy of this thought left my body trembling.

I paused. Two small tears moistened the corners of my eyes, but they were not tears of sadness. They were tears of release. How can you put into words what you feel when you finally ‘understand’?

A thought in itself has no form, no substance. But at the same time, it is everything that defines us. It is the foundation of everything we are. I closed my eyes for a moment and let this revelation sink in.

Everything I had experienced, everything that had brought me joy or hurt me, every moment of doubt, every thread of hope – all of this had been created by me, in my own mind.

‘What remains of us if our thoughts disappear?’ I wondered. ‘If one day all the voices in my head fell silent, if the constant turmoil of my mind became quiet, what would remain?’

And perhaps this is precisely why people are so restless. They seek validation, love, success, and security. At the end of the day, all that remains is how we think about ourselves. A relationship lives only through our thoughts. Happiness, too.

The world is nothing but a mirror of what is born in the mind.

I remembered all those moments when I thought my life depended on actions, people, and external events. But now, sitting here in Bali, I realised that everything I had experienced was the result of my thoughts.

Then another question came to me: *‘If life is made up of thoughts, why do I let myself be lured by fleeting desires, by temptations that distract me from what really matters?’*

The answer came quickly. It came as a warm whisper, like a caress that makes you stop trembling: *‘Because that’s how you learn. Through thoughts you discover yourself, through desires you understand your limits, and through temptations you find your true strength.’*

Maybe that's why Marty came into my life. Maybe he was more than just a person – he was a thought manifested in reality. A thought that tested my patience, understanding and desire to be authentic. Everything he said to me was nothing more than a reflection of my feelings. A mirror.

I repeated the words until I felt them become part of me: '*You are your thoughts.*' I felt these words penetrate every cell of my body, transforming into a truth I could no longer deny.

And in that moment, everything became clearer.

It wasn't about Marty, nor about my temptations. It was about me – about how I am the author of my own reality. About the fact that, no matter what I let disturb me, nothing from the outside can truly touch me.

Perhaps this is the greatest mystery of life – the fact that we live our own creation. That we are the unseen authors of our story. And that, at any moment, we can decide to change the ending.

I am here in Bali, in a bungalow in Argasoka, and I am taking a break from my journey to write down my thoughts. Why? Perhaps because I don't want to lose them. Each thought is a new piece of my personal puzzle.

Someone told me that I am exactly where I need to be, that my life is exactly as it should be. And you know what? I'm starting to believe that's true. The universe guides me, even when I don't see it – even if I repeat myself.

And maybe, at some point, I will truly understand the depth of life. But until then, I will enjoy every thought, every temptation, every moment of awareness. Because, in the end, that's all that matters.

And today... A new day in paradise begins.

It's Saturday, and a cloudless sky accompanies me on my journey. I realise that I don't even have a specific goal, but maybe I don't need one. The warm, humid air of Bali hit me in the face as soon as I stepped out of the bungalow.

The sun was already high in the sky, shining brightly over the rooftops. The streets of Ubud were full of colour and bustle: shops, restaurants, improvised stalls where locals displayed their wares with discreet pride.

As I walked, all kinds of material temptations caught my eye: jewellery sparkling in the sun, flowing dresses, bags and ingeniously shaped souvenirs. The scent of scented sticks mixed with that of frangipani flowers filled the air. 'How easy it is to get lost in all this,' I said to myself.

But, to my surprise, I didn't feel the urge to buy anything. Instead, I remembered my conversation with Irina about my minimalist luggage:

"Is that all your luggage?" she had asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," I replied with a smile. "I only have a few things, but I don't lack anything."

Minimalism had become a kind of liberation for me. The more objects I gave up, the closer I felt to my essence. Without luxurious clothes or expensive accessories, it was just me, with my thoughts, exploring the world.

Minimalism wasn't just about luggage; it was about thoughts. The more I let go, the closer I get to who I am.

I reach the queue for tickets to Monkey Forest. It's crowded, tourists are laughing, taking pictures and racing to be first in line. I check my wallet and realise I have very little cash left. The bank card machine isn't working.

For a moment, I feel the familiar irritation. Seriously? Right now?! But something inside me whispers quietly: 'It's just a coincidence. Don't let little things ruin your day.' I take a deep breath, and the tension disappears.

I enter the park, leaving the hustle and bustle of the city somewhere far away. The dense vegetation of the forest brought me welcome coolness, and the air was moist, fresh, laden with the scent of leaves and earth. The sunlight barely penetrated the branches.

The monkeys, those seemingly cheeky and unpredictable creatures, seemed to be the masters of this world. They walked among people with the confidence of someone who knows they belong there. That they are part of the old order of things, while we, the curious tourists, were just passing guests.

At one point, one of them crossed my path. It had bristling fur and piercing eyes that seemed to see beyond me. Her gaze lasted only a second, but it was enough to send a shiver down my spine.

In her eyes, I could see myself – curious, but full of mistrust. Do monkeys think about us the way we think about them? Do they look at us with curiosity, or do they simply live their lives, untroubled by desires or unnecessary questions?

As I went deeper into the park, the coolness became more intense, and the air seemed to thicken, as if the forest was breathing at its own distinct rhythm.

The leaves rustled like whispers, and the monkeys scurried about freely, with a curiosity that seemed to mirror our inner turmoil. Each step I took made a gentle, almost ritualistic sound, like a drumbeat lost in the tropical silence.

I stopped next to a huge tree with thick roots that spread across the ground like veins pulsing with life. I touched its trunk, and the rough texture of the bark made me close my eyes. I felt that this tree, with its roots deeply anchored, was communicating something to me.

Perhaps I, like it, had invisible roots that nourished me even when I felt lost. Perhaps I didn't always have to run, do something or change something. Perhaps it was enough to just sit here, in the present moment, and let my thoughts flow and take root.

A few steps away from me, a larger monkey was walking slowly, with a small baby hanging from her belly. The simplicity of their gestures was mesmerising. They seemed to move in perfect harmony with everything around them, completely indifferent to the chaos and curiosity of the people who were frantically photographing them.

‘What would it be like to live like that?’ I wondered. ‘Connected to our instincts, without being haunted by conflicting desires, without getting lost in thousands of thoughts that lead nowhere.’

I continued walking along the narrow paths of the forest, letting the sounds accompany my steps. A smaller monkey, with bristly fur and inquisitive eyes, crossed my path. It stopped suddenly, rising on its hind legs and began to make short, strange sounds. It was a tiny creature, but at that moment, I felt it had control over me.

I tried to look it in the eye, but I remembered the warning: don't look monkeys directly in the eye. I lowered my gaze. My heart was beating fast, as if it too had understood the lesson: sometimes, giving up control means survival. At that moment, the monkey calmed down. It disappeared into the thicket.

I leaned against another tree, lost in thought. Like monkeys, thoughts lose their power if you look at them from a different angle, without confronting them. Maybe all I have to do is let them pass, not cling to them, just like I did with the monkey.

I continued walking, but now the forest seemed to speak to me more clearly. There was something in its rhythm that calmed me, a silent order in the apparent chaos of the trees, the monkeys, the leaves that fell from time to time on the paths. In this place, everything seemed to make sense – even the things I didn't fully understand.

After almost three hours, I felt that I had seen and experienced enough for one day. I slowly made my way to the exit, feeling a pleasant tiredness in my legs and a new calmness in my mind.

Monkey Forest, with all its wildness and apparent disorder, offered me more than just a walk. It was a reflection of my inner life, of thoughts that come and go, of moments of calm that slip through moments of turmoil.

And the real lesson of the forest was to learn to accept without trying to control.

I entered a small restaurant with bamboo tables and minimalist decor. I ordered a plate of spaghetti and a coconut. When they brought my food, I let myself go with the moment, savouring the simple flavours.

As I chewed, I looked around. The other customers were taking photos, laughing, filming themselves with their food in front of them, trying to capture the perfection of a moment that seemed more for their cameras than for themselves.

I smiled slightly and let myself be overwhelmed by the feeling of simple luxury: a good meal, a deep inner conversation, and the calm that was beginning to settle over my mind. I already knew that happiness does not come from a beautifully decorated plate, perfect selfies, or an exotic location.

'Happiness comes from the way you choose to live your thoughts.'

I checked WhatsApp. Ketut, Irina's friend, hadn't replied to my messages, and I let the thought of him fade away, as many others do.

At a street corner, a local cut across my path, smiling broadly.

"Hello, ma'am! Tour? I'll show you the most beautiful Bali! 250,000 IDR, a good price for a whole day."

His voice had a mixture of hope and desperation that made me stop. I listened to him for a few moments, sensing that his insistence hid a burden.

"Thanks, but I already have plans," I said, giving him a quick smile. And even though I turned him down, I left him my number. Maybe out of politeness. Or maybe because part of me wanted to keep all my options open.

As I walked away, my thoughts returned to my journey. It doesn't matter if I end up exploring every corner of this island or if I get lost on a single street. The essential thing is not what I see, but how I choose to see it. It's all about the perspective I construct.

Finally, my phone vibrated again, and this time it was Ketut, coming to life on my screen, like a character who joined the story at just the right moment.

Ketut had appeared, materialised by my own thoughts, to be part of my story. I wanted to see more of this wonderful little town, and I knew I needed a guide to match.

“Hey, Yda! Irina has already told me about you. Bali is a place that requires patience. If you rush, you miss the beauty. But tomorrow, I'll show you everything you need to see.”

We discussed our plans for the next day. I felt everything falling into place, and that tomorrow I would explore Ubud with the right person.

A simple thought made me contact Ketut, after I had received his contact details from Irina, and from that thought, an entire plan for tomorrow was born.

Everything starts in the mind, like a seed that takes root and grows. Sometimes we don't even realise how powerful our thoughts are.

I remembered the man on the street corner. Oh, yes... I sent him a message and explained that I wouldn't be going with him. He insisted, telling me he had a family and children to feed, and for a moment I felt a twinge of guilt, as if he wanted to turn me into his saviour.

But then I stopped myself. I realised that everyone lives their own thoughts, their own trials, and that I can't please everyone. It's so easy to get lost in other people's thoughts, to let their pressure become your burden. But if life is thoughts, then I have to choose which thoughts I let shape my reality.

After I hung up the phone, I suddenly remembered the visa issue. It was something I had to resolve today, but, bizarrely, I felt afraid to start. In my head, the scenarios were unfolding rapidly: unnecessary complications, bureaucracy, excessive fees. I headed to the agency with a knot in my stomach.

I entered with hope, but the confusion in the agency quickly crept into me. The fees and vague answers only amplified the agitation that was already smouldering inside me. Plus trips to Denpasar for

signatures – I had just come from there, I had no intention of going back.

“If you pay two million IDR now, we’ll take care of everything for you,” said a young man with a fake smile plastered on his face.

“Thank you, but I think I’ll manage on my own,” I replied, trying to stay calm.

When I left the agency, my head was heavy and my mind was tired. I walked aimlessly for a few minutes, trying to clear my thoughts. I took out my phone and checked the email I had received from Immigration again. I scrolled slowly until a seemingly trivial detail caught my attention: “To extend your visa, scan the QR code and follow the steps.”

I stopped abruptly at the edge of the pavement. I read that sentence again, as if I were seeing it for the first time. It was so obvious. Everything I needed to do was already there. I opened the app, scanned the code, and within minutes, the process was complete. My visa extension had been approved.

I started laughing in the middle of the crowd in Ubud, feeling that the whole day had been a ‘test.’ Everything had been there, within my reach, and I had blinded myself to the solution. It was almost comical.

When I got back to the bungalow, the sunset coloured the sky in a mixture of orange and pink. I sat on my terrace and let my mind return to the events of the day.

The monkeys in the forest, with their simple gestures, came back to my mind. The way they lived without being troubled by human complexities. Without unnecessary thoughts, without conflicting desires.

Ketut, with his promise to show me his favourite places, seemed like another symbol of simplicity. Everything was so straightforward in his way, so uncomplicated. And then there was the visa issue, which had proven once again how easily I could let my mind sabotage me. Everything I needed had always been there, but my own inner turmoil had blinded me.

Every decision, every emotion – they all start with a thought. My life is just a creation of what I choose to think. And just as you can choose to look at or avoid a monkey in the forest, you can choose to cling to or let go of your own thoughts. Maybe that's why this day seemed so intense.

It was past 11:00 p.m., but sleep was far away. I slowly got out of bed and went out onto the terrace, looking gratefully at the stars and the moon spreading its light like a delicate veil over the houses in the Argasoka complex.

From somewhere in the distance, traditional Balinese music could be heard, and the hustle and bustle of the city began to fade, like a murmur dissipating into the night. I took a deep breath, letting the warm, humid air fill my lungs, and felt my thoughts slowly settle.

'Tomorrow, I will meet Ketut,' I said to myself, and for the first time, the thought of a new encounter did not make me anxious. I felt a wave of calm, of confidence. Maybe he will be more than a guide, maybe he will be another piece in the puzzle of this journey I am taking through myself.

I returned to my room and, with an impulse beyond myself, I opened my laptop and began to write, letting each word flow, settle, and shape the story of this extraordinary day. I knew that, in the end, they were not just simple words on a digital page. They were thoughts. My thoughts, transmitted into this world, into this reality.

'Shape the path of your own thoughts, Yda,' I said to myself, smiling. And then I knew: *'No matter what tomorrow brings, everything will be exactly as it should be.'* I turned off the light and let my thoughts flow, like waves on the sand, calm and free.

Every day tests us and gives us the chance to be the creators of our own story. Our choice is the thread we follow. And my life is just a story written from thoughts – and I am the author.

"We are what we think. Everything we are arises from our thoughts. With our thoughts, we create the world." – Buddha

A Day Between Heaven and Earth: Suspended Moments

Sunday, 30th July 2023

I don't know what disturbed me last night, but I slept restlessly, caught up in an unease that was difficult to decipher. At 3:00 a.m., my eyes were wide open, illuminating the dark ceiling like headlights.

I dozed off for a while, but at 4:00 a.m. I was awake again, with an energy that had no place in my tired body. 'What's happening to me?' I asked myself, without finding the answer. It was as if something was floating in the air, a tension that foreshadowed the unexpected.

And, of course, today was the day I was supposed to meet Ketut.

When the clock finally rang at 6:15 a.m., I struggled to get out of bed, as if I had sand in my eyes. But it didn't matter anymore. A new day in paradise was dawning. After a long shower, I managed to clear my vision and regain some of my balance.

At 7:00 a.m., I was in front of the resort, waiting patiently, letting myself be caressed by the warm morning breeze. I absentmindedly fiddled with my phone until I saw him coming – a young man as energetic as a deer, ready to take me on his scooter. I looked at him and smiled – dark-haired, charismatic and disarmingly shy, he exuded a special charm and an air of common sense. And his name, Ketut, sounded so authentic, as if he were predestined to appear in my life right here, in the heart of Bali.

'No doubt... It's going to be a special day,' I thought to myself, realising that Irina has some wonderful 'friends'. And as Ketut

presented his plans, I realised that, like me, he had no clear idea where the day would take us.

I think I was causing him some confusion, some dissonance, because he was used to tourists who knew 'exactly' what they wanted. When I told him what I really wanted, he looked at me with wide eyes, visibly surprised.

"Coffee?" he asked me.

"Yes, coffee." I smiled. I needed it like air, not just to wake up, but also to anchor myself in the reality of the morning.

I wanted to regain some 'apparent' control, but I knew... The most beautiful days of my life were precisely those when I had no plan. The ones when I let things happen. At that moment, I caught a playful smile on Ketut's face in the small rear-view mirror of the scooter.

He had never set off without a clear itinerary, without a goal. But I felt that it was precisely in this unpredictable lack of a plan that lay all the beauty of the moment.

We passed a market where locals, gathered in large numbers, filled the air with laughter and bustle. Their faces, lit by the gentle morning sun, radiated a simple joy, like a silent celebration of a new day. The fresh smell of fruit, the bright colours of the stalls and their mingled voices transformed the market into a lively spectacle.

Ketut told me that this is how it is every morning, and to me it seemed almost incredible – a world that woke up before sunrise, like an unbroken community ritual.

Small children ran between the stalls, old men carried heavy baskets, and women negotiated their purchases with infectious energy. As the scooter carried us through the charm of that market, I felt part of the unbroken rhythm of a world that needed no words.

Swing Heaven was our first destination of the day. Or rather, it was Ketut's choice, as he seemed intrigued by my lack of interest in plans. I hoped it would be open when we arrived, although I didn't know what to expect. But when we got there, we were greeted by a large, defiant padlock.

“It doesn't open until 9:00 a.m.,” Ketut said, studying the schedule with a slight disappointment in his voice. I glanced at my watch: 7:25 a.m. Too early, much too early for paradise.

I laughed, and he shrugged and smiled resignedly: “Coffee remains our option.”

And we set off again, leaving behind the lock and the promise of an adventure that would have to wait.

He drove for another ten minutes until we arrived in front of a café. The surprises of the morning were piling up one after another, like fallen leaves on a forest path – seemingly disordered, but each in its perfect place. You guessed it, it was closed here too.

The street was deserted, and the sun's rays stretching lazily across the rice terraces failed to bring any life to the place. The café seemed caught in a pre-awakening numbness, and silence enveloped it like an invisible veil.

“It only opens at 8:00,” Ketut muttered, more to himself than to me. For a moment, I caught a shadow of frustration on his face, but almost instantly, his face lit up. His gaze changed, as if he had just discovered a hidden treasure.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said suddenly, with the enthusiasm of a child who had just come up with a brilliant idea. “Let's go!”

I let myself be carried away by the mystery, without asking any questions, letting the scooter cut through the fresh morning air. The breeze touched my skin, laden with subtle scents of damp earth and leaves just coming to life. I was sure he was taking me to the right place. Even though I had no idea what awaited me, a comforting certainty whispered to me that this day was going to be very special.

We arrived at an empty car park, where a large, polished sign revealed our destination: Bali Pulina Plantation. I laughed to myself. Seriously? The Luwak coffee plantation he had told me about yesterday... And yet, it was closed – an unexpected but very amusing surprise.

I watched Ketut apologise with a mixture of embarrassment and confusion. But instead of being disappointed, a loud, liberating laugh escaped me without my realising it. The situation, which could have seemed frustrating, had now become the source of a unique memory. *'The unpredictable creates magic,'* I said to myself, with a smile still on my face, like a revelation of the morning.

Standing in that deserted car park, with the morning sun caressing my face, I felt something change. The fatigue that had weighed on me until then disappeared like a shadow, and the energy of the moment pulsed through my veins, a new breath promising adventure.

There I was, in front of Ketut – two strangers who had just gone through a morning full of unpredictability. And yet, at that moment, I felt that we were beginning to get to know each other. Something was blossoming between us, an invisible thread of trust, a fragile friendship that was taking its first roots, deeply embedded in our shared vulnerability. I looked at him and asked, with curious eyes:

“Where to now?”

It was a simple question, but one laden with endless possibilities. Ketut, who had already been through a rollercoaster of emotions that morning, seemed to begin to relax. His shy smile turned into a new confidence, and his eyes now had a different light. A silent spark, a moment of vulnerability that seemed to bring us closer together – as if all the events up to that point had brought us exactly here, to this turning point.

But the moment passed, like a breeze that caresses your skin for a moment and then disappears. And perhaps that is the beauty of life – that nothing lasts forever, that the magic of moments comes and goes without apology.

This magic is difficult to put into words. It is like a subtle, invisible energy that envelops the mundane and transforms it into the extraordinary. It is not something you can hold in your hands or

fully explain. It is like a flash of lightning that, for a second, lights your way in the darkness.

That's exactly how those moments with Ketut were – fleeting, but full of intensity. A short flame, a matchstick that burns quickly, but leaves the light imprinted in your mind. Perhaps life is nothing more than a collection of such flashes – short, fragile, but so precious.

I realised that we cannot prolong a moment beyond its destined duration. We can try to keep it in our minds, to replay it endlessly in our imagination, but the real magic lies in living it then, in its fragile present.

‘Is this the magic of life?’ I asked myself. ‘To enjoy every moment in all its splendour, without trying to stop it?’

Because magic is not something you can plan or control. It is an unexpected wave that engulfs you, a light that touches you only if you are open to receiving it. In that deserted car park, with the warm morning sun and Ketut by my side, I felt that I was living that unique, unrepeatable ‘now’.

And, in fact, that is the magic of life – to live every moment as a revelation, to let it be what it is, without clinging to the past or pushing it into the future.

His eyes lit up again, and for the first time, I felt the barriers between us crumble, like a thin veil that the sun shatters in the morning.

“Anywhere,” he said simply.

Looking at his serious face, I burst out laughing again – a sincere, contagious laugh that seemed to reveal something essential. Ketut laughed too, as if, in that empty car park, we were sharing the pure joy of a perfect moment precisely because of its imperfection. It was a moment that needed nothing else – just us and our laughter.

There, that morning, I understood that life is about letting yourself go, about allowing yourself to be surprised. Even when the cafés are closed.

“Let's go find some coffee,” I said, feeling its absence begin to envelop my thoughts in a bittersweet fog.

We turned the scooter around and headed back to Tis Cafe. The car park was just as empty, but this time it didn't matter.

I waited there as the morning sun began to spread its golden fingers across the world around me. Slowly, other people began to appear – two young blondes with sleepy smiles, a few young men on scooters, their light laughter filling the silence.

And then I understood that maybe this place had something special – a quiet but irresistible energy that attracted people even before the gates opened. It was as if the place knew how to promise, even before it delivered.

Tis Cafe

I stepped inside the famous café and, for a few moments, I lost myself in the beauty of the place. The rice terraces stretched out before me like a green dream, with hues so vivid they looked like they had been painted by the hand of a master artist. My breath stopped for a second, and a thought crossed my mind: ‘You're here, Yda. Finally, you're really here. This is the Bali you dreamed of...’

Ketut, who wanted to wait for me outside, seemed surprised when I motioned for him to come in.

“Would you like to come with me and have coffee together?” His hesitant gaze, full of childlike distrust, betrayed his uncertainty about stepping into a new place. “Really, Ketut, you're not going to stay outside. Come with me.”

For a moment, I saw him transformed – no longer the confident guide who had accompanied me all morning, but a shy boy, as if I had opened the door to a secret sanctuary. His eyes, filled with childlike distrust, hesitated, but eventually he gave in and followed me. I smiled at him, convinced that this day would remain in our memories forever.

I found a small table with only two chairs and sat down right in front of the rice terraces, the view being majestic.

"Come, sit with me, don't leave me alone here in paradise," I said, pointing to the empty chair. He smiled shyly and sat down, and for the first time it seemed to me that this moment was more than just a stopover – it was the beginning of a story that neither of us had foreseen.

I learned to share my joy with those around me, to let happiness spread, embracing everyone who accompanied me. For me, sharing a moment does not mean diminishing it, but amplifying it, making it more vivid through the emotions of others. For Ketut, however, it seemed like something new, a lesson he was only now beginning to decipher. The wonder was written all over his face, clear as text in an open book. His eyes betrayed his embarrassment, as if he were wondering if he had the right to enjoy it as much. I sensed his restraint and, wanting to make him feel at ease, I avoided saying too much. Eventually, he let himself be carried away by the moment, giving up his resistance.

The terrace, carefully constructed from bamboo and wood, seemed to be from another world – a world suspended somewhere between earth and sky. I smiled playfully at Ketut:

"I want us to stay here all day, never to leave."

His gaze betrayed a moment of surprise, as if he were trying to figure out if I was serious.

"Really?" he asked with childlike uncertainty.

"Yes!" I replied, laughing, as I already imagined myself lounging by the infinity pool, gazing out at the vibrant green of the rice terraces. It was a dream, a world that seemed to vibrate under the gentle rays of a new day. "A life to be envied!" I added, as a whisper, more to myself than to him.

For a moment, I paused and asked myself, 'How could you not envy such a moment? Such a view?' Perhaps the answer was not about

envy, but about gratitude – gratitude that I could be there, that I could feel all this beauty pulsing through every corner of my soul.

It was hard to believe that, not long ago, I had longed for such moments – and now, I was experiencing them with my whole being, as if every detail had been designed especially for me. ‘How could I not want to stay here forever?’ I said to myself, as my gaze wandered over the vibrant image in front of me.

But reality gently tugged at my sleeve, brought me back by the Balinese waitress, who greeted us with a smile so radiant that it seemed to be an extension of the sun.

“What would you like to order?” she asked in her gentle voice.

I ordered a cappuccino, and Ketut, full of curiosity, chose a Vietnamese coffee.

The coffee... oh, the coffee! It was impeccable – creamy, hot, enveloping my senses like a hug. The rich aromas and velvety texture dispelled any trace of fatigue, and with each sip, it seemed as if time was slowing down. At that moment, everything seemed to reach perfection: “Me, living a dream I had so many times before.”

While we were enjoying the coffee, I told him about my trip through Vietnam and how, one late morning in Hanoi, I had discovered the famous ‘Egg Coffee’. His eyes lit up, a spark of amazement crossing his gaze – he, a passionate barista, had never heard of it before.

“Really? Coffee with egg?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I quickly searched for a video on Google and showed it to him. The look on his face, transformed into pure fascination, was truly priceless. It was as if he had just discovered a hidden treasure – a new world of flavours and techniques that he couldn't wait to explore. For a moment, I felt that it wasn't just me experiencing a special moment, but him too – a small discovery that made him smile with all his heart.

As I sipped my coffee, Ketut revealed a few fragments of his story to me. He was a barista in a café in Ubud and had recently taken on the role of tourist guide, trying to find new sources of income. As

he spoke, his eyes lit up with passion, especially when he described the art of creating those perfect patterns on the creamy foam of the coffee.

"It's so difficult to do that, isn't it?" I asked, smiling at him.

"Yes, but it's also so satisfying," he replied, looking up. "Every cup of coffee is like a little work of art. Sometimes it turns out perfectly, sometimes it doesn't, but that's the beauty of it."

I couldn't help but admire his talent and dedication. Ketut was a true master, and I felt privileged to be there, sharing such an authentic conversation. It was a conversation about coffee, but also about much more – about life, about work done with love, about the little satisfactions that give you meaning.

Time flew by without us even noticing. We probably stayed for over an hour, losing ourselves in spontaneous conversations and laughter that seemed to come out of nowhere. They were simple moments, but they had a special weight – a subtle joy that leaves a mark on your soul.

But, like all beautiful things, this too had to end. The day was moving on, and Ketut had other responsibilities waiting for him.

We finished our coffees, and when I went to pay, I felt like I would have paid double – not for the drink itself, but for the peace, laughter and joy shared with my new friend, Ketut. Sometimes, the value of a moment lies not in what you consume, but in what you feel and in the presence of those around you.

We got on the scooter and set off again for the coffee plantation, where, unbeknownst to us, a new story awaited us.

Bali Pulina

We were the first customers of the day, and the man at the entrance handed me a card with a number on it – a ticket to an experience that promised to be unique. I smiled. What's this about? I wondered, amused by the formality of a place that seemed like

something out of a dream. All around us, everything was silent – an almost reverential silence. Not a soul in sight. Just us and the sleeping plantation, waiting to reveal its stories.

Tis Cafe had been a dream place, with its vibrant energy, but the coffee plantation was about to amaze me in a completely different way. I was ready to discover more, to feel, to live and to lose myself in this universe of coffee, aromas and stories that had not yet been told.

A smiling young woman, with an expression that seemed to hide a well-kept secret, asked for the card I had received and told us to follow her. Her gestures were full of calm energy, as if each movement had been carefully orchestrated. She led us through that garden full of shrubs, and there, in the semi-shade, in a cage, she showed me a tiny creature that resembled a lazy fox, sprawled on a makeshift bed suspended from the ceiling.

“This is Luwak, the one who produces the famous coffee,” she said, pointing to the animal that seemed completely uninterested in our presence.

I looked at the sleeping creature, wondering if it knew how much attention it was getting. What would it think of the people who came to admire its ‘work of art’? It was amusing and yet fascinating.

The girl told us the legend of the famous ‘Kopi Luwak’: the coffee beans are ingested by the animal, pass through its digestive system and are then excreted, becoming the basic ingredient of one of the most expensive coffees in the world. I found it bizarre, but interesting. It was a subtle lesson about how something seemingly insignificant can gain value when viewed from a different perspective.

Standing in front of huge trays of coffee beans, I felt like a child in front of a bowl of sweets. I had an irresistible urge to taste them.

“No, they’re not clean,” said the girl, stopping me in time, with a slightly bewildered expression. “And they’re not good either. I’ll let you taste the beans only at the last stage, before grinding.”

She quickly explained, laughing awkwardly: “These beans aren't shelled yet – right now they're just ‘poo’ – little droppings from sleeping foxes.”

I burst out laughing, aware that I was probably the first person to try eating ‘raw’ coffee beans from a luxury plantation. Ketut looked at me in amazement, but in his eyes I saw a spark that told me more than any words could. It was a combination of surprise and admiration – as if he were saying, ‘This woman is something special.’

But my curiosity knew no bounds. ‘What could be so bad?’ I wondered, chuckling at my own culinary adventure. I even had a philosophical impulse: surely the enzymes in the fox's stomach somehow contribute to the magic of the final flavour. Perhaps, after all, every experience – no matter how bizarre – has a touch of poetry, a magic that you can only feel if you accept it wholeheartedly.

For a moment, I felt like a restless child who had just done something silly, but who had somehow managed to win the silent admiration of those around him. And maybe that's the magic of absurd moments: they create stories that are worth living and telling. And at that moment, I knew I was writing one of them.

After watching the coffee beans go through washing, hulling and drying, it was time for roasting – the part that seemed to have a special charm. I found myself in front of a makeshift stove, heavy and burnt by time, like an artefact brought directly from the distant past. Standing in front of it, I suddenly felt like a child in my grandmother's kitchen, where everything had a different rhythm – slow, authentic, unhurried.

The fire smouldered under the stove, fed by thick logs that crackled softly, and the heat enveloped me, warming my cheeks. It was the smell that completely captivated me – a mixture of smoke and the raw, bitter aroma of coffee coming to life. The air vibrated slightly, and at that moment, time seemed to slow down, as if each stage of this process had its own meaning, its own rhythm.

It was as if I had been transported to a world where everything was manual, intimate, devoid of the impersonal rush of modern machines. A world where every movement was charged with patience and passion. Even the cast-iron hob seemed to tell a story – a story of hands that worked with care and traditions that refuse to disappear – like a ceremony, part of an ancient ritual.

There was something magical about this improvised kitchen, a magic that seemed to dwell in every detail. The rudimentary utensils, worn by the passage of time, seemed to bear the marks of old crafts, untold stories of work, dedication and care. Everything had an air of almost sacred authenticity, and the simplicity of the place conveyed a special tranquillity, as if every object knew its place and purpose.

Even the small wooden chairs, worn down by the weight of so many bodies that had rested on them, seemed to tell their own stories. They had that unique patina of things that have seen more lives than words can express, a kind of silent witness to the passage of time.

Ketut was glued to me, more faithful than a shadow, following me with curiosity mixed with concern. In his black clothes, he too seemed to have stepped out of a story, like a secondary character who somehow steals your gaze. For a moment, I felt like the heroine of a film – and he, my devoted “bodyguard”, watching me closely, ready to see what madness I would come up with next. His eyes showed amazement and amusement, as if every step I took was a little adventure worth waiting for.

Invited to participate in the roasting process, I was handed a long wooden spoon, and a funny helmet was placed on my head. I felt more like a witch preparing a magic potion than a tourist eager for adventure. ‘All I needed was a broom,’ I thought distractedly, with a smile hidden under my chin.

The heavy, hot cast-iron stove seemed to be the beating heart of the makeshift kitchen. The flames danced frantically beneath it, casting playful shadows on my face, and the heat embraced my

skin with an intensity that almost made me flinch. I leaned over it, determined not to give in, and began to stir the Luwak coffee beans, moving them rhythmically in a direction known only to me, as if performing an ancient ritual lost in the mists of time. The raw beans, pale at first, were transforming before my eyes, gradually turning an intense brown, almost black. It was as if I was watching their rebirth, their moment of glory.

“Do you want pictures? Video?” asked the girl who was guiding me, and I, with the smile of a happy child, shouted enthusiastically: “Yes!” How could I refuse to immortalise such a moment? I quickly handed my bag to Ketut, who sighed slightly but complied without comment.

I chose a small wooden stool, but when I sat down, I felt my balance playing tricks on me – it only had three legs! I straightened up at the last moment, and everyone burst out laughing. Sitting precariously and spinning around in the huge tray, I was in my element. Bizarrely, this scene made me feel like the protagonist of a film about Indonesian coffee, part of a script that was now being written for me. I could smell the roasted beans penetrating my skin and soul, in a perfection that is difficult to put into words.

Suddenly, two Indian tourists appeared, stopping abruptly in front of me and laughing.

“Your photos are awesome!” they said, and I replied with a big smile: “Thanks! But it's the smoke that makes all the magic...” We laughed together, happy that I had managed to turn even a mundane moment into a little story.

The thick smoke enveloped me like an invisible cloak, the air became difficult to breathe, but none of that mattered anymore. I was too absorbed in the moment – in the pure joy of a moment that already seemed timeless to me.

The sound of the beans roasting on the stove, that rhythmic and soothing crackling, penetrated my mind, while their intense aroma danced in the air, gliding like a hypnotic dance. It was one of those

rare moments that consume you completely, when you feel alive in every cell of your being.

But, like all beautiful moments, this one too dissipated, like another passing cloud. I looked at the stove for the last time, feeling the magic dissolve along with the smell of smoke that was beginning to disappear. I got up and followed the girl further, leaving behind the fire, the stove and that feeling of suspended enchantment. I knew I had experienced something unique, but I already accepted its ephemerality – another thread in the fabric of the day.

We arrived in front of a huge machine with a heavy, shiny crank, as if it had been caressed by hundreds of hands over time. It looked like an exhibit from a museum of another century, a relic that still pulsed with life. Inside the metal shell, the roasted coffee beans were ground with a rhythmic, monotonous sound – a sound that seemed to speak in a secret dialect.

I was fascinated to see how, in a world dominated by technology, these traditional methods still retained their charm. Ah, so there is more than just that huge grinder – a whole ritual of coffee transformation, each tool playing a perfect role in this story.

The girl then led me to a long table, where three large glass jars glistened in the soft sunlight. Each jar was filled with coffee beans – Robusta, Arabica and the famous Luwak. “You can taste as many as you like,” she said with a broad smile as she opened one of the jars.

Ketut, with a serious look that tried to mask his amusement, watched me as I eagerly made my way towards the jars. I could no longer hide my excitement. I felt just like a child in a candy store – irresistibly drawn to the little coffee beans. I reached out, eager to taste each one, as if each bean were a little treasure waiting for me to decipher. I felt their texture – some smooth, others slightly rough – and brought them close to my nose, letting their aroma envelop me. Then I tasted them, a little of each, so that I could say I had explored the entire universe of coffee. There was something almost ritualistic

in the way I approached them, a moment of silent connection with this 'drink' that united the world.

As we tasted, the two Indian tourists watched us amused, laughing at my childish enthusiasm. The girl, smiling broadly, told them about the episode with the civet's 'poo'. I laughed with them heartily, because life is too short not to enjoy such funny moments – moments of liberation, when you no longer care what others think.

I let the berries melt slowly on my tongue, and their taste enveloped me completely. It was strong, intense, with a subtle sweetness – like my own journey through this exotic country. It was as if their stories, their journey from the huge plantations to here, merged with my own experience. A journey of transformation, of discovery, of returning to the simplicity of the things that matter.

The girl's lesson had come to an end, but what remained was more than just a lesson about coffee. It was a memory, a moment of pure joy, something I will keep in my heart as a talisman of this perfect day. And perhaps, beyond the taste of coffee, this is the true essence of life: to collect such moments and carry them with you wherever you go. Little gems scattered along the path of life.

Finally, we arrived at the real tasting. We sat on the plantation terrace, and in front of me, a steaming cup of Kopi Luwak seemed to reveal new stories. The taste was complex, sweet, delicious – like a little secret whispered in my ear.

I let my thoughts float above the rice terraces, that green infinity that undulated like a calm sea under the gentle rays of the sun. Everything seemed suspended – a perfect moment in all its splendour.

Ketut sat silently beside me, sipping his own brew from a delicate cup. At that moment, our shared silence was not awkward, but comforting – words were unnecessary. His lost and calm gaze reflected everything I was feeling: a silence that said more than any sound could ever express. We were no longer two strangers. We were

two souls sharing that moment of magic in a corner of the world forgotten by time.

“Will you remember this day, Ketut?” I asked him, and he replied with a quiet smile, a smile that said more than words ever could. It seemed so obvious that the answer was ‘yes’, that his silence became an answer in itself.

When we got up and headed for the scooter, the sun cast long shadows across the rice terraces, and the air smelled of warm earth and leaves coming to life. On the way, the wind blew my hair, and the sun warmed my face like a gentle caress.

Maybe the day didn't go according to plan, but that's what made it so charming. Every unplanned moment is pure joy. And today, I felt like I was truly alive. And the day continues its natural course.

Swing Heaven

I stepped into this place with an open heart, ready to feel the thrill of adventure. Enveloped in the novelty of each moment, I had completely forgotten that I had originally wanted to go to the waterfall, not to the ‘swing’. But at that moment, none of that mattered anymore. The car park, which had been empty at 7:25 a.m., had turned into a sea of people, scooters and cars, a veritable anthill. Everything pulsed with excitement, as if the world had gathered here to catch free tickets to a show that promised to change lives.

Girls in brightly coloured dresses, dancing in the sunlight, moved among the people like exotic butterflies. The colours – yellow, red, bright blue – seemed to come to life in the hot morning air. Ketut, observing the scene, suggested that I rent a dress too.

“It looks good in photos,” he said, smiling slightly.

I looked around, taking in the feverish bustle of people waiting, laughing, adjusting their outfits, each trying to create their perfect moment of glory. It was as if I were in another world, a suspended

reality, a dreamlike place where everyone was searching for a piece of immortality.

'I want pictures too,' I said to myself, letting the excitement of the place wash over me. But then I stopped. I looked around again, at all those girls who seemed to be playing a role written for them, and I realised that maybe I didn't need a dress to truly feel this experience. Maybe the moment was already complete – just as it was.

I followed the girl, who showed me all the options – packages, prices, promises of memorable experiences. I settled on the complete package, but without the extras: no dress, no professional photos. I told myself that the beauty of a place like this cannot be bought. It cannot be perfectly immortalised in a photograph. It must be lived, felt, and breathed.

I stepped inside with Ketut, and what was revealed before my eyes took my breath away. The rice terraces stretched endlessly, disappearing into the horizon, where they merged with the sky as if in an ancient and sacred dance. The vibrant green of the rice seemed to pulsate in the gentle morning light, and each terrace seemed like a step towards another universe.

"Wow..." was all I could say. So simple, yet so sincere. At that moment, I felt small, like a leaf floating on a huge river, but paradoxically connected to something infinitely large, something deeper than myself. It was as if the earth and the sky were embracing me, and I was becoming part of this harmony.

Ketut stood next to me, silent, respecting my amazement. For a moment, nothing else existed – just the earth, the sky and us, lost in the beauty of a perfect moment.

The swings seemed like a dream come true for the adult child in me. Each swing awaited me, suspended between heaven and earth, like an invitation to pure freedom. Ketut, pragmatic and attentive as always, guided me to the freest ones, letting me choose my path among them.

I tried all seven attractions. Each swing made me forget about time. The world below me seemed suspended, like a dream that needed nothing but wind and sky. 'Me and the Universe,' I said to myself, smiling with my whole being. It was the kind of moment that fills you with pure, childlike joy, one that makes all the boundaries of life disappear. And for that hour, I truly believed that anything was possible.

Ketut, always on duty like a good guardian, stayed close by, holding my luggage. He was watched by the curious – and perhaps slightly envious – glances of the other tourists. But when it was time for the last swing, something unexpected happened. The boys who were operating it told me that I couldn't swing on my own, that it took two people to balance it.

"Can I take Ketut with me?" I asked, and they nodded in agreement. His reaction was like a surprise sunrise – his eyes lit up and his face broke into a wide, genuine smile, like a child receiving an unexpected gift. At that moment, Ketut was no longer just my guide. He was part of my story, a character who was experiencing the magic alongside me.

When we sat down together on the swing and began to sway, our laughter mingled with the wind. In those suspended moments, I felt that the magic of the place had embraced us both. For me, the joy was in experiencing the magic; for him, it was in discovering it for the first time. And perhaps that is the essence of the most beautiful moments – they only become truly real when you share them with someone.

Much later, Ketut confessed to me that it had been his first experience. And only then did I understand the importance of that day.

I left Swing Heaven with a full heart, but somewhere, a part of me remained suspended in the wind, on one of those swings. It was 11:20 a.m., but time seemed to have lost its meaning there, between heaven and earth.

I knew Ketut had to be at work at 12:30 p.m., so I didn't want to mess up his schedule. In front of the resort, I handed him the 150,000 IDR (about 9 euros), and our eyes met for a moment in a silent exchange of gratitude. We said goodbye, promising each other that maybe we would explore together tomorrow, that maybe he would manage to swap shifts with a colleague.

But it was not to be. In the evening, a message from him brought me the news – he had not managed to swap shifts. I felt a slight wave of regret, but I smiled, knowing that today had already been perfect in its own way. Sometimes, magic only happens once – and that makes it all the more precious.

When I got to my room at Argasoka, I immersed myself in the messages I had received about my filming. I was inundated with enthusiastic and curious feedback, but what I liked most was that people had noticed the same thing I had felt: that spirit of adventure that had given me wings all day.

I spent the rest of the afternoon by the pool, letting my thoughts drift to Ketut. I remembered his naivety, the shyness that had prevented him from entering the coffee plantation alone or trying the swings. It was touching how he was discovering the world with me, as if every step revealed a new window to a universe of possibilities. And then I understood – it wasn't about money. It was about the invisible barriers we build for ourselves, about how we sometimes refuse to live because we feel we don't deserve it.

The evening came slowly, enveloping me in a deep silence, like a heavy velvet cloak. I had dinner and sat down to write, thinking about this incredible day, about how lucky I was to experience all this. I felt energised, as if Ketut's youthful enthusiasm had been lent to me for a while, transforming every moment into something alive and vibrant.

The neighbours in the cottage next door returned late, around 1:30 a.m., disturbing the night with their voices, and a service in which the name 'Maria' was repeated obsessively and echoed absurdly. I

smiled, amused by the contrast between the solemnity of the singing and the little dream world I was still floating in.

Although tired, sleep refused to come. My mind was still floating among the memories of the day – the swaying above the world, Ketut's infectious laughter, that pure feeling that life can be so simple and wonderful.

I closed my eyes and imagined myself there again, suspended above the world. Smiling slightly, I said to myself:

'Life is just a tapestry of fleeting moments. And today I added a thread that will always shine in my memory.'

"Life is not measured by the number of breaths you take, but by the moments that take your breath away." – Maya Angelou

12

Where Wandering Leads

Monday, 31st July 2023

A beautiful Monday morning, when I allow myself the luxury of staying in bed, indulging in the warm embrace of the sheets until sleep loses its intensity. But reality does not always leave room for prolonged indulgence. A determined knock on the door gets me out of bed.

The cleaning lady, with her hair tied back carelessly and her hands worn from work, gave me a look that seemed to say, 'I have work to do. Don't you have anything better to do than sleep?' Her brightly coloured dress seemed to try to soften the monotony of a day like any other.

"You sleep a lot, miss... Where are you from?" she asked me as she nimbly lifted the crumpled sheet. Her voice was gentle, but her eyes betrayed her – they seemed more tired than her body.

"From Romania," I replied in a sleepy voice, and she tilted her head, as if trying to place a place she had never heard of on the map.

"A beautiful country, I think. Not that I've ever left the island. But the world is big, isn't it? You tourists have a beautiful life," she said, shaking the pillows as if she wanted to chase away the dust and a shadow of unfulfilled longing. Looking at her, I realised: 'Dust is like thoughts – it always comes back. And yet we wipe it away again and again.'

It was like a revelation, suddenly appearing before me...

I check my watch: 10:30. With a sigh, I tell myself that today is not the time for late dreams. She had no idea that I had stayed up late on social media, following people I don't know and leafing through the lives of others like a late-night diary. Well, it seems that some days begin without being asked.

With lazy steps, I go out on the terrace, letting her go about her business. As she hummed something unknown, a melody that seemed to chase away the silence, I wondered if each of us has our own ritual for facing the day.

It's a day without plans, a day when my only mission is to enjoy the unknown. I glance at the rafting and ATV offers, trying to convince myself that the adventure of the day awaits me. The prices, however, whisper something else. I decide to go out in search of a better deal – there is something satisfying about negotiating with life.

Wearing a light dress that dances on me with every step, I walk confidently beyond the resort gate. My first contact is with an agency that offers me rigid prices and cold words. The woman behind the desk seems more interested in her work than in selling me a dream. 'No, thank you,' I say to myself, but I decide to let her tell her story. She offers me a small discount, hoping to entice me. However, 400,000 IDR (about 24 euros) for an hour and a half of rafting seems a bit too much to me. Nevertheless, I realise that sometimes people are content to offer what they think we need, not what we are really looking for.

I wander from one agency to another, feeling that the city is whispering its secrets to me at every corner. The air carries mixed scents: fragrant sticks from temples and the sweet aroma of fresh satay.

After a couple of hours, I arrive at a café – a refuge for my thoughts, where the smell of fresh coffee restores my energy, enveloping my nostrils like a comforting embrace, and the omelette in front of me looks more like a palette of colours than breakfast. I smile ironically and push aside the vegetables that steal from the

simplicity of this moment. The music, barely audible, creeps between the tables, like an invisible thread connecting all the stories here. It was sweet music, reminding me that sometimes the most beautiful moments are those that find you unprepared.

Time seems to slow down. From the street, I can hear the engines of scooters, their noise mingling with the giggles of children and the monotonous song of a street vendor.

I leave the café, leaving behind the comforting aroma of coffee, and lose myself again in the streets of Ubud, following an unplanned route that seems to lead me, inevitably, to something I don't know I'm waiting for. On one of the advertising boards, I discover a cheaper offer for rafting – only 250,000 IDR (about 15 euros).

The idea suddenly pops into my mind: 'Look, life really does give you what you're looking for, if you're patient enough to wait.'

I set off with determined steps towards the address indicated by the GPS, my heart filled with the joy of discovery. The road was lined with old buildings with cracked facades, and the stone slabs felt hot under my feet. But when I arrive at my destination, the agency is closed. The door with a large padlock on it, the dusty glass reflecting the midday light, and an old, partially torn poster fluttering gently in the wind – all give me the feeling that I have missed something. It is a strange feeling, a mixture of anticipation and disappointment, as if my hopes had been locked inside, left to chance.

I sit my tired body on the kerb, and my mind begins to dance into the unknown – and waiting becomes a kind of silent conversation with myself, a dialogue without many answers. 'What do I do now? I don't want to pay 400,000 IDR for something I can get for 250,000 IDR,' I say to myself, as my gaze wanders into the distance. In this deep silence, time seems to expand, and I feel suspended between the desire to get what I want and the uncertainty of the answer.

The hot kerb burns my thighs through the thin fabric of my dress, but I let myself feel that discomfort. Maybe sometimes it's good to

feel something concrete, even when your soul seems suspended in the unknown.

My thoughts dance chaotically on the pavement. I look around me, as if for the first time since I sat down. A few empty packages are carried by the wind. A puppy looks at me with calm eyes from a few metres away, as if curious about my stop on his street... Children's voices can be heard from somewhere, like sounds from a distant past.

And suddenly, I ask myself: 'What am I actually looking for? A good rafting deal? Or maybe something deeper – a hidden meaning to this seemingly random wandering through the city? An excuse to waste time until my soul finds answers I don't even know I'm looking for?' Or maybe, without realising it, I'm just looking to find myself, where there are no plans and everything is uncertain.

Perhaps, rationally, I was pretending that all I wanted was a good rafting deal, but another, deeper voice urged me to wander aimlessly, as if the answers only came when you stopped looking for them.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a phone number written on a crumpled piece of paper stuck to the window, a detail that seems sent by the Universe at a crucial moment, like a thread of hope to show me the way. I take out my phone and send a message on WhatsApp, stubbornly believing that someone will respond. Nothing. Silence envelops me like a thin veil, and the noises of the city melt into complete absence. In this silence, I feel invisible, lost in the hustle and bustle of the world around me.

The phone felt heavier in my palm, and my mind played out scenarios – what if they don't answer? What if the locked padlock is the final answer? The puppy looked at me calmly, without moving, as if he understood my dilemma better than I did. In his silent presence, I found a subtle form of encouragement – a reminder that sometimes answers come when you just stand still and wait. 'Does he have any idea about my dilemma?' I smile at the thought, as if this is the moment when I truly understand... It's time to leave.

And yet, just as I look up and am ready to get up, my phone vibrates softly in my palm. A response. Always, just when you give up asking, life gives you what you need. It's as if the Universe was waiting to see if I could let go of control before revealing what I was looking for.

That vibration awakened all my senses, like a discreet whisper telling me that I was seen, heard. My hand trembled slightly as I opened the message – simple, direct, but full of promise.

“Yes, tomorrow at 9:00 a.m.” A few words, and my whole universe had changed. It was as if the whole day, with all its uncertainty, had been justified by this small promise. I realise that this moment will stay with me – not for what will follow, but for the lesson I learned about patience and acceptance.

I exchange a few more messages with that invisible person on the other side of the screen to finalise the details, and when I get up from the kerb, I feel the blood flowing through my veins again, as if the wait had frozen me.

‘I got what I wanted,’ I say to myself, a slight smile lighting up my face. ‘And even though I had to wait, it was all worth it.’ Happy and light-hearted, I head back to the resort, carrying in my heart another lesson that life has taught me.

Back in my room, I open my laptop and start writing, trying to capture those invisible threads that connect the moments of the day into a unique tapestry. Evening falls gently, and the seemingly mundane French fries and burger become a silent ritual of simple joy.

It is quiet. The terrace offers me a space where I can breathe, and I wonder where the monkeys that used to appear are, those little creatures that remind me that we are never truly alone.

As I gaze at the sky, I realise that I have taken another step into the unknown. Today I extended my stay by three more nights, because... I still don't know where to go. And maybe the answer isn't important, maybe the destination is just an excuse to discover.

‘Maybe,’ I tell myself, ‘true beauty is found in the way we let ourselves be carried by the wind, without fearing the direction.’

There, among the stars, the unpredictable was still weaving another story. A story I was to discover tomorrow.

Late at night, I enter my room and look at myself in the mirror – I see the reflection of a woman who is finally learning to live. I smile, because I know that the unpredictable is not an enemy, but a silent ally in my adventure. And then I realise that it is here, in the unknown, that magic finds its power to ‘be’.

Yes... Perhaps magic does not lie in plans, but in the way you abandon yourself to the unpredictable. Perhaps the true beauty of life is not knowing where you will end up, but being at peace with it.

The night slowly embraces me, and in its darkness, I feel an invisible thread connecting all the moments I have lived. The stars seemed to whisper stories that needed no words, and their silence taught me that sometimes the answers are more beautiful when they remain unknown.

My life writes its own story, and I am merely its pen.

“To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people just exist, that's all.” – Oscar Wilde

13

Overcoming the Currents of Fear

Tuesday, 1st August 2023

I woke up before the alarm went off, as if the excitement of the day had awakened every cell in my body. The plan was clear – rafting – but the thought troubled me.

Rafting was a word that sent cold shivers of fear and waves of excitement through me. Beneath the layers of courage that pushed me forward lay a silent but persistent uneasiness. Water. The unknown.

It was a duel between the desire for adventure and that whispering voice reminding me, ‘You’ve never been a big fan of water.’ Then I said to myself, almost forcefully, ‘What could be so bad about going down a river?’

However, the question remained unanswered, suspended in the air.

At 9:00 a.m., I left the hotel and greeted the lady at the reception desk with a smile. As usual, she didn’t miss the opportunity to ask me if I would like to sign up for an organised tour. I politely declined her offer, already knowing that the prices listed in her brochures were much higher than what I had found on my own.

At 9:10 a.m., a black car, a kind of sturdy jeep, stopped in front of the hotel, and two young men got out quickly. I approached them and, in a determined voice, told them my name. They leafed through a notebook, where the name ‘Yda’ was circled in red. I later found

out the reason: I was the only one who had not paid for the tour in advance.

In the car, I quickly greeted the group. The laughter of the others filled the cramped space, but I felt no peace. Three young Australians, with their spontaneous jokes and contagious relaxation, seemed to be enjoying the adventure as mere entertainment.

The two Spanish girls, scantily clad, giggled excitedly, gesturing in rapid Spanish. I, on the other hand, felt a growing tension. I watched their laughter as if through a window, as if I were just a spectator to my own adventure. For me, it was a new test, but they seemed to live in their own ease, oblivious to any shadow of fear.

Soon, the car picked up speed, and the road wound through landscapes that seemed to be taken from a forgotten story. After about 20 minutes, we arrived at the rafting registration point – a huge car park, haunted by an air of anticipation, almost empty.

We crossed the road and entered a makeshift building that looked like an old warehouse, full of rafting equipment scattered chaotically, and a long wooden table, where we were invited to sit down.

We received instructions, and the moment had a strange solemnity, as if every word was a covenant with the adventure to come. They asked us to leave all our luggage there. Two of the girls put on only their swimsuits, ready to face the waters.

I, however, kept my shorts and T-shirt on, feeling that they protected me from the unknown that was about to be revealed.

Everything seemed unreal to me, a picture in which I was about to take the first step towards the adventure of adventures. In my stomach, a knot of emotion reminded me of my old fears.

On the way, my fear crept up on me, like a thick smoke that filled the van. It was like an old enemy, an uninvited guest who already knew my weaknesses.

‘What if the boat capsizes?’ I wondered. The question lingered in my mind, along with a visceral fear that seemed to never go away. The question seemed simple, but the answers began to come like

flashbacks: my childhood, those moments when I just stared at the water, and the overwhelming feeling that I wasn't good enough, not even for a swimming pool.

My breath caught at the thought that the cold water could swallow my body. I wondered where this fear came from, but maybe it didn't matter. All I felt was the knot in my stomach and its weight, like a symbol of the challenge that awaited me.

My emotions were mixed, like on the first day of school – the unknown was lurking, and I was just a brave but uncertain explorer.

We were given the necessary equipment: yellow protective helmets, which turned us into a kind of improvised miners, and large paddle shovels, as if we were preparing for an expedition to another planet. I could barely hold the shovel in my hand, its weight giving me the feeling that I was facing an obstacle I had to overcome.

An old van, belching thick smoke, appeared in front of us. They loaded us all into it, each with our own helmet and shovel. The road seemed to stretch on forever, every second accentuating the discomfort of the helmet heating my scalp, while the thick smoke invaded my nostrils.

Finally, we arrived at another car park, just as deserted and strange. We got out slowly, like miners preparing to go underground. We were told that we had to walk for about 25 minutes to reach the river.

I found myself smiling, feeling a kind of solidarity with the others. We looked like a small improvised army – and the girls in their swimsuits and yellow helmets were a mesmerising sight, but perfectly directed by an invisible hand. Every time I met their gaze, I smiled at them sincerely, as if we were part of a shared secret.

We didn't even have time to catch our breath when another van pulled up beside us and six more young people joined the group. We set off together on the path, like a strange procession, passing through bright green rice fields, banana orchards and forests so dense that the sky was barely visible through the crowded leaves.

When we started down the steep road with slippery steps, I felt a thrill. It was as if we were heading into battle, armed with our shovels as weapons of defence against the unknown.

As we got closer to the river, the feeling of anticipation became palpable. When we finally arrived, we were instructed on how to row, how to hold the side ropes, and how to react to the unpredictable.

I got into the boat, but my mind was already wandering: 'Why am I so afraid of water?'. 'Is there something in me that refuses to let go?' And then I remembered that 'life is thoughts.' And at that moment, I decided to let go of all my fears, surrender, and enjoy the journey. And suddenly, the burden evaporated, like a passing cloud.

When the boat gently pulled away from the shore, I felt the river take hold of me. At first, every movement felt forced, every wave reminding me how fragile I was in the face of nature. But then something changed. A cold splash hit my face, like a slap that chased away my thoughts.

My hands held the paddle, but my body seemed to dance to the will of the water. The laughter of the others echoed like background music, and for the first time, I felt part of something bigger. I was no longer a stranger in a hostile environment – I was a thread in the fabric of the river, letting myself be carried by the current.

It was, without a doubt, one of the most intense experiences I have ever had.

The Ayung River, with all its wildness, enveloped me in its story – vines stretching out like tense arms, ancient sculptures carved in stone, waterfalls cascading from dizzying heights, and river bends that seemed to defy every law of nature.

In those moments, I felt like I was in another world, in a parallel universe. We stopped at a waterfall, where we laughed and splashed each other with water as if in an initiation ritual. It was as if we had been invited to participate in a celebration of life, a celebration of existence. I felt the river baptising us, welcoming us into its

mysteries, and in those loud laughs, it seemed to seal our belonging to that unique moment.

My clothes were soaked with cold water, my shorts were heavy and seemed to pull me down, but it didn't matter anymore. At every bump or turn, we held on tightly to the thick ropes, as if our entire existence depended on them.

When the boat hit the rocks hidden under the water, I understood that the river had a will of its own, that every corner hid a trap designed to prevent us from reaching the other side.

We fell into the rhythm of the river, clinging fiercely so as not to fly out, laughing out loud at every bang of our bottoms hitting the plastic boat, accompanied by shouts of joy and that tingling sensation on our skin when fear turns into adrenaline. We enjoyed every cold drop of water that splashed us.

The forest watched over us from the edge, a silent witness to our adventure, grandiose and full of mystery. In those moments, I felt that deep connection with nature, with the river, but also with the people around me.

From the middle of the river, the views unfolded like a painted canvas: deserted villages, followed by luxurious settlements clinging to the cliffs, and at one point, a suspension bridge, from which people watched and filmed us, like toys abandoned to the mercy of the waves.

It was an experience I never dreamed of, in perfect rhythm on a day when my fear of water was overcome by the joy of living. And no, I no longer felt that tightness in my throat at the thought of falling into the murky waters of the river. I was part of the river, the forest, the laughter, and every minute was a victory of life lived to the fullest.

We covered about 12 kilometres in two hours, which flew by like a dream. When we reached our destination, we were allowed to swim near the boat, but I hesitated.

Fear had returned, silent and treacherous, just when I thought I had conquered it. The water, which had seemed friendly earlier, had

once again become unknown territory. It was like an old friend who turns his back on you without warning. I sat on the edge of the boat, looking into the river.

I observed others effortlessly jumping in, laughing, and floating in the water like children free from any worries. However, I felt as though my feet were anchored to the boat, as if an invisible chain was holding me back. It was not the water that frightened me now, but the fact that I had to relinquish control.

I touched the water with my fingertips, feeling its coolness, but also the weight of unspoken decisions. 'You're not ready yet,' I told myself. And I allowed myself to accept that. Sometimes the struggle is not to overcome fear, but to look it in the eye and say, 'Not today, but soon.'

The river, with its wildness and unpredictability, showed me that life cannot be controlled – only lived. Sometimes gentle, sometimes harsh, the river challenges you to accept its rhythm. Fear was now part of me, just like the river. I didn't have to chase it away, just accept it.

I reached the pontoon and climbed the steep steps through the forest, feeling tired but happy. At the cabin, I was given a towel, took a shower, and changed my wet clothes. Upstairs in the building, in a makeshift restaurant, I enjoyed a hot meal, although my mind was still on that journey on the water.

'I did it,' I said to myself, smiling to myself. 'I faced a fear, I had an adventure. Maybe that's what it means to be truly alive.' Maybe I hadn't completely gotten rid of my fear, but with each day and each small step, I was getting closer to my dream: to no longer be afraid of water... at all!

Back in the quiet of my room, I lay down on my bed, feeling all the emotions of the day still coursing through my veins. I closed my eyes, and those moments of rafting began to replay in my mind, like a film I never wanted to forget. I remember the laughter, the splashes of water, the vibration of the boat at every turn, and how my heart beat

in unison with the waves. My body still feels like it's moving, floating on an invisible river of adrenaline, as if the waves are still rocking me in a continuous embrace.

I feel the pleasant weight of fatigue, like a warm blanket enveloping me. Every fiber of my body is still vibrating, but it is a sweet vibration, a vivid memory of a day when I overcame my own fears. With each passing moment, I feel the energy of the day dissolve, the adrenaline turns to calm, and my eyes slowly close.

Before I fall asleep, a thought crosses my mind:

'If all fears are just illusory barriers, how could I conquer them from now on?'

And with this question left floating in the ether, I fell asleep, carried by the waves of dreams into a world where thoughts no longer have cages.

I woke up, still floating between dream and reality, disoriented by the sweet sensation of afternoon sleep. When I opened my eyes, an entire hour seemed to have passed in another time, and a smile spread across my lips at the memory of today's rafting trip. I was like a lost boat, but here I am, I managed to find the right current, to let myself be carried away by the mirage of the day.

My gaze falls on the ATV poster on the bedside table, which tempts me more seductively than any handsome man could ever do. So I already know that the day has a new challenge in store for me: finding an affordable ATV tour.

After today, I feel like I've got the 'key' to these adventures. There's no need to rush; just be tenacious, let time flow, and be a little stubborn if necessary. The real adventure is not just the journey itself, but the patience to discover all its facets, with the confidence that, in the end, everything will make sense.

At around 3:00 p.m., I put on my sunglasses and leave the room, ready to seek a new dose of adrenaline. And so it begins again. I repeat yesterday's experience, but in a different light. The price of the ATV tour is the same everywhere – 500,000 IDR (about 30 euros). I feel

caught in a kind of time loop, always at the same point, waiting for something to change, for a miracle to happen.

Maybe adventure isn't about finding the answers right away, but about continuing to ask questions. About being patient with myself.

I walk mechanically towards the woman from whom I am trying to get the tour. It is the third time I have stopped at her, and something inside me is still preventing me from making a decision. Something energetic, almost imperceptible, tells me not to do it. And every time I walk away, with a strange feeling that she attracts me, but she is not what I need.

I remember that I should withdraw some money and stop at an ATM. I buy two croissants from the market, so I have them handy in my room for when I feel like something sweet.

Time passes slowly, almost like the people passing by me. Some smile at me, others seem not to see me. It's almost dark, and my steps carry me back to my accommodation, guided by an instinct that seems beyond me.

In the evening light, people are looking for a place to have dinner, agitated, eager for new experiences, while I experience a deep silence, a silence that foreshadows something. You can feel it in the air.

I buy an ice cream cone and, lost in thought, savour it as I walk.

I was halfway to my resort, among the winding streets of Ubud, and my thoughts were far away. And then I see her.

Esther.

She is there, a few metres in front of me, unaware, as lost in her own world as I am. In that split second, I decide to approach her. It would have been so easy to walk past her, to ignore each other's existence.

But I don't.

Something inside me tells me that nothing happens by chance. We were meant to 'cross paths', even if I didn't know it at the time.

But I could feel it. I had completely forgotten that I had met her that night in the club, caught up in the uniqueness of each day.

I stopped suddenly in front of her.

"Hello!" I said.

Esther looks at me in surprise, her still dreamy eyes returning to reality.

"Um... hello..."

"How are you?" I asked her.

"Oh, what a coincidence, to meet like this," she replied with a smile. "I just got out of a yoga class and I'm going to eat a pizza."

"Great. Where are you going?"

"There's a place further down the road, they have good pizza at a decent price."

Esther smiles at me, visibly amazed by our unexpected encounter, as if she can't quite believe it. With my eyes still on my ice cream cone, I ask without thinking:

"Do you mind if I come with you? I haven't eaten yet either, and I'd love to keep you company."

"Of course. It looks like you've started with dessert," she says, pointing to my ice cream.

We both laugh and slowly start walking in the direction she indicated. I, too, am amazed by this unexpected encounter and think about the invisible threads that have brought us together again.

I felt it was one of those encounters that catches you off guard, without you realising that they will remain deeply engraved in your soul. She had a smile that seemed to welcome you into her soul, a genuine warmth that radiated around her and dispelled any fear. She looked me straight in the eye, without haste, as if she already knew my story, and that gave me an inner peace, a sense of belonging in a world where everything seemed ephemeral.

At the restaurant, we discuss our lives, the journeys we have experienced, and those that await us. She tells me about her life in the Netherlands, how she took a year off to explore the world, about

her love of salsa dancing. I look at her, admiring the way she speaks, the vibrant energy she exudes.

Esther was like a gentle breeze on a hot day.

Her brown eyes seemed like an invitation to open up, without fear. As she talked about her travels, I realised that in the melancholy of her smile there was a call, an invitation to look at my own struggles with more kindness. The mirror she represented was not perfect – it had cracks, but it was precisely those cracks that reflected my hidden fragments. In the melancholy of her smile, I saw an echo of my own hesitations. It was not just a chance encounter – it was a moment sent by the Universe to show me that I am not alone on this path of searching.

After we finished our pizza and lemonade, we got up and headed to my resort, where we parted ways. I wanted to suggest that we travel together. I felt I should ask her, but I hesitated. Maybe she wants to be alone, to live her own journey at her own pace.

We exchanged a few words of farewell, but behind them lay the complexity of the moment, a connection that you rarely encounter. She simply said, “Yes, yes, let's keep in touch.”

Watching her walk away with light steps, a thought crossed my mind: ‘Where will our paths take us?’

The evening I spent with Esther was incredible, and I felt her rare ability to bring out the best in me, to give me a space where I could be myself, authentic. It seemed like a predestined encounter, the meaning of which I had not yet fully understood.

Once in my room, I jumped into the cold shower, letting the water wash away the fatigue of the day. Esther's face kept coming back to me – that gentle smile and deep eyes, like two wells hiding secrets.

What stories lie behind that gaze?

What silent pains weighed on her soul?

I felt that beneath her protective shell, there was a struggle, an attempt to find herself, to gather together the fragments scattered over the years. I realised that in this year of self-discovery, her search

was not just about places, but about those pieces of herself that she hoped to recover. 'Like me,' I murmured, and my skin shivered under the cool water. I got out and wrapped myself in the fluffy towel that smelled of lavender.

Then I opened my laptop and started writing. Each word was an attempt to capture the essence of that encounter, to figure out what it was about Esther's presentation that had touched me. There was something so familiar in her turmoil, as if I were looking in a mirror.

I could see myself in her eyes.

And it was strange!

I found myself reflecting on my own fears and hesitations. Slowly, my thoughts about the ATV tour – that uncertainty that had gnawed at me all day – dissipated like smoke scattered by a gentle breeze, leaving behind a sense of calm.

Finally, I laid down on the bed, and the languor of the day enveloped me like an embrace. I felt all the energy of the day drain away, leaving only tranquillity behind. The images of the river, the laughter, Esther, all played out in my mind like a film that seemed to have no end.

And, above all, that simple but powerful thought:

'What if every fear I feel is just an invitation to surrender more to life?'

Maybe I don't need to understand everything right now. Maybe sometimes the search was the answer itself.

And, in one last thought before sleep overtook me, I thought of Esther and how, sometimes, strangers can become mirrors that reflect parts of ourselves that we haven't even discovered yet.

I let myself be carried away by the waves of sleep, into that world without limits.

"The greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time you fall." – Confucius

14

The Dance of Ubud

Wednesday, 2nd August 2023

At around 9:00 a.m., I reluctantly broke free from the warm embrace of my bed, after the alarm had become a siren song – a sweet call back to dreaming. With each press of the snooze button, I clung to a thin thread of sleep, as if I could prolong the tranquillity of the morning.

Finally, I got up and walked to the bathroom, letting the water caress my naked body.

As I performed my little morning ritual, I reviewed the events of the last few days in my mind: the trip with Irina, that little financial misunderstanding with Gusti, the unexpected meeting with Ketut, and how I met Esther. The visa? Easier to sort out than I could have imagined. I smiled slightly at my reflection in the mirror.

‘I have a few more days here,’ I said to myself. Enough time for the ATV I had been dreaming of, or for that cooking class Esther had told me about with such enthusiasm. ‘Why not?’ I murmured. ‘What could be worse than burning my fingers on a wok?’

And yet, beyond all these plans, one thought lingered in my mind: ‘I had to go back to Tis Cafe.’ This place was waiting for me, and I knew I couldn't leave without reliving that moment.

The first time I went there with Ketut, time seemed to stand still. The sun warmed my cheeks, the smell of coffee floated like an invisible perfume, and Ketut's laughter – sincere and carefree – still

rang in my ears. It was more than just a coffee bar in the Tegalalang Valley.

It was a sanctuary, a place where peace and dreams merged, becoming a part of me.

But the reality of the day called me back, like a gentle breeze touching your shoulders when you lose yourself in a daydream. I sighed softly, letting the warm morning air fill my lungs, and stepped out of my reverie, back into the lively rhythm of the city.

Ubud felt different today.

A mysterious energy hung in the air.

The shops had their shutters down, like eyes closed to the sun. The offerings, carefully placed on street corners, gave off a sweet smell of incense sticks and frangipani.

Everything was wrapped in an invisible cloak.

‘A little break,’ I said to myself, passing by people dressed in traditional costumes, who seemed caught up in a silent dance with the history of the place.

Irina had told me about this strange, heavy energy in Ubud, an invisible burden that weighs on tourists' shoulders. ‘Not everyone can handle this energy,’ she had said.

But I didn't feel it as a burden. For me, Ubud was like the arms of a mother welcoming her lost child. In the midst of the chaos, I found deep peace, like a calm sea under a starry sky.

I wandered the streets with no particular destination until I finally returned to the resort. At the reception desk, I asked hopefully if there was any chance I could take a cooking class.

They replied with a gentle smile: “It's a holiday, we don't have classes today.”

I smiled understandingly, but my gaze lingered on the long wrinkles on the receptionist's cheeks. She wore them with pride, and for a moment, I envied the nonchalance with which she wore her years.

I retired to my room, aimlessly scrolling through my phone. I was trying to find a direction for the day. My morning plans were unavailable... until I remembered Tis Cafe.

Meanwhile, Mone's messages began to flood my screen: "How did you like the rafting?" "How did the Luwak coffee taste?" And, inevitably: "Who's the blonde girl in this picture?"

It was Esther.

He had also received a picture of the two of us, happy, laughing like old friends. I smiled as I remembered our meeting and her energy, which seemed to have stayed with me. I didn't answer his question right away. Some things are better left to myself.

We talked for a while, me telling him about all the new sensations I had experienced, him listening attentively, with the patience of a true friend. I felt him calm, his soul light, knowing that I was better than he could ever have imagined.

When we finished our conversation, I ordered a taxi through the GoJek app and let myself be enveloped by the tranquillity of the moment, waiting patiently in the blinding sun in front of the resort. The warm air, the scent of frangipani, and the distant sounds of the city seemed to whisper that the day ahead would be special.

From the scooter, I looked at the city unfolding before me like a living painting – people dressed in traditional clothes, children with innocent smiles, stray dogs on the sidewalks, looking for a cool place to rest.

When I descended the bamboo steps to Tis Cafe, the world seemed enveloped in an ephemeral magic.

The pool sparkled in the sun, and the DJ's music synchronised perfectly with the rhythm of my heart. I sat down on a sun lounger, letting the sun's rays warm every fibre of my skin. In that silence, my thoughts melted away. All that remained was Bali: its bittersweet air, its vibrant colours, and the scent of a story I had not yet finished writing.

I opened my laptop, and the words began to flow.

It was as if inspiration, dormant for so many days, had suddenly awakened and was dancing through me. In that perfect silence, in that moment suspended between reality and dream, I wondered again if I could stay here forever. If I could keep this state of grace for myself, this feeling that the whole world is nothing but a backdrop for my own story.

I felt so connected that, for a moment, the boundaries of my identity blurred, and I became just a grain of sand carried by the warm breeze, as if Bali had swallowed me up, and I was now part of its whispers, its colours, and its subtle scent.

I ordered a vegan salad and fried bananas, and the delicate but intense flavours flooded my senses. Each bite was a reminder of the contrasts that life had offered me.

Sitting there by the pool, I had a moment of lucidity, a flash of clarity that crossed my mind: the dream I had carried in my heart for so many years, the dream that once seemed so distant, was here, it was real. It was no longer just a fantasy that had sprung up during sleepless hours, but a tangible place, a universe in which I lived with every breath, with every beat of my heart.

And then, I asked myself, with a curiosity that burned inside me:

‘What happens to a dream when it becomes reality? Does it lose its magic or does it change shape, becoming part of us?’

When the sun began to set, bathing the horizon in a pink halo, I went down to the pool. The cold water embraced my body, and in that moment, I felt like a painting that only Bali could create.

I was more than just a being – I was a detail in the painting, a splash of colour blending into the background. In that state of grace, I understood that the real dream was not Bali or the pool, but that deep feeling of being alive, connected to something greater than yourself.

Darkness quickly descended upon Tis Cafe, like a silk cloak covering the stage after the final act of a play. The light gradually faded, and the colours of the place seemed to dissolve into soft

shadows, as if every corner of the café was bidding farewell to the passing day.

I tried, with a slight uneasiness, to find a taxi to take me back to the hotel. The air was heavy with mystery and the coolness of the night, and the sounds of the street were beginning to fade, leaving behind a barely perceptible murmur.

When I finally arrived in my room, the clock showed 7:30 p.m.

I felt that the day was now a story that had come to an end, like a novel you close after the last page.

I left the emotions of the day under the same cold shower, and the water, in its continuous fall, turned into small streams that flowed and disappeared. Each drop seemed to whisper memories, and I stood there listening to them until they blended into a soothing song.

Wrapped in a white towel, I lay down on the large bed and looked at the ceiling again. I closed my eyes for a moment, and in that quiet darkness, all the moments I had experienced appeared to me like in a film – every smile from the girls at the pool, every glance from the curious waiters, every step I had taken through Tis Cafe.

‘No one bothered me this afternoon.’

Since I had spoken to Mone, the phone had remained silent. No messages, no curious questions from friends. It seemed that even the Universe understood that I needed this moment, that I needed to sink into myself, without noise, without expectations.

On that night in Ubud, the universe whispered a new story to me.

And, for the first time, I felt what ‘silence’ really meant.

It wasn't just the absence of sound, but a rare silence in which thoughts dissolved before they could take shape.

Then the silence broke like a wave crashing against the rocks.

Esther.

Yes... Esther.

I smiled, feeling a strange warmth filling my chest. Sometimes magic happens when you least expect it.

“Hey, Yda, how are you? Have you eaten sticky rice today?”

The trivial detail about sticky rice – my favourite dessert – gave me the feeling that someone there had really been listening to me, with an attention that surprised me. Esther was full of surprises, and that intrigued me more than I wanted to admit. I smiled at the message, even though she couldn't see it.

“No. But I hope to find some soon. Today I went to Tis Cafe.”

“I'm leaving for Amed tomorrow. Maybe we'll meet there.”

Her invitation was clear, like clear mountain water.

My thoughts oscillated between enthusiasm and fear.

Something in her tone seemed to promise a new adventure, but there was also an uneasiness that I couldn't define. Maybe it was the fear of the unknown, of opening my heart again to someone I had only known for a few days. Or maybe it was the fear that once I left Ubud, I would lose some of the peace I had just discovered.

“Okay. I'll write to you when I get there.”

Amed, famous for its diving courses, was more than just a point on the map for me; it was a promise of answers, and now the Universe seemed to be throwing me a clue. The place already seemed to promise adventures where the ocean meets the mountains and tranquillity hides answers.

I thought for a moment that diving wasn't exactly my comfort zone – the ocean has its own secrets, and I wasn't the best swimmer – but maybe that was exactly why I had to go there.

The ocean attracted and intimidated me at the same time – a place where everything begins and everything ends. Maybe that's why I had to encounter it, to discover something deeper within myself.

‘*Nothing is random,*’ I said to myself.

“Okay. Talk to you soon.”

I turned off the phone and let my thoughts wander. Maybe life is a road without clear signs. Or maybe people are just beacons that light the way so we can see it better.

In the deep night of Ubud, I let myself fall asleep. Amed was waiting for me – a new journey, still unknown.

'Maybe that's what travelling is all about,' I said to myself.

'We don't travel to escape life, but so that life doesn't escape us.'

And maybe that's exactly what I was looking for – the unknown that would lead me to a more complete version of myself.

“The road to the unknown never ends.” – Jack Kerouac

Journey through Flavours and Revelations

Thursday, 3rd August 2023

The first ray of light caressed my face, but the thought of waking up seemed like a punishment. ‘Why do we have to leave so early for this cooking class?’ I asked myself, dazed, looking at my phone: 6:45. Late last night, the reception had informed me about the trip.

With regret, I pulled myself out of the fluffy arms of the bed, which seemed to whisper conspiratorially, ‘Stay a little longer...’

A quick shower awakened my senses, and the cool cream applied to my skin became the prelude to a ritual of preparation. Accuweather showed me a scorching day, but the thought of the promised experiences motivated me.

Before going out, I looked at myself in the mirror. The green dress caressed my tanned skin. My hair danced rebelliously around my face, as if caught by a wild spirit, as if the Bali sun had brought it to life. I feel a strange connection between my hair and Bali – both free, unruly, but full of life.

In the mirror's reflection, I saw a transformed Yda – a woman who now bore the marks of her travels. It was a profound change, beyond words. I smiled at the girl from the past, that Yda who didn't know that one day she would end up here, at the end of the world, embraced by her own destiny.

I left the room feeling light, as if I had just received a double dose of energy. The reception was quiet, deserted, as if the morning itself

had been suspended. I looked at the posters on the walls, lost in thought.

At 7:45, a black car pulled up in front of the hotel. The driver, an elegant man with a warm smile, exchanged a few words with the receptionist before giving me an appraising look. His gaze, combined with that confident smile, gave me a strange feeling. 'Today will be special,' I whispered to myself.

The car started, and the driver, with his deep wrinkles and enigmatic smile, seemed to hide a life full of stories.

We stopped in front of a resort to pick up the rest of the group. In front of me, a French family – Christelle, a charming woman, her husband Manu, a little shy but with a contagious smile, and adorable boys – quickly became familiar to me.

Soon, our group grew to include another French family and three noisy children. I laughed to myself at this coincidence: 'Me, of all people, the only Romanian lost among the French in the middle of Bali.'

Our first stop was at a local market, a maze of stalls that seemed to be more than just places to sell goods – they looked like pages from an ancient manuscript of Indonesian life. Bob waved his hands like a consummate storyteller, and his infectious energy seemed to draw us along with him among the stalls, like curious students in an unusual lesson. His voice told of spices, traditions, and Balinese cuisine.

The market was a sensory spectacle. Exotic fruits – golden mangoes, pink dragon fruit, and green bananas – glistened in the sun. The scent of flowers and scented sticks mingled with the aroma of spices: turmeric, chilli, pepper. Bob, like a true teacher, explained how each spice has its own story in Balinese cuisine.

As we walked through the market aisles, I stopped at a stall where a woman offered me a taste of an unfamiliar fruit – salak, also known as the "snake fruit". Its reddish-brown, scaly skin looked intimidating, but once opened, the flesh was sweet and sour, with a crunchy texture. She smiled at me and said something in Indonesian, and her

smile was enough to understand that she was inviting me to taste more.

At another stall, a traditional drink served in old bottles attracted curious glances.

"It's a strong drink, similar to brandy," Bob tells us with a mischievous smile. "After the first glass, everything is fine. After the fourth, you can barely see straight, and after the tenth, you'll probably wake up in a hospital bed."

Our laughter echoed among the stalls, and Bob's stories turned the moment into a unique experience.

On the way out, a sleepy kitten sprawled on a raffia bag caught my attention. Bob told us that Balinese people have a special relationship with dogs, but cats are rather ignored. I looked at the feline with a mixture of compassion and curiosity, wondering what stories her life hid. Fragile and bedraggled, the kitten nevertheless seemed at peace, floating away from the hustle and bustle of the market, as if it were a little spirit of the place, unseen and forgotten by others. I wondered if it was her vulnerability that made her so free.

After the market, Bob took us to see the rice fields.

The cars stopped at the edge of green terraces that stretched to the horizon. Without hesitation, I took off my sandals and stepped barefoot onto the damp earth. The morning dew caressed my feet, and each step was like an invitation to connect more deeply with nature.

For a moment, I ran along the narrow paths, like a butterfly flying from flower to flower. The fresh earth, the cool air, and the warm sunlight made me feel more alive than ever.

'Live in the moment, Yda!' I whispered to myself as I gazed, spellbound, at this wonder of nature.

The road to Bob's house was filled with laughter and jokes, but nothing could have prepared us for what we were about to see. When the car pulled over, I looked at the courtyard as if it were a gateway to another world.

I stepped timidly inside, admiring the architectural details that spoke of an ancient but still living tradition. At the entrance, we were greeted by an altar – a stone sculpture covered with a black and white fabric, specific to Balinese culture.

Fragrant sticks were burning on the edges, and a fresh offering, decorated with frangipani flowers, seemed to bless our passage.

Bob, with his calm yet authoritative voice, explains:

“This is our family temple. Every Balinese family has one, and in it we keep the memory of our ancestors alive. Offerings are our way of giving thanks for all the blessings in life.”

We moved on, and my gaze was drawn to the lively courtyard. Bob's house is not just a house – it is a complex of buildings, each with its own story. The morning sun reflected off the carved stone walls, and between the buildings, lush greenery made its way through small stone paths. An inner courtyard full of tropical plants gave the place a sanctuary-like feel.

On the steps of the first house, Bob's wife, Reka, greets us with a bottle that seems to capture the sun's rays. “A welcome drink,” she says with a smile. The yellow drink, with a subtle citrus scent, aroused my curiosity. The first sip, bitter and pungent, revealed the taste of fresh earth and wild roots. Its warmth flooded my senses, and in one decisive gesture, I drank the whole glass.

The sensation is almost hypnotic, like a warmth passing through my veins and opening my senses. My stomach, remembering its forgotten hunger, protests slightly, but the drink seems to calm it for the moment.

Then Reka invites us to create offerings. Twisting banana leaves, arranging delicate flowers, and combining symbolic colours, I discovered a ritual that is not just a tradition – it is a little Balinese secret. She and their daughter, Ara, came to show us each step, with patience and kindness. Ara was a quiet teenager, but her face radiated a calmness that calmed me, too. My hands are clumsy, but under

their gentle gaze, I realise that intention is more important than perfection.

When I look at the final offering, small and simple, I feel a deep joy, as if these gestures have opened a door to something greater than myself.

My offering is now more than just an object – it is a silent conversation with the Universe, one I didn't know I wanted to have.

For the first time, I felt that a simple gesture could carry profound meaning. Without words, only through colours, shapes, and intention, I discovered a way to connect sincerely with the Universe.

From the hustle and bustle of the market, with its explosion of smells and colours, I had arrived at the tranquillity of the offering ritual. Bali seemed to be a place of perfect contrasts, a place where life pulsed in all its forms – wild, but also sacred.

When we were done, Bob took us to the back of the house, among the small houses that belonged to family members. Each house had its own veranda and everything was tidy, clean, and in harmony with nature.

On the porch of one of the buildings, several women were gathered around baskets full of fruit. We were invited to taste what they were preparing. I chose a slice of papaya, juicy and sweet, which flooded my taste buds with a taste so natural that it almost made me sigh with delight.

As I ate, an old woman approached and handed me a fruit I had tasted before in Manila. It was a small, brown sphere with a thick skin and a soft white flesh – a perfect combination of sweet and sour. I learned that it was called mangosteen, the 'queen of fruits' in Bali.

Behind the courtyard, the open kitchen awaited us. A large space, flooded with natural light, with long wooden tables filled with ingredients. Pots, pans, plates, cutlery – all ready for the show that was about to begin. Reka greeted us with a warm smile, and Bob, like an actor finishing his leading role, discreetly disappeared, leaving us in the care of her and their daughter.

We were introduced to the ingredients, each one a story in itself: freshly ground turmeric paste, lemongrass leaves with a scent so intense it seemed to fill your lungs, red chillies that promised to add fire to the dishes, and pieces of coconut as white as milk foam, which would form the basis of many recipes.

Reka showed us how to grind the spices in a stone mortar, using circular movements, encouraging us to feel the texture and aroma of the ingredients. Here, cooking was not a simple task – it was a ritual, a celebration of life through aromas and textures that seemed to speak to you.

Over the next few hours, we prepared several dishes together. Each of us had our own workstation, and Ara would quietly come over to correct our small mistakes or show us how to do things better.

We cooked *sate ayam base manis* – chicken skewers with a sweet sauce, infused with ginger and coriander; *sup jagung ayam* – a Balinese salad with corn and chicken; *sayur arab* – mixed vegetables; *tempe base manis* – a fermented soy cheese; *tum tuna* – a kind of flavoured meatballs; and *dadar gulung* – a Balinese dessert with fresh coconut and vanilla, flavours that seemed to envelop your soul.

From time to time, I tasted a little bit of what I was preparing, smiling conspiratorially, as if I had committed a small sin, a violation of the rules. Each flavour seemed to speak to me, to tell me its own story, and I let myself be seduced by the new, unknown tastes.

I didn't get the coffee I was waiting for, but it didn't matter anymore – I was completely captivated by the moment, caught up in the web of cooking. I let myself be carried away by memories: of the evenings when I cooked for my family in Romania, losing myself in every gesture, every aroma.

But here, in Bali, everything was more vivid – more intense, more profound. Food was not just nourishment, but an art, a ritual that spoke to me of roots and connection with nature. I felt that I had moved to another level of cooking, that all my knowledge had merged with this new spectrum of flavours and textures.

We laughed, we tasted, and we let ourselves be carried away by the energy of the group. Reka talked about traditions, and we, lost between the laughter of children and the scent of spices, felt that we were part of something bigger.

An atmosphere of camaraderie enveloped us like a warm blanket. I felt part of this improvised family, as if we were meant to meet here, in Bob's kitchen. The children, with their boundless energy, were amazing, throwing themselves into every culinary challenge with enthusiasm. I remember their laughter, the looks of pride when they finished a task, and the way the whole group seemed to be enveloped in a collective energy that was almost tangible.

After four and a half hours, when everything was ready, we sat down around the long tables, and the plates were filled with the fruits of our labour. Each bite was an explosion of flavours, a story about Bali told not through words, but through taste.

We ate until we couldn't eat anymore, but the temptation to taste 'just a little more' was impossible to ignore.

It all ended abruptly when Bob reappeared, with that satisfied host's smile on his face. He thanked us for participating and asked us to leave a review if we enjoyed the experience. We all had big smiles on our faces, full of food and happiness. I realise how much richness this day has brought me, how much it has enriched me internally.

We said goodbye to his wife and daughter and got into the two cars waiting for us at the gate. At 2:30 p.m., we arrived at Argasoka, full, but it wasn't just about the food. It was that feeling of 'overflowing,' that delight that invades you when you experience something with your whole being. I threw myself onto the big bed and fell asleep, not caring about the warmth of the sun caressing my face or the two cheeky flies circling around me. I fell into a deep sleep, as if the day had taken its toll.

The neighbours' noises woke me up after a good two hours. I smiled as I realised I was lying naked in the huge bed, remembering

the day I had lived. It had been a full, lively day that had brought me more than I could ever have expected.

My phone was full of messages, and as I looked at them, an angelic smile lit up my face. Sometimes I felt as if the world at home was a forgotten dream, another life. But these messages – full of jokes and affection – brought me back to reality, reminding me that somewhere, someone was waiting for me and remembering me.

“Are you still alive?” Mone asks me, joking, and Sawa wrote to me, as if in silent conspiracy with him:

“What are you doing? Were you kidnapped by Indonesians, or did you move there permanently?”

I smile and reply:

“I'm alive, yes! More than ever. I went to a cooking class and cooked seven dishes. I outdid myself!”

Ralu, my friend, also sends me a message: “It's as if the earth has swallowed you up, you don't say anything anymore...” I reply, joking about my ‘disappearance’: “Yes, Bali has swallowed me up, but I promise to reappear soon, if they let me.”

These conversations remind me that I am part of a bigger world, that my journey has not completely cut me off from others. With my thoughts on them, I head for the shower, letting the water wash away the fatigue of the day. Each drop seems to soothe every tense fibre of my body and clear my mind.

‘Can I live like this, without a care in the world, for the rest of my life?’ I ask myself, looking at my long body reflected in the mirror. The thought is tempting, almost as seductive as the idea of staying forever in a beautiful dream.

I go out onto the terrace and sit down at my laptop, feeling a strong urge to write, to capture on paper all the moments I have experienced in Bob's house. The words flow, but no matter how hard I try, they don't seem to fully capture the joy, laughter, and little revelations of the day.

I'm getting hungry, and my craving for something salty leads me straight to a huge portion of French fries. After all that healthy food at Bob's table, French fries become a little indulgence, a guilty pleasure that fits perfectly with the torrent of thoughts occupying my mind.

But you know what's curious? Just as I was returning to my room, I saw it. A large billboard, which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, right near the Argasoka complex. How did I not notice it before? It was an advertisement for an ATV tour, and the images of a huge, deep brown puddle caught my attention. The faces of the people on the billboard radiated confidence and enthusiasm, and something inside me clicked. I wrote down the phone number, almost without thinking, and headed back to my room, humming.

I returned and sat down to write again, completely forgetting about the phone number. Writing had a magnetic force; I felt I had to put into words what I had just experienced, to keep the memory of this day alive. It was only after a while that I remembered the number. 'Ah, yes!' I said to myself, picking up the phone and dialling quickly.

To my surprise, someone answered immediately and told me that they had places available for tomorrow. The only problem was that they didn't offer a pick-up from the location, and I would have to get there on my own. I received the address and the price of 350,000 IDR (~21 euros). I couldn't believe it. Coincidence? Luck? Or maybe the Universe is preparing another gift for me?

Happy, I wrote to Mone, and his reply was not long in coming:

"See? That's what happens when you're in harmony with the Universe! Only surprises await you!"

I hang up the phone and smile. I don't know if the Universe is guiding my path or if I'm just letting myself be carried along, but I feel that all of this has meaning. Perhaps the magic lies precisely in the fact that I don't try to understand, but simply accept.

I feel that my steps are guided by an invisible force. Everything seems to align perfectly. An unexpected thought crosses my mind, like a whisper: *'Do we only get what we deserve or what we need?'*

I remembered Reka's gentle eyes, the children's clumsy hands, their sincere laughter. Perhaps the magic of Bali doesn't give you answers, but teaches you to listen to the questions.

With a smile on my lips and my heart beating with excitement, I fall asleep. The thought of adventure whispers to me, like an eager friend:

'Tomorrow I'm going on an ATV...'

"It's not the journey that matters, but what you discover about yourself during it." – Paulo Coelho

16

Expect the Unexpected

Friday, 4th August 2023

The morning came like a cold shower: brutal and waking me up with only one thought in my mind: the ATV!

Under the powerful spray of the shower, each drop seemed to wake me up to reality, washing away the fragments of fear hidden in the corners of my mind. This day would be a test – not just of my courage, but of everything I had tried to leave behind.

At 9:30 a.m., with a dose of improvised courage, I left my room and ordered a taxi from the GoJek app. A noisy motorbike carried me through the narrow streets of Ubud to Fun ATV Ubud, where the adventure was about to begin.

On the way, the wind whistled in my ears, bringing back memories: motorcycle crashes, especially the one that left marks on my hand and leg. Those scars were still whispering to me: ‘You don’t belong here. Your place is not on two wheels.’

At first, I was doing surprisingly well. My instructor, Alex, with his tattooed arms and calm voice, guided me patiently, and I easily passed through the cones, drew perfect figure eights, and even ventured to ride with one hand in the air. I was ready to take the final test to go out on the road. And yet, right in the middle of that hard-won confidence, something broke.

I clearly remember the discussion at the office – a conversation that, instead of lifting me up, brought me down. “Leave the office. Today. You haven’t done anything in these two months anyway,”

Marius told me. His words cut through my pride like a cold blade. At that moment, I felt my entire worth reduced to zero, as if every effort I had made up to that point had been useless. It was like a slap in the face, one that takes your breath away and leaves you speechless.

And yet, I refused to cry. Not there, not in front of him. I packed my things without a word, and a few days later, I resigned.

Why were these memories haunting me now, on the way to the ATV? Perhaps because, in a strange way, the serious fall from the motorcycle had been, like that moment, a turning point – a fracture between what I was and what I was about to become.

Why do we let the wounds of the past shape our future? I still didn't know the answer. Maybe I didn't even want to know. But at that moment, I was getting on the ATV not just for an adventure. It was more than that. It was about those wounds – and maybe about something I didn't yet know I had lost.

The thought of the ATV sent cold shivers down my spine, ironic on a 31-degree Balinese morning. It scratched at my mind like an animal caught in a trap, not knowing whether to run or struggle. That's when I made a promise to myself: 'I won't let anything hold me back anymore.' This whisper, though barely audible, was my anchor in the midst of emotional chaos.

When I arrived at Fun ATV Ubud, the noise of revving engines and the smell of burnt rubber seemed to pull me out of my own thoughts. The large car park vibrated with excitement – an energy that almost forced me to take a deep breath. Bali was going to be the place where I would face my fears – step by step, challenge after challenge. Taking a deep breath, I looked up at the sky, letting the warm sun touch my face.

'Today I will be strong,' I whispered to myself, trying to give myself courage.

Everything happened unexpectedly quickly. A smiling girl handed me my equipment: a heavy helmet, a pair of slightly damp rubber

boots, and a leaflet with instructions. She seemed completely untroubled by the worries of the world.

I paid the fee – 350,000 IDR, a reasonable amount for an experience that promised to test my limits – and the girl quickly explained what was going to happen. Her tone was relaxed, but when she mentioned that the insurance also covered fatal accidents, a shiver ran through me – small, but enough to make my heart beat faster.

“Don't stress too much,” she said, smiling as if nothing bad could happen. “The boys are used to helping beginners. It'll be easier than you think.”

I smiled back, but her words, though well-intentioned, barely managed to break through the barrier of anxiety that was growing inside me.

In the backyard, a group of relaxed boys sat under a large umbrella, joking carefree. One of them, wearing a mud-stained white T-shirt and a mischievous smile, stood up with an almost contagious nonchalance and approached me.

“Are you alone?” he asked, and I nodded. “There's another girl who's coming with us,” he added, and these words brought me unexpected peace. The fact that I wasn't completely alone gave me a little courage, but enough to take the next step.

The briefing was brief – perhaps too brief for someone experiencing this for the first time. The boy explained the basic controls and a few signals in a mechanical voice, accustomed to repeating the same speech day after day. Everything seemed simple in theory, but I felt like I was preparing to jump into a huge void.

I climbed on, trembling. His gaze burned into me, but I had no time to hesitate. I took a deep breath. It didn't help. There I was, straddling that engine – it seemed alive, like an animal I didn't know how to control.

My thoughts were spinning around in my head like a dizzying carousel. How am I going to survive? What if I fall? What if I hit someone? What if... Waves of panic rose up inside me.

"Do you have a problem with self-confidence?" asked the boy, as if he had guessed everything I was feeling. "It's your first time doing this, isn't it?"

"Yes, but... it'll be fine," I stammered, even though my hands were shaking on the handlebars.

"Don't let the mud scare you... When you accept it, it starts to help you move forward. It's like fear, you know?" he said with a knowing smile.

I decided not to give up. My hands were clenched on the brakes, gripping them like an anchor on which my life depended. When I pulled out onto the street, the traffic in Ubud hit me like a chaotic storm of motorcycles and cars. In the midst of this chaos, on an ATV that seemed dissatisfied with me, I felt my chest tighten as if in a vice.

I had only driven the motorbike on the track, far from the wild world of a real road, and now I felt exposed, vulnerable. Clearly, the traffic in Ubud was not the best place to start your 'career' on a motorised vehicle.

My hands were shaking, and the blood was pulsing in my temples, flooding my senses. The road seemed like an enemy surrounding me, ready to knock me down at the first mistake.

And yet, I don't know how, but I managed to maintain control.

Every bend, every turn was an almost impossible test, but somehow I passed them all. As I drove, the surrounding landscapes began to capture my attention. The vibrant green of the rice fields, stretching to the horizon, opened its arms under the clear sky.

Slowly but surely, my fear began to dissolve. My panicked thoughts gradually melted away, like the mist on a rainy morning, and something different took their place. It was a respite, a rare pause, in which everything that had been agitated within me withdrew silently, leaving room for something new.

Now, looking back on those moments, I honestly wonder how I managed to survive. ‘How strong can the desire to overcome your own fears be?’ I ask myself. Sometimes fear seems so great that it engulfs you, but perhaps willpower, that inner drive you don’t even know you have, is greater than any fear.

I stopped at the first round of photos. My hands were loosening up, and the deep tension inside me seemed to dissolve, as if I were breathing fresh air for the first time. The boy approached and, with a careful look, asked me simply:

“Are you okay?”

The lump in my throat tightened, and all I could manage was a simple, “Yes.”

It was a barely audible answer, more an attempt to convince myself than him. But it was a ‘yes’ full of hope, a silent promise that I would go on.

The route changed suddenly. Ahead of us lay an endless swamp. The ATV vibrated, purring heavily. Every bump was a shock. Every movement was an effort. My fingers gripped the handlebars desperately. Everything seemed to be falling apart, but I kept going.

Every metre was a struggle. Every movement, a victory against myself. ‘Incredible,’ I whispered. That’s all. The landscape, the struggle, the new ‘me’ – everything seemed to fit into that word. Slowly, my hands began to find a rhythm, and the ATV, which had been an enemy, was now becoming a partner I could control. It was my own battle for control.

The ATV slid slightly, pulling me in a direction I couldn’t control. I held my breath and, with an instinctive movement, corrected the direction at the last moment. It was as if an invisible force had pushed me back onto the track, saving me from a possible mistake. I wondered if the camera could capture everything I was experiencing: the uncertainty, the adrenaline, but also the small victories that kept me afloat.

As I struggled with the route, another battle was raging inside me. The past haunted me like an echo obsessively bouncing off the walls of my memory. All the failures, all the wrong decisions, all the moments when I felt incapable or lost – they were all there, together, as if summoned to witness this day. I was no longer completely paralysed. I was still me and my fears, but I was moving – and that was a victory in itself.

At that moment, I knew this was my test. It wasn't just about the ATV, the mud, or the trail. It was about me. 'If I get through this, if I can keep myself on my feet now, then I can get through anything else.' With that thought, I pressed harder on the accelerator.

The guy in front seemed to be dancing with his ATV, joking with us, as if this trail was just a Sunday stroll. While it seemed like child's play to him, I was fighting every particle of mud, every hidden corner of fear that was still trying to swallow me whole.

Thoughts and emotions flowed through me like an avalanche. I was a sublime amalgam, an explosion of sensations that kept me completely awake.

Every fibre of my body screamed at me to be careful, to stay alert, not to give in. Mud stuck to my boots, adding weight to every step, and cold splashes hit my face, tracing the path of the swamp on my skin. The engine roared beneath me like a wild heart, in perfect sync with my racing pulse. Everything – the sounds, the smells, the movements – blended into an intense, visceral, almost primitive experience.

In the middle of the mud, on that ATV, I felt for the first time that I was at peace with myself. I was there, completely, without questions or doubts. I was simply living, and that 'being' was a freedom I had never experienced before.

I don't know when it happened, but I realised I had succeeded.

Now I was driving the ATV!

It was no longer about questions or doubts. I was moving forward, and that 'forward' belonged to me. An entire chapter of my life that

I was now, somehow, leaving behind. It was about understanding that sometimes the only way to move forward is to leave everything behind.

‘The guy is actually driving backwards.’ It was like a scene from a film. I almost laughed as I clumsily tried to keep up with him. I thought about shouting, ‘You’re incredible! How do you do that?’ but I refrained. It wasn’t the time to get distracted. I had my own race to run, my own battles to win.

The swamp seemed alive, a monster pulling my wheels into the sticky mud. The engine’s vibrations seemed muffled, and every drop that splashed on my face was cold, like a slap that woke me up. But suddenly, something changed. It was no longer about fear. Everything, absolutely everything, seemed to turn into a ‘symbol’.

In front of me, the mud was no longer an enemy, but a canvas that I was conquering step by step. Every heavy movement, every cold drop on my skin told me that I could go further. The swamp had stopped pulling me down. Now it was pushing me forward. And maybe it was the same with my past – something that once paralysed me, but now forced me to move forward, to reincarnate myself, step by step.

When I reached the end of the trail, after an hour that felt like an eternity – but also like a moment, at the same time – I was unrecognisable. My breathing was ragged, as if I had just run a marathon. I was shaking! It was the trembling of victory, of liberation. The adrenaline was still pulsing through my veins, transforming fatigue into a strange energy that had taken over every fibre of my body.

At that moment, I felt something I hadn’t felt in a long time: a deep sense of pride.

I was given a clean towel and headed for the shower. I changed my dirty clothes for new ones, feeling lighter, freer, more prepared. It was as if I had embraced myself, the new version of myself.

Finally, I sat down at the table with a steaming bowl of noodles and a hot tea in front of me. It was like a perfectly orchestrated scene

– the calm after the storm. As I slowly sipped my tea, I felt that I had overcome another mental barrier. I was someone else. Confident!

I received the photos, those little pieces of memory that will serve as a reminder of this moment of personal victory, and set off on foot towards Argasoka. I was smiling broadly, my heart light, as if I had unloaded a burden I didn't even know I was carrying.

Before I left, I opened the app to call a taxi, but something stopped me. My finger froze on the screen, as if an inner voice was whispering that it wasn't the right thing to do. I needed time. Time to process everything I had just experienced. I didn't want to get back on a motorbike, even if someone else was driving it. The very idea made me hesitate. Strange how, after overcoming one fear, another seemed to rear its head.

Three and a half kilometres. The road to the accommodation would be a time for reflection – a moment of quiet in which to let my emotions settle. I walked slowly, lost in my own silence. Everything was buzzing inside me – sensations, memories, emotions. But with each step, my thoughts found their place, and the burden became lighter.

The emotion of driving... I feel it alive, in every cell, invisible but always present. Sometimes I forget about it, but it reappears suddenly, like a storm that catches me unprepared. 'How can I free myself?'

But how else could I grow, if not through this constant confrontation with myself, with my inner demons? My mistakes? Yes, I've made enough. So what? Without them, I wouldn't have learned to look ahead – and face my fears step by step. They are just shadows now, leaving room for a new version of myself.

Lost in thought, my gaze was stolen by a huge billboard, strategically placed to interrupt my introspection:

'EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED!'

That's what it said in bold letters, and the message seemed to resonate directly in my mind. Reality hit me like a revelation that shakes you to your core: every day, every moment is unexpected.

What could be more fascinating than the unknown that surrounds me now, here, in my life? Every step I take is a mystery, every decision a leap into the void, and that... that's what makes everything come alive.

A few metres away, a dusty poster caught my eye. It was an advertisement for a shuttle bus to Amed. The price? Only 145,000 IDR – about 9 euros.

I blinked in amazement. Just a few days ago, I had checked the prices for a taxi to Amed and found amounts well over 600,000 IDR. How did this poster appear right now? Coincidence? Or maybe a sign?

Esther's smile suddenly popped into my mind, like a warm memory. 'Maybe we'll see each other there...' Without thinking too much, I let myself be carried away by impulse and followed the address indicated.

I arrived at a small office, and two smiling boys greeted me. They were relaxed and friendly, and one of them briefly explained the details to me. They told me that the shuttle was leaving tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. I paid for the ticket on the spot, without hesitation. I don't know exactly why, but I felt that this was the direction I needed to go in. It hadn't been in my original plans, but something inside me knew that the road to Amed was already written for me.

Back at my accommodation, I slipped into the shower, letting the water whip my skin. Each drop seemed to carry away the tensions of the day. I could still feel the adrenaline pulsing through my veins, fragments of the ATV experience obsessively returning to my mind: the tight corners, the mud splashing over me, the vibration of the engine between my legs, and the instructor's raised eyebrow, which seemed to say, 'Do you really have the courage to do this?' But I had done it.

The past appeared to me like a dirty window through which I was trying to look into the future. And yet, something in me had changed. The fear hadn't completely disappeared, but now it was smaller, more distant. I knew it would be waiting for me again, but today it hadn't won. The struggle continued, but today I had taken a step forward. And I realised that it was this constant confrontation that was changing me, helping me to grow.

Later, I sat down at my laptop. The keys became my confidant, and the words my refuge. 'Does writing really help me?' Yes, I think so. Writing is where I find myself, where scattered thoughts become orderly strings, where I understand myself better. Writing is like a mirror – it shows you not only what you want to see, but also what you are trying to hide.

In the evening, I went out to dinner. I chose Cafe Dautiga, a chic restaurant where live music was played every night. In front of me, an abandoned building seemed to tell a forgotten story. I realised that, just as this building kept its shadows, every place we leave behind remains marked by our presence. Perhaps Ubud will also keep a trace of me, just as I was leaving with its stories.

All around, laughter and conversations, unfamiliar voices that became part of the landscape. One last evening in Ubud – a silent embrace of a place I knew I would leave behind. But... every place has its time.

I walked back to my room more slowly than usual. On that last evening, every step seemed like an attempt to stop time, to prolong the moment. The warm lights of the lanterns, the delicate scent of flowers, and the sounds of the city filled my senses, transforming the moment into a simple revelation: time is just a construct. Real life is in the moment – and that moment, in Ubud, felt endless.

Later, I called Mone. His cheerful voice, always ready to lift me up, made me smile instantly. I told him about the ATV adventure, about the seemingly endless swamps, and how fear had almost overwhelmed me, but he, as is his nature, started laughing.

“It's just an emotion that got out of control, Yda. That fear doesn't exist, you're just amplifying it in your head.”

And he was right. As always.

Fear was not a real monster, but just a simple thought, a creation of my own mind. And yet, how easy it is to fall prey to thoughts that steal your control... Mone knew how to simplify everything, to bring me back down to earth, even though his voice was thousands of miles away.

After I hung up, I looked around. My room had become a transitional space – a place that no longer belonged to me completely, but couldn't release me yet either. I packed my bags in the silence of the night, trying to stay calm. Amed was waiting for me, a place I didn't know. A place I knew nothing about, but which already seemed like another chapter, a new blank page.

In a way, it didn't matter where I was going. I just felt a deep need to move, to leave behind everything that had become familiar to me in Ubud – all its beauty and lessons. Maybe one day I'll come back here.

But today... Today I had to leave.

Life pulsed within me like an elixir you receive without asking for it, a gift meant to propel you forward. It took courage to climb onto the ATV, but even more courage to climb onto myself – to overcome the fears and limits I had set for myself.

Life taught me something simple: you can't cross the sea just by standing on the shore and contemplating the waves.

The past hadn't disappeared.

It was still there, like a distant shadow. But today, for the first time, it seemed smaller, less frightening. I had taken a step forward. And I understood that each step left behind a part of my burden.

1:00 a.m. came like a silent shadow.

Outside, the crickets were singing, and the moon hung in the sky like a silent lantern. In the silence of the Balinese night, the unknown was no longer an enemy. It was an open window.

I closed my eyes and, in my heart, I felt that I was ready to step into the unknown. Tomorrow, with all its mysteries and promises, already seemed written in the stars.

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” – Franklin D. Roosevelt

Take a Deep Breath and Take the Next Step

Saturday, 5th August 2023

Santa Fe Bungalow, Amed – Bali

In Bali, every morning brings something new – a question, a call, or a test of courage. The sun breaking through the damp sky, a scooter rushing down the street, the smell of frangipani mixed with the smoke of incense sticks. Bali has always guided my path with invisible signs – and yesterday, the unknown whispered to me to leave Ubud.

Where did it come from? I don't know.

But sometimes the answers don't come from plans; they come from the unknown – exactly where you are most afraid to look.

I had no idea where to go.

That frightened me and liberated me at the same time. Where to? I had the safe option: to extend my stay at Argasoka, or to remain in the safety of the city. But I felt that my days in Ubud were over.

In Sawa's list of destinations, I found Amed – the place for lovers of underwater adventures. It wasn't my thing. The thought of water paralysed me. Then, as a sign, Esther sent me that message, one to which I had not replied. I left everything up in the air. But something beyond me said, 'Amed.'

Today I am up at 6:30 a.m. I don't know what awaits me, but the unknown has become a friend I have begun to listen to.

I got out of bed, aware that this would be the last time I would see this room. But leaving no longer makes me emotional. Rooms come and go, but lessons remain. And every morning in Bali feels like a new chance – a lesson, an unexpected path. It's like a constant stream of resets that forces me to rediscover myself.

I realise now that my days in Bali are not alike. Each day was unique, and each one surprised me with something new. It's as if Bali has been my teacher, one who keeps you in a continuous repetition of lessons until you really understand them. And I admit – I needed it. Maybe that's why, this morning, I wasn't surprised that the unknown was asking me to leave, to follow my path.

My morning ritual is simple but necessary. I pack, gather my luggage, and walk out the door at 7:30. At the reception, everything seems deserted, but after a few minutes of waiting, the receptionist appears, rushing in on a scooter. I thank her for everything, we exchange a few pleasantries, and in a few moments, I am back on the road.

With my backpack on my back, I head for the bus stop, convinced that the next lesson awaits me there. I leave behind the vibrant streets of Ubud – perfect sunsets, traditional dances, lively terraces. The memories are still vivid – I take them with me wherever I go.

Even now, I remember that sign that appeared out of nowhere yesterday. 'Expect the unexpected,' it said, and those words seemed to go straight to my heart. An echo. A call. The universe was sending me a new, clear message: let the unknown show me the way. So I did. Today, I knew Amed was waiting for me.

I arrive too early at the station, where the noisy conversations of the travellers bombard my still sleepy mind. Two minivans are waiting for us, one to Amed and the other to Lovina. At 8:30 a.m., we are all crammed into the cars, each with our luggage and stories.

There are nine of us, each from a different corner of the world: a Chinese woman, a Mexican woman, two French men, two German men, a Spaniard man, an American woman, and me, Yda, the

Romanian. Out of curiosity, someone asks where we are from, and the driver amuses us by saying, gesturing theatrically with his hand:

“I’m from Indonesia, but if you ask me, Bali is a different country!” As if that wasn’t obvious... And, without giving us time to reply, he continues: “Do you know who the loudest tourists are? The French! They’re always talking, always eating! But I like them... they’re fun.”

We all laugh, and for a moment, that small, cramped space becomes a miniature world. Every language, every accent, every story – all mix together in a pleasant chaos. And so begins our journey to the unexplored city of Amed.

On the way, I isolate myself in my own world. I put on my headphones and lose myself in music. The voices around me – Chinese, French, Spanish, German – intertwine chaotically, like scratches on an old vinyl record. I don’t understand them, I don’t care. My playlist becomes the only thread connecting me to something familiar.

I hadn’t done much research on Amed. I only knew that I was heading to the sea and that I had booked a simple room in a cheap homestay. I told myself that maybe the unknown would open a door to something I didn’t even know I wanted.

How strange is it to let yourself be guided by impulse, without making too many plans?

Music becomes the perfect backdrop for thoughts. I realise that I’ve been here for over two weeks now, and everything has been almost perfect – like in a story. Bali, like a little paradise, served me breathtaking landscapes, friendly guides, and exciting adventures on a silver platter. Each day was a beautifully written chapter, and I often felt caught in a magical loop where everything was ‘rosy.’

But nothing lasts forever, does it?

I knew the tests weren’t over.

I could feel my sixth sense, that subtle intuition, whispering to me that other days would come. New lessons. Challenges. Beyond the

dirty window of the minivan, the palm trees seemed to stare at me unflinchingly, like silent witnesses to my new struggles.

And yet, instead of letting myself be overwhelmed, I decided to let my thoughts flow. Why stress about something that hasn't even happened yet? The road taught me something simple: breathe deeply, accept what comes, and move on. In the end, everything will be 'perfect'.

I arrived in Amed around noon, exhausted from the journey. The hot, suffocating air hit me immediately, and the oppressive silence of the place seemed to follow me everywhere. In just a few minutes, sweat was pouring down my black T-shirt, leaving my skin sticky.

The gentle coolness of Ubud, with its quiet evenings that inspired me to write, was a stark contrast to the overwhelming atmosphere in Amed. Here, everything seemed suspended in time, and the oppressive silence was broken only by the barking of stray dogs.

I adjusted my backpack and, for the first time, really looked around. Dusty streets, deep potholes. I felt like I had landed at my grandmother's house in the countryside. The houses, small and simple, had rusty tin roofs, and the general atmosphere gave me the impression of a fishing village, not a tourist town.

A group of men sat in the shade, gathered on scooters, waiting for tourists to get off the shuttle. They looked at me curiously, and one of them hurried to ask me where I was going. Local taxi drivers, no doubt, were ready to earn an honest buck in their small rural settlement.

I smiled and thanked him politely, but declined the offer, telling him that my destination was close by.

"Come on, miss, I'll take you there! My scooter is faster than your feet!" he said, laughing and snapping his fingers, as if we had already arrived. His thin moustache twitched with every broad smile, and his eyes studied me like a half-convinced customer.

I smiled at him and walked on, thinking I had escaped.

The man started his scooter and rode alongside me. Eventually, he left me alone, but not before wishing me a good journey with an amusing gesture. I waved at him, admiring his persistence.

With a slight sigh, I let myself be enveloped by the naturalness of the place and continued on my way to Santa Fe.

One of the women from the shuttle bus caught up with me. It was the woman from Mexico – a figure who seemed to have been taken out of a childhood TV series. Long, platinum grey hair contrasted with her tanned skin, and unusually bright blue eyes completed the enigmatic air. The fragility of her body betrayed a life full of intensity.

“Hey! Where are you going? Do you have a place to stay?” she asked me, as if we were old friends.

“Yes, Santa Fe Bungalow,” I said, wondering if I would regret it.

We set off together, exchanging a few words along the way. That’s how I found out that she had been here a few years ago and that the place had changed a lot. Then, suddenly, she stopped.

“I think I’ve changed my mind. I want to stay at a hotel,” she said with a vague smile. Then she took a fan out of her bag – a colourful one with an abstract pattern – and began to wave it absentmindedly, as if her decision had already been made. She said goodbye and turned back the way she had come. I stood there watching her go, convinced that Eva was the kind of person who left stories unfinished – more of a shadow than a constant presence.

Esther suddenly crossed my mind. In fact, the way she had entered my life had the same exuberant naturalness, the same air of instant connection. What a coincidence! Where could she be now? I promised myself I would write to her later, to tell her I was in Amed.

I had barely arrived, and unusual events had already begun to unfold: first the insistent driver, then this fascinating woman, who seemed to float through life without a care in the world.

Her last remark, uttered with disarming casualness, left me speechless:

“Maybe we’ll see each other around!”

The silence that followed was heavy. For a moment, I wondered what I was doing here, in a dusty village on the edge of the island. But Amed, with its deserted streets and rural atmosphere, seemed to want to hide the real reason I was here.

I checked my GPS app and set off with one thought in mind: Amed was going to be... interesting.

But wait... I stopped in the middle of the road, staring at my phone like a broken oracle. 'Reconfigure route!' the app showed me, but even it didn't know where I was. I felt like the shuttle bus had dropped me straight into the Twilight Zone.

The signal came and went, and the GPS messages only irritated me. 'You have reached your destination.' Really? Where? Looking around, I was in the middle of a deserted street, flanked by a few small houses and a makeshift terrace that looked half abandoned. I felt the need for a break...

To my left, I noticed a woman lying on a wooden sofa covered with colourful cushions, in a relaxed position that contrasted sharply with my inner turmoil. The woman was holding a baby to her chest. She seemed sculpted from tranquillity, every movement she made – from the way she rested her head to the way she caressed the baby – vibrated with a calm that made me breathe more slowly.

I paused for a moment to look at her, smiling instinctively. There was something profound in that simple picture. 'Motherhood is so beautiful,' I said to myself, nostalgically remembering my own moments from long ago.

I caught her smiling at me, and that gesture brought me out of my reverie. An instinct beyond anything else made me walk towards her.

"Are you looking for something?" she asked, looking at me unhurriedly, as if she already knew the answer. Her eyes had a special sparkle that captivated me instantly. I felt like I was looking at a goddess from another world, with her perfect white skin and calm face.

When the baby in her arms began to whimper, she shifted her gaze to him and whispered something, stroking him gently before bringing him back to her breast. I was captivated in that moment, as if it were the first time I had ever seen a mother breastfeeding.

“Hi! Yes, I’m looking for a bungalow called Santa Fe. Do you know where it is?” I finally asked, pulling my backpack closer, as if that would make me feel more confident.

I saw a spark of curiosity in her eyes before she replied.

“I don’t know, but let me check.”

With her free hand, she opened her phone and quickly opened an app. Warung Santa Fe was 700 metres away. I sighed. Seriously? Another 700 metres? It seemed impossible to get there.

She smiled slightly, as if understanding more than she was saying: “Amed is not like Ubud. Nothing is easy to find here, but that’s the beauty of it – you get lost and somehow find what you need.”

Without thinking too much, I replied with a joke:

“Yes... Compared to Ubud, Amed seems like it’s a few years behind.”

We both started laughing, and our laughter disturbed the child, who suddenly began to cry. I made a brief gesture of apology, but she focused all her attention on him, calming him with a few whispers.

My need to go to the toilet had become urgent, so I asked her where the bathroom was. She pointed to a blue wooden door. When I came out, I was able to think. I set the new location on the GPS, thanked her for her help, and left.

I finally arrived at Warung Santa Fe, but I felt no sense of triumph at reaching my destination. I was tired, sweaty, and almost exhausted. I wanted to lie down on a bed, but the place looked more like a set from a forgotten film.

No reception in sight. Just a small terrace with four wooden tables, which seemed to have been covered in dust for some time. The atmosphere was strange – a mixture of oppressive silence and the smell of fried fish. Around us, the vegetation tried to save the

scenery: exotic flowers and plants surrounded the terrace, and a few coconut trees swayed their leaves lazily in the wind.

I sat down at one of the tables, letting my backpack slide off my shoulders. 'Too early to check in,' I said to myself. I got up a few times, wandering aimlessly among the tables, looking around, and trying to adjust.

A woman appeared from behind the alley. She was sturdy, with lightly tanned skin, purely Indonesian features, and large, dark eyes that studied me intently. She wore a simple dress, made of thick, faded fabric, which fell loosely on her body.

"I was cleaning the rooms and didn't hear you," she said, apologising slightly.

Her voice had a warm tone that immediately put me at ease. She explained that she hadn't finished cleaning yet and asked me to wait a little longer. She disappeared for a few moments and returned with black coffee, a small banana, and a jelly biscuit, beautifully wrapped in a green leaf.

"This is from our garden. You'll feel the Bali sun in every bite," she added with a proud smile, pointing to the perfectly ripe banana.

I sat down at the table, thanking her for her gesture. The smell of coffee somehow brought me back to life, and the sweetness of the banana made my stomach forget the effort of the journey for a few moments. I opened my laptop and started writing, letting my thoughts settle.

At 1:30 p.m., the woman returned.

"You can choose your room," she said cheerfully. "Since you've been waiting."

'What a nice gesture,' I thought. But looking at the two available rooms, I wished for a moment that she had chosen for me. Rooms 1 and 2 were next to each other, and choosing between them turned into an absurd spectacle. I moved around a few times, searching for perfection. In the end, I laughed at myself: diva antics. I chose room 1.

After a quick shower, I decided to explore the surroundings. Without a concrete plan, I had only one goal: to satisfy my hunger. The streets were deserted, as if time had frozen in the small village. There was a silence that struck me; only a few stray dogs crossed the roads indifferently, like silent shadows.

I finally reached the sea. A narrow street led me straight to the beach, and the smell of salt in the air penetrated deep into my chest. I breathed in the fresh breeze, letting my skin cool and my mind calm down. 'Breathe deeply,' I told myself. 'It's the first step.'

The beach stretched out before me in apparent infinity. But it wasn't the fine sand I was used to. Under my feet, the rough gravel scratched my soles. It was as if this place demanded a small tribute – to feel every step, to pay attention to every detail.

Amed was not a comfortable paradise. It was more of a raw setting that made you feel more than you wanted to.

And the waves crashed against the shore with a force that seemed to defy the surrounding tranquillity. Their sound, loud and turbulent, dominated the entire landscape. They seemed to whisper something to me – a call, a challenge. I watched them, mesmerised, but also with a knot in my stomach. It was a bizarre attraction, as if something deeper than fear was calling me in. But at the same time, every fibre of my body was screaming at me to stay on dry land.

I took a few photos. I wanted to capture the sea, to capture its untamed nature, but no frame seemed to convey what I was feeling at that moment: that raw, wild force that sent shivers down my spine and fascinated me at the same time.

I continued walking along the beach until I came across a few terraces. Most of them were empty, like abandoned sets. I finally stopped at one of them. A small warung – modest but welcoming.

I ordered fish with coconut sauce, sautéed vegetables, and rice. All accompanied by a lemon iced tea. The bill? Only 85,000 IDR, or about 5 euros. In Ubud, I would have paid double for the same meal.

While I was waiting for my food to arrive, the woman who ran the warung approached me.

"Where are you from?" she asked, smiling.

"Romania," I replied.

"Romania... That's the first time I've heard of it. But I think the people there must be friendly, like you!"

I could see she was trying to locate the country somewhere in her mind, but she couldn't. Finally, she bowed her head in a gesture of kindness and left.

When she brought me my food, the inviting aromas of coconut sauce and freshly sautéed vegetables flooded my senses. Every bite was a small feast. I thought that, in all its simplicity, this place had a special charm.

As I savoured the last bites of the delicious fish, I suddenly had the idea to review Sawa's 'must-see' list. I opened my phone with some curiosity: 'What awaits me in Amed?'

I sighed when I saw the first recommendation highlighted: a diving school. Seriously? I chuckled nervously. 'Me, diving?' And yet, something inside me awakened. A curiosity or, perhaps, a desire to defy the fears that had haunted me all my life.

'Why not?' I said to myself. If I'm here, if I've already made crazy decisions so far, what difference does one more make? I saved the school's address and set myself a goal. Tomorrow, or maybe even today, I was going to test this new madness.

My fear of water haunted me – as if someone had pressed the wrong button and my entire nervous system was on alert. I knew it would only take one step to stop that snowball from rolling. One small but courageous step. So I suddenly decided not to wait any longer.

'I have to go diving. Now! Before I change my mind,' I said to myself, getting up from the table, determined to go ahead.

With an unusual dose of courage, seemingly coming out of nowhere, I set off for the diving school. My mind, of course, was trying

to sabotage me: 'Yda, you and diving? With your fear of water? Who do you think you are?'

But this time, the critical voice was drowned out by another force, one that I felt growing: unexpected courage. I knew that it was all happening in my mind. In reality, all I had to do was find my way to the selected location.

Amed seemed like a place of bizarre coincidences. This time, the map took me right to... where do you think? The diving school. But even stranger was that, in front of me, on the terrace, sat that beautiful woman with alabaster skin and her little baby. That terrace was, in fact, a diving headquarters, one of the schools in Amed. Our eyes met... again.

"Hey, did you find your accommodation?" she asked me, smiling as if she had been waiting for me. I was shocked by the coincidence, but I managed to reply cheerfully:

"Yes, yes, I found it. Everything is perfect."

She invited me to sit next to her. For a second, I thought about giving up... It wasn't too late yet, and she didn't know why I was there. But looking into her blue eyes, I understood. The universe had brought her my way for one purpose. I knew I just had to 'believe' in my first instinct. So, in the next few minutes, I had already made plans for the next day. My first 'Begin Diving' session was scheduled for 8:00 in the morning.

Her husband, an Indonesian man with gentle features, appeared in the meantime, wearing a blue T-shirt with 'Bali Dive Cove' written in large letters. He was an instructor, and from the way he talked about the sea, you could tell he was a man who loved his job.

As we talked, their questions flowed naturally. I didn't feel like I was being interrogated, but rather taken under their protective wing. I told them where I was from, how I ended up in Bali, and, most importantly, about my fear of going into the water. When I told them I couldn't swim, they started laughing.

“Don't worry, you're in good hands,” she said, trying to encourage me. “You don't need to know how to swim. You'll have a special vest and an instructor with you at all times.”

Her husband immediately added:

“It doesn't matter if you know how to swim. Underwater, it's all about breathing. Just breathe and let yourself float.”

He looked at her as if every word she said was a confirmation of why he had fallen in love with her. She looked back at him, smiling warmly, but saying nothing. Sometimes silence says more than words.

Then, to ease my mind, they showed me a video of a man who had recently come to try diving for the first time. I saw him floating, almost as if in a dream, in the clear waters, and his relaxed expression seemed to whisper to me: ‘If he can do it, so can you.’

I felt that somewhere, in a distant corner of my mind, courage was beginning to spread its wings. She looked at me, amused:

“You'll see. You'll fall in love with the water.”

She looked at me with a mixture of curiosity and certainty, as if she knew something I wasn't yet ready to understand. ‘How could I fall in love with the water when it held me captive at its edge, unable to penetrate it?’

My instinct told me that this diving lesson was not just about getting into the water. It was about evolution. About ‘resetting’ a limit that was holding me back.

When I took out my wallet to pay, she waved her hand:

“Never mind, you can pay tomorrow, after you finish.”

I smiled, wondering if the Universe was offering me another ‘test’ to change my mind. A small loophole... But I wasn't going to give up. Not now. Diving was the next step, so I could move on.

With my plans set for tomorrow, I stayed for a few minutes in the company of Georgia, who spoke to me with the naturalness of someone detached from the conventions of the world. She was from London, but Amed had irrevocably won her heart a few years ago.

She had come here with some friends, but the place would change her life.

I don't know why, but it was easy for me to believe her...

"I fell in love with a guy and stayed here. A simple love story," she told me, smiling vaguely, as if the story was so natural that it didn't need any details.

We exchanged a few more stories, jumping from one topic to another, as people who haven't known each other for long but seem to have something in common. When I left, I felt Amed breathing with me – faster, more alive than ever.

Only now did I realise: everything seemed interesting at first – rafting, ATVs, they all seemed like adventures. But behind the excitement was fear, always fear.

I got on the ATV with fear, and I got on that boat with fear when I went rafting. And yet, none of this meant safety.

Still... Ubud had been that refuge, a place that had enveloped me in a warm feeling of protection. But now I understand that safety can also be a mirage – a comfortable space where you hide from the lessons that really matter.

Amed, with its harsh tranquillity and rural setting, no longer offered me a corner to retreat to. It was honest to the core. A place that demanded nothing – only presence. To be there, with all that I am, to feel without filters, without excuses.

The road back to my accommodation was invaded by the same inner struggle. Thoughts flowed chaotically, enveloping me like invisible tentacles: 'Yda, are you going diving? You? Panicked by every drop of water?' That critical voice rang in my ears. But beyond it, another voice, calmer, wiser, cut it off: 'Don't listen to it. You know what you have to do. You have to do it.'

I stopped for a moment in the middle of the road, letting this thought sink into my mind. Diving seemed like a simple test, but I knew that a complicated battle would take place inside me. It was the test I had to pass.

Then I promised myself not to tell anyone about it until everything was over. It was a secret pact I had made with myself. They say there is no cure for madness, so... why not? If I die there, drowned in my own fears, at least I die at peace, knowing that I had the courage to face a fear that has no logical justification. It doesn't even matter how much I fear it.

‘Courage is not the absence of fear. It is moving forward despite it.’

Once in the room, I lay down on the large bed and turned on the air conditioning. The heat was suffocating, but even the cool air that began to circulate could not calm the turmoil in my mind. As I stared blankly at the white ceiling, my thoughts began to flow again, and an image from the past suddenly appeared, uninvited. The Philippines. Yes, that's where it all began. That's where I dared to go into the water for the first time. It was as if my memories knew the perfect moment to hit me.

And with that image, he appeared too... Essra. Why? Why now? What part of me was bringing him to the surface, like a ghost who couldn't find peace? Essra had once told me, laughing, that he would teach me to swim. I didn't think my fear of water meant anything to him. But now, in the silence of the room in Amed, his voice echoed in my mind. It was as if he had told me more than I could understand at the time.

I let the thought flow without rejecting it. Other memories came, like a wave sweeping everything in its path.

I remembered Esther and went out onto the terrace. I flopped down on a chair and, on impulse, wrote her a message. She replied quickly that she was still in Amed and invited me to watch the sunset with her at the resort's Resto-Bar. I confirmed immediately: ‘I'll be there at 4:30 p.m.’

Still sitting on my terrace, phone in hand, I was trying to gather my thoughts.

From room number 2, a man suddenly stepped out onto the terrace. He caught my attention instantly. He was tall, thin, with completely white hair, sunburnt in places. His features seemed to hide a long story, but his outfit – a combination of a loose-fitting T-shirt and bright pink shorts – was too much for any story worth taking seriously.

He looked at me with a friendly smile, and before I could say anything, he had already started a conversation.

“Where are you from?” he asked, sitting down uninvited on the empty chair next to me.

“Romania,” I replied, trying to maintain a cool politeness.

His eyes lit up suddenly, as if I had offered him the key to an infinitely interesting subject.

“Oh, Romania! I've never been there, but I've heard you have beautiful women and spectacular mountains!” he exclaimed, adjusting his pink swimming trunks, completely oblivious to the fact that I was looking at him somewhat bewildered.

It was obvious that he wanted to socialise. Or maybe he was just bored with loneliness. But I wasn't in the mood for pleasantries.

“You know... I'm sorry, but I have something to do,” I said, getting up from my chair.

He didn't seem offended at all. In fact, he smiled broadly and said, in a theatrical tone:

“You've broken my heart!”

I paused for a second, raised my eyebrows, and replied curtly:

“I'm sorry,” then I went into the room, slamming the door behind me. Only then did I allow myself to giggle. Who wears pink trousers in a dusty bungalow in Amed? And yet, there was something about his energy – a lightness that I almost envied.

I threw myself on the bed. I quickly got into a conversation with Andreea. We had finally managed to synchronise online after a few days of trying. We were discussing our plans for a YouTube channel, and she was giving me advice on how to create attractive videos and

how to structure the content. I got lost in the technical details of our conversation, and the image of the guy with a 'broken heart' quickly evaporated from my mind.

Later, as the sun began to set, I left the room and headed for Esther's resort. I had a kilometre and a half to walk, but I was in no hurry.

On the way, I stopped at another diving school, more out of curiosity, to see if the rates were different. But no, they were identical to those at Bali Dive Cove. I smiled, thinking that the Universe was guiding me exactly where I needed to be.

I looked at the village I was passing through and marvelled once again, wondering when exactly I had teleported from Bali. There was nothing here that resembled the classic image of a paradise island, but it was precisely this contrast that fascinated me.

When I arrived at Barracuda Resto-Bar, I found Esther lying on a sun lounger on the beach. She was talking on the phone, and when she saw me, she smiled and motioned for me to sit next to her.

I waited for almost an hour, during which time I had nothing else to do but admire the beach and lose myself in the sound of the waves. The sky was dotted with small grey clouds, and the setting sun coloured everything in a spectacular mixture of orange and pink. I took a few pictures and tried to capture the magic of the moment. When Esther finally finished her call, she turned to me and smiled, sighing deeply.

"My boyfriend in Ghana..." she said, laughing briefly. "Long-distance relationships are hard." I raised an eyebrow, intrigued, and she continued: "And my ex-husband was from Peru. I guess I'm good at complications," she added with a smile that told me more than her words.

I listened to her smiling, but in my mind I wondered, 'How can Esther accept such a complicated life with such serenity?' I had built an existence based on control, on plans. Maybe that's why I was here

now, in a constant state of reset. Maybe I was looking for my own complications.

“You probably find yourself in these complications,” I replied, convinced that the answer was also true for me, and we both laughed. Our laughter was accompanied by the gentle rustling of the waves.

When the sun had completely disappeared into the sea, we got up from our sun loungers and walked together to another terrace. We ordered something to eat and lost ourselves in stories – about men, about life, about love, children, and everything that connects or separates people. With Esther, the words flowed effortlessly. She was the kind of person who turned every story into a confession.

At around 9:30 p.m., I returned to my room. On the way, I stopped at a small market to buy water, ginger beer, and chocolate. These were my cravings from Amed.

When I finally turned off the light, I felt like the day had been longer than a week. I have no idea how I fell asleep, but one thing was certain: my mind was trying hard not to think about tomorrow.

‘Just do it!’ had become my mantra. Every step was accompanied by this simple but powerful phrase.

My dive will not be just about diving, but about looking that demon in the eye. And, for the first time, I will dive straight into the fear that has held me captive for too long.

Water is just a symbol. Deeper than the fear of drowning is the fear of floating.

Tomorrow... my fear and my courage will face each other in a life-and-death struggle. I don't know who will win, but it doesn't really matter. After all, which is harder – diving into an ocean, or looking in the mirror and accepting who you really are? And with that thought, I let sleep take me.

“In the face of fear, all you need is one step – and the courage to breathe all the way through.” – Anonymous author

Where Fear Becomes a Mere Doorway

Sunday, 6th August 2023

Diving. My first thought in the morning.

6:30 a.m. The alarm wakes me up, but a deep startle keeps me alive. ‘Can I do this? Or will I lose myself in the water?’ I turn on the light, hoping to chase the shadows from my mind.

I do a few exercises to wake up my numb body and, in the mirror, I say to myself: ‘Today you must not think. Today you must live!’

It's 7:40 when I leave the room. The village is shrouded in silence, as is the small restaurant of the bungalow. Nothing has woken up yet, and all that moves around me is a dull restlessness that stirs through me like a cold wind.

Breakfast? I forgot to tell the owner about my morning adventure, so I'll leave without it. Anyway, my stomach is too tight to eat anything. I wander around the courtyard, trying to find someone to make me a coffee, but instead, a minivan pulls up in front of the terrace.

A guy gets out. He's wearing a black T-shirt with the simple words: ‘Breathe. Anything is possible.’ He stares at me, and there's something in his gaze that I don't understand. Courage? Or maybe just habit. He responds with a brief, almost annoyingly calm smile.

“Yda?”

“Yes,” I reply, surprised.

“Georgia sent me to get you.”

I smile. My forgetfulness is well covered by Georgia's care. I had thought of walking to the diving school – just a few hundred metres, nothing complicated. But I get into the minivan without protest.

I arrive at Bali Dive Cove.

The sun bathes the terrace in a breathtaking golden light. The vibrant blue of the building seems to vibrate in the hot morning air. Georgia? She's nowhere to be found. She's probably still asleep, along with the baby. Instead, a few guys appear, moving casually among the diving equipment.

One of them comes up to me and extends his hand:

“Gede. I'll be your instructor today.”

I smile at him and shake his hand. The warmth of his palm takes me by surprise. He exudes calmness and confidence. And suddenly, I feel a little better. I don't know how, but his presence has that effect.

His face radiates confidence, and his voice – when he asks me if I'm ready – has a soothing tone, as if there's no reason to worry.

But I am worried. I try to focus on his athletic, tattooed body, but that doesn't seem to help either.

Gede brings me the wetsuit and starts adjusting it. He gives me a vest, diving fins – the smallest size possible – and explains how everything works. When he's done, he takes a video of me.

“I just hope I don't die today,” I say jokingly, but my voice sounds shaky.

He laughs heartily.

“Don't worry. I'm here. And I've been ordered not to let you out of my sight!” In his jokes, I sense some of the determination I need.

But a feeling of heaviness burns through every fibre of my being. I sit on the edge, watching him arrange the oxygen tanks and all kinds of other cables. He moves quickly, efficiently, as if he's been doing this all his life. I see him joking with the other guys in Indonesian, but I feel completely cut off from their world.

‘Just do it. Stop thinking.’

My mind repeated this like a poem I had memorised, but nothing in me seemed convinced. It was already 30 degrees outside, it was going to be a scorching day, and I was shivering like a dog caught in the middle of a storm. It was as if all my cells refused to give in. I felt caught between two worlds – the calm world of Gede and the chaotic world inside me.

The boys loaded all the prepared items into a van that had arrived in the meantime. I paced around them like a lion in its own cage, unable to sit down or relax.

I breathed. I inhaled. I tried to remember all the relaxation techniques I could to clear my mind of the turmoil. I don't know how long it was before one of the boys told me I could get in the car.

I got into the van, and Gede sat down next to me. I stared out the window, but my mind was in chaos. What am I doing here? And why don't I just give up now?

I thought about telling him I was quitting, but my attention was distracted by something trivial: three Starbucks cups on the floor. Seriously? Starbucks, here?

I smile involuntarily. For a few moments, fear is replaced by a funny thought. But it doesn't last. Gede's voice brings me back to reality. I don't understand what he's saying – today, everything is complicated.

We arrive at a car park full of people, cars, vans, and stray dogs. Gede asks me if I want to go to the bathroom. Of course I do. I always want to go to the bathroom when I panic.

When I come out, I find him waiting by a pole. His gaze quickly scans me, as if checking to see if I'm still in one piece.

“Are you okay?” he asks, smiling.

He leads me to the beach, where I am struck by the hustle and bustle of the place. Dozens of people, makeshift stalls, a small restaurant, and groups of divers are moving in all directions. Gede sits me down at a table.

“Wait here. I'll be right back.”

I don't know how long his 'right back' took, but it seemed like an eternity to me. I wanted to run away, but my feet seemed to be glued to the chair.

'Is this some kind of test? Is he preparing to chase me when I suddenly decide to run away?' My pulse was already racing.

To pass the time, I glance at a noisy group of French people with oxygen tanks and tubes, as if they were preparing to go to the moon. I quickly return to the turmoil in my chest. Gede snaps me out of my reverie. He returns calmly, smiling, and says to me:

"We have to start with the theory."

He sat down next to me and started talking. Me? All I could hear was background noise. His lips were moving, but my brain was frozen. I tried to concentrate, to make sense of Gede's words, but doubt occupied every corner of my mind. I could feel my pulse in my ears, and his words reached me as if through a thick filter, as if I were already underwater.

All I could do was nod and hope that I looked more composed than I felt. He kept asking me questions, and I struggled to guess the right answers. I clutched my coffee cup tightly between my fingers, as if it were an anchor in a world that no longer felt like mine.

After his third failed attempt to make me understand something, he sighed and said:

"Okay, that's enough. You don't have to know everything. We'll take it step by step. Come on."

He equipped me completely – suit, vest, cylinders, belts. I was like an astronaut ready for an impossible mission.

"Ready?" he asked, adjusting the last details. I wanted to say 'no,' but I just nodded and we headed towards the water together.

My ragged breathing betrayed the storm inside me. I struggled to put my paws down, but I couldn't do it without his help. Gede grabbed my hand and said calmly:

"We're going down slowly. Breathe. That's all."

'I can't! What am I doing here?!' my mind screamed, but I didn't have time to answer. The cold water enveloped my skin, but it wasn't just my body that was shaking – my whole being was vibrating with fear. Gede signalled for me to lie back, and the vest carried me, floating above the water.

But my mind? It was sinking. My thoughts were struggling, like angry waves, crashing into each other. 'Why am I resisting? Why is it so hard just to breathe?'

I take a deep breath through the oxygen tube. The sound of my breathing echoes like an echo in a narrow tunnel. It's a mechanical, unfamiliar sound, but it becomes my only constant. Gede holds my hand tightly and signals that it's time to go down.

The water envelops me like a cold, heavy cloak. The pressure traps me between worlds – on my chest, on my ears, in every fibre. I close my eyes – a mistake. The darkness is unforgiving. I open them again and... panic hits me like an unexpected wave.

A sharp sensation pierces my ears. I try to breathe through my nose, as Gede showed me, but something is wrong. The pressure increases, and my breathing becomes rapid and chaotic. The water touches my cheeks through my fogged mask. I feel the salt stinging my eyes.

In a reflex action, I rip off the breathing tube. The false air I was relying on disappears, and panic turns to pure terror. I signal desperately to Gede: 'Get me out! Get me out now!'

In a second, he lifts me to the surface. I breathe in the warm air, but my breathing is in total chaos. I'm shaking from head to toe. It doesn't matter that the water is calm. I am the storm.

"That's it. I can't do this anymore! Gede, this isn't for me!" I say between gasps for breath. My tears mix with the salt water.

But he doesn't let go of me. He stares at me. His eyes are calm, determined.

"Yda, listen to me. It's not fear that's stopping you. It's your brain. You can do it. You've come this far. Do you think people who can't do it get this far?"

"But I can't go down... I feel like I'm suffocating!"

"And yet you're breathing. You're scared, but that's normal. If you weren't scared, something would be wrong. That fear is part of you. I'll tell you a secret: it will never go away. But if you focus only on your breathing... just that, Yda... you'll let it pass."

He is silent. He gives me a few seconds to digest his words, but I say nothing. I realise that I am still holding tightly to the hand of a man I barely know, but who somehow seems to know me better than I know myself.

"Let's try again," he says, his tone brooking no protest. "Breathe. Come on... one breath. Then another. And another."

We descend again.

The pressure on my ears returns. I pinch my nose and breathe out slowly, as he showed me. Something isn't working, and the pain intensifies. Suddenly. My brain is no longer responding to anything. I feel like I can't breathe. My movements become chaotic, and I pull the tube out of my mouth again. Gede quickly grabs my vest and pulls me close to him, signalling for us to ascend. We return to the surface, I cough loudly, and air floods my lungs.

"No... I can't do this anymore. It's too much."

He comes closer and stares at me, almost as if he wants to hypnotise me.

"Hug me," he says suddenly.

"What?" I look at him, confused.

"Just do it."

I approach him hesitantly. His arms wrap around me, and the feeling of safety is so strange that I stop trembling for a moment.

"Sometimes, overcoming fear means doing something you wouldn't have thought of doing. Kiss me. If you can do that, you'll be able to go down again."

Really? He thinks a kiss will make all my fear go away? How absurd! And yet... his eyes. Part of me feels like it might work. Part of me wants to believe.

“What?!” I protest, but he looks at me, serious.

“Trust me.”

It's as if time stands still. I cup his face in my hands and kiss him, almost mechanically. But his lips are warm and soft, and in a second, my fear melts away.

“See? You did it,” he says, smiling. “Now let's try again.”

“Oh!” is the only sound that comes out of my throat... I look at him and feel that I hate him and love him at the same time...

“You decided to do this even though you knew how much you fear water. Tell me... are you the kind of person who gives up easily?” he continued.

“No. But...”

“No buts...” He puts his finger to my lips to stop me from explaining...

“Okay... Just this once. But if I feel like I can't... Gede, if I feel like I can't...”

“Then we'll get out. I promise. You have my word. But I have a feeling that this time, everything will be different.”

“I don't know what to say...”

“You don't have to say anything. Just come. One more time.” His voice is calm, without a trace of doubt.

I close my eyes for a moment to gather all my strength. I didn't want to accept it, but he's right: I've come this far. If I take another step back, I'll never forgive myself.

And I went back into the water for a third attempt.

This time, he holds my hand more firmly. The water embraces me just as coldly, but his arm pulls me slowly forward.

We descend, and the pressure on my ears returns immediately. He motions for me to pinch my nose and blow through it. I do. The pressure eases slightly, but remains there, like a silent warning.

My breathing is jerky but steady. Shhh... I inhale. Shhh... I exhale. The sound is hypnotic, like an engine idling. It seems to me that this noise is a reflection of the turmoil inside me.

As we descend, panic strikes me again. Thoughts scream in my mind: 'You've gone too far! The air isn't real, it's just an illusion! Get out now! You're not safe!'

I try to stop, but Gede squeezes my hand and motions for me to look into his eyes. Those eyes. They are steady, reassuring, like two beacons in the middle of a storm. I slow down, but I don't stop. I don't struggle anymore.

When I look around, colourful fish float lazily by me. They look at me curiously, oblivious to the chaos inside me. They are free, in their element. I begin to wonder, 'Why can't I be like them?'

But the pressure returns, and my ears start to hurt. My brain is sending me warning signals. Without thinking, I signal to Gede that I want to go up. He doesn't hesitate. In a few seconds, we are back on the surface.

I take a deep breath. This time, the warm, salty morning air calms me more than it agitates me.

"We'll take a break," he says simply and pulls me by the hand towards the shore.

Gede helps me out of my vest and guides me to the terrace. I'm shaking, but not just because of the water. I can still feel the pulsing of fear in my palms.

"Would you like some chocolate?" he asks, handing me a wafer. I accept without comment. I take a slow bite, and its sweetness anchors my thoughts, even if only for a moment. It's ridiculous how something so simple can bring you a gram of peace.

"How are you feeling?" he asks after a few minutes.

"Exhausted. Broken."

"Perfect. That means you're on the right track." He laughs softly and leans on the table. I give him a long look.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you insisting?"

He leans slightly towards me, and in his eyes I see something almost familiar: trust.

“Because I know you can do it. You just need one more try. One where you feel like you're there.” I remain silent. I want to protest, but I can't. Deep down, I know he's right. I need one more try.

We return to the water. Gede takes my hand, and the familiar feeling of his grip gives me courage. We descend slowly, but this time something has changed. I am no longer fighting; neither against the water nor against my fear.

The pressure is on my ears again, but I breathe through my nose and everything becomes bearable. The sound of my breathing occupies my mind, and the fear, although still present, begins to diminish in intensity, becoming just a shadow that accompanies me.

As we descend, the world around me becomes a spectacle. Colourful corals, vibrant fish, and a giant turtle floating gracefully beside us. Everything is so... alive.

For the first time, I am completely present. I look at Gede. He signals that he will let go of my hand. He takes out his camera and starts filming. He points to the turtle, and I smile, even though I know he can't see my smile because of the mask.

I float. I breathe. I dive!

There are no limits. The water is no longer a danger, but a whole world that accepts me as I am. I am simply here... and living in the moment.

Breathing was the “key”. Deep underwater, with the world pressing down on my ears and chest, my breathing was the only thing that kept me alive.

When we return to the surface, the sun is higher in the sky. I take off my mask and breathe deeply. I look at Gede.

“I did it.” My voice is just a whisper, but he understands. He smiles.

“12 metres,” he says triumphantly. “You managed to go down 12 metres. Let me make this clear, Yda: you are stronger than you think.”

The clock showed 11:55. Gede's smile had changed. He was looking at me differently now... not just as a scared beginner, but as someone who had crossed a threshold, someone who was no longer the same.

We were standing together in the car park, in the shade, waiting for the car to arrive. He asked for my Instagram address. I exchanged it without comment, but there was something about his gesture that made me wonder if it was just a simple courtesy or something more. I felt he was making advances towards me, but I had no idea how to interpret his glances.

"If you want, I can take you on my motorbike to see the surroundings of Amed," he said, leaning casually against the wall of the building.

I looked at him silently, searching for the right words, but I couldn't find them. Was he just being nice? Or did that smile have hidden intentions? I didn't answer him. What could I have said?

At around 1:00 p.m., I was back at headquarters. Everything: the roads, the breaks, the lessons, the emotions – all compressed into five hours. Five hours that had transformed me into a woman more confident than I knew myself to be.

Georgia was waiting for me on the terrace. She was alone, and her gaze was warm and encouraging.

"You did it!" she said, smiling broadly. "I knew you could do it. Congratulations on your first diving lesson."

I thanked her, but didn't say much. I was still overwhelmed with emotions, and fatigue was beginning to catch up with me.

"Your lunch is ready on the terrace," she said, motioning for me to go upstairs.

I ate alone, watching the traffic on the street. A bowl of rice, vegetables, egg, and a few slices of juicy melon. The glass of cold juice was a blessing in the midday heat.

When I finished, Gede appeared next to my table, holding a diploma in his hand. It was decorated with the diving school's logo and my name written in large, almost garish letters with a black

marker. He held the diploma out to me, but when I reached out to take it, he withdrew it with a mischievous smile.

"I'll give it to you... If you give me a kiss."

I burst out laughing. Seriously? I didn't know if he was joking or serious, but it didn't matter. My laughter gradually faded, and he continued to look at me, without backing down.

"You're not joking..." I said slowly, almost in a whisper.

"I'm not joking."

And why shouldn't I? He had been there when I fought my fear, when I wanted to give up, when I lost myself and found myself again. He hadn't given up, no matter how many obstacles I put in his way.

I stood up slowly and cupped his face in my hands. I kissed him. His lips were as soft as I remembered, and the sensation was surprisingly soothing, light. They tasted sweet now. When I pulled away, he was smiling broadly, and the diploma was already in my hand.

"Miracles do happen," I said in passing, picking up my bag.

The afternoon found me lying in my room, my body exhausted and my ears throbbing slightly with pain. But I didn't care. It was a good pain – a mark of the day, a sign that I had survived. I let the hot water from the shower embrace my skin until my body became soft and relaxed. When I laid down on the bed, sleep caught me immediately, like a protective cloak.

I woke up a few hours later, different. Not perfect, but different. My breathing was calm, and the pain in my ears seemed like a distant echo, one that made me smile.

"This is what victory must feel like," I said to myself.

In the evening, I went back to Bali Dive Cove, where Gede's videos were waiting for me. On the way, I stopped at a terrace. I don't remember what I ordered or what I ate – I was lost in my thoughts, still fascinated by myself. It was almost unreal.

"I really did it," I said to myself. And, of course, now I was going to brag about it. How could I not? No one knew what I was going to do. It was my challenge – a personal one, one that could have remained

hidden forever if I had chickened out. But I didn't chicken out. Now I had proof: a video.

Twelve metres underwater, I understood a simple truth: 'Fear is not a wall pushing me back. Fear is a door – and the key is to breathe and walk through it.'

I had never understood the power of breathing until today. In the water, under the pressure of the world, breathing had been my only ally. I had learned to breathe. To accept. To let myself be carried away.

Now, on dry land, with the sea somewhere behind me, the thought that obsessed me was different:

'And if I can dive into my fear – if I can breathe among corals, turtles and shipwrecks, 12 metres underwater – what else is possible in the world above?'

I thought about posting something on social media. To share my little triumph with my world. But the internet in the room was a disaster, so I left the thought for another day. 'Tomorrow,' I said to myself. 'Tomorrow will be a new day.'

The sound of the guy in the next room, talking casually on the phone, entered my mind like background music. The tone of his voice was calm, soothing, as if it were part of that new tranquillity within me. I fell asleep without realising it, floating between dreams and reality.

In my dream, the water calls me. The depths are silent, cool, perfect. I am no longer trembling. I am no longer struggling. I am floating. And I am breathing.

"Courage begins with a breath. And sometimes with a kiss." – Anonymous

A Sunset Between Two Worlds

Monday, 7th August 2023

It's Monday. A lazy morning where only the quiet rustling of palm leaves can be heard. My body feels every second of yesterday like a deep imprint. I stretch my arms slowly, as if they were made of lead, and make a few gentle movements in the air.

Every muscle protests, as if I had run a marathon through water and not just a timid dive for a few minutes. I have muscle fever and feel like a rusty little robot barely finding its mobility. 'But hey, I went diving yesterday!' Somehow, I wear this pain with pride.

'I have to relax today, I'm not going to do anything,' I tell myself firmly, like a solemn promise to myself. As if anyone had made me do anything anyway. But the mere idea of doing nothing completely changes the tone of the day. It works – my mood changes. I gather enough courage to get out of bed and crawl to the bathroom.

The cracked mirror in the bathroom reflects my face. You can still see the marks left yesterday by the diving mask, pressed too hard on my face by Gede's caring hands. I smile as I remember the moment: how he pulled the strap with almost childlike attention, as if he were building me armour for battle. My gaze slides to my pigtails, which are now a crumpled version of the African hairstyle I had two weeks ago. They look more like satellite dishes, giving me a mischievous air. I think about undoing them, but something tells me 'not yet'. It's not the right time.

Esther's message from yesterday comes to mind. She wrote to see how my diving went and to invite me for coffee at the beachside Resto-Bar, Barracuda, at 11:00. I am surprised at myself: I am punctual. Sometimes I really amaze myself.

When I arrive, Esther greets me with a big smile and a barrage of questions.

"How did the diving go?" she asks me, with genuine curiosity. She asked me the same thing yesterday, but she probably wanted to look me in the eye when she heard the answer.

"I survived," I reply with a laugh, but I immediately realise how true my words are.

"That's all that matters! It means you're stronger than you think," she tells me, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. But those were exactly the same words Gede had used yesterday... What a coincidence!

We sit down on deckchairs by the sea. She has already ordered two black coffees. Unfortunately, they don't have cappuccino, but honestly, I don't care right now. Everything is quiet. The sun's rays gently caress me, and the breeze blows softly through my hair. Relaxation. Yes, that's what it says on me. It's one of those days you don't even dream of, and yet, when you experience them, you realise how much it means to simply be present.

As we chat, Esther introduces me to a new girl. She's her roommate and arrived in Amed yesterday. Her name is Fury and she's from Hungary. She seems easy-going and charismatic, and her presence intrigues me. After I enthusiastically tell her about my first dive yesterday, I find out that Fury came here to get her freediving licence.

"What's freediving?" I ask curiously. She laughs and explains simply:

"Diving without an oxygen tank. It's just you and your breath."

Fury talks about water as if it were a sanctuary, and I can't get the image of my panic yesterday out of my mind. I think to myself, 'Do

people like her ever feel fear?' I hesitate. No... I'm not going to ask her that. What would be the point? She talks passionately about how much she loves pushing her own limits and staying underwater for as long as possible. Her blue eyes sparkle in the sunlight, and I listen to her, mesmerised.

After a while, hunger starts to kick in. I suggest to the girls that we eat something simple. French fries. Fury politely declines and focuses on her phone, so it's just me and Esther. Our walk on the beach takes us to a chic warung. A few noisy children play among the foamy waves, and we watch them as if they were a show.

The sea is spectacular today. The waves seem orchestrated, a concert dedicated to us, and I feel privileged. We order far too much food: French fries, fried onion rings, vegetable rolls, soups, and, of course, two fruit smoothies. The potatoes are salty as if they had been fried directly in the seawater, but they are incredibly good.

Between bites and laughter, I receive a message from Sawa. He sent me some suggestions about what not to miss in Amed, and one of the locations immediately catches my attention: a viewpoint called Sunset Point.

"What do you say, shall we watch the sunset from here?" I ask Esther enthusiastically.

"Wow, yes! Let's go!"

After paying and saying goodbye to the kind lady at the warung, we head to Sunset Point. The road there is a bit of an adventure. Traffic jams, paths, and closed stairs, but in the end, we find our way to the location.

Sunset Point Amed Bali is more than I expected. The infinity pool stretches like a blue mirror, and from its edge, the ocean seems to merge with the sky. The entrance fee includes drinks, so I order a cappuccino. If I had known about this place earlier, I would have slept here. Maybe I would have even offered to clean up, just so they would let me stay. I'm joking, of course...

But the biggest surprise of the day comes like a bolt from the blue when I see Eva, the Mexican girl I came with from Ubud. She is sprawled out on a deckchair, cocktail in hand, the epitome of supreme relaxation, as if this place had been created for her. The coincidence is so bizarre that I stop for a moment, trying to convince myself that it's not just a hallucination from the midday sun. 'The universe has an incredible sense of humour,' I say to myself as I approach her.

"Eva?" I ask, as if I can't believe she's here, right in front of me. She looks up and smiles broadly.

"Yda! What a surprise! What a small world, isn't it?"

She laughs heartily, and I approach her. Without saying a word, she hugs me like an old friend. No explanations, no formalities. There is a naturalness in her gestures that completely disarms me.

"Wow, you really know how to relax," I say, pointing to the cocktail in her hand.

"What can I do? Life is better with a drink in your hand," she jokes, but her gaze tells me it's more than that.

She's not alone, she's with a girl from Jakarta – Indonesian through and through. They met at her hotel this morning. Why am I not surprised? They were inspired and had been here since opening time this morning.

The fun starts instantly. We swim, laugh, chat, take photos and videos, and meet other people.

We move to the edge of the pool, where the sun's rays turn the water into a mirror. Eva tells me with the naturalness of someone who has gone through a storm and come out unscathed on the other side: she sold everything she had in Mexico to travel.

"Everything," she says, emphasising the word. I feel her words echoing my own decisions. Somehow, I find myself in her story, but the intensity with which she tells it hits me right in the chest.

Not only have I done the same thing, but her thoughts and decisions are so similar to mine that I feel a strange thrill. The *coup de grâce*! How could there be so many coincidences, one after the other?

“And how was it? Was it hard to leave everything behind?” I ask her, feeling our meeting take on a special meaning.

“Not at all. It was easier than I could ever have imagined. Plus, I like solitude and unpredictable days.” She smiled in a way that I really understood.

“Me too...”

“I don't need a boyfriend; he would only be an obstacle in my way,” she said with a certainty that hit me, again, right in the heart. She thought exactly like me.

“Wow!” was all I could say.

As she speaks to me, I feel her words crashing into me like relentless waves. First, they surprise me, then they overwhelm me. I realise that our stories are not just similar – they are like two sides of the same coin.

“But what about you? What brought you here?” she asks me, mirroring my own thoughts.

I feel strange telling her out loud that I did exactly the same thing. ‘What if she thinks it's just a cliché and I want to impress her?’ But I make up my mind: I tell her how I sold everything in six months after my trip to the Philippines; how I wanted to leave the suffocating routine behind and completely change my lifestyle. That I currently have no source of income... Eva listens to me without interrupting, and at the end, she looks at me for a long time:

“Girl... You're crazier than me. And that's a compliment.” Then she continued, as if that wasn't enough: “You know... I noticed you at the shuttle bus station in Ubud and I wanted us to be friends,” she said with a smile.

All I could think at that moment was: ‘The universe doesn't ask if you're ready for the people it brings into your life.’ I don't know if I

was ready for Eva yet, but what I do know for sure is that... I accepted her with an open heart.

The girl from Jakarta left us around 8:30 p.m., and we only left when the pool closed. The journey back to our accommodation, after a day full of laughter and water, is enlivened by my new friends. Their story of love becomes an open confrontation, an exchange of ideas so intense that I feel like a spectator at a closed-door match. Eva is in her element, and Esther tells her about her boyfriend in Ghana, with whom she has a long-distance relationship.

"And how does that work? Do you really think a man thousands of miles away can be faithful?" Eva asks, raising her eyebrows.

Esther hesitates for a moment, but replies firmly:

"I trust him. I know him."

Eva laughs briefly, almost sarcastically.

"Oh, dear, trust is beautiful in theory. But the reality is that men are... well, men. If you gave him a chance, he'd cheat on you at the first opportunity."

Esther looks at her, slightly offended, but tries to remain calm.

"Not all men are like that. Love isn't about always suspecting someone. It's about connection, about... knowing you can rely on the other person."

Eva makes a sweeping gesture with her hands, as if she wants to throw the words into the air.

"You know what I think? I think love is a trap. It gives you the impression that you have everything, only to knock you down when you least expect it. Men aren't the solution, Esther. You don't need them."

"Easy to say," Esther replies, irritated. "But no one wants to be alone. Maybe you don't need anyone, but I... I don't want to live my whole life without feeling a man's arms around me. I want to love and be loved."

Her reply hits me, too. Without meaning to, I find myself in her words. Do I want love? Or did I decide from the start that I don't want to take any more risks?

Eva doesn't give in.

"Love is beautiful in stories, Esther. But in reality? You're just a mouse accepting a piece of cheese without seeing the trap. You know the cheese will disappear, right? And then what will you do?"

Esther is silent for a moment, and I try to figure out if she is convinced or just overwhelmed. Then she replies, more calmly:

"Maybe the trap exists. But that doesn't mean it's not worth trying. What's the point of living if you don't feel anything?"

Their dialogue becomes a ping-pong of opinions, and I find myself caught between two philosophies that both attract and repel me. Eva, with her stormy energy, defends her opinion like a gladiator in the arena: 'Love is a trap.' On the other hand, Esther responds with quiet but firm force: 'Without love, what's the point of living?' Between their exchanges, I feel like an unqualified referee, unable to decide which of them is right. Deep down, I feel that they both are, in a way. I remain silent. What is the point of intervening when their truth silently shakes me?

Even after the silence has settled, their words echo in my mind. Eva – the storm that defies all obstacles. Esther – the anchor that refuses to give up on love. Between them, I am a grain of sand, carried back and forth by the waves.

We arrived at Barracuda, but the girls' discussion had no clear conclusion. Perhaps it couldn't have. So they let it go – for now, at least.

Esther quickly disappeared, saying she was going to charge her phone, but it was probably an important conversation with her boyfriend. Who knows? I didn't insist on finding out.

I'm left alone with Eva at the table. The band is playing, and the atmosphere is pleasant, even relaxing. The songs are familiar, and the

four young men in the band have hairstyles as if they were cut out of a film – exotic, but somehow fitting for the place.

A guy from the pool shows up at our table. He's a diving instructor at another school and wants to show me a special place in Amed, something with a spectacular view, he says. He leaves me his business card with a big smile, but in my mind, I'm just thinking, 'Pfff, as if I've confirmed anything.' I decide to leave and say goodbye to Eva. She wants to stay; I have no idea where she gets all that boundless energy from.

On the way to my accommodation, the idea of the tour I had talked about today slips into my mind. So I stop at an agency. The guy there, Arin, promises me a complete tour for 3-4 people for only 800,000 IDR. We exchange phone numbers, but I leave the decision for later. It was too much information for such a 'relaxing' day.

In my room, I throw myself straight into bed after a hot shower, but the stories of the day urge me to call Mone. I tell him about Esther, Eva, and all the events of today. At one point, Mone bursts out laughing:

"Well, of course everyone thinks you're crazy. But only crazy people do interesting things." Maybe he's right. Eva is crazy, and I admire her for it. I'm crazy too... and I feel good about it.

Late at night, as I turn off the light, the girls' words echo in my mind. Esther and Eva are so different, and I... I'm somewhere in between.

Eva sees love as a trap that weakens you, an obstacle to freedom. Esther considers it essential, an end in itself. But me? What do I think?

Maybe I'm right to shy away from love. Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know. But Esther's words remain etched in my soul: 'I prefer to take the risk. I prefer to love, even if it hurts, than to live a whole life without feeling anything.'

Perhaps freedom and love are not opposite worlds, but just different ways of achieving the same goal: finding yourself.

Is it time to reconsider my position? Perhaps a long-distance relationship, without obligations, would be the solution. But who would accept such a thing? Someone who meets my standards and is willing to play this impossible game? A game of appearances?

Perhaps love is the greatest adventure of all. Riskier than diving, deeper than any ocean. And perhaps, who knows, the only one truly worth diving into.

I close my eyes with a smile on my lips, but inside me, thoughts still roll like ocean waves. The universe has shown me that the impossible is just a story we tell ourselves to protect ourselves from the unknown. But me? Am I ready to move on? Maybe I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but part of me – that crazy, courageous part – already knows that the answer is 'yes.'

'Ask and you shall receive,' I whisper to myself before falling asleep. 'Am I... really crazy?'

“When it comes to love, every risk is a window into yourself.” – Anonymous author

20

I Don't Chase, I Attract

Tuesday, 8th August 2023

I didn't get out of bed until 10:30 a.m. A luxury. A blessing. A Tuesday that makes me wish that all Tuesdays in my life could be just like this: lazy, quiet, perfect. Pfff... I don't even know when I last slept so well.

The fatigue of the last few days had settled over me like invisible layers of dust: diving that makes my muscles protest, the change from the air of Ubud to the salty sea breeze, the stories with the girls, and the questions about love that still haunt me. The storm in my mind has subsided.

Sometimes, sleep is the only anchor.

Today, it was my salvation.

But now, it's time to get moving. I've decided to write. I don't know exactly what, but I feel I have to. Thoughts swirl through my mind, intertwining like tangled threads. The only way to untangle them is to put them down on virtual paper, to see them in front of me, to give them shape.

I go out onto the terrace to look for something to eat, and my stomach, dissatisfied with the lack of attention, urgently pushes me towards the kitchen of the small guesthouse. Even though breakfast time is long gone, the owner, always kind, quickly prepares a platter that would put any chef to shame: a fluffy omelette, toast with butter and jam, two golden, sweet bananas picked from her garden, and

strong coffee, which instantly wipes away any remaining traces of sleep.

I look at my plate and smile. Everything is so simple and yet so perfect. In moments like these, I realise how little you need to be happy: good food, a clear sky, and a sincere smile that welcomes you without asking for anything in return.

With my plate empty and my belly full, I return to my room with boundless energy, as if someone had reset all my internal buttons. It's time to write. I feel that today there is no room for procrastination. Procrastination... that old habit that always catches me in its web. In the last few days, I've put off writing so many times that I don't even know what I've written down and what I've left unfinished. But today? Today is about me, about my words, about the story I'm building, day after day, with every place I see and every person I meet.

Around 1:00 p.m., my phone vibrates. A message from Esther:

"Hey, Yda! I found a nice driver for 600,000 IDR."

I let out a short laugh. Of course he's nice, we all know Esther's standards when it comes to men. I reply:

"Ooo... Perfect! Where will he take us? The same places, I suppose?"

"Yes, I showed him the locations you sent me. He agreed to all of them."

"Great! But please ask him if we can leave early tomorrow morning. There will be a queue at the Gate of Heaven if we arrive late. Maybe at 5:30 or 6:00? Do you think that's okay?"

"I think that's fine. Anyway, the man said we can leave whenever we want. We'll organise it today."

After a few seconds, another message arrives, along with a link on Google Maps.

"Around 5:30 p.m. we're going here for dinner, sunset, and... a birthday."

I raise an eyebrow, curious.

"Birthday? Whose birthday?"

"The restaurant owner's. He told us that if we come today, we get a 20% discount on food and drinks. I met him earlier on the beach."

"Haha! Discount and birthday? So it's going to be a big party? Hmm, sounds tempting. So Infinity Pool is off the list?"

"Nope. Fury really wants to go here, she says it's a place with a rooftop and a superb view."

"Ok, ok... but let's not forget about the sunset. I told Eva last night that we'd meet at Sunset Point around 5:00 p.m."

"Eva can stay on her comfortable sun lounger. We're going to eat well!"

I smile. Esther is funny with her directness. I send her a short message:

"By the way, what does the driver look like?"

The reply comes quickly:

"Big smile, very friendly. You'll see for yourself tomorrow!"

I laugh and turn my gaze back to my laptop. 'Big smile, then,' I think to myself. At least we know we'll have a relaxed atmosphere on the way.

I have plenty of time until 5:00 p.m. to break away from reality and lose myself in writing. So that's exactly what I do. I position my laptop more comfortably, and my fingers begin to dance across the keys. My mind flows like a river, the stream of thoughts pouring out without stopping. Each sentence I write seems to free me from an invisible weight. I realise how much of what I experience inevitably turns into stories. And stories... they are my way of understanding the world. A world that I seem to discover from a new angle every day.

At one point, a thought slips into my mind, as if whispered:

'I don't chase! I attract!'

I find it a fascinating idea, with an almost magical air about it. I feel like writing about it right away, but something tells me I need to let it grow, take root. Some ideas are like wine: they need time to settle, to become what they are meant to be. I leave it there, tucked away in my mind, like a bud waiting to bloom.

When I look up at the clock, it's already 4:30 p.m. How did the time pass? It's as if I were in a trance, and now, suddenly, reality is knocking at my door in the form of a hungry stomach. I remember that I have little time left before the party. I grab a glass of water and try to calm it down temporarily. It will have to wait until then.

Around 5:00 p.m., I walk out the door. I like to be punctual, even if it means keeping my steps at a steady, mechanical pace while my mind is still flying through the words I've written. My thoughts are so far away that I don't even realise I'm going in the wrong direction. In fact, I don't realise until I arrive in front of the Barracuda resort and Esther isn't responding to any of my messages. I check my phone, open the link she sent me, and see... the address is on the opposite side.

'Perfect, Yda. Well done.'

And then, instead of getting angry, I start laughing. I laugh heartily, alone in front of the resort, like a stray shadow. In fact, I am amused by how lost I can sometimes be in my thoughts, so caught up in my inner world that I completely detach myself from reality. 'Walking makes your legs beautiful,' I tell myself, shrugging my shoulders and setting off in the right direction. This time I have to walk 2.5 kilometres, but I really don't care.

I put my favourite music on my headphones, and my steps begin to synchronise with the rhythm of the songs. With every street corner, I rediscover Amed. The smells of incense sticks and food float through the air, and the smiles of the locals greet me as if they have known me all my life. The people are so simple and serene that they make you feel at home. The houses with colourful walls and gardens with exotic flowers now seem like living paintings to me. Amed is not just a small town – it's like a movie that never ends, full of scenes that grab you from the very first second. And me? I feel like I'm part of the script. A lost but happy princess.

I look at my watch again. I still have time. And I think, as I walk among the tiny houses and dusty alleys, that maybe some detours are

essential. Maybe every wrong step, every ‘detour’ brings you closer to where you need to be. Or, at least, to what you need to understand about yourself. And, honestly, I feel privileged to be here – with this landscape, with the people smiling at me, with myself.

Amed Stop Inn Rooftop Restaurant

When I arrive, I realise that the whole journey – including the 2.5 kilometres I took wrong – was well worth it. I climb the narrow stairs, which seem to go on forever, and find myself in a place that looks like something out of a storybook. Everything is made of bamboo, with a rustic and authentic feel, and the view... Ah, the view!

The rice fields stretch far into the distance, like a green sea undulating in the gentle breeze. The mountains loom in the distance, lost in a pastel of blue and grey. The sky looks like it was painted by an artist in a playful mood.

It is quiet. But not an empty quiet – it is a quiet that fills your soul, a quiet that makes you want to stay put and breathe in every second. I stop and simply admire. I breathe in. I breathe out. It is as if the whole universe has conspired to bring me here, now.

I take out my phone and start filming. I like to capture these moments, even though I know that a video can never capture all the magic. It's just for me, a reminder of the places that took my breath away.

I order an orange, carrot, and ginger juice – my favourite combination – along with a large plate of Mie Goreng. I wander from one corner of the terrace to another while waiting for my order, trying to absorb every detail: the wood creaking softly under my feet, the smell of freshly cut grass, the girls smiling broadly as they serve customers, and the sky beginning to change shades.

Shortly afterwards, Esther's message announces the girls' arrival:

“We'll be there in 5 minutes. We're coming by scooter.”

“Great! Ask at the entrance for someone to show you the way up. It's hard to find,” I reply.

It doesn't take long before I see them climbing the stairs. They appear one by one, and their reactions make me smile. For a moment, they stand still, looking around like children discovering a secret castle.

“Wow! What a place!” they exclaim almost simultaneously. A perfect sound, accompanied by the soft music coming from the speakers.

“That was exactly my reaction,” I tell them, laughing. “But you should know that no photo will ever do it justice.”

The four of us sit down at the table in the corner of the terrace. The rice fields stretched to the horizon, and the sky slowly turned orange, like a painting forgotten in the sunset light.

The girls ordered something to drink, and in no time, the atmosphere of the terrace completely captivated us. We relaxed, and the conversation began to flow naturally as the sun slowly descended towards the horizon.

Fury's Canadian friend had joined the group, with a big smile and an attitude as if she were ready to start a stand-up comedy show. Fury was already relaxed, legs crossed, sipping an exotic juice, and casually adjusting a rebellious bracelet on her ankle. As usual, I preferred to observe before launching into any discussion.

“So, Yda, what do you write in that secret diary of yours all day? I hope you don't include us, with all our blunders,” Fury said, giving me a mischievous look.

“Hmm... maybe. Only if you do something interesting today,” I replied, amused.

“Oh, then I accept the challenge! Let's talk about men, because that's women's favourite topic, right?” she continued, while arranging her hair, as if she were already preparing for a potential hypothetical date.

The Canadian, whose name was Greta, joined in without batting an eyelid, even though she had no idea what Fury was talking about:

“Men? Well, let's be serious. If you want to waste your time, find a man. If you want to find peace, run away from them as fast as you can.”

The girls start laughing, and Esther interjects:

“Greta, you're more categorical than Eva! Seriously? Why run away from men? Okay, if they're the kind who don't know how to treat a woman, then yes.”

“My dear, they're all the type who don't know how to behave,” Greta replies, leaning towards us and winking. “They want to seem interested, but it doesn't take long before all they want is to cheat on you with another girl or, worse, tell you what to do.”

This girl had a way of speaking that somehow left me speechless. She was direct and spontaneous at the same time... I looked at her rebellious curls on her forehead and couldn't help thinking that she was a rare gem in our circle.

“Hmm... maybe you've only met boys, not men,” Fury replied, with a slightly provocative tone. “Not all of them are like that. I mean, honestly, it depends on how you choose them.”

“Oh, Fury, you and your criteria!” Esther teased him. “You have a checklist longer than a Christmas shopping list for the family. Height? Check. Nice smile? Check. Nice car? Check. And let's not forget – age. But only if it's younger than anyone would guess.”

Fury laughed loudly but raised her hands in a defensive gesture.

“What? If I want to look good, I have to look good! And stop picking on me. Just because I like handsome men and flirt with them a little doesn't mean I'm superficial.”

“But really, Fury, how old are you?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. I was genuinely curious.

Fury leans over the table a little and says to me in a conspiratorial whisper:

“Depending on the situation, I'm between 25 and 35. It depends on who's asking.”

We all laugh, and Esther blurts out:

“So, if a 40-year-old asks you?”

“Oh, then I'm exactly 30, because I'm mature, but still young,” Fury replied with a serious air that provoked even more laughter.

I decided it was time to intervene:

“But if a 20-year-old boy shows up, what do you do?”

Fury tossed her hair over her shoulder, acting like a diva:

“My dear, then I'm an experienced woman of... let's say 27. I give him life lessons. What, isn't that okay? In a bar, I can be 27. At a business conference, I can be 35. It's really a good idea to be a little flexible.”

“Oh, I can't believe what I'm hearing, Fury!” says Esther, laughing so hard she almost knocks the glass off the table.

But Greta raises her hand, asking for silence:

“Seriously now, jokes are fine, but let's talk seriously. Do you really think it's worth investing time in men? I'm not saying they're not nice sometimes, but if you live a good life and are happy on your own, why complicate things?”

“Because,” Fury begins, “life is more interesting with someone else. It gives you something to learn, it challenges you. And if you're lucky, you might even find someone to support you.”

The silence that fell over us was brief but heavy. Greta twirled her finger on the rim of her glass, looking at us from under her eyelashes, as if waiting to see who would speak first. Fury stretched her back, absentmindedly playing with the straw from her smoothie. Esther moved her lips in an involuntary gesture, probably preparing her response. For a moment, we looked like four actresses improvising a moment of silence on an invisible stage. I think each of us was trying to figure out if Fury was really right or just saying what she wanted to believe.

“What if not?” Greta suddenly broke the silence, her expression impassive. “What if all you find is someone who just messes you up?”

“Then you enjoy the moment, learn what you have to learn, and move on,” Fury replies, raising her glass as if making a toast. “It’s not the end of the world. But to say you give up completely? That seems sad to me.”

Esther joins the discussion, more seriously:

“I think love is worth the risk. What if it hurts? So be it. It means you’ve experienced something real. Without love... what’s the point of living? Honestly, whatever you say, any of you, I won’t change my mind.”

Greta seems to want to say something, but stops herself. I feel I have to intervene, even though I’ve been quiet until now.

“Maybe love isn’t just about men,” I say quietly. “Maybe it’s also about us – about learning to love ourselves as we are, with all our mistakes and dreams. Ultimately, love is a mosaic, and every piece has to find its place. Including us.”

All eyes are on me. A new moment of silence descends upon us, until Fury says with a subtle smile:

“Okay, Yda, well said. But I still think a good-looking man wouldn’t hurt sometimes.” We all laugh again, and the atmosphere becomes more relaxed.

In their own way, they were all right. Each of us has a different definition of love – that unique mosaic built from our own experiences and fears. But all those definitions together build something greater. Perhaps... a truth we have not yet discovered.

We leave around 8:30 p.m. I choose the quiet of the deserted road, and they head noisily to a bar, laughing and planning another beer. We cross paths once on the way, and Fury calls out to me from her scooter:

“Yda, come on! Just a few minutes!” I laugh and shake my head.

“Pass. Have fun for me!”

If I went, I would probably get carried away by their loud laughter and other stories of the night. I am content to continue walking in silence. I feel the need for quiet, for my own time, just me and my thoughts. I stop by a market, buy some water, then retreat to my room, where the dim light of the single bulb and a bed that seems more welcoming than ever await me. My phone warns me that my memory is full. I smile wearily. A problem for tomorrow.

I turn off the light, but sleep is slow in coming. My thoughts begin to dance like long, tireless shadows. I think about today – simple, but full of layers. Like a ripe fruit that reveals a different flavour with every bite. It was a day when I got lost in the streets of Amed, but found myself in the details. A day when I wrote, laughed, and listened to stories about love, stories that seemed to remain suspended in the air, seeking to find meaning in my mind.

Today's words come back to me: '*I don't chase! I attract!*' I turn them over and over, trying to understand their weight. Are they just words, or... is it a message? A subtle call, a hint left by the Universe? Sometimes, truths don't come as clear answers, but as puzzle pieces. And I... I'm still discovering the pieces.

Maybe that's the key. I don't chase. I attract.

And, thinking about it now, maybe there's an even softer way to say it.

'I don't pursue! I attract!'

It feels like the gentler version of the same truth.

It feels calmer. Like I've stopped running, not just physically, but inside me too. As if I'm starting to trust the rhythm of things as they come to me.

Maybe everything I'm experiencing now is just bringing closer what is already meant to come.

I can still hear the girls' laughter in the silence of the night, and among those echoes, I wonder:

'Am I ready for something great?'

Something inside me whispers yes. That none of this is random. That, in their own strange way, every event today, every laugh, every mistake, every thought was like an invisible thread woven by the Universe around me. Maybe all these threads lead to something. Or to someone.

Tomorrow, the tour awaits me. The image I saw in the pictures comes back to my mind – that high arch, like a gateway to the sky, reflected in a mirror of water. Will it be as spectacular in reality? Maybe yes. Maybe no. But I know I will enjoy every moment.

Now, I let the day slowly fade away, like a sunset embracing the world. The Universe knows what it is doing. I, perhaps, do not yet. But I am ready to find out. Life has already shown me that sometimes the answers come only when we stop looking for them.

“You don't attract what you want. You attract what you are.” – Wayne Dyer

Gates to Heaven: Lessons from Nature and Ourselves

Wednesday, 9th August 2023

6:00 a.m. My sleepy body is still clinging to the warmth of the sheets, but I have to get up. Fury has convinced me that the sunset at the Gate of Heaven will be more spectacular than the sunrise. She has a way of seeing things better than I do, and that thought makes me get my feet out of bed. A day full of adventures awaits me, and excitement begins to overcome sleepiness.

My phone vibrates on the bedside table. It's Esther. I see her message on the screen, and the corner of my mouth lifts into a sleepy smile.

"Yda, are you ready?"

"Not yet, but I'm almost there."

"No rush. See you at 7:00."

'I still have time. Perfect,' I think, stretching my arms lazily.

I walk over to the mirror, where I am greeted by a version of myself with unruly pigtails, tousled from sleep. After a few moments of contemplation, I decide: the red dress, short and flowing, is perfect for photos. Black sandals complement the outfit. This dress is perfect. I smile at myself in the mirror. Sometimes, feeling good about yourself makes all the difference.

At 7:00 sharp, a white car pulls up in front of the resort. The rear window rolls down slowly, revealing the smiling faces of Esther and

Fury. They look rested and refreshed, as if they didn't stay up late last night. For a moment, I envy their naturalness.

Esther motions for me to get in the front, next to the driver. I don't get a chance to protest – I open the door and sit in the left seat.

Dek, our Balinese driver, smiles broadly and turns his gaze back to the road. His black hair, tied back in a ponytail, and white shirt give him a calm, confident air. And the large rings and massive watch? I look at them, amused – he looks like a mobster from an old movie.

Fury and Esther laugh in the back seat, exchanging impressions about last night. I, on the other hand, can only think of one thing: coffee. I declare, almost dramatically:

“We need coffee. I, at least, definitely do.”

Dek gets the hint, and within minutes, the car pulls up in front of a café along the route. We go in, quickly order coffees to go, and hit the road again, warm cups in hand. The smell of cappuccino wakes me up completely, and the first sip of coffee seems to have a magical effect. The boy offered it to me with a broad smile and a discreet bow. Maybe he was just being polite – or maybe my red dress had something to do with it. I amuse myself with this thought as I take another sip.

With the warm cup in my hands and the first wave of caffeine coursing through my veins, I am ready to face the day. And what a day! Our agenda is full: Gate of Heaven Lempuyang Temple, Lahangan Sweet, Maha Gangga Valley, Tirta Gangga, Puri Agung Karangasem, and Taman Ujung.

Dek suggests we start the list from the bottom up, and his proposal sounds logical. I thank him in my mind for the idea, even though I'm still not sure what awaits us there. Suddenly, I feel that this day really has potential.

The Palace on the Water: Taman Ujung

We arrive at Taman Ujung on a road lined with palm trees and quiet villages.

I feel like we are stepping into another Bali, one hidden from the usual hustle and bustle of the island.

Once inside, the large white gates open onto a garden that seems to breathe from another era. The almost regal tranquillity of this place contrasts strikingly with the hustle and bustle of the island, as if it belonged to another world.

The perfectly designed main alley draws your gaze to the large water basins, arched bridges, and elegant pavilions.

The place seems to guide you, step by step, through its history. The air, heavy with the scent of tropical flowers, penetrates your skin as if you were wearing an invisible scarf.

"This view seems like something out of a dream, with every detail carefully carved in time," I whisper as I climb the stairs leading to the central gazebo. I let my hand touch the wooden railing, feeling the imperfect texture of a story carved by time.

The place exudes a regal tranquillity. Every bridge, every reflection in the water, seems like an invitation to stop and listen to untold stories. It was more than just a building – it preserved the traces of times gone by.

The legend of the place makes its way into my mind, giving voice to history: how a simple pond was transformed, more than a century ago, into a symbol of royal grandeur, combining Balinese and European architectural styles.

Every corner seems to bear the mark of a refined past, and the story of King Karangasem comes to life before my eyes.

Esther, with her phone always ready, finds the perfect angle and takes a picture of me on the steps of the gazebo. "Yda, don't move, you look like a queen," she says, and I laugh. At that moment, I really did feel like a queen, a small part of a grand setting.

Something about this place – the symmetry, the tranquillity, the reflections on the water – has a calming effect. It makes me want to stay longer, to absorb not only the visual beauty, but also the story of the king who created this garden from nothing.

I close my eyes for a few seconds, trying to absorb all the details – the bridges glistening in the sunlight, the tranquillity of the water that urges you to stay, the stories that seem to float in the air.

Taman Ujung is not just a place – it is a fragment of another time, suspended in the present.

Dek is waiting for us in a shady corner, leaning against a tree, smiling at us with his usual calm.

“It was worth every penny,” says Fury, getting into the car with a sigh of satisfaction. I look at her and smile. Yes, it’s worth starting the day in a place that carries the echoes of forgotten stories, whispered from every corner of the garden.

Dek turns on the music and sets off on the winding roads to the next landmark. As the car sinks back into the green landscape, I feel the day revealing its magic to us, piece by piece.

Grandeur in Simplicity: Puri Agung Karangasem

The massive gates of Puri Agung Karangasem are like a border between two worlds: the hustle and bustle outside and the solemn tranquillity inside. As we walk down the main alley, I feel the tranquillity of the place begin to seep into me.

The old trees, with their gnarled branches, seem to stand silent watch, witnesses to all the stories that have filled this place over time. What strikes me first is the elegant simplicity of the place – a beauty that needs no artifice to impress.

“Look at this door!” Esther exclaims, pointing to an intricate carving with almost perfect lines, combining that royal red with gold.

“Do you think they made it by hand?” I ask, touching the fine edges of the carving with my fingertips.

“Without a doubt,” Esther replies, smiling. “Art back then was more than a craft – it was a way of life.”

In the inner courtyard, I sit down next to an impressive statue covered in moss, which seems to watch over the place silently. I

close my eyes and let the energy envelop me. The scent of frangipani flowers floats in the air, and the silence is broken only by the rustling of leaves. Fury doesn't miss the opportunity to capture the moment of serenity.

"What do you think life was like here back then?" asks Esther, her eyes fixed on the intricately decorated pavilion, as if trying to bring it to life.

The image takes shape in my mind: women in silk dresses and elaborate hairstyles, dancing under golden umbrellas that reflect the warm light of the lanterns, while the air vibrates with the sounds of a distant gamelan.

"Lace, huge dresses, dancing... Bridgerton-esque, but with Balinese influences?" I catch myself saying my thoughts out loud... We laugh, but the image is so vivid in my mind that I feel like I'm there too.

We enter a small exhibition hall, where old objects – fabrics, ceremonial weapons and a delicate lampshade – tell stories of a refined past. Esther approaches a painting of the royal family and smiles.

"Have you noticed how all the kings have that look? It's as if it penetrates beyond you, as if it could read every hidden thought."

Esther had this gift of making you see beauty even where my eyes passed indifferently. Maybe that's why we get along so well: we are contrasts that complement each other.

When we leave, Dek motions for us to look at a modest courtyard across the street.

"Fighting cocks," he says, as if it were the most mundane thing in the world.

It's hard not to notice the contrast between the solemn grandeur of the palace and the modest simplicity of the roosters' yard – two worlds that share the same space but speak different languages.

"It's awful to see them like that," says Esther, looking at a rooster shaking its feathers in a nervous gesture.

“Yes, but you know what?” I reply. “It's their tradition. We don't have to like it, but it's not our place to judge them.”

Esther sighs, but says nothing. Fury is silent, but I catch her looking at one of the roosters, as if she wants to understand its story.

I look at the bamboo cages and wonder: “How often do we live with the feeling of freedom, but trap ourselves in our own limits, invisible but just as real?”

The contrast between the two places haunts me like a silent lesson about life: a palace and a cage, two opposite worlds coexisting on the same land.

“Let's go,” I say suddenly, breaking the silence, and we cross the street again. Maybe some things are just the way they are. You can't change them, you can't explain them, you just look at them and try to understand – or at least accept that they exist.

In the car, Dek drives with his usual calming composure, and the slow pace of the road gives me time to look at the scenery. Colourful houses, bamboo cages, gardens full of flowers – they all flow past my window like fragments of stories I will never know. And yet, I think of those roosters. Their beauty trapped behind bars, the contrast between what they are and the destiny they are given. I try not to judge, but I wonder: ‘How much is missing from the story we see from the outside?’

My thoughts turn to the three of us. How did we end up here, together, on the sunny streets of Bali? What invisible hands have woven our paths together? Esther, with her open heart and care for everyone, even a captured rooster. Fury, pragmatic and direct, always ready to put everything in the right perspective. And me... I am always caught between my dreams and the reality that keeps pulling me back.

I try to fly, but sometimes I feel my wings hitting an invisible barrier. I'm not a prisoner, not completely... but caught between who I am and who I should be.

I ask myself, 'What does it mean to be truly free? To belong to yourself, without conforming to the invisible expectations around you?'

I look at Esther, who is laughing at something on her phone, and at Fury, who is studying her map with a seriousness that makes me smile. They are so sure of themselves, so confident. But they, too, have their scars, hidden beneath layers of smiles and irony. I know that. Each of us carries them.

And yet, right now, here, in Dek's car, we are together. We are where we are meant to be. Some things are not random. Maybe we were meant to be here, sharing the same day, the same moments, on the narrow streets of this island. Maybe our destinies were meant to intertwine for a while.

I don't tell them that. I choose to remain silent, but I smile. Sometimes, the most valuable friendships don't need words.

Dek slows down, passing by a courtyard hidden under huge trees. Balinese music flows smoothly from the speakers, and the air between us is filled with that comfortable silence. I look out the window and enjoy the moment. This day. Them.

Sacred Waters: Tirta Gangga

It is said that the sacred waters of Tirta Gangga spring from the nearby mountains, carrying the blessing of the gods and a story as old as time itself. A sanctuary of tranquillity and spiritual rebirth, but also of hidden energies waiting to be discovered.

But the magic of the place is overshadowed by the hustle and bustle of tourist spots – the multitude of stalls and the constant buzz seem to dilute the sacred charm of the gardens. Once there, we have to make our way through vendors offering colourful bracelets, fish food, and garish souvenirs. The constant buzz is far from the tranquillity we associate with this place.

“It's like a cheap festival here,” Fury comments, raising an eyebrow. “If it weren't for the fish in the pools, you could almost forget that this place is sacred.”

The round paving stones in the main pool seem to float on the surface of the water, creating a magical path that tourists tread carefully, surrounded by colourful fish moving gracefully among the reflections of the clouds. As I make my way across those paving stones, I feel the eyes of those around me – a mixture of impatience and fascination.

“Do you think they see this place as it should be seen?” I ask, watching the tourists take pictures while the sacred water flows indifferently past them.

Esther looks up from her phone and smiles. “Maybe... Or maybe everyone just takes what they need.”

I stand by the main fountain and listen to the sound of the water flowing incessantly, like an ancient and gentle whisper, carrying the memories of another time. I try to imagine Tirta Gangga as it was a century ago – no stalls, no phones, just the silence of the water, the fountains dancing under the open sky, and the shadow of the gods who seemed to watch over the place with patience.

I'm not here just for the photos. I'm here for that subtle tranquillity, hidden beneath the waves of agitation, for the stories that the water seems to whisper to anyone who has the patience to listen.

After saying goodbye to the gardens, Dek takes us to a local warung on the seashore. The meal is simple – fresh fish and rice – but the sound of the waves and the smiles of our hosts make it a blessing.

“We have to admit,” says Esther, taking a sip. “The food is one of the best parts of our trip.”

We all agree. And as I savour my last bite, I think that perhaps the true beauty of places like Tirta Gangga is not in what you see, but in what you feel. Satisfied, we get back in the car and head for the next item on our list.

Beauty Cannot Be Bought: Maha Gangga Valley

Maha Gangga Valley, a name that evokes images of the sacred river Ganges from Hindu mythology, promises to be a place where nature and the soul meet. Rice terraces, arranged like steps carved into the hills, slowly appear among palm trees and green fields. The view is spectacular – a vivid picture of bright green, lit by the afternoon sun.

At the entrance, however, a price list dampens our enthusiasm: 165,000 IDR (~10 euros) for a simple tour, and the VIP package costs 400,000 IDR (~24 euros).

“Seriously? Paying for rice? If I want rice, I’ll just go to the supermarket,” says Fury, gesturing towards the fields stretching out in front of us.

Her reply makes me laugh, but the price does seem excessive. Dek, smiling in his usual calm manner, seems to have a better solution. Without comment, he starts the car and drives us to a more secluded spot, where the beauty of nature is just as spectacular – without the entrance fee.

The rice terraces stretch out before us, perfectly sculpted, like steps climbing towards the sky.

The vivid green of the plants reflects the sun’s rays, and the reflection of the water in the terraces creates the illusion of a constantly moving painting.

Dek buys us coffees from a local warung, and we sit on some improvised bamboo benches, slowly sipping from our steaming cups.

“The real magic of Bali lies not in the places promoted in guidebooks, but in hidden corners like this, where nature whispers something just to you.

Where beauty does not have to be bought, but only admired.” The words come out without me thinking, but they are sincere. Esther nods, smiling.

“Sometimes we forget how much nature gives us... without asking for anything in return.”

We sit there for a while, in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. The beauty of the day is right here, within us. A sip of coffee goes down wrong, and I start coughing.

Fury hands me a bottle of water. She says nothing, but her gesture is a reminder that true friendships are more about silence than words.

After finishing our coffee, we feel ready for the next adventure. Dek starts the engine and smiles at us through the mirror.

“Next?” he asks.

“The Gate to Heaven,” Esther replies.

Lempuyang Temple, Gate of Heaven, awaits us. And even though I don't know what that place will bring us, I feel that today retains its magic.

The Gate of Illusion: Lempuyang Temple

The road to Lempuyang Temple seems to take forever, but not in a bad way. As we climb the winding roads that snake through the forested hills, I feel that we are approaching something grand, that perfect place where nature and spirituality go hand in hand. The sun begins to bathe everything in a golden light, and the air, cooler here, carries a soothing energy. In the car, Esther talks to Dek about local traditions, and her warm laughter perfectly complements the atmosphere. Fury, on the other hand, is silent, lost in thought.

When we arrive, we are greeted by a cacophony of noises – the voices of hurried tourists, laughter, street vendors. The atmosphere is far from anything I had imagined.

The Gate of Heaven was a contradiction. The sacredness of the temple was swallowed up by the fever of modernity, but beyond the cameras and the agitated crowd, Mount Agung continued to watch solemnly, like an indifferent god. And yet, I felt a strange calm –

something in the presence of the mountain made me believe that this place, even so, had a story to tell.

I look around and murmur:

“And this is the famous Gate to Heaven?”

The irony in my voice makes the girls smile. It's not the kind of tranquillity you associate with a holy place, but perhaps everyone finds their own magic here.

But the surprises are just beginning. We can't go straight to the temple. First, we have to cross a parking lot, where we pay a fee of 45,000 IDR to board a shuttle that takes us to the next level. We don't know exactly how far it is, but the shuttle starts with a specific rumble, and the driver seems to make this trip at least a hundred times a day.

The road is full of narrow hairpin bends, and the wheels sometimes seem to slip on the dusty gravel, but the surrounding view is spectacular. The dense vegetation and green hills that surround us create a fairytale landscape. As the shuttle moves forward, I realise that this road is like a metaphor – to reach the Gate to Heaven, you must first go through several trials.

When we arrive at the next car park, we are asked to pay another fee of 55,000 IDR for access to the temple itself. I feel like laughing.

“Two fees and two car parks,” I joke. “If there's a third one, I'll feel like I'm paying a mortgage. Like in Monopoly.”

Esther laughs and replies in the same tone:

“Magic always comes at a price, Yda.”

After tying our colourful scarves around our waists, as tradition dictates, we enter the complex. And despite our earlier jokes, the place seems to have its own magic – not necessarily in the silence, but in the way Mount Agung rises beyond the gate, like a bridge between heaven and earth.

“Do you think all these people are here just for the photos?” I ask, looking at the group in front of me.

“Probably,” Esther replies. “But who are we to judge?”

A large sign greets us with a list of strict rules – no kissing, no yoga, no removing your scarf, even in this heat. Fury reads aloud, raising her eyebrows:

“Seriously? Even yoga is forbidden?”

All three of us laugh, but the atmosphere of the place commands respect. The sacredness of this temple is evident, even if the hustle and bustle around us sometimes obscures it.

We are given numbered tickets for photos: I have 547, Esther 548, Fury 549. We look at each other when we hear what number is now in line: 237.

“That means at least two hours,” Esther sighs.

While we wait, I walk around the courtyard and look at the people around me. Everyone seems to be looking for something different here – some just want the perfect photo, others, perhaps, a spiritual connection. I wonder what I'm looking for.

I look at the massive gate, framed by the silhouette of Mount Agung, and try to imagine what this place would have been like hundreds of years ago. A sacred silence, interrupted only by the rustling of the wind through the trees and the singing of the priests. The past and present collide here – an ancient world, full of spirituality, now coexisting with the fever of modernity and the desire to immortalise everything in photographs.

After a while, Fury discovers a smaller temple on the map, just a few kilometres away. She suggests we walk there.

“We have time,” she says, and we agree without hesitation.

The road is steep, and the heat tests our patience, but the place we find is more than worth it. The wild vegetation, the perfect silence, and the unobstructed view make me stop and whisper:

“You know what? This is the real Gate to Heaven.”

We descend slowly, and when we get back to Lempuyang, our numbers are close to our turn. We take a few pictures, but everything seems devoid of magic to me. All I feel is fatigue and the hustle and bustle around me. Dozens of tourists, trying to stage the perfect

moment. In front of the gate, a local sets us up and uses a mirror for the reflection effect, but I'm not impressed with the result. For me, the magic wasn't here. It was earlier, in those hidden corners where nature whispers its stories.

After taking our famous photos, we slip through the crowd and leave the temple courtyard. On the way, we come across another area set up for photos, somewhere on the edge of the car park. A large sign indicates the price: only 20,000 IDR.

"Hmm, I want to try here too," I tell the girls, looking with interest at the simple wooden platforms and amused by the subtle disappointment left by the 'official' photos.

One of the boys there, seeing my red dress, smiles broadly and says:

"We've just finished the programme, but... for you, we'll make an exception." I can't help but laugh. 'Well, aren't I a princess?' I say to myself.

We venture onto the four improvised sets: a large wooden heart, a boat suspended above the abyss, a giant hand that looks like something out of a fairy tale, and another fabulous angle that captures the sunset. The wind lifts the ruffles of my dress, and each frame looks like something out of a storybook. The photos? A hundred times better than the ones taken at the famous Gate of Heaven. No comparison! Their simplicity and natural setting convey exactly what I felt throughout the day: freedom, authenticity, and uncommercialised beauty.

As I look at the pictures on my phone, Esther giggles:

"I think it wouldn't hurt for some people to skip the photos at the Gate and come straight here."

Fury nods in agreement: "Yes, especially since you don't have to wait three hours." The three of us laugh, happy to have found the perfect place to end the moment.

When we get in the car, Dek looks at us smiling in the rear-view mirror.

“We have one more item on the list,” he says calmly, but with a slight hesitation in his voice. He looks at his watch and adds, “It’s already late, but we can try. It’s not far anyway.” It’s 5:30 p.m. and the day seems to be coming to an end, but we all agree to continue.

The road there turns into a real adventure. Steep switchbacks, a road full of potholes, and a slope so steep that Dek’s poor car can barely move in first gear. We all look at him, silently sympathising, but he remains calm and relaxed, smiling.

“Is this destination really worth it?” I wonder, especially as evening is already falling. Fatigue is beginning to set in, but something about Dek’s attitude makes me think it’s worth being patient a little longer.

“This is Lahangan Sweet,” he says, turning off the engine and letting us discover what’s next.

The Cherry on Top: Lahangan Sweet

After Dek stops the engine in the dusty car park, we see a few makeshift booths, where we are told the rules: to get to the top, to our destination, we can only go up in a Jeep, for 50,000 IDR (~3 euros) per person. The boy who gives us the information has a jaded look, as if he recites the same thing dozens of times a day.

Fury, who can’t resist the temptation to do some quick calculations, immediately raises her eyebrow:

“Really? For less than a kilometre?” Her sarcastic tone makes me smile, but I understand her indignation. We are in no hurry to pay.

“Let’s walk up,” Esther suggests, revealing a hint of curiosity. “Who knows what we’ll discover along the way?”

The boy shrugs, clearly unimpressed, and we set off on the dusty, bright red road that seems to transform everything it touches. My black sandals turn orange in a matter of minutes, and my feet are already covered in fine powder. ‘Great,’ I say to myself, looking at the

endless road stretching out before us. The huge trees and the sky gradually opening up above us all create a sense of anticipation.

“Isn't this more fun than in a Jeep?” Fury jokes, giving me a knowing look. In a way, she's right. The effort makes everything seem more real, more well-earned.

After about 20 minutes, we reach the top. At the entrance, we pay the 30,000 IDR fee. My fatigue disappears the moment my gaze meets the panorama: the sea stretches into the distance, glistening under the last rays of the sun, and the mountains, with their gentle contours, seem to dance in the sunset light. The blue sky, sprinkled with shades of orange and pink, looks like a living painting.

I sit down on a suspended wooden platform, letting my legs dangle in the air, and feel the wind ruffling my unruly hair. The air is clean, the silence complete.

“This place is simply magical,” I whisper, more to myself than to anyone else, but Esther hears me and gives me a big smile.

We stroll among the platforms, but we're in no hurry. There's something in the air that forces you to slow down, to stay in the moment. Fury jokes that the place would be perfect for camping, and Esther looks at me knowingly.

“Let's come back tomorrow at sunrise,” she suggests. The idea is tempting, but right now I just want to savour the moment.

However, the magic of the place was to be overshadowed by a minor confrontation.

Although the sun was beginning to set, the men at the entrance wouldn't let us in without paying the full amount. Their gaze said more than words ever could.

“Seriously? We have to pay even in the dark?” Fury asks, with a hint of irritation in her voice.

“It's not my problem,” one of them replied curtly, shrugging his shoulders.

His reply attracted everyone's attention, but the man seemed determined not to give in. Fury rolled her eyes, and I clutched my

phone between my fingers, trying to hide my frustration. But Esther didn't give up and took a stand. In the tense silence, her sharp tone breaks the quiet.

"Is that how you talk to a lady who travelled halfway across the world to see this place?" she asks, looking him straight in the eye. The tension in the air grows, but our insistence and Esther's determined tone seem to be working.

"How can you ask for extra money for people who can't even see the place? People come here to feel the magic of the place, not to pay tax after tax," Esther continues in a calm but unyielding tone. The man hesitates, and I realise that he is not used to being confronted like this. Esther's words seem to disarm him. For a moment, he runs his hand through his hair, avoiding her gaze, before responding unconvincingly:

"I don't make the rules..." But the hesitation in his voice betrays him.

After a few more brief exchanges, we are allowed to enter with the same tickets if we decide to come back tomorrow.

"In the end, we got what we wanted," Fury says triumphantly as we leave the area.

We descend into darkness, each lost in our own thoughts. The light from our phones guides our way, and in the valley, Dek waits patiently for us, like a devoted bodyguard.

"Did you manage to see anything?" he asks, with a slightly amused tone.

I don't answer. It's not something you can explain. I smile, get in the car, and let the silence speak for itself.

Dek drives calmly, letting the dark roads of Bali flow beneath the wheels of the car. After the experience at Lahangan Sweet, we are all immersed in that comfortable silence that comes after a long day full of intense moments.

Amed seems an eternity away, but the fatigue is pleasant. It's the kind of exhaustion that comes with the satisfaction of a day well lived,

where you've seen, felt, and learned more than you ever imagined you would.

The girls check their phones, each lost in their own thoughts. I look out the window, and the flashing lights of the Balinese villages, scattered among the palm trees, look like stars that have fallen to earth.

Once in town, we make one last stop at a small restaurant recommended by Fury.

"It's known for its burgers," she assures us, and our hunger makes us all believe her without question.

When we enter, the place welcomes us with a warm atmosphere, inviting smells, and the sound of live guitars accompanying the cheerful conversations of tourists and locals.

We order burgers and fries – something simple, but exactly what we needed after all the hustle and bustle and explorations of the day. Esther takes a sip of her drink and sighs contentedly:

"What a wonderful day we've had."

She had such a direct and simple way of expressing her gratitude...

When we finish, we leave the restaurant and feel the coolness of the night embrace us, soothing all the fatigue from our bones.

Back in my room, I take off my sandals and smile when I see the traces of reddish dust still stuck to my feet. I run my fingers over the edges of my soles and remember how the dusty road to Lahangan Sweet seemed endless.

After a hot shower, I collapse onto the bed, phone in hand. The cool air in the room caresses my skin like a tender touch, and my mind begins to replay images from the day that has just ended.

I wake up and open the Instagram app. I start scrolling through a few notifications, likes, and messages that I usually ignore without regret. But today, something keeps me in the app. A vague impulse, a feeling that 'something is coming.'

At one point, a follower's request caught my eye. It's a new account for me – a dark-haired guy with a mischievous smile and dark eyes that seem to stare at you. When I saw his profile picture, something inside me stirred.

I didn't know him, but it was like an equation that was starting to solve itself. Part of an old dream.

Maybe just a fantasy with desert eyes.

His profile has a different vibe – Morocco, desert landscapes, spectacular sunsets, fragments of lyrics in French and Arabic. Nothing ostentatious. Just poetry, in its raw form.

Maybe just a fantasy with desert eyes. But one that is slowly invading my thoughts, like a breeze of sand.

My finger hovers over the accept button, hesitating. I'm not the type to add strangers at random. But at that moment, something inside me gives way. A vague memory pops into my mind – Essra, my friend from Palawan, with his quiet charm and eyes that told stories. This stranger reminds me of him, and the corner of my mouth lifts into a smile.

Maybe just a fantasy with desert eyes. Or maybe... a beginning written long ago.

'Why not?' I hit the accept button without overthinking my decision. Maybe he had something of Essra in him... Or maybe I just wanted to give him a chance. Sometimes, the smallest gestures lead you on the most unexpected adventures.

And so, I decided to let him into my story.

I close the app shortly after, without studying his profile too much. I don't want to waste my time analysing, but the thought that I did something different, something spontaneous, makes me feel a pleasant energy, like a breath of change. I let the image of that dark-haired guy cross my mind once again. Morocco. Essra. And maybe something I haven't discovered yet. I let it flow...

And I slowly return to this day, which was more than just a series of places ticked off a list. It was about the details – our laughter, the

dust on the road, the sunset seen from above, the moments of calm in the midst of chaos, and the unexpected lessons that nature teaches us.

Perhaps beauty is not only in what you see, but in what you feel. In the moments when you stop to breathe, to laugh, to be. And maybe the real magic of a day lies not in famous places or perfect Instagram shots, but in the small, unplanned things that stay in your heart.

I close my eyes, and the images of the day begin to flow through my mind: the golden rays of the sun reflected on the water in Taman Ujung, the tranquillity between the rice terraces in Maha Gangga Valley, the colours of the sunset at Lahangan Sweet.

I didn't pursue anything today, and yet... everything came to me. Including that Instagram account.

'This is just one of many adventures,' I tell myself as sleep begins to take hold.

And on that night, Bali enveloped me in its tranquillity and magic, filling my soul with quiet gratitude – and the promise of other stories waiting to be discovered.

“True beauty is not found in famous destinations, but in small, unplanned moments.” – Anonymous author

22

What Is Meant for Me Will Find Me

Thursday, 10th August 2023

They say that what is meant for you will find you, no matter how much you run away from it. But what happens when you don't run away? When, instead of resisting, you let your steps be guided by the invisible thread of destiny?

This morning I woke up feeling light, as if the Universe had whispered something to me during the night. A vague but powerful intuition, like an echo from a future that was just beginning to take shape. I went out onto the terrace, and the sweet Balinese morning air caressed my skin, as if the day had a secret of its own.

Breakfast was simple, but the conversation with the owner of the guesthouse brought me back to reality. She asked me if I had decided on my plans, if I was staying or leaving tomorrow. I just smiled and promised to give her an answer by tonight. In reality, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I had no plan. I didn't know where I should go next.

I was going to write all day to put my thoughts in order. But life had other plans for me. And, as usual, its surprises begin when you least expect them.

It was past 11:00 a.m. when I sat down at my laptop, but the words refused to come. I felt a strange uneasiness, as if something was waiting to happen. Around noon, I received a message from Esther – a new restaurant, a new dinner together: Blue Earth. 5:00 p.m.

I smiled, glad that the day already had a little adventure planned. But the real change was not to come from there.

During a break, without realising why, I opened Instagram. That's when I saw it. A message. A short verse, like a whisper:

'Your sun sinks into the ocean. Mine dies in the sand. Do you think it's the same?'

An unknown name: Youn.

A stranger from a faraway place: Morocco.

A man I had never met. And yet... I felt that this story had begun long before we wrote our first words to each other. 'Maybe just a fantasy with desert eyes,' as I thought last night. But now... he was here, real, and he was writing to me. He was exactly the type I had accepted last night, at a moment when I didn't choose with my mind, but with a dream I didn't even fully understand.

Things come to me exactly when they should. Always. Even when I don't understand them at first. Maybe I don't always recognise them, maybe sometimes I doubt, but something inside me knows that there is an invisible thread guiding me. In the last few days, my intuition whispered that something was coming. I didn't know what, but I could feel it in the air, like a familiar scent that you can't quite identify, but you know you've smelled it before.

And I smiled.

Now, looking back, I can't help but wonder: 'How can you fall in love with someone just by visiting their social media profile?'

I know, it's a tough question, which comes with many other unknowns. But let's start at the beginning...

First, I read the message. It's simple, but it seems to say so much. I open his page and check first... 'Is he friends with Essra?' I look for him among our mutual friends, but there is no visible connection. 'How did he find me?'

And then, like an echo from the past, a thought I had long forgotten comes back to me. It was in Palawan, on the day I walked

with Essra through El Nido. I said to myself then, amused: 'If all Moroccans are like this, I'm going to look for a Moroccan boyfriend...'

I smile to myself in my room, thinking about how good I felt on that island.

In a world where everyone seems to know everyone else on the internet, it's almost shocking to see how unpredictable connections can be – and how, in fact, they come about. But our conversation was beginning to take shape, to take on a quiet depth. I read his message aloud:

"Your sun sinks into the ocean. Mine dies in the sand. Do you think it's the same?"

And with that... he effortlessly won my full attention.

I completely forgot that I was in the middle of a creative process and replied. A stirring deep within my soul urged me to follow this call – like a whisper coming from beyond the horizon, from a place I had not yet visited, but which I already felt was part of me.

"Hey, Youn!" For a second, I pause to think. His simple sentence has a unique poetry to it, a subtle trap, elegantly laid. I like it. I continue, before I have time to change my mind: "Maybe it's not the same. But it enlightens us one at a time."

A few seconds of silence. Then he replies quickly:

"I'd like to see how you see it. Can you send me a picture?"

I smile and open my phone's gallery. I choose a beautiful picture of the sunset reflected in the water, and send it to him without thinking too much about it.

Youn: "Wow... It's incredible. But I think it's even more beautiful in real life."

Yda: "Sunsets can't be captured in photos. You have to experience them."

Youn: "Just like you have to experience people?"

Yda: "People aren't photos. They never stay the same."

Youn: "Then tell me... who are you, beyond this photo?"

Yda: "I'm still finding out."

Youn: "I like your answer."

Yda: "Me too. Because it's true."

Youn: "What if I told you that I feel like I've known you for a long time?"

Yda: "I'd say that sounds nice. But I also believe that people project their desires onto the unknown."

Youn: "Maybe. But that doesn't mean the unknown can't be real."

Yda: "We'll see."

Youn: "I'd love to see you one day. In reality. Not just in a message."

Yda: "Reality is relative. And it depends on where you look from."

Youn: "That's right. And where do you look from?"

Yda: "It depends on which side of the world you look from."

Youn: "So, if we looked at it together, would it be the same?"

I look at the phone screen. Hmmm... A play on words. A test. A beginning.

Yda: "Maybe. But would you be willing to travel to the end of the world to find out?"

He's reading. I can feel it. I wonder if he'll respond on the same wavelength or if he'll break the rhythm.

Youn: "For some answers, it's worth getting lost along the way."

Wow. I suddenly straighten my back and take a deep breath. I grip the phone tightly in my hand. This boy is not like the rest. He doesn't come up with platitudes, he doesn't ask 'How are you?' He plays with the idea of destiny. I like his answer. Maybe too much.

I run my fingers over the edge of the phone. It's as if he's challenging me. As if he knows that the answers scare me more than the questions.

Yda: "What if, by getting lost, you discover that the answer isn't the one you were looking for?"

Youn: "Then it means the answer was different, not that the path was wrong."

A pause... I breathe and close my eyes... until I hear a new sound.

Youn: "You're different. Where are you from, princess?"

Princess. I catch it. I let it go. I ignore it.

Yda: "From a distant land. Maybe even from another planet."

Youn: "Then I'm lucky you chose to land on my planet." I laugh. I like the ease with which he answers me.

Yda: "And where did you come from, Youn?"

Youn: "From the sand. From orange sunsets. From the place where, at night, the stars show you the way."

Wow. A storyteller. A poet. Or just a boy who knows exactly which words to choose?

Yda: "Have you ever lived a story written in the stars?"

Youn: "Not yet. But maybe it's just beginning." I stop here. My heart is racing, a strange agitation that makes me want to breathe more, deeper... 'What are you doing, Yda?'

Youn: "I feel like we've known each other for a long time."

I run my fingers through my hair. Typical. But with him, it sounds different.

Yda: "Maybe we met in another life."

Youn: "Or maybe, in this life, we've been searching for each other without knowing it." It's too intense. Too soon. But maybe, just maybe, it's not a coincidence at all.

Yda: "Do you believe in coincidences?"

Youn: "No. I think some encounters are written before we know how to read." Hmmm... this is not a normal conversation.

Suddenly, I look at my watch. It's almost 4:20 p.m. I should be heading to Barracuda. But I can't stop reading his messages.

Youn: "When will you let me decipher your story?"

Yda: "Maybe one day. Maybe never. Or maybe you've already started."

Youn: "Then I'll continue. Until you want to read with me."

I don't reply. I get ready, grab my bag, and head out the door. The girls are waiting for me. But in my heart, I know that this story is just beginning... and that, in a way, it's already part of my journey.

At 4:50 p.m., right on time, I'm in the Barracuda car park. Esther shows up right away. She's alone. Fury will come later, on her scooter. We walk to the location.

Blue Earth Village

The warm evening air carries the smell of burnt wood and salt, like a promise of the night to come. We climb the bamboo stairs to the Blue Earth terrace. This place is not just a restaurant – it is a sanctuary, a window to the ocean, where time seems to slow down just to give you the chance to savour the moment.

The wooden floor creaks softly under our footsteps, accompanying us like a gentle echo of the evening. Around us, low tables made of unfinished wood are casually placed on floors covered with colourful rugs.

Barefoot, relaxed people sit in familiar circles, laughing and sipping slowly from their glasses, as if they have all the time in the world. All the tables at the edge, the ones with a view of the ocean, are occupied. Sunset is an event here, a promise not to be missed.

A waiter leads us to a central table on the upper terrace, the only option available. It's fine. We have enough space to unfold our stories.

The view opens up to the expanse of water reflecting the fiery sunset sky. Somewhere in the distance, we can hear the waves breaking on the shore, accompanied by a subtle mix of relaxing music and the low laughter of other travellers.

We sit down and are immediately brought handwritten menus on recycled cardboard. A detail that fits perfectly with the vibe of the place.

Esther runs her fingers over the wood of the table and sighs contentedly.

“Seriously, Yda, I don't know how we always find places like this, but this... this is a dream.”

I lean back, resting on my elbows, my gaze wandering among the lanterns hanging above us. The evening seems to be slowly enveloping us.

"Just the kind of place where you could write a novel or fall in love... or both." Esther gives me a sly look, and I just raise my eyebrows. If only she knew...

Amed has a gift for making anyone feel like they're part of a story. I know that, like me, Esther isn't here for the food, but for the moment.

"Another Bali wonder,' I tell her. It's more of a statement to myself. In recent weeks, I've said this about so many places that it shouldn't surprise me anymore. And yet, every new place has something unique, an energy that touches me differently. 'Maybe I don't have to stay in one place. Maybe the whole world is my home.'

Fury arrives shortly after us, her hair tousled by the wind and a mischievous smile on her face. She carelessly throws her backpack on the ground and sits cross-legged.

"Did I miss anything?" she asks, looking out at the ocean.

"Just the beginning of a legendary sunset," Esther replies, gesturing broadly towards the horizon.

The waiter appears with our coconuts – large, green, covered with small drops of condensation. We instinctively raise them, as if for a silent toast. A silent ritual of those who know how to appreciate the moment.

The menu is simple but delicious. We order a vegetable curry with wild rice and a huge cheese pizza. We share everything, as we usually do. I like this feeling of community. Of belonging. But as I listen to the girls' laughter and watch the sea swallow the sun, I can't help but wonder where I'll be tomorrow. Will I leave? Or will I stay?

Amed gets under my skin. Bali runs through my veins. But with every place I feel 'at home,' I learn that home is not a fixed point on the map, but a state of mind. If I had to choose a place to stay... But no. Not now. I don't want to settle in just one place anymore.

I realise that places like Blue Earth are everywhere in the world. Everywhere. Unique. Why should I cling to just one? Why limit my horizons when I can have the whole world at my feet?

I stroke my rebellious pigtails reflexively and let my thoughts float away with the breeze. Fury winks at me, raising her eyebrows.

"What's with you? You look lost on another planet." I look at her and laugh.

"Maybe I am."

And as I bend down to pick up the coconut from the table, my phone buzzes softly. A message from Youn. I ignore it. At least for now.

Fury rests her elbows on the table, looking at us with a mischievous smile.

"So... you really want to leave? And leave me here alone?" she asks, absentmindedly playing with the straw in her coconut.

Esther and I exchange glances. The question hangs over us like a lazy cloud on a clear day.

"I'm supposed to check out tomorrow... but I haven't decided what to do yet," I reply, but my tone doesn't sound convincing.

Fury raises her eyebrows provocatively.

"Do you have to? Or did you just say that to sound more organised?" I smile at her... but I don't have an answer to her question; she's got me cornered.

Esther, however, saves the day.

"Honestly? Amed is magical. This place... Bali... everything. Why leave if we're happy here?"

I look out at the ocean. The sunset has already swallowed half the sky, bathing everything in a reddish light, like an unspoken promise. It's as if it too is telling us to stay. I look at Fury, who is waiting patiently.

"And what do you have in mind if we stay?"

Her eyes sparkle, as if she's been waiting for me to ask that.

"I challenge you to explore Amed properly! Let's go to places tourists don't usually go. Let's call Dek now and schedule a new tour for tomorrow morning... with the rest of your list. What do you say?" Her proposal sounds tempting. More than tempting.

"Hmm... and if we accept your challenge, what do we get?" I ask, smiling slightly.

Fury puts her hands on her chest, pretending to be offended.

"Well, besides some unforgettable memories? Isn't that enough?"

Esther looks at us both, nods, and raises her glass.

"We're staying! Let's see what else the Universe has in store for us."

I smile broadly and watch the sunset fade into the ocean. I don't know why, but I feel like this decision has just changed something.

Somewhere out there, Youn is probably watching his own sunset. A different sunset, but perhaps, at the same time, the same... But the story with him can wait. Now I am here. And I want to be here. No past, no future. Just this moment suspended in an endless sunset.

Blue Earth was a story in itself, but the night did not end there.

When the tables emptied and the sunset turned into a star-studded sky, we left the terrace, still floating in the dreamlike state that the place had given us. The streets of Amed were quiet, lit only by pale streetlights and the discreet flashes of scooters passing by from time to time.

Fury, always up for adventure, convinced us to stop at a bar with live music, a small but vibrant place where a local band was playing reggae. We chose a secluded table under some lights hanging from the branches of a tree and ordered something sweet. Banana split for me, cold beers for them.

The rhythm of the music, the laughter around me, the bohemian atmosphere – everything made me feel like I was part of a living painting, painted in shades of pure relaxation.

But as the night wore on, I felt the need to retreat.

"I'm heading back to the hotel," I tell the girls, getting up and slinging my bag over my shoulder.

"Alone?" Esther asks, raising her eyebrows.

"Yes, I want to walk a little, to put my thoughts in order."

Fury winks at me. "Be careful not to get lost among the stars, dreamer." I smile. Maybe I'm already lost among them.

Amed is magical at night, too. I let myself be carried away by the quiet of the road, by the light breeze caressing my skin. After walking for about a mile, I reach Santa Fe. I go into my bungalow, take off my sandals, and collapse onto the bed.

Then, almost like a ritual, I pick up my phone. I knew there would be a message waiting for me. And I was right: "My princess, have you returned to your castle?" I laugh in the dark. Yeah, he really knows how to create stories.

And somehow, tonight, I'm ready to play along...

I leave my phone on the pillow for a few seconds and stretch lazily in bed. Outside, I can only hear the distant sounds of the waves and a stubborn cricket that seems to be giving a solo concert near my window.

I run my fingers through my hair and twist a few rebellious strands. 'I should undo these African braids,' I think to myself, as, in an almost reflexive gesture, I pick up my phone, open the message, and reply: 'Maybe so. Or maybe the castle is where I close my eyes and feel at home.'

A few seconds of silence. I see he's reading. I wait. Then his reply comes: "Then I hope you're home now, wherever you are."

Hm. A simple but weighty reply. I snuggle into the big pillows and wake up thinking about him. 'Who is Youn, anyway? What does he want? Or rather... what am I doing in this conversation?'

Yda: "Home is a strange place for me. It's always changing."

Youn: "Maybe because you're a nomad at heart." He's right. But how does he know that?

Yda: "Maybe. Or maybe I haven't found the place where I want to settle down yet."

Youn: "Or maybe you don't have to settle down at all. Some people are meant to belong to a place. Others are meant to travel."

I put the phone down on my chest for a few seconds. This guy really knows how to push the right buttons. I look at his profile picture again, see his broad smile and, for a moment, I think... I choose to continue.

Yda: "And you? Are you made to belong to a place or to a journey?"

Youn: "I don't know yet. Maybe the Universe sent you to show me what it's like to wander without fear."

There's something different about him. It's not your typical social media conversation. He doesn't speak in clichés. He plays with the idea of destiny, and I feel like I'm in a Shakespeare novel.

Yda: "Or maybe the Universe put you in my path to remind me that some places are worth revisiting." Read. Finally, his message appears: "Does that mean you'll ever visit me?"

I feel a shiver down my spine. Morocco. Desert. Orange sunsets. Endless stars. I remember Essra and sigh deeply... and he invited me to Morocco. Will I really get there? But Essra isn't here, nor does he want to be...

I didn't answer him right away. I let my thoughts float away with the gentle breeze coming through the window. I leave Essra in the past, like a shooting star, and close my eyes. For a moment, I imagine what it would be like to be there. To feel the hot sand under my feet. To hear the sound of the wind dancing among the dunes. To discover a new place through the eyes of a stranger who, somehow, no longer seems so strange. And I reply: "Who knows? Maybe the stars already have a plan."

My phone vibrates again in my hand.

"Then I'll wait. With my eyes on the sky."

Then, silence. I take a deep breath.

Tonight, the world seems a little bigger, and the future... a little more unpredictable. And maybe the world hasn't shown me all its surprises yet. I like that idea.

“Our encounters are never accidental. The people we meet are meant to be our lessons, our loves, or our guides.” – Carl Jung

23

Messages from Two Worlds

Friday, 11th August 2023

The alarm clock wakes me from a deep sleep at 6:30 a.m. I take a deep breath and stretch my arms above my head, trying to wake myself up. A new day, a new adventure.

A quick shower, creams, a few stretching exercises – my morning routine. I try to wake up my body, but my mind is already one step ahead, eager to see Mount Agung again.

At 7:45 a.m., we are already on our way. Esther and Fury are in the back seat of Dek's car, and I am in the front seat. He is just as I left him last time – long hair, colourful jewellery and that smile of a man who seems to have no worries. He puts on his sunglasses and starts the engine, humming a reggae song softly.

Lahangan Sweet

The journey takes about 45 minutes. The road narrows as we climb, the houses disappear one by one, giving way to lush forests and coffee plantations. The same potholes and hairpin bends, and the car creaks again in protest. But Dek is calm and drives on.

“Where are we having our coffee today?” asks Fury, anticipating my wishes.

As we find nothing along the way to catch our attention, today we enjoy our Balinese coffees at that little warung in the Lahangan Sweet car park. An elderly woman serves us three small cups, black as night

and with a smell that wakes you up instantly. Sipping the hot liquid, I look towards the steep path that leads to the top. But today I am prepared, I have put my trainers on.

The climb begins. The sun is already strong, we can feel the sweat running down our backs, but the slope is unforgiving. The ground is slippery, covered in the same fine dust, which seems even more orange than I remember. A few scooters pass us by, panting, and some locals try their luck climbing with their motorcycles, leaving clouds of dust behind their wheels.

Finally, we reach the top. Mount Agung reveals itself before us, half covered by a fluffy cloud, as if wearing a crown. The air is cooler here, and the silence envelops you like an invisible cloak.

We spend almost two hours in silent contemplation. We sit on the edge of the bamboo platform, looking towards the horizon. There is something hypnotic about this image – I feel small and, at the same time, part of something bigger. We take pictures and let our thoughts float away. A moment suspended in time.

But inevitably, we have to go down. I get up, dust myself off and look at the steep path.

“Okay, another epic descent! Let's see who makes it down in one piece.”

But we make it down to the car safely and head back to the city. Fury has a mission – she has to withdraw money from Western Union. We stop at the first bank, but... nothing.

While we wait for her, I lean against the car and tilt my head back, watching the clouds slowly move across the sky. A long day awaits us. And I have a feeling that it's not just the banks that will give us a hard time today.

Tenganan Pegringsingan Village

After Fury unsuccessfully tried to withdraw money from two Western Union branches, Dek took us to a place he had been talking

about for several days. An old village where time seemed to have forgotten to pass...

When we enter the stone-carved gate, I immediately feel that I have stepped into another Bali. Not the Bali of luxury resorts and Instagram-worthy beaches, but a Bali untouched by time. Tenganan Pegringsingan is a village from another era – small houses made of stone and bamboo, open courtyards, locals who look at us with curious but calm eyes.

On the side of the dirt road, women sit on mats and work on fabrics. We approach one of them. With her aged hands, she patiently weaves a fabric that Dek tells us is Geringsing, one of the rarest double ikat weaving techniques in the world.

“It is said to carry protective energy,” she explains. “Only a few families still know how to make it.”

Esther picks up a piece of cloth and looks at it in the light. The intricate, symmetrical pattern seems to vibrate.

“Wow... how long does it take to make a fabric like this?” she asks.

The woman holds up three fingers and Dek laughs.

“Three years,” he translates.

“Three years? For a single piece of fabric?” I ask in surprise.

“Yes. Each thread has to be dyed separately, each pattern has to be calculated in advance. It's a lifetime's work.”

My phone vibrates softly in my bag. I take it out and glance at it. A new message on Instagram. I laugh: ‘Who made me activate my Instagram notifications?’

A guy named Andy.

“Hey. I saw you in a book group, are you a writer?”

I look at the message in surprise: ‘A new stranger?’ Romanian, this time. And yet, his message makes me smile, without knowing why. ‘Maybe the energy of this place vibrates differently,’ I think.

I glance around. The sun shines gently over this forgotten village, the woman in front of me resumes her weaving with confident

movements, and in the distance, a child laughs as he runs barefoot between the houses.

“What group? I'm flirting with writing, yes. Hey.” I type quickly, then close my phone and return to the present.

We walk slowly through the village, exploring the narrow alleys and traditional houses. Dek tells us about the Perang Pandan ritual, where the village boys duel with pandanus leaves to prove their courage.

“And what does the winner get?” asks Fury, looking curiously at a courtyard where a few old men are sitting in the shade, sipping from small cups.

“Honour,” Dek replies simply.

The phone vibrates again. It's Andy again.

“Books read, book reviews. Have you managed to publish anything, or are you just doing it for your own satisfaction? I'm asking because I've started writing a book myself.”

I smile at the thought that the universe has sent a writer my way. So I reply simply.

“I have one ready, it's at the agency now. I'm working on the second one.”

I run my fingers over a wooden sculpture displayed on the edge of a porch. A dragon with finely crafted scales. I try to imagine the story behind the hands that created it.

But Andy insists.

“What are the costs involved? Roughly speaking, because the market is changing at the moment.”

“I don't have prices yet. Only for styling and the cover. But I think it depends on what you have and what you want. I'll let you know when I find out, eventually.”

“Please, with ISBN, etc.”

I find myself wondering, ‘What does this boy really want?’ I slip my phone into my bag, but my mind remains stuck on the conversation with him, and I have no idea why.

After a few more minutes, another message arrives: "How's your day?" I smile and look up at the sky.

"Hot. In every sense." And, on impulse, I send him a photo of the village, of the woman still weaving, caught in a piece of time that seems to never end.

His reply comes instantly: "How peaceful... are you on holiday there?"

"Something like that. I don't have a return ticket."

I breathe in deeply the scent of burnt wood and tropical flowers and feel that Tenganan Pegringsingan is the place where a month becomes a moment.

'But what about me? Can I stop somewhere?'

I look at the woman weaving, caught in an endless routine. Maybe I weave too, but with words. Maybe I don't need a place, just a story to take me further. A place where you could stay for a month and it would feel like a moment.

The phone vibrates again.

"No stress, no limit..."

I don't answer it anymore. Instead, I look towards the horizon. Maybe that's how it is. No stress. No limit.

Esther suddenly pulls my hand.

"Yda, let's go further, I think they're selling some handmade bracelets."

Like an obedient robot, I follow her. But my mind is far away. I feel the sun burning mercilessly on my skin. The air is heavy, hot, sticking to me like a second skin...

It's already noon and our stomachs are starting to protest seriously.

We head towards the sea, looking for a place to eat. Fury has heard of an interesting location with a Lingam – a sacred Shiva symbol – but when we arrive, we discover that it is closed and abandoned. An abandoned place that, in other times, may have been full of life.

We quickly change direction and find a small warung on the side of the road, where locals are frying fresh fish on a makeshift grill. The mixture of aromas – burnt wood, spices and salt – instantly attracts us.

“Let's try here,” says Esther, glancing at the simple plastic tables.

We sit down and order. The portion is 25,000 IDR (~1.5 euro), but Fury raises her eyebrows when she hears the price.

“But you said 20,000 earlier,” she says to the man serving us.

He shrugs and smiles broadly, innocently. “Friends price,” he says, pointing at us. We laugh and accept. Because... why not? We're in Bali, bargaining is part of the experience.

After we satisfy our hunger, we return to the city. Fury has to sort out the money from Western Union, so we stay in the car with the air conditioning on full blast. Esther rests her head on the window and sighs – only she knows why. I don't ask her. I don't want to ruin the moment, so I let my heavy eyelids close for a moment, letting the silence slowly envelop me.

Outside, Dek remains leaning against the door, watching the street with the attitude of an unofficial security guard. It's funny how, without realizing it, he has become a kind of bodyguard for us. When Fury finishes, the engine vibrates beneath us and the city begins to flow past the windows again.

The road to the waterfall is long – over an hour and a half of winding roads. On the way, we see a Balinese ceremony. Stopping is inevitable. The Balinese, dressed in their traditional white and gold clothes, walk in an orderly line towards the temple, carrying offerings of flowers and fruit. Gamelan music floats in the air, hypnotic, and for a few minutes, we remain motionless, just watching them.

We approach to take some pictures, but a local stops us with a smile:

“If you want to go in, it's 30,000 IDR each.” Esther and Fury look at each other.

“What do you say?” Fury asks.

I shake my head. "Let's wait for tomorrow's ceremony, we already agreed with Dek."

We head back to the car. Dek disappears for a few seconds and returns with three bottles of cold water, handing them to us without a word.

"Dek, you really can read our minds," I say, taking the bottle and pressing it to my forehead.

He smiles and gets behind the wheel. "We'll be there soon," he announces.

We pass through picturesque villages, each with its own charm. One impresses me in particular. It's different. The houses are neater, the temples more imposing, and the people on the side of the road seem caught up in a perfectly staged scene.

"Pfff... it's like a film set," I murmur.

Dek taps his fingers lightly on the steering wheel, an involuntary gesture, then turns his head towards me for a split second, as if to see if I'm joking. He quickly returns his attention to the road. "Who knows? Maybe something was filmed here."

Gembleng Waterfall

We continue to gaze out the window, fascinated. Bali never ceases to surprise us, and the road to Gembleng Waterfall is an adventure in itself. The narrow streets, hidden among palm trees, seem like a maze designed specifically to test our patience. Dek asks the locals several times, turns the car around in impossible places, and we giggle at every failed attempt to find the entrance.

"A little more and we'll turn back," jokes Fury, while Esther checks her phone.

"If we can get a signal, maybe we can search on Google Maps," she suggests, but Dek shakes his head.

"No need, we're close."

Finally, we arrive. Dek parks, and we look up. Steps. Lots of steps.

“Nothing surprises me anymore,” Esther sighs, leaving the banknote in the donation box. Next to us, the sound of water grows louder, like an impatient murmur. We prepare to climb, and each step seems like part of a tropical oasis, as if we were slowly walking towards a hidden corner of paradise.

The waterfall reveals itself to us like a scene from a dream. The water flows down natural stone steps, forming suspended pools sculpted by time. The sunset reflects its colours on the surface of the water, painting ephemeral pictures that fade and reappear with every passing moment. The air is humid, saturated with the scent of the forest, and the sound of water falling in small cascades creates hypnotic music, as if nature itself were whispering a story to us.

“It's a place out of this world,” I murmur, losing myself in the beauty of the moment.

The sky is an incredible spectacle of colours – gold, orange, pale pink. The air vibrates slightly and, for a moment, time seems to slow down. Everything remains suspended in a beauty that asks for nothing more than to be experienced.

A boy from the security team interrupts our reverie.

“You only have three minutes,” he tells us. “After 6:00 p.m., everyone has to go down.”

“What? Come on...” I protest, without thinking twice. My hand automatically reaches for my luggage, from which I take out my swimsuit. I didn't travel an hour and a half just to look at the water from a distance. No way... of course I'm going in!

In a second, I'm in the water. Cold, vibrant, it caresses my skin and awakens every cell in my body.

“You're crazy,” Esther laughs, but the next moment she does the same thing.

Fury, on the other hand, stays on the sidelines, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I don't have my swimsuit with me. But don't worry, at least someone has to take pictures.”

We laugh and enjoy every second. The photos are spectacular, but the reality is even more beautiful. The water embraces my skin, washing away any trace of fatigue.

Finally, we have to get out. We gather our things in silence and descend slowly, as if this place still holds us captive.

"It's wonderful here," says Esther, taking one last look over her shoulder.

Yes. And deep down, I know I want to come back. Maybe one day when I'm not in a hurry, a day when time no longer matters. To this day, it remains my favourite waterfall. And maybe nothing will ever compare to it.

We are exhausted and all dozing in the car. Darkness has already covered the island, and the only lights come from the headlights of the cars that cross our path.

Dek drives cautiously. So cautiously that he changes lights and honks at every bend, as if we were in an area with hidden dangers. For a second, I feel like telling him to let me drive. But I keep quiet. The important thing is to get there safely. And, of course, we're hungry again.

We stop at the same restaurant as last night. But today I don't want burgers. Today I want something light. A salad.

"Are we celebrating surviving that waterfall?" Fury asks me, with a mischievous smile on her lips. I smile too, as I raise my glass of coconut water.

"Yes. And the fact that we're exactly where we need to be."

My phone vibrates softly on the table. Youn. I open the screen and see that I have messages. I had sent him two pictures from the waterfall earlier.

Youn: "Hey... what incredible places! You have a talent for finding beauty wherever you go. I wish I could be there with you... to see what you see."

Yda: "Hey."

Youn: "Still on the road?"

Yda: "No, at dinner. With the girls."

Youn: "Dinner at sunset. It's still lunchtime here. Time flows differently for you."

I smile slightly, for no reason. Why do I get the impression he's not just talking about the time zone?

"Sometimes, yes," I reply.

Youn: "Right now, you're just there. But later, you'll be here with me, in our conversation."

I look up from my phone. Esther and Fury are engaged in a lively discussion about tomorrow's plans. I hear them, but I'm not listening. I wonder if Youn realises how easily he slips into my thoughts, even from a distance.

Yda: "Maybe."

I send the reply and leave my phone on the table, trying to turn my attention back to the girls' conversation. But his words are already there, in my mind. Suspended, persistent.

Suddenly, a wave of tiredness washes over me. I feel my skin prickle slightly, as if a cold breeze had brushed past the back of my neck. What's wrong with me? Tiredness? Too much sun? Or maybe... something else? I run my fingers over the back of my neck, trying to get rid of this strange sensation.

I close my eyes for a second. I take a deep breath, trying to bring myself back to the present. The sound of Fury's voice reaches me as if through a filter, as if she were far away.

"Hey, are you okay?" Esther asks, putting down her fork.

I meet her gaze and nod slowly.

"Yes, I think so. It's just... I think fatigue has taken its toll. Don't mind me, I'll be fine."

"We have to leave early in the morning for tomorrow's ceremony. But maybe we shouldn't take Dek. I don't think it's a good idea. We'd better take my scooter. I'll take you there, one at a time," Fury suggests, and we both agree with her.

We finish dinner and slowly get up. The night air is warm and thick, still bearing the traces of a hot day. I walk back to my accommodation. It's already 10:00 p.m. The streets are quiet, lit only by pale streetlights and the discreet flashes of scooters passing by from time to time. My footsteps sound muffled on the asphalt, rhythmic, but my mind wanders elsewhere.

I think about my conversation with Youn. Sometimes, time really does flow differently. Sometimes, people stay in your mind longer than they should.

I arrive in Santa Fe, enter my bungalow and close the door behind me. It is finally quiet. Only the distant buzzing of crickets and the rustling of palm leaves moved by the breeze fill the space.

I get ready for the night, but I don't even get to finish my usual ritual before my phone buzzes. I look at the clock: it's past midnight. Who's still awake at this hour?

Youn: "Hey, my angel... I'm still waiting for you to text me. Are you still out?"

Yda: "No, I just got back to my room and finished my evening routine."

Youn: "You did all your rituals, but do you still have time to dream?"

Yda: "I think so. Maybe we dream even when we're awake."

Youn: "And what are you dreaming about now?"

Yda: "The places I haven't been to yet."

Youn: "Then you have to come to Morocco."

Yda: "Morocco? You're tempting me with that idea..."

Youn: "It's not just an idea. It's a fairy-tale land. Have you ever seen Game of Thrones?"

Yda: "Yes, why?"

Youn: "Part of it was filmed here, in Aït Benhaddou. A centuries-old clay fortress village where the sun bathes the walls in gold. It's like stepping into another era."

Yda: "It sounds like a place where time has stopped running."

Youn: "Exactly. But Morocco isn't just about the past, it's also about sensations. Have you ever felt the desert sand under your bare feet at night?"

Yda: "No. What's it like?"

Youn: "Warm. Soft. Like a caress from another life."

Yda: "And have you walked on the dunes at night?"

Youn: "Many times. Under a sky so full of stars that you feel you can reach out and touch them. The desert teaches you silence."

Yda: "Maybe one day I'll see all that too."

Youn: "Here's what we'll do: I'll show you Morocco. You show me the world."

Yda: "What if that day comes sooner than you think?"

Youn: "Then I'll be your guide. I'll be the one to explain the mysteries of the markets in Marrakech, tell you the stories of the blue houses in Chefchaouen, and guess your favourite tea before you even order it."

Yda: "That sounds tempting. I don't know if I'm ready to be wanted... or if I know what it means to be truly wanted. Maybe that's why I'm searching – to find out."

Youn: "I'm here."

I look at his message and, for the first time, I feel a twinge of uncertainty. Who is this man from another corner of the world who seems to know me better than I would like?

I turn the phone in my hand, as if this gesture could clarify something. My thoughts are racing in all directions, but none of them settle well enough for me to grasp them. Part of me wants to give a clear answer, to label everything that has happened. Another part... just gets tired trying to understand.

Andy talks about costs, ISBNs and technical details. Youn asks me what it's like to walk on sand at night. One world plans. Another dreams.

I turn off the light and snuggle into the bedding. The darkness of the room keeps me captive between the desire to understand what

'they' are looking for in my life and the fatigue that weighs on my eyelids.

Tomorrow I don't need ceremonies. Just rest. It's well past 2:00 a.m. when I write to the girls in the group.

"Hello, girls. Don't be mad at me, but I won't be going to the ceremony with you tomorrow. My body needs rest. Take pictures and have fun. Talk to you later. Kisses."

I press send and leave my phone on the bedside table.

I fall asleep instantly. A door has opened. I don't know where it leads.

"Your journey begins where the usual roads end." – Rumi

24

Events That Should Not Have Happened

Saturday, 12th August 2023

'Hey... life... is for those who put a comma and move on.'

I saw this written in a post last night and it stuck in my mind. Maybe because that's exactly what I'm doing right now. Sometimes I put commas and continue. Other times, I put a full stop and start from scratch.

But it doesn't even matter which is the right option. Maybe there isn't one. Commas or full stops, they're all already marked on the map. Every road is different and no two days are the same.

So, yes, I woke up late today. 10:30 a.m. Lordliness. I went down to the restaurant, where the owner was waiting for me, curious to find out what I wanted.

I said, "Just fruit today."

She smiled and, next to the plate of bananas, mangoes and dragon fruit – all carefully cut – she put her famous coffee, black and hot.

Strange. I wasn't hungry. I nibbled a little, then retired to my room and immersed myself in writing. My phone was on silent. I was determined not to let anyone or anything disturb my day.

Around 3:00 p.m., during a break, I wrote to the girls. Esther replied immediately: they had just returned, were tired and wanted to rest a little. But tonight, they wanted to go to a traditional dance in the neighbouring village. They invited me too.

Today they met a local woman who told them about the ceremony. They were leaving at around 6:00 p.m. Of course I want to go. I'm not going to stay in my room all day.

However, after so many hours, my stomach is starting to protest. I go out to find something to eat. I find a restaurant with a quiet garden full of flowers. I sit in the shade, open my laptop and continue writing.

Later, I return to Santa Fe. Inspired, I start writing again.

Around 5:00 p.m., Esther buzzes me to hurry up. I had already agreed with them that I would go, but since there are no taxis in the area, Fury was going to take us one by one on her scooter. She took Esther first, then came back for me. We were already on our way to our meeting point.

Banjar Kangkaang Village

We arrive in the village and Fury parks the motorbike. We walk down a narrow street full of people dressed up for the holiday. Black raffia sheets are spread out on the ground, and the locals sit directly on them. The atmosphere is both sacred and familiar at the same time.

The men wear white shirts and sarongs tied at the waist, and they have white scarves wrapped around their heads, tied with precision. The women wear delicate lace blouses, either white or brightly coloured, all with long sarongs and colourful scarves tied at the waist. They move gracefully, with that calm elegance specific to Asia.

The light of sunset filters through the low roofs, bathing the scene in a golden glow. A mixture of jasmine, incense sticks and coconut smoke hangs in the air. We pass through the crowd and turn into an even narrower alley until we reach a traditional house.

In the courtyard, a woman smiles broadly at us. On the low porch, two men smoke and glance at us curiously. She is small in stature, barely reaching my chest, but her gaze is lively. Her name is Wayan

– just like my landlady. It is probably a common name in the area. Esther and Fury already know her.

Later I find out that the girls had taken the wrong street and, on their way to the village, had stopped at a local café. There they met Wayan, who knows a few words of English – a rare detail here, where most people only speak Balinese.

Esther, enthusiastic as I know her to be, immediately started asking questions, and Wayan told them about the festival taking place that very evening. It is held only twice a year, with dances, rituals and local customs. So she invited them. And they invited me.

If you think about it, what were the chances of me ending up here? The girls take a wrong turn. Then they decide to stop for a coffee. There is a local woman there who knows English. A conversation ensues. An invitation is extended. Later, Fury comes to pick me up on her scooter. And here I am, in the middle of a Balinese village, on the porch of an unfamiliar house.

Destiny? Coincidence? Or maybe just life, writing its own stories?

Wayan tells us we can't go to the ceremony in our clothes. We need to wear sarongs and sashes around our waists. But no problem, she has plenty. She brings us some from her house. I choose a yellow one with embroidered butterflies and a brightly coloured sash. As we get ready, two other women and a few children gather in the courtyard.

They stare at us as if we were an alien spacecraft. Already accustomed to such looks, I smile and adjust my sarong. Fury, who has been travelling through Asia for seven years, is even more relaxed than I am.

We sit down on some mats, and Wayan brings us each a cup of hot tea. The aroma is sweet and floral, with a subtle hint of ginger. In the middle of the courtyard, in a large bamboo basket, there are traditional sweets and puffed rice snacks. We take a few and enjoy them in silence.

The man who is smoking asks us to take pictures with his family. We try to communicate with gestures and smiles, and a boy, embarrassed, hides behind his father. Finally, he comes over to me and we take a picture together.

The courtyard gradually fills with curious neighbours. By 8:00 p.m., we are ready to leave.

We go out into the street and walk into the middle of the crowd. It is much more crowded than when we arrived. Most people are sitting on the ground on raffia mats.

Children are playing on the sidelines, and teenagers are exchanging knowing glances. Although the festival is a sacred event, the atmosphere is warm and relaxed.

We are the only tourists. Whispers are inevitable. They look at our sarongs, our colourful scarves, the red flowers pinned to our ears. They smile at us. They stare at us.

The drums can be heard, a sign that the festival is beginning.

In front of the improvised altar, decorated with offerings of flowers and fruit, the village elders gather, leaning on bamboo sticks. They begin to chant, and their low voices float in the air like a spell.

The dancers make their appearance. Their movements are slow and controlled, each step having a hidden meaning. Their gazes are fixed and intense.

Then, at an invisible signal, everyone sits down quietly on the ground. They pray, their palms pressed together. I feel the vibration of the moment. A collective energy gathers around us, like an invisible river.

A ritual with holy water begins. A man sprinkles the crowd, and people bow their heads. In a bamboo basket, someone distributes holy rice. The women stick a few grains on their foreheads. Part of me tries to understand, another part just feels.

At around 10:30 p.m., the festival is coming to an end.

We return to Wayan's house to leave our sarongs and, in exchange, we receive fruit and sweets from the offerings at the ceremony.

Fury takes me first on her scooter, then comes back for Esther. I arrive at Santa Fe and go into my room.

The day before, none of this was on my horizon. And yet, here I am. Life doesn't ask questions, it doesn't explain — it just reaches out and throws you into the unknown. We just have to have the courage to follow it.

I feel the energy of the evening still enveloping me, but the online world is timidly knocking at the door. From the top of my bed, I have other conversations. Since he discovered me, Andy has been giving me hearts on all my posts. He even comments on some of them. But nothing more. Until today. Today he seems to want to write more.

"I'm showering you with adoration..." I smile and reply after a while.

"I notice. And thank you."

"Because I admire you, I appreciate you, I respect you very much, and you deserve all the best in the world."

"Oh, thank you very much."

"With great pleasure! Anytime."

I roll my eyes, amused. Sometimes, people online are a spectacle in themselves.

Then Mone calls me, and we get lost in stories.

We talk about the book, about the strange pace at which things are moving. Alin and Andreea have their own unique style – as if this project requires the time it needs to come to fruition. I feel that the end is near. I feel that there is a meaning to all the delays, and that the 'why' will reveal itself, exactly when it should.

In my room, it's late at night and quiet, only my phone is vibrating. Youn. I open it.

"Hello, my love. I missed you."

I smile.

“Hey, Youn. I went to a festival today. I'll send you some pictures.”
I send them. A few seconds of silence, then...

“Wow... Do you have any more?”

“From the festival?”

“From anywhere. With you.” I can't help but laugh.

“I have about 14,000 photos on my phone. Do you think that's enough?”

“Never. I never get tired of looking at you.” He sends me a screenshot. A photo of me, now the background on his phone.

“That's a bit much, don't you think?”

“I don't care. I want to see you every day.”

I feel him so present, so close, that for a moment I forget we're thousands of miles apart. I feel like reaching out, as if I could touch him, as if there were nothing between us but warm air and an illusion trembling in the light.

Then, surprise. He sends me some pictures of himself. I didn't ask for them. He just sent them. I look at him differently for the first time.

“I'm ugly. But you... you're beautiful.”

I suddenly miss something I haven't had in a long time.

“Do you know why I'm happy?” he continues unabashedly.

“Why?”

“Because I know we'll meet.”

“Not so soon...”

“Why? Do you think you'll change your mind? Don't you want to go to Morocco?”

“I don't know what tomorrow will bring, Youn. I don't make plans.”

“Then let me believe that the Universe will be on my side.”

I fall silent. I don't say anything else to him.

I leave my phone next to my pillow and close my eyes. The night embraces my thoughts. Maybe the Universe knows more than I do. Maybe it has already chosen where to take me. Maybe tomorrow will be different from what I imagine now.

But until then, I'll go with the flow. No questions. No plans.

Just this moment – and the unknown that awaits me beyond it.

“When you think you're writing your own story, the Universe laughs and hands you a different script.” – Anonymous author

25

The Call of Morocco

Sunday, 13th August 2023

It's already 9:00 a.m. when I open my eyes. My body feels heavy, my mind still foggy, as if caught between dreams and reality.

Last night found me lost in thought, and I don't even remember when I fell asleep. That's how it is when you fall asleep while rewriting your life ten times in your mind, when ideas roll over each other and reality becomes a thin, almost imperceptible thread.

The smell of coffee pulls me out of bed. I let myself be guided by it, almost instinctively. Wayan puts thin, golden pancakes in front of me, and her black coffee with a hint of spices and unfinished stories. I sip it slowly, my eyes still heavy with sleep, letting the strong taste wake me up inside. Yes, just right. This morning is mine and the world can wait.

Back in my room, my laptop is waiting for me, open, the cursor blinking impatiently. I write. Because I have to. Because otherwise all these things, all the moments and sensations that fill my days will fade, will dilute into the chaos in my mind.

Today is our last day in Amed. Last night, at Esther's suggestion, we decided to leave together for Lovina. We had no concrete plan, and the islands are far, far away. I took it as a sign. 'Follow life...' Ah, those words follow me everywhere.

Fury, on the other hand, didn't want to join us. She said it was better for just the two of us to leave. Maybe she's right. Maybe sometimes you have to go alone to know you're on the right path.

And yet... This morning, when I woke up, I had a vague feeling that I had forgotten something important. A thought lost somewhere, suspended between sleep and reality. But now, at this moment, it hits me hard. So clear that I can almost hear it:

‘Go.’

Youn. 30 days.

30 days. That's all I need to write a book. That's all I need for a dream to take shape, for a story to find its voice. I have learned that this is my rhythm, that it is the natural cycle of creation, that in 30 days a thought can become reality.

In 30 days, you can explore a whole universe of sensations. In 30 days, reality falls apart and is reborn, taking shape in pages that breathe. 30 days of pure experience, of chaos and revelations, of questions and answers hidden between the lines.

Maybe it's not a coincidence. Maybe 3, this sacred number, leaves its mark on me too. 3 is the beginning, the middle and the end. It is the complete cycle, the creative energy, the invisible thread that connects the past to the future, inspiration to the written word.

And maybe that's why I feel I have to give Youn 30 days too. Not for him. But for the story.

But I know that sometimes the story doesn't end in 30 days. Sometimes it just changes its pace, expands, metamorphoses and continues, in another place, in another form, under another sky. Because every event leads to another.

They are different stories, but they are all connected, like in a Universal Matrix, woven from coincidences that are not coincidences, from paths that meet exactly when they should, from choices that seem random but are already written somewhere beyond what we see.

Because there is never a true ending. Only a continuation.

The thought was so perfect and clear that I could visualise it... A month in which to see him, to feel his energy, to realise if everything he told me with such conviction is real.

Last night, after I turned off the phone, I stared into the distance. For two days I had been thinking about his words, about the way he said with such certainty:

‘Then I will be your guide. I will be the one to explain the mysteries of the markets in Marrakech, to tell you the stories of the blue houses in Chefchaouen and to guess your favourite tea before you even order it.’

It wasn't the first time someone had talked to me about Morocco. Essra. I first heard about this place from him, on a hot afternoon in El Nido. That's when I felt the excitement of Moroccan cities through his eyes, letting myself be carried away by his stories about the colours of the Medina, the desert and the smell of mint in hidden tea houses.

But now, suddenly, all the pieces are falling into place.

It's not just about Youn. It's not just about this 30-day adventure. It's about a journey that began long ago, without me realising it. It's about Morocco.

I'm going.

I want to see everything with my own eyes, to lose myself in the dunes of the Sahara and feel the sand under my feet, to taste the sweet tea served in small glasses, to hear the call to prayer echoing over the old cities.

Now Youn has appeared. It's as if the universe wanted to remind me of what I had forgotten. Every time I talk to him, Morocco takes shape: I see the colourful bazaars, I hear the muezzin's call floating over the Medina, I smell the scent of cinnamon and mint in the air.

It's closer than it's ever been.

Youn is just the catalyst.

Maybe I'll get to know him too, maybe I'll discover that he's not what his words make him out to be, maybe the reality will be completely different from the fantasy he has built about me. But Morocco... Morocco is there, real and fascinating, waiting for me.

I close my eyes. I hear Youn in my mind, obsessively repeating the same things:

'I can't take my eyes off you.'

'If you were with me, I would never let you go.'

'You are the woman of my life.'

I smile slightly. How easy it is to say these words. But reality... reality is another story.

'What will he do,' I wonder, 'when he realises that I'm not just a beautiful image he's projected in his mind, but a living person, with my chaos and my freedom, with my way of taking on the world?' It will be fascinating to find out.

I get out of bed and look in the mirror: 'Yes. I'm going. One month. Morocco. An experience. Why not?'

I've never let a man get too close to me, but now that's how I feel. If I don't feel good, I'll leave. Simple. Nothing is final. But until then, I'll let the story unfold.

I can already see him reacting to the news: wide eyes, childlike wonder, explosive enthusiasm. He'll repeat a thousand times that he can't believe it. He'll tell me that his life is just beginning. That he'll spoil me, that he won't leave me alone for a second, that he'll take care of me like he's never taken care of anyone else.

I feel like laughing, and I do laugh, and my laughter echoes strangely off the walls of the empty room.

They imagine that love means having someone by your side and not letting them go. But what will they do when they realise that I come and go according to my own rules?

It will be interesting to see. Very interesting!

A strange desire creeps into my mind: to see so many enchanting places that I am no longer amazed by beauty. To be able to accept it calmly, not with amazement. Is that possible?

Of course... Morocco is part of the story. Its image is vivid in my mind. Essra's stories, now Youn's stories. Yes. I have to go and visit Morocco. When my Indonesian visa expires.

The rest of the day I lose myself in books, talk on the phone and struggle to solve technical issues on my laptop. When I look up, it's already dinner time.

Fury has delayed our schedule by an hour, so we arrive at Warung Gayatri around 7 p.m. The place is small, with only five tables, but it has something magical about it. That warm, yellow light that turns people into stories. The smell of spices, lime and coconut, a mixture of aromas that touches your soul.

Wayan, the woman I met at the ceremony, works here. She stops twice at our table, smiling broadly, as if our presence makes the place more beautiful.

I order a green juice with everything in it. A strange mixture, but good. I also order a portion of rice with vegetables and... surprise! Okra! I don't know how, but every time I find okra on my plate, I feel like life is winking at me.

Dessert? Yes, of course. Rice with coconut and mango, the famous 'sticky rice'.

We watch people, talk, laugh. Then I stop and let my gaze take in the place. I'm going to miss Amed – its energy, the lazy mornings, the ever-foaming sea, dinners every night in a different corner of paradise. But I know: it's time to go.

Around 9:00 p.m., Fury suggests we go to a bar with live music. Sounds good. Sounds like a fitting way to end our last night in Amed.

When we enter, we are hit by a wave of sound. Drums vibrating in our chests, electric guitars tearing through the air, hoarse voices screaming into the microphone. A crowd of people laughing, drinking, dancing, moving chaotically to the rhythms of heavy rock. The smell of beer, subtle cigarette smoke, perfumes mixed with sweat.

We squeeze between the tables, looking for a free spot. There are only about three empty tables, but something doesn't feel right. I try to say something, but my words are lost in the noise. I look at Esther and Fury. They feel the same way. We understand each other with a

glance. We turn around and go out into the street, where the night air is cooler and gentler.

"We'd better have our own party in the room," I say, laughing, trying to lighten the mood.

Esther raises her eyebrows, smiling.

"Or maybe we'll just go back and sleep."

And that's what we do. We don't need the chaos of the bar to feel alive. Today is about something else. It's about peace and quiet, about the roads that lie ahead of us, about decisions made between two sips of coffee and a glance out the window.

We're leaving early tomorrow. 9:30 a.m. Esther and I are going to Lovina. Fury is staying. I ask her again if she wants to come with us. Or at least join us later. She fixes her hair and smiles slightly.

"I don't know what will happen," is her answer. As simple as it is complex. But I understand her, I think the same way.

I hug her, holding her tighter than usual. Maybe because I'm not sure if I'll see her again.

In my room, I pack my bag at my own slow pace, putting each item in without rushing, as if I could stop time by delaying my departure just a little. I take a long shower, massage my skin with the last drops of oil from the bottle and let myself breathe. I feel... different.

My phone vibrates on the bedside table. Youn. I pick it up and read:

"I miss you. And the place that awaits us."

But I don't reply.

Not yet.

I feel that some answers deserve silence.

I lay my head on the pillow and close my eyes. I see my footsteps, first on the beaches of Lovina, then on the streets of an unknown city, where the smell of spices floats in the air, and Youn looks at me as if I were something he had dreamed of for too long.

Tomorrow morning I'm leaving. Lovina.

Then... who knows?

One story ends. Another begins.

And somewhere in Morocco, a dream I forgot is waiting for me to live it.

“Travel doesn't begin when we leave, but when we start dreaming about it.” – Anonymous author

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The Universe is Moving the Pieces. What Am I doing?

Monday, 14th August 2023

Pfff... The alarm clock rings at 7:30 a.m., but my mind refuses to accept the morning. My body feels heavy, tired, caught between the vague dreams of the night and the half-perceived reality of the room.

Last night I fell asleep late, my thoughts rolling over each other, constructing scenarios that never came to fruition. Maybe there was no need.

The morning air is still cool, but the humidity is already creeping in, heralding the heat to come. I leave the room, take a deep breath and feel the world beginning to settle into place. Wayan sees me and seems surprised that I am awake so early.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

Of course I want coffee. And eggs. I have a long journey ahead of me today and need to start the day with something substantial.

I sit down at the wooden table, and Wayan places a steaming omelette and a cup of strong black coffee in front of me, with the same scent of spices and untold stories. She sits down next to me with her own portion, and for a few minutes, we eat in silence, like two old friends who don't need words.

Then she starts telling me about her plans. She tells me she wants to give up the restaurant and just keep the tourist cottages, because everything has become too complicated.

She absentmindedly runs her palm over the cups, as if performing an incantation known only to her. She pulls gently on the edge of the table as if leaning on it. She sighs deeply and looks me straight in the eye, as if she could find new answers to old questions. She is tired. I can see it in her movements, in the way she blinks more often than she should.

“It's hard. Too much. And I'm alone.”

Her husband helps her in the evening, but he also comes home tired from work. She runs her hand through her hair and shows me a few grey strands, but it's not that that tells me everything, it's the way she stares into space, as if trying to regain her strength. Her eyes? Her eyes hide a deep fatigue, one that I understand better than I would like to.

Life has an ironic way of testing us just when we think we've found our way. We choose, we build, we imagine a future, only to discover, at some point, that we are overwhelmed by our own choices. And then? What do we do then? Do we stop? Do we change course? Or do we continue, hoping that at some point the weight will diminish on its own?

I look at Wayan and realise she doesn't have the answers. Maybe I don't have them either. I can still feel the weight of her words as I finish my coffee. The universe seems to push us all forward, but it doesn't give us a manual on how to deal with fatigue. I look at my cup, almost empty. My hands are light. Hers are heavy. Life is strange like that.

The short honk of Dek's car brings me back to the present. It's time to go.

I sit in the back seat next to Esther. The seat next to Dek is empty, and somehow I feel Fury's presence is missing. I don't know exactly why. At first, something about her made me cautious. I didn't understand her energy, her way of being, the invisible barrier she had erected between us. But then I got past her shield. I saw her. And I realised she wasn't what she seemed.

Maybe we're all like that, in one way or another. A shell of appearances, hiding inside something we don't want to be seen.

We don't have accommodation for tonight. We wanted to book something last night, but in the end we gave up. We're sure to find something there, Lovina is a big place. The truth is, I'm starting to like this feeling – not knowing exactly where I'll be sleeping the next night, letting things arrange themselves, without controlling them. Like a test from the Universe, a small proof that when you surrender to the moment, solutions appear on their own.

On the way, we stop at a warung on the side of the road to drink Balinese coffee. Only 2,000 IDR. Almost nothing. As I sip the black, strong liquid, I look around – an old man is smoking quietly on a wooden bench, a few locals are chatting at a long table, and a dog is sleeping sprawled out in the shade. A typical morning in Bali, but for me, every moment like this has something mesmerising about it.

Esther looks at me intently and, on impulse, says:

“You look different today.”

In the reflection in the window, I see another version of myself. Yesterday, my hair was tied back in messy pigtails, holding captive all the days gone by. Today, it is free, as if it has forgotten its way back to the past. Perhaps it is not the island that has changed, but the way I allow myself to be discovered in it. Bali has enveloped me, and Lovina seems to whisper to me: ‘It's time to move on.’ One stage has ended. But where will the next one take me? And, as an extension of my own thoughts, I reply:

“Yes, I think the Universe has set new landmarks for me.” I smile at Esther. “Each stage has its own face, and now I have the Lovina look.”

Esther laughs and shakes her head. Maybe she thinks it's an absurd idea, but I feel that things don't happen by chance. When you change on the outside, something inside you reconfigures itself. Maybe every place I go changes my face a little. Or maybe it's me who feels the need to change, every time.

And yet, I feel that something is... out of place. I check my phone. I had texted Youn late last night, but he hadn't replied. Strange. Before, he used to reply almost instantly. I felt his presence, insistent, almost... overwhelming. But now, his silence seems charged. Like a false note in a familiar melody.

Hotel Dupa, Lovina – Bali

After about two hours of lost in thought, letting the landscapes flow by me like in a blurred dream, we arrive in Singaraja. Esther needs to extend her visa and will submit the application in person at the Immigration office. Unfortunately for her, she can't do it online – she has a visa on arrival.

While she takes care of her business, I cross the street to a petrol station where I find a Mandiri ATM. I withdraw 4,000,000 IDR, an amount that sounds huge in rupees, but which, in reality, will quickly evaporate between accommodation, meals and travel. I love these moments, when I walk alone through unfamiliar places, feeling the day unfold slowly, without haste, like a parchment on which my story is written.

Dek invites me to a warung to eat together. The place is far from the tourist restaurants: just two plastic tables, peeling walls and a mixed smell of fried rice, cigarette smoke and unknown spices. Probably a place for workers, a corner of the world where no one is in a hurry and no one worries that there is no menu in English.

The strange smell in that tiny space makes me hesitate for a second. But hunger is stronger. I choose a portion of rice with something sweet, probably tempeh – fermented soybeans, a Balinese dish that I haven't fully figured out yet. Next to it, a few salad leaves and iced tea. When I take the first bite, the sweet and spicy taste of the tempeh surprises me. I don't even realise when I finish everything.

Another lesson: when you stop wondering how the food was prepared and just let yourself be caught up in the moment, everything

becomes perfect. Life falls into place, your thoughts stop racing, and your stomach is happy.

I try to pay, but Dek waves me off. "It's on me." I look at him in surprise. A man I've only known for a few days insists on treating me. I remember again how different the world works here. It's not about money, it's not about who owes what. It's about simple generosity, about the joy of sharing.

We wait together for Esther to come out. She tells me she has to come back on Wednesday to pick up her passport. Also from here. She paid 500,000 IDR (~30 euros) for the extension. Note: it's not just in Denpasar that visas can be extended, as I initially thought. Another detail that no one was eager to mention. Or maybe it wasn't supposed to be known.

Then we head to Lovina. When we arrive at the hotel Esther found, it's clear to me that today is about things falling into place. There were exactly two rooms available. 420,000 IDR for two nights. It's a good thing I took out cash – I can't pay by card here.

We leave our luggage and talk to Dek to take us back to Singaraja. We didn't have anything planned for today, but that's exactly why exploring will be even more interesting. We pay him for the ride – 450,000 IDR – and let ourselves be carried away by the city, the people, the events that choose us, exactly when they should.

Singaraja doesn't have the tourist charm of other cities in Bali. It is raw, authentic, a place where time seems to flow differently. The streets are wider, the shops older, and the hustle and bustle is different – less hurried, but denser. The air is filled with the smells of food and clothes drying in the sun. Children run barefoot or giggle from behind fences. People notice us, but their eyes are fixed more on Esther. They ignore me, as if I weren't even there. I wonder why?

We come across a market full of tents and ask what's going on. A festival? A fair? Something special? We are told that these are just preparations and that the main event will not take place until Thursday.

A man suddenly joins us, striking up a conversation with Esther. I become background noise, a negligible presence. The conversation flows until he asks her, without hesitation: "Is she your daughter?"

Tension builds instantly. I feel Esther's body tense up. She looks at him for a few seconds, analysing whether she has understood correctly.

"No. I'm not her mother."

The answer falls heavily between us. The man smiles awkwardly, but doesn't understand why her tone has changed.

As we walk away, I notice her running her hand through her hair, an automatic gesture, but slightly tense.

"This is the second time..." She pauses, then continues, without even looking at me. "I don't know if I look too old or if you look too young, but something doesn't fit here."

From her tone, I understand that it bothers her more than she wants to admit. It's not just about age. It's about how others see her. It's about who she thought she was and what people tell her she looks like.

Looking at her, I realise that four years ago, it would never have occurred to me that I would end up here with her. And yet, here we are.

We enter a McDonald's, not necessarily for food, but for the air conditioning that hits us like a wave of saving coolness. Outside, the heat is suffocating, the city seems to absorb the sun into its concrete, and the absence of a breeze makes every step an effort. We sit down at a table by the window and order ice cream – matcha with biscuits, cold and creamy, a perfect contrast to the hot air outside.

We stretch our legs and sink into our chairs, with no hurry to go anywhere. We have no concrete plans for the rest of the day, and I like that. It's that feeling of total freedom when you have no specific destination, but you know for sure that you'll end up exactly where you're expected to be.

I remember Sawa's list and we open it, looking for an idea. A park, somewhere nearby. Sounds good. We go back out onto the street and head towards it, but after only a few minutes, we find ourselves in front of a makeshift barrier.

The street is blocked, and a troop of scouts is marching in step. There is a mixture of enthusiasm and discipline in the air. We try to figure out if it has anything to do with the festivities we saw earlier, but from a quick conversation with a local, we learn that it's a one-time thing.

The further we go, the more people we see. Dozens of young people, lined up in uniforms, are preparing for something that seems important. On the sidelines, parents and friends watch with their phones raised, ready to capture the moment. A deep voice, amplified by a microphone, announces something unintelligible, but the solemn tone makes the whole scene seem like a rehearsal for a grand performance.

A boy of about 10 or 11 suddenly joins us. He is clearly excited to practise his English and begins to talk to us with surprising ease. He tells us that his mother is teaching him to speak well, that he also practises in online gaming groups and that, in general, he likes meeting new people. As he talks, he twists the edge of his T-shirt between his fingers, as if he needs something solid to hold on to. It seems like an involuntary gesture, but it gives him a charm and style all his own.

"My best friend is going to be in the parade," he tells us proudly. "He's on team 86."

I listen to him smiling, and meanwhile, I feel people's eyes turning towards us. It's that subtle moment when you realise you're different, that your presence breaks the mould of the place. We are the only tourists here, in a city that doesn't appear on the usual itineraries. And, honestly, I like that. I like the feeling of being in a place where no one has rushed to put up signs for tourists, where every interaction is authentic and unpredictable.

We lose ourselves among the people, notice details, take pictures and videos, let ourselves be caught up in the energy of the place. Two hours pass without us noticing. Then, almost simultaneously, we get hungry. I glance at Esther and know we're thinking the same thing.

"Let's head to the sea. Let's see what we can find to eat." We return to the streets that are already familiar, but somehow always look different. We find a free table at the restaurant on the pier. We gaze at the sea with its foamy waves and the sky in thousands of shades. We wait for the sunset.

My phone vibrates on the table. I look up from the sea and glance at the screen. Youn. "I envy you, you're always so happy..."

His message appears like a discordant note in the silence of the sunset. I leave it unread for a few seconds, then, without meaning to, my finger scrolls through the conversation. A second message follows a few minutes later.

"But tell me something, if I have an idea for a project, would you like to be my partner? I'll explain everything when we meet. Of course, it's about tourism. What do you say?"

I rest my elbow on the table and look beyond the pier, where the waves lazily crash against the aged wood. I don't answer him. Not now. I don't know exactly why, but something in his messages leaves a strange taste in my mouth. A few days ago, Youn was pouring his heart out. Today, he's proposing partnerships. Too sudden. Too calculated. It seems like too abrupt a change.

I haven't told him yet that I'm going to Morocco. I've been putting it off, waiting for the right moment, but I'm starting to wonder if there is such a moment. Maybe I shouldn't tell him at all. Not yet.

I look up at Esther. She is sitting with her chin resting in her palm, gazing at the sea as if reading a hidden truth. The sunset bathes everything in an orange light, and for a few moments, we let the silence fill us. A good, comfortable silence.

The food arrives, and when the bill comes, we look at each other, slightly surprised: 4 euros for a full meal for two. I laugh quietly,

remembering how much we paid in Ubud for something similar. Sometimes, life knows how to balance things in its own way.

Night has fallen when we decide to return. The walk through the city is a combination of exploration and small impulse purchases – creams, fruit, unimportant but cute souvenirs. I like to see how Esther analyses each product with the attention of someone looking for something specific, even though she doesn't know exactly what.

We order two GoJack scooters, and I arrive at the hotel first. I say 'I' because Esther is late. A vague uneasiness creeps into my stomach. Eleven kilometres isn't that far, but nighttime brings with it all kinds of scenarios. I call her. No answer.

I sit on the bed, trying to ignore the feeling that something is wrong. Then, finally, the phone vibrates.

"My driver got the address wrong. He's on his way back to the hotel now." I breathe a long sigh of relief. I'm glad she's okay.

When she arrives, I greet her in the lobby, but she's not in the mood for conversation. We say a quick hello and each retreat to our rooms.

I get in the shower, letting the water run over me, feeling it wash away the dust and fatigue of the day. The water is black, as if I've gathered the whole city on myself. In the mirror, I look at my reflection for a few seconds. Yes, I look young. I remember the moment today when that man asked Esther if I was her daughter.

The phone vibrates again. I pick it up. Andy. "What a look you have... Kissis."

I smile. Andy is... interesting. I don't know exactly what his intentions are, but he's there. Like a shadow. Like an echo of something even he doesn't seem to define yet.

My world is a chaos of unanswered questions, of people coming and going, of messages that seem to hide more than they say. But that doesn't bother me. Truth is a game of perception. What you see is not always what it is.

I write for a while, until the phone breaks the silence. Youn, again. I look at the message, hesitating – I don't know if I want to reply.

“Hey, sorry... I didn't talk to you today. I remembered my father and I couldn't do anything else.”

A few minutes pass and another message appears: “Did I tell you that I lost my father four weeks ago? He was my whole life and now I'm alone...”

Hmm... He didn't tell me that. If it was so important, why didn't he mention it until now? I reply simply: “I'm sorry to hear that...”

“I still can't believe he's gone. That he's no longer here...” A few seconds pass as I think about how to respond... when he continues: “And, by the way, I wrote to you about the tourism project... I wanted to specify that you don't have to do anything, I'll take care of everything.”

That feeling that something is wrong is acute now. They're just words. Calculated empathy. But what is he actually trying to tell me?

I reply briefly: “I'll think about it.” Then I put the phone down and sink into my thoughts.

Tomorrow morning we're going to see the dolphins, then the waterfalls. The night is quiet, but my mind is not. Something in this conversation reminds me of a half-open door, through which only a shadow can be seen. A shadow that you don't know if it's real... or just your projection.

I try to stop my thoughts, but the feeling is clear: somewhere, in everything I was told today... there is a crack. An invisible but clear crack. As if the pieces had been forced together and now they are losing their balance. An unfinished truth.

Something doesn't add up. But maybe it doesn't have to. Not yet. Silence speaks volumes. Until it says nothing. Then what remains? A half-spoken truth? A crumbling illusion? Or just a game of shadows? One of them is real. But which one?

The universe has moved the pieces. Me? I'm still standing with my hand over the board, not knowing whether to attack... or protect my queen.

“In a world of masks, who dares to be real?” – Anonymous author

Lovina: Beauty and Disillusionment

Tuesday, 15th August 2023

The phone rings at 5:00 a.m. I want to turn it off and go back to sleep. But my thoughts from the night before have multiplied, and my body is on alert for no apparent reason. I toss and turn a little longer, but at 5:20 a.m. I get up. I have to.

At 5:30 a.m., someone knocks on the door. I thought it was Esther, an early riser. No, it's the boy from the reception desk, smiling. I didn't know he would wake us up, so I was amused.

At 6:00 a.m., I'm downstairs in the lobby. Esther is already there. After waiting for five minutes, during which time we quickly drink a coffee from the reception tray, a guy shows up. We follow him on foot to the beach, about 200 meters away. The morning air is damp and cold, and the streets are still asleep. All we can hear is the distant sound of the waves, a rhythmic rustling, like the heavy breathing of the sea. A sleepy dog looks at us with gentle eyes from behind a wooden deck chair.

We board a small boat with two other tourists. They are sleepy and silent. I have no idea what nationality they are – they don't even exchange a word between themselves. They look like they've stepped out of a monotonous painting: a couple bored with life. Or maybe they're just too sleepy to feel anything.

Our rower doesn't speak English. Why am I surprised? The boat's engine makes a hellish noise and, as a bonus, emits black, suffocating

smoke. Who would have thought it would pollute the air on this beautiful morning?

The sea is sensational, and the moment before sunrise is worth every penny. The sky has thousands of shades, as if someone were pressing an invisible remote control every second to change them. Slowly, the sun makes its appearance from somewhere behind the sea, like a king conquering, piece by piece, his place in the daytime sky.

We sail for about 20-25 minutes, with that electrifying sensation on our skin. The currents envelop me, and the salty spray stings my face slightly. I feel my lips are sticky and coated with salt. I remember my experience in Amed and feel like jumping into the water. But not today, I don't have my swimsuit on.

From the neighboring boats, a few tourists hold on to the edges and look into the depths. What are they seeing there? No one says anything; only the sound of the engine accompanies us.

We get close to the other boats. There are dozens of them. Maybe even hundreds. A real industry built on people's fascination with dolphins.

Around us, the boats accelerate and suddenly change direction every time someone spots a fin. The dolphins are chased from one side to the other, like in an aquatic rodeo. As soon as they appear in one place, all the boats rev their engines and rush towards them. Logically, this scares them.

At one point, one of them jumps out of the water, close to our boat. Just for a second. Long enough for me to see its gaze – a quick, instinctive blink. Is it panic? Is it fatigue? I don't know. But I do know that in the next moment it disappears back into the depths, and the boats rev their engines in another direction. The show must go on.

Somehow, I expected this. And yet, seeing it with my own eyes, reality hits me differently. It's absurd.

I look around. Some tourists are thrilled – they laugh, take selfies, and shout. Others, like me, watch silently, with a strange feeling in

their stomachs. Our boatman remains impassive. Is it a habit? Or does easy money numb any trace of empathy? This is not an encounter with dolphins. It is a hunt with spectators.

500,000 IDR for snorkeling with dolphins. And for what? To chase some souls through the water? For a few minutes of fun? Ridiculous.

At around 7:30 a.m., we head back to shore. All the way there, I keep my eyes closed, enjoying the breeze, the sun caressing my skin, and the thoughts running through my head. A wonderful day is beginning. It's only 8:00 a.m. when we return to shore.

Some people were already there, ready to sell us something... wooden dolphins. As if that could make up for what happened on the water. The human imagination has no limits.

We got to the hotel in five minutes, poured ourselves some hot tea, but before we could even take a sip, our driver showed up. He has a complicated name, which I didn't remember. He has sunburnt skin, bad teeth, and a big moustache, which accentuates his permanent smile. He talks a lot, laughs, and jokes nonstop with the woman from the kitchen.

He hands us a basket with bananas, a few tangerines, and some snacks, just like the ones we saw in the temple offerings. "You need energy, because we have a long way to go today," he tells us with a smile.

Aling Aling Waterfall

We leave the hotel at around 8:20 a.m. The journey takes about 45 minutes, but we get lost a few times. The driver doesn't know the route exactly, so he keeps stopping to ask for directions, reversing, and apologizing. Finally, we arrive.

We stop at a large parking lot, where we have to buy tickets. There are three packages: the first, 125,000 IDR (~8 euros), includes insurance, a local guide, admission to two waterfalls, and activities (jumping and slides). The others, for 200,000 and 250,000 IDR, also

offer access to the other waterfalls, including Blue Lagoon. I would have liked to go there too, but Esther and I agreed to skip it. Maybe another time.

Our guide to the waterfalls is called Ketut. Most locals have common names, such as Ketut or Gede – probably to make them easier to remember. Ketut is a nice kid, passionate about photography. He knows exactly how to surprise us and takes some amazing pictures – it's like we're celebrities.

The road through the jungle is simply indescribable. No photo can prepare you for what you see with your own eyes. In a place where the light penetrates perfectly through the trees, a mini waterfall flows down a rocky wall covered with vegetation. An improvisation of nature. In the sunlight, a rainbow comes to life, so clear that it looks like it has been painted. Wow!

Perhaps the beauty of the world is not meant to be understood, but only experienced. Like a miracle that requires no explanation. Just like people. Sometimes, you just have to look at them and accept that you will never truly understand them. And maybe that's where true freedom lies.

I don't miss the opportunity, of course. I throw off my blue dress and jump under the waterfall. The water flows with force, hitting me in the face, blinding me. I feel myself merging with it, as if nothing else exists. An explosion of pure energy.

Esther and Ketut, each with a phone, take pictures in rapid succession. They laugh. It's unreal! But I have to detach myself from it...

I wrap myself in the green leek towel I received from the hotel, and we descend to the Aling Aling waterfall, a natural wonder that pours down from a height of 35 meters. Amazing. We wait for a few tourists to leave, then – of course – take another series of photos.

"You're not allowed to swim here," Ketut tells us. "The waterfall is considered sacred." He looks at us for a moment and, probably seeing the disappointment in our eyes, adds with a smile: "The current is

too strong, and the rocks are slippery. But you can jump at the other waterfalls, it's allowed there."

We look up, fascinated by the force with which the water crashes down. We can't go in, but it doesn't matter. We stand there quietly, savoring the moment. You have to visit it if you ever go to Bali, that's for sure.

These sensations are priceless. And maybe that's why I feel them even more deeply.

Kroya Waterfall

We head to Kroya Waterfall, where more adrenaline awaits us. Unlike Aling Aling, there are special places for jumping here, and the natural slide makes Kroya one of the most spectacular waterfalls in Bali. The water has an incredible turquoise hue, contrasting sharply with the black volcanic rocks, and the smooth flow over the stone wall creates a perfect 'slide,' as if sculpted by nature especially for adventurers.

The place is full of tourists. Ketut tells us that yesterday there were 175 people here. I wonder if that's a lot or a little. From what I can see, everyone has come for thrills – the place offers 5, 10, and 15-meter jumps, and laughter and screams of pure joy can be heard throughout the canyon.

"Everyone must wear a life jacket," Ketut tells us, pointing to the equipment on the edge. "It's a mandatory rule. But with the jacket, you can try anything, it's safe."

I already knew about the jumps from the videos Sawa sent me. He jumped. Me... I don't think so, haha...

I start with the small slide and swallow a lot of water. If Ketut hadn't encouraged me, I probably wouldn't have gone in. Pfff. But I hold on for a bit, gather my courage... maybe from Ketut's enthusiasm, which is contagious. I jump from 2 meters. Yeah... I also wanted to encourage Esther.

We move on to the big slide, a 12-meter natural slide, and as I climb up, I can't stop wondering how crazy I am to do this. However, with the vest on, I feel safe, and apparently, that gives me an unexpected burst of courage. Sometimes, all it takes is a push to throw yourself into the unknown.

'Does it work the same way in life? If you know you'll be caught, is it easier to take risks?'

I reach the top, pause for a moment – my heart is racing, and my legs are dangling over the edge of the cliff. Ketut laughs and winks at me.

"Take a deep breath and go! After this, you'll be jumping from 10 meters for sure!"

My heart is almost bursting out of my chest, and a loud whistling sound numbs my senses, drowning out the roar of the waterfall. But I don't back down. Not now. I take a deep breath, hold it, pinch my nose, and let myself be carried by the water. For a split second, I float, suspended between the sky and the water. Absolute freedom. Then the impact – brutal, invigorating. The water engulfs me and, for a moment, everything is quiet. Then I surface and breathe. I'm still shaking, but not from fear. From joy.

Ketut films everything, and when I watch the video, I can't believe I did it. Intense and extreme.

We stay there for a while, watching the others. Some are braver, others more cautious. That's life. A while ago, I would never have imagined that I would be standing on the edge of a 12-meter natural slide, let alone actually going down on it! 'Change your perspective, Yda!'

We leave Aling Aling with difficulty, but we have one more waterfall on our list today. It's as if we don't want to leave this dream oasis, where the energy of the place holds you captive, like an invisible magnet.

It's already noon, and I'm starting to get hungry.

Sekumpul Waterfall

On the way to Sekumpul Waterfall, we can't find anything to eat, so we stop in the village of Sekumpul, where we come across a local restaurant. We are pleasantly surprised: in addition to food, they also offer local coffee and teas for tasting. The avocado coffee catches my attention. What could that be like?

The man brings us samples of all the varieties, with incredible generosity. We like some, others not so much. In the end, we order food and share it – a serving of tuna with sauce and one of curry, each with rice on the side. Delicious. We eat slowly, without rushing, enjoying the moment.

With our bellies full, we go to the ticket office. Here, as at Aling Aling, there are two tourist packages. We choose the first one, for 150,000 IDR (~9 euros), which includes visits to two waterfalls. The other package also included Fiji Waterfall, but it seems that today we will only see it in pictures.

We have a new guide here, Gede, who has a relaxed air and a slightly suspicious energy. I wonder what he's been smoking? Anyway, it's none of my business. We listen to him as he tells us about the place, but I prefer to keep my distance.

The road to the waterfalls is an adventure in itself. We descend a long way, a very long way, and I think with horror that we will have to climb back up this way on the way back. But the route is superb – a dense jungle, full of exotic trees and flowers I've never seen before in my life. Banana trees, coconut trees, mangoes, tangerines, papayas, jackfruit – a true tropical paradise. I take pictures, I make videos, until I get the notification again that my phone is full and I have to delete something. 'I must get a phone with maximum memory next time!' I think, resigned.

Gede also shows us a clove tree. At first, I don't quite understand what he wants to show us, but then, when I recognize the shape of the fruits and their intense smell, I realize. They are harvested by

hand, then spread out on the ground and carefully sorted. Another new lesson today.

We descend. Steps. More steps. We see the waterfalls and the bamboo forest in the distance. A lush, green jungle, full of vines clinging to the rocks. The sound of water grows louder and louder. When we get close, it takes our breath away: a huge wall of water crashes down from about 80 meters, forming clouds of fine mist that float in the air. Sekumpul Waterfall is incredible.

But our first stop is Hidden Waterfall, a smaller waterfall hidden among the rocks, which cannot be seen from above, like Sekumpul and Fiji. We carefully climb down the wet rocks, and enter the water. I only go in a little. The strong currents scare me and I don't dare venture further, unlike Esther, who dives in without hesitation.

We take pictures, lots of pictures. I try to enjoy the moment, but I start to feel cold. I'm shivering. I can't get rid of the goose bumps. It feels like it's raining here, even though up in the village it's sweltering hot. The humidity in the air and the force of the water create their own microclimate, which overwhelms you. This energy is magnetic!

We approach Sekumpul Waterfall. Here, the force of the water is simply brutal. I have no chance of getting in – the current is far too strong. I try to take pictures, but I can't get any decent shots. I'm no longer in a princess mood when I'm shivering and my teeth are chattering from the cold. We leave.

We climb. It's hard. But we climb. With every step, I feel the air getting warmer and the humidity dissipating. When we reach the top, I can't believe how cold it was down there. It's as if the seasons have changed in just a few minutes.

We return to the restaurant where we ate earlier and warm up with some tea. While we drink, we transfer photos, and I delete a few, trying to make room for the next few days. At 4:30 p.m., we head for our accommodation, and after an hour's drive, we arrive. We pay the driver 500,000 IDR (~30 euros) and finally retire to our rooms. A long day, but full of sensations.

And yet, we feel restless. We change our clothes and, without thinking too much, go out again. The beach is calling us, and so is our stomach. Today's trip has exhausted us, but it has also whetted our appetite. Pfff... what scenery! What wonders the forest hides! Not to be missed, clearly.

We miss the sunset this time, but the sky is still ablaze with color, spreading reddish and golden hues over the sea. Here, sunsets and sunrises are always special, impossible to compare. Each has its own unique and unmatched charm.

We walk slowly, in time with the waves that gently lap the shore, as if the sea is breathing with us. There is something special about this beach, an atmosphere that captivates me without me realizing it. Perhaps it is the warm air, the fine sand beneath my feet, or simply the feeling that time expands here.

We find a restaurant on the sand and stop. The dim lights, relaxed people, and live music create exactly the mood we need.

The singer has a surprisingly pleasant, deep voice, as if he were telling a story with each verse. I listen to him and realize that I like Lovina, even though I haven't seen much of it. Maybe it's not about what you see, but what you feel.

I order a salad and a passion fruit juice, and Esther has soup and a coconut. We sit there, enjoying the moment, without talking too much. There's no need. We let the music fill the empty spaces between our thoughts.

Around 9:30 p.m., we return to our rooms. Tomorrow is a 'relaxation day,' but today... today I still have stories to tell. With Youn, of course.

A message. A video. A couple dancing beautifully on a beach at sunset. Just few words in the description: "The two of us..."

I stare at the message for a few seconds. I don't know what to feel. This morning he told me he 'can't right now.' Yesterday, he didn't reply to my messages. Now he's sending me romantic clips, as if nothing had happened. As if I had no reason to ask questions.

I run my fingers over the screen, undecided. Either he has something on his mind, or he's trying to keep me close without telling me the whole truth.

"Do you know how to dance?" I ask him.

Youn: "A little. But I think you're already a pro. Will you teach me too?"

Yda: "I hope you know enough. Men lead girls... haha."

Youn: "I'll teach you everything I know."

Yda: "I'm not a pro."

Youn: "Haha, I don't believe you."

Pfff... How does he always manage to draw me into his game? A few well-placed lines and I find myself smiling. But I'm not going to let this conversation bury my intuition. Not this time.

Before I get too deep in my thoughts, my phone vibrates again. Andy. Well, here's the other dreamer...

"I thought I'd make your day a little brighter," he writes, without wasting any time.

"Ambitious plan," I reply, smiling.

Andy: "I'm not playing games. Have you gotten your dose of admiration for today?"

Yda: "Hmm... not enough, I think."

Andy: "Well then, listen up: you're an incredible person, you have an energy that changes everything around you, and I think you're the kind of person the Universe remembers."

I don't even know what to do, whether to laugh or take every word seriously.

"Wow. That's quite a statement," I reply, trying to sound indifferent, but a smile plays on the corner of my lips.

Andy: "What can I do if that's how I feel?!"

I laugh as I look at my phone screen. Andy with his boundless energy and enthusiasm, Youn with his subtleties. Yin and Yang. Perfect contrast.

I close my eyes. The waves can be heard in the distance, slowly lulling me to sleep. But the truth is, waves don't lie. They just come and go, without playing games.

'Could people learn something from this?'

'Lovina, what are you trying to tell me?'

The thought slips into my mind like a silent wave: 'To let myself be carried away, but without losing myself?'

In my dream, the waves become dance steps. Steps that seem to be mine, but I don't know if I'm ready to follow them.

"We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." – Anaïs Nin

The Games of Silence

Wednesday, August 2023

I'm finally caught up on my writing. I look at the clock: it's already 4:00 p.m. Esther isn't responding to my messages, and I have no idea what to do – has she finished with her visa or not?

I'm hungry and I haven't even had a coffee today. I got out of bed around noon, went to the bathroom, then opened my laptop and... suddenly it was 4:00 p.m. Time does what it wants, as usual.

Yes, you guessed it: I haven't left my room today. And I should, right? I'm in Lovina, so it wouldn't hurt to at least see the sun today. So I go out, with no specific purpose.

I walk through the streets and, by chance, I find a central grocery. I buy another 50 GB of internet – the 70 GB I bought in Seminyak ran out quickly. 193,000 IDR – a bit expensive.

Then I go back to the beach. The sea calls me, just like it does everywhere I go. I walk slowly, just admiring the endless expanse of water, far away and back. My phone vibrates. Youn.

He just woke up. I text him to call me so I can show him the sea. I still hope that all my worries are just in my head.

“I'm going to take a shower and be right back, because I'm too sleepy and I don't want you to see my face in the morning.” I laughed. I understood him. I probably would have done the same.

But five hours have passed.

Either he's taking the longest shower in human history, or... I don't know.

I sigh and tell myself: that's it. Or, who knows... maybe Youn is actually a sheikh from Zagora, with three wives and seven children, potbellied, bald, and covered in gold rings on his fingers. Maybe he only has time for me between two lavish dinners in the desert. Or maybe he downloaded his photos from some forgotten corner of the internet and doesn't even really exist.

Sometimes, the only solution is to make light of the situation, as the Romanians say.

I haven't found anything to catch my eye along the way, so I decide to go to that nice restaurant on the beach where I stayed last night with Esther. When I get close, guess what? Esther is there. She's sitting about 20 meters from the restaurant, on a bench, tapping away at her phone with such concentration that you'd think she was negotiating world peace.

Surprise, surprise...

She looks up and, when she sees me, she looks at me as if she's just seen a ghost. Pfff... She has that 'I can't seem to get rid of you' look on her face, and it amuses me to no end.

So I have company. We go to the restaurant together. The sunset is magnificent, slowly sinking into the sea, right in front of us. The atmosphere is just as incredible as last night, even though now there's no band on stage, just a soft melody coming from speakers strategically placed around the tables.

I order spaghetti with tuna and a latte, and Esther just has pineapple juice. She ate earlier, she tells me.

We chat, but something is... different. I feel her more distant, more absent. And then, suddenly, she tells me she's changed her plans.

"I don't want to be on the run anymore." She runs her hand through her hair, looking at her sandals. "You make your plans. I... I want to be more settled."

I freeze for a second, unable to understand what's happening. At first, everything seems confusing, but then it becomes clear

that something has changed in her – and I don't understand what happened between yesterday and today.

I don't say anything; what could I say? These are her choices, and I have to respect them. However, on the way to the hotel, the thought that maybe I did something wrong haunts me, following me like a shadow that won't go away.

We were supposed to check out tomorrow morning, but yesterday, when we were at the waterfalls, we decided to extend our stay so we would have more time to explore the area. But with her change of plans, everything is turned upside down.

When we arrive at the reception, we are told that we can only stay one more night – after that, the hotel is fully booked. Oh well... I pay for another night and tell myself that we'll see what happens tomorrow.

We say goodbye, and I go into the room. I close the door and lean against it, my back pressed against the cold wood. I don't know how long I stand there, stuck in a tangle of thoughts. What happened to Esther? What changed overnight?

I force myself to put my thoughts in order, but everything is confusing. Our first meeting was on July 28, at the PC Lounge in Ubud – dancing, rhythm, new people. Esther laughed a lot then, with an energy that made you want to get to know her better. Then, as if by chance, we bumped into each other on the street and went to dinner together. It didn't seem like a choice, it was just... natural. We talked for hours, without breaks, without awkward silences.

A few days later, we met again in Amed. The coincidences began to seem intentional. We sought each other out and found each other. From then on, day after day, we kept each other company: we laughed, we explored, we shared moments. When we decided to go to Lovina together, it seemed like the logical step. At first, we even talked about sharing a room, but when we arrived at the accommodation, Esther asked for a separate one.

Maybe I should have understood then. She needed space. Maybe, for her, it wasn't as simple as it seemed to me. And now? She doesn't even want to share the same resort anymore.

What broke between us? Did I do something wrong? Or... maybe it was just meant to be.

I feel the cold door supporting my weight, but in my mind, everything is shaking. I hold the phone in my hand and look at the number Esther gave me earlier – Sunrise Lounge, a beach resort.

Yesterday, we were talking about maybe moving there together. She said it looked nice, close to the sea. But today she went to see it on her own, and when she came back, she simply said:

“I don't want to go there, but you go.” That's it.

I'm left holding the lit screen in my palm, hesitating. If I book, it's like I'm accepting that it's over. That the line has been drawn. But deep down, I know the line has already been drawn.

I take a deep breath and type. A woman answers immediately, and in less than a minute, I book three nights. I press ‘send’ and feel like I've just symbolically pressed ‘reset’ on our relationship.

Esther had been clear: “Something else.” Not just another place – something else that doesn't include me. Basically, she told me she didn't want to be together anymore. Not even in the same accommodation.

Seriously... I don't know if I did something wrong.

Maybe it was too much for her. Maybe she never wanted to be friends the way I thought she did. Or maybe she just got tired of people asking her if I was her daughter.

Feelings are strange. They change our direction without us understanding why, and they make us take unexpected decisions. But everyone is free to choose. We can't ask anyone to feel what we want them to feel. Maybe, in fact, the universe is guiding me towards something else.

At least tomorrow seems to be going ahead as planned: we're going to Singaraja together. Fury is coming too, apparently. The gang's reunion. Then... we'll see. It'll be fine.

I get in the shower and let the water run over me. I don't even know how long I stand there, but it doesn't matter. I just feel like I need to wash away all the baggage of the evening.

I realized late that Youn hadn't given any sign today. No phone call, not even a text. Nothing. Caught up in the whole Esther thing, I had completely forgotten about him. And yet... something inside me tenses now that I realize he's not here.

My phone vibrates. I jump. I grab it quickly, almost certain it's him. But it's not Youn.

It's Essra.

Huh? I feel my stomach tighten. I look at the screen, blink twice, as if I don't understand what I'm seeing. After all this time, he was showing signs of life. Pfff... Why today? Why right now, when I was wondering where the hell Youn had disappeared to? It's like the universe is playing jokes on me.

"Hey, how are you? How's life in Bali? Where are you now?"

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I feel a knot in my stomach. I reply, although, as always, I have no idea why I'm doing it:

Yda: "Hey. Bali's fine. I'm still here, yes."

Essra: "Did you get a two-month visa?"

Yda: "No, just one, but I extended it for another 30 days. Why?"

Essra: "I just wanted to know, out of curiosity."

Really? After all this time, you're asking me that?

Yda: "What about you?"

Essra: "What about me?"

Yda: "Where are you now?"

Essra: "Still in the Philippines. I'm in Manila, staying with a family of friends."

The conversation flows for a while, simple, without any obvious undertones. But I know this rhythm. It wasn't just a casual "hi, how

are you?" – it was clear that he was testing the waters, that he wanted to see me.

Only I wasn't going to ask anything specific. I had promised myself I wouldn't take any more steps forward.

I didn't even tell him about Youn. What would be the point? That I had fallen under the spell of another Moroccan? That, instead of learning from the past, I had confidently stepped into the same trap?

'Pfff... Nice move, Yda. Very clever.'

But Youn hasn't given any sign. The phone is silent. Just like him.

I close the screen and lean back, staring at the white ceiling of the room. Essra appeared just as Youn disappeared. The universe seems to have put two options on the table and is watching me amused, waiting to see what I choose.

Except I don't want to choose anything. And yet...

I unlock my phone, activate silent mode, and place it on the nightstand. At least today, I want to ignore it as much as it ignores me. But I know that tomorrow I'll look at it again. I don't know what upsets me more: that he hasn't written, or that I still hope he will.

And that's what angers me the most.

"Maybe the Universe doesn't present us with choices, but only tests our patience." – Anonymous author

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The Last Illusion

Thursday, 17th August 2023

Esther's voice sounded like it was coming from a sewer, muffled and incomprehensible. Who could she be talking to at this hour? Pfff... I pulled the blanket over my head, trying to ignore her, but the echo of her voice seeped through the walls. I couldn't understand a word. And that irritated me even more.

At 9:30 a.m., we set off for Singaraja, each on a GoJek scooter. Our destination? McDonald's. Yes, I know, it's not exactly authentic Balinese, but sometimes you need a predictable breakfast. Pancakes and coffee with milk. Just what I needed.

Esther didn't mention anything about her decision. No reference to last night's discussion. We ride side by side, chatting normally, but something has changed. You can't see it, you can't say it, but it's there. An invisible space between us.

And yet, everything had changed.

Tomorrow we will part ways. This fact sounded strange in my mind, as if I was trying to assimilate it, but I still didn't fully understand it. Is it just habit that makes me feel this way? Or maybe the Universe is trying to tell me something? To stop getting attached? To learn to let people go? Or maybe it's a deeper lesson than I can see right now. It's a strange experience, but I'll cope.

From McDonald's, we head straight to the square where, two days ago, we discovered the festival in preparation. Today, finally, is the big day.

Fury wrote to us that she won't be coming, something to do with a health problem that arose overnight. I don't know how serious it is or if it's just an excuse, but the fact is that today it will just be the two of us.

We expected to find hustle and bustle, music, and excitement, but the festival won't start until around 6:00 p.m. Until then, only the stands are open, and the area is rather quiet. So we stroll around without rushing, exploring every corner, taking pictures of locals dressed in traditional costumes, and studying the souvenir stalls.

When we reach the big stage, we notice a few boys putting up the last decorations. One of them invites me on stage, probably as a joke, but I take it seriously and actually go up. Since he gave me the opportunity, why not?

Esther laughs and takes a few pictures of me, and instead of standing shyly in a corner, I start parading around like a princess, to everyone's amusement. The boys ask me where I'm from, we exchange a few jokes, and on impulse, I tell them I'll be back tonight to help them on stage. They laugh too. Everything is spontaneous, chaotic, and incredibly fun.

We're getting hungry, but the food stalls aren't serving anything substantial at this hour, just chips and packaged snacks. We decide to go back to the pier, to the restaurant where we ate last time. Quiet atmosphere, good food, decent prices, and, most importantly, a view of the sea.

The city seems suffocated by the heat. The air is so hot that we feel like we're melting. My skin is already sticky, and my clothes are sticking to my back. It's like we're in an outdoor sauna.

On the way, some children start running after us, shouting something in their language, laughing loudly. We don't understand what they're saying, but we laugh too, caught up in their energy.

And suddenly, a childhood memory hits me. How we used to run after the trucks crossing the village, shouting at the top of our lungs: 'Gum! Gum!'

Back then, gum was a rarity. A luxury that was almost impossible to find. The communist regime was not like it is now, when you can find anything, anywhere. What times...

We arrived at the sea. The sun, spectacular, bathed everything in a warm light, and the sea sparkled, full of shining 'diamonds.' Each wave seemed to dance under the golden rays, in an endless game of light and shadow. It was sublime.

After a hearty meal, just as cheap as last time, we set off again, walking along the shore. The light breeze cooled our skin, and the sound of the waves mingled with the laughter of the people.

At one point, we came across a local competition – a large group of people, cheerful music, and a huge rope stretched between two teams. Tug of war. Two teams of seven people each, pulling with all their might, trying to knock the others down. Simple, but captivating.

We stood there watching them, caught up in their energy. The shouts of encouragement, laughter, and music mingled in a continuous buzz. At one point, a woman approached us. She spoke English, not perfectly, but enough to share her enthusiasm for the competition.

When the game ended and the crowd dispersed, we continued on our way, wandering the streets of the city. In front of a salon, we stopped instinctively. Hair, manicure, massage. We looked at each other and, without thinking too much, we went in. I had a massage, and Esther had a manicure and pedicure.

Two hours later, more relaxed and ready for the evening, we set off again into the streets, killing time until the festival. The wait had become part of the experience.

When we returned to the square, everything had changed. Hustle and bustle, lights, organized chaos. People everywhere, bustling like an anthill, smell that either whetted your appetite or turned your stomach. The air vibrated with music, and people's voices rose in a frenetic mix of energy and joy.

We struggled to make our way to the stage. Everything was in Indonesian, but even that didn't matter. The crowd, mostly young people, lay on the grass, sitting on cushions or directly on the ground, with food beside them and children playing around them. It was like a huge picnic combined with a free concert. The atmosphere seemed unreal, and the colorful lights scattered over the crowd made everything spectacular.

We found a place somewhere in the middle and sat down. Esther seems agitated. I feel her moving next to me, twirling strands of hair between her fingers, constantly looking at her phone. A few minutes later, she suddenly gets up: "I'm going somewhere where I can talk."

I don't know why, but her words sound strange to me. I watch her disappear into the crowd and suddenly remember her conversation this morning. Who was she talking to at that time? Was it the same person? I want to ask her, but I don't. It's none of my business.

I pick up my phone to check my notifications and, at that very moment, the screen lights up. A new message. Youn.

My eyes remain fixed on his name. After a whole day of complete disappearance, he suddenly remembers my existence? I open it and, to my surprise, it's in French.

Really? I look at the message and wonder what game this is now. I try to appear indifferent, to pretend that his absence didn't affect me, that it didn't annoy me that he told me yesterday he would call me and then completely disappeared. So, while watching the scene and the traditional dances, I find myself caught up in a conversation that I'm not sure I want to have.

"Do you know French?" I write, pretending to be amused.

Youn: "A little conversation, yes."

Yda: "Maybe you know Romanian too... who knows?"

Youn: "Are you a descendant of the Romans?"

Yda: "I'm just Romanian."

Why am I doing this? Why am I continuing to talk to him?
Hmmm...

Youn: "Where are you now?"

Yda: "At a festival."

Youn: "What kind of festival? I would have liked to dance with you..."

Really? Yesterday you couldn't even send me a message, but today you want to dance with me?

"Come on, come!" I write, provocatively.

Youn: "You know I'd like to, but it's difficult right now."

Right now. Always 'right now.' Always an excuse.

Yda: "Are you married with three children? Haha..."

Youn: "Nooo. Why? I'm not coming because I haven't made plans. I don't have the money."

I feel my heart beating faster, not with excitement, but with nerves. There is something about the way he juggles his answers that makes me doubt his every word. And, for the first time, I decide to say exactly how I feel.

Yda: "Sometimes I get the impression that you're hiding something."

Youn: "No, I swear. I'm not hiding anything. If there was something, I would have told you."

Yda: "Okay. You know best."

But I don't believe him. I don't believe him anymore.

Youn: "Don't worry, Yda. I'm being honest with you. Imagine that we'll be together."

Imagine? Is that what he wants from me?

Yda: "I'm sorry, but I feel like something's not right. Maybe we should stop talking."

Silence.

Youn: "Why do you say that?"

Yda: "I have a strange feeling about you. Sometimes I feel like I'm talking to two different people."

Youn: "That's not true! It's just me, one Youn."

How sweet. But which one?

I feel my breathing quicken and my fingers slide quickly across the screen.

Yda: "Leave it like that..."

Let it float in the air, like a truth I'll never know.

Youn: "I want to call you, my princess... Tell me: did you have a drink there?"

Really? That's your problem right now? After a whole day of disappearing, after making me doubt myself?

I feel something break inside me. A thin thread, stretched too far. And in that moment, I know it's over.

Yda: "It doesn't matter anymore. Don't call me."

Youn: "Why?"

Yda: "I don't like people who don't keep their word. I'm sorry."

Youn: "Hmmm... If it's about yesterday... I was with my brother... I'm sorry. I wanted to be alone..."

I wanted to be alone. How banal. What a stretch. How annoying to have no real excuse.

I read and reread his words.

Yda: "A five-second message. That's all it took."

Youn: "You're right..."

Yda: "What if I told you I was coming to Morocco and then didn't come? But I wouldn't even tell you anything. I'd just leave you waiting... What would you think?"

Youn: "I don't want to lose you..."

But you've already lost me.

I block the contact.

I leave my phone in my lap and stare into space. The music vibrates around me, the stage lights dance over the crowd, people's laughter mingles with the sound of the waves. Everything is the same. But I... I'm different now.

I feel a lump in my throat, but I swallow hard. Why does it affect me so much? Not because I wanted Youn. Not because his departure hurts me.

But because, deep down, I knew. I always knew.

When I set out on my journey, I promised myself I would stay away from men. That I wouldn't get caught up in their games again, in their sweet talk, in promises that lead nowhere. I thought I had learned my lesson. That I had grown up.

And yet, I let Youn into my thoughts. Maybe because he seemed different. Maybe because I wanted to believe that people really can be different.

Maybe because my conversations with the girls, with Esther, with Fury, made me wonder if I was avoiding what the Universe was sending me. Or... maybe because he reminded me of Essra? Maybe that's why I let myself get caught up in his game.

But no. The Universe hadn't punished me. It had tested me. It had asked me, 'Have you learned your lesson?'

And I answered... as before. As always. And that hurts me the most. Not his loss. But the fact that I didn't listen to what I already knew.

I wipe my tears with the back of my hand and take a deep breath.

'No, Yda. From today, you will be strong. From today, no man will ever make you doubt yourself again. Ever.'

I pick up the phone. I unblock it. I unblock the contact.

Not because I want him back. But because, finally, I don't care anymore. I'm no longer caught up in this game. I'm no longer a toy in someone's hands. I won. Not love. Not revenge. But my peace of mind.

Later, we returned to our accommodation. In front of the room, I hug Esther. Maybe we won't see each other again, maybe we will. But honestly? It doesn't matter anymore. Today... I don't feel anything. Not that Esther wants 'space,' not that Youn sweetened my reality with beautiful words. From today, it's just me. No emotions to hold me back. No shadows hanging over me.

But in all this emptiness I feel now, one thought stands out clearly, like a long-forgotten echo: Morocco. I know I have to get there. Not for Youn, not for Essra, not for anyone else. For me.

Maybe I wasn't ready to go then. Maybe I'm not ready now. But one day... one day I will be.

Not now. Not today. But one day... one day I will go. Not to someone. Not for someone. But to who I truly am.

“Sometimes the hardest lessons come not from what we lose, but from what we realize we never had.” – Anonymous author

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The Diamond Called Life

Friday, 18th August 2023

I said goodbye to Esther at around 1:00 p.m. In the morning, we went into town together, without saying much. At the beach terrace, we enjoyed our coffees in silence, letting the sea fill the spaces between us.

The coffee cup was hot in my hand, but the morning air already had the weight of a hot day. Across the table, the sea repeated its endless ritual: lazy waves, white foam melting on the sand. Children ran barefoot, shouting happily, and the breeze ruffled their hair as if wiping away all their worries. A moment suspended in time.

Then we headed for the city. Each with her own business. Esther had to charge her phone, and I had a more practical problem to solve: the portable battery. The old one was acting up – it showed 100% charge, but refused to give even 1% of its energy.

We went into a market. And there, surprise: bread with seeds. Just like we used to eat in Romania. It caught my eye instantly. I reached for it and, for a moment, the smell of home cooking became almost real. The taste of quiet mornings, butter spread on bread, the radio playing in the background. Here, thousands of miles away, the smell was different, but the feeling... the feeling was the same.

Next to it, I put a can of fish, a small cheese, olives, an avocado, and a few tomatoes in my basket. Bananas and oranges for a healthy dessert. Simple but nutritious food. The total? 130,000 IDR. Almost as much as a meal in town. But I was craving a meal like this.

When I arrived in front of the hotel, I hugged Esther. I didn't say much. Maybe there was no need. Then I got on the scooter I had ordered. Without looking back.

Sunrise Lounge & Lodge Lovina

I thought the resort was by the sea, but I was wrong. Still, the location had charm. A rustic decor, lots of wood, and vintage objects. In the restaurant, the tables were made of solid wood, meticulously carved. In one corner, there was an antique TV set from another era, maybe even from my grandparents' time.

I pay 510,000 IDR for three nights' accommodation and get a spacious room with two beds and a huge bathroom. It's not modern, but I like its welcoming atmosphere. In just a few minutes, my luggage creates indescribable chaos. I don't feel like tidying it up. I leave everything as it is and go out to the reception.

Wullan, the nice girl I talked to on WhatsApp, hands me a plate and a knife. I thank her and sit down on the terrace in front of the room, where I prepare my dinner: bread with seeds, olives, cheese, avocado, and tomatoes. After so many days of rice, this taste is a real treat.

I get up. I don't feel like staying in my room. So I go out for a walk, with no particular destination in mind.

I reach the pier. I keep walking, further and further, until I can't go any further. I stop. I look at the sea. In the quiet of the afternoon, the locals' boats return from the open sea. I hear their voices, but I don't understand what they're saying. Everything feels like a continuous flow – thoughts, sensations, conversations... like a carousel that refuses to stop.

I try to understand what's next.

It is said that if you do not examine your lessons, you do not understand them. And if you do not understand them, they return, again and again, until you learn. I already know that the lesson with

Youn was just a 'slip-up.' Or maybe not. Maybe I needed to see beyond the lesson. But what am I missing?

Most of the time, reality is not what we see. If I asked you today, what do you see in my life? Do you think what you read is reality? Or just a story I'm telling you, nicely packaged in the right words?

But you know what the beautiful part is? You'll never know what reality is. Because reality is never an absolute truth. It's just what we choose to see.

A few days ago, Esther asked me:

"Why do you write about your life? About your intimacy? About your emotions? I couldn't put my soul on display like that."

Can you guess what I replied?

"My life isn't just mine. It belongs to everyone who reads it. To those who turn page after page, who want to see how I moved forward despite all the obstacles."

Why would I hide it?

My life is just a rough diamond that I work on every day. I look at it. I touch it. I smooth out its edges. I admire it. I change it if I get bored with it being the same. Sometimes I change the intensity of the light. Other times I make it transparent. And then I admire it again.

Every morning, the diamond called *life* must be caressed, polished, and understood."

I dwell on this thought. On every day that I start over, with determination. On how I write... Sometimes I don't even know what I'm writing. Ideas cross my mind, but when I start putting them on paper, they evaporate. As if someone had accidentally pressed the reset button.

Then others appear. Like little lights coming from afar, weary from so much walking. Words that come to life. And then... I just write.

Does it seem complicated?

Maybe it is.

But I can't imagine life any other way.

I got up from the pontoon. Like a soldier, I walked towards the room with measured steps. My mind kept spinning thoughts, like an avalanche you can't stop.

Today... today I just write. No distractions. No expectations. The diary of life. Why not write about it?

And, in the silence that surrounded me, I wrote. About her. About life.

Until my phone vibrated. Mone. We hadn't spoken much lately. Probably aware that my lessons had to be assimilated in silence.

He just said this: "Stay there. You're fine. As long as you're on level four, it's perfect."

I smiled. Yes, some days are quieter, but full of meaning.

And maybe that's what being on level four really means: being fine exactly where you are. Not in a hypothetical future, not in the past. But here. Now. Where, in silence, life polishes your diamond.

"Life doesn't always give you the answers, but it always gives you the opportunity to seek them." – Anonymous author

The Crossroads of Destiny

Lovina, Bali, 19th August 2023, 5:00 a.m.

The night was silent, like an endless expanse of unanswered questions. Sleep seemed like a distant illusion, something that refused to come to me. I tossed and turned in bed, trying to find the peace that eluded me every time I thought I had found it. Since I had turned off the light, the hours had passed like shadows on the walls, bringing no rest.

I slowly opened the bedroom door and stepped out onto the terrace, searching for answers under the starry sky. Barefoot, dressed in shorts and a thin tank top, I let myself be enveloped by the gentle warmth of the night. The cold tiles of the floor anchored my feet in the present. I looked at the sky, feeling a void in my chest like an unfinished chapter.

The moon shyly hid behind a fluffy cloud, revealing only its pale outline – like an unspoken promise.

My heart felt heavy, with that feeling of emptiness, of uncertainty...

‘Was the breakup with Esther the cause of this anxiety?

Or was it something deeper?

How many more people do I have to lose to truly find myself?’

Thoughts that echoed strangely in the starry night, stirring up a past I didn't want to stir up.

But I knew it wasn't just about Esther. It was something deeper, something that kept coming back, like a wave that never completely

recedes. The trip through Asia had not only meant new places, but also encounters with parts of myself that I had not known before. And yet, I felt suspended in an uncertain place, as if I were moving forward without knowing where I was going.

It wasn't fear. It was something else... a dull uneasiness that made me flinch, like a cold shiver down my spine. Sawa, my guide through Vietnam and Indonesia, had finished his part in my story. Now I was on my own.

'Was that the real source of my uneasiness?'

I wondered if, somewhere deep inside, I didn't feel capable of moving forward without support. Perhaps the doubt was just a shadow of old insecurities still trying to whisper to me. The night seemed to have its own language, a continuous whisper that stirred my thoughts.

'Could it just be about the fact that I'm on my own now?'

Until today, every step of my journey had been guided, and every encounter seemed like a piece of a puzzle that completed the big picture. But now, facing this new stage, there was no map. I didn't know whether to greet this unknown with fear or the curiosity of a new beginning.

'Maybe that's the real lesson,' I said to myself, looking at infinity. 'Maybe now is the time to let my intuition guide me, to trust that the Universe will continue to show me signs.'

The signs had always been there – in small details, in coincidences, in unexpected encounters. In the decisions I made in the moment. The Universe had spoken to me many times – through Sawa, through Esther, through every person who had been with me for a part of my journey.

Now it was my turn to move forward, without relying on anyone else. It was my turn to open my eyes and see clearly the path that was unfolding before me.

'I don't have to force the answers. They come anyway, when I'm ready to see them.'

I went into the room and picked up the phone. Maybe Mone would know what to tell me. Something. Anything.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I typed without hesitation.

The phone vibrated, and Mone's reply came quickly:

“Looking for answers in the middle of the night, Yda?”

“Ahh... If only you knew... I don't know what's next, and it's like something is stirring me beyond my power of understanding. I feel like I'm suspended between two worlds: the one before and the one that awaits me, without knowing how to take the first step.”

Mone replied calmly:

“Your journey has always been about your evolution... not about a specific destination. I thought you knew that... Why do you think you feel the way you do now?”

For a split second, I looked at his message. I hesitated. But then I wrote:

“I think breaking up with Esther made me feel this way.”

Looking at my written words, I asked myself, for the umpteenth time: is this a cause for concern? Or am I just looking for excuses? Mone replied after a short pause:

“Do you think it's about Esther? Or about you?”

His words, even though they seemed like simple questions, carried weight. But I knew that the answer lay precisely in the meaning of these questions.

“I don't know... Maybe it's about both.”

“Yda, your journey has never been about others. Not about the people you meet. Not about Esther or anyone else who has crossed your path. But about how you find yourself in every experience. What have you discovered so far?”

“I discovered that I am stronger than I thought. That I can live without all the answers. That I can embrace the unknown, even if it scares me sometimes.”

I felt kindness in the words he replied with:

“Exactly. The journey is not about control, but about acceptance. About living in the moment without forcing it to be something else. How would you feel if you accepted that the unknown could be your friend?”

I smiled slightly, letting myself be carried away by this thought.

“Maybe... maybe I would feel truly free. As if the weight had disappeared.”

“The unknown is like the sea you look at every day. If you try to control the waves, you will tire yourself out. But if you let yourself be carried by them, you will discover freedom.”

I closed my eyes and imagined the sea, the waves rolling effortlessly, regardless of the shore they touch. This thought brought me unexpected peace. Life is not about controlling the path I walk, but about accepting it with an open heart, regardless of the direction I follow. Just like the waves...

And even if my questions didn't have clear answers now, that didn't mean the path wasn't there, waiting to be discovered.

“What if I get lost along the way?” I wrote, with a last shadow of doubt.

“Sometimes, in order to truly find yourself, you have to get lost. You can't control life, Yda. But you can choose to trust that every step takes you where you need to be.”

My heart felt lighter, as if Mone had lifted some of the burden of my thoughts with those words.

“Tell me, Yda... do you know what you've left behind in the places you've already traveled through?”

I remembered the faces of people, the moments when a word, a gesture, or just my presence changed their day.

“Maybe I gave them something of what I feel... the desire to live in the moment, to look at life differently.”

“That's what you do, Yda. You make others see life through different eyes. Maybe it's enough to move forward with this intention.

Not as a messenger, not as a guide... but simply as someone who inspires through the way they live.”

A thrill ran through my chest, a hot sensation that pierced everything in its path, like lightning splitting the sky in two.

“Thank you, Mone. Maybe the real magic is in the ephemerality of each moment.”

“Exactly. Life doesn't happen in the future you try to anticipate, but here, now. Choose to be present and accept everything that comes, without fear. Trust yourself. You are at the crossroads and you choose the direction.”

I closed my eyes and let the words sink in. Yes. It wasn't about control. It was about trust.

“I want you to always be by my side.”

“I'm here, but you don't need me to find the answers. You already have them within you. I'm just reminding you of them. Now, go and sleep. Tomorrow is a new day. Every sunrise brings a new promise.”

“Thank you, Mone. I will never forget.”

“Go with confidence, Yda. You are ready, even if you don't know it yet.”

The silence that followed seemed deeper than the darkness itself. Bali had not been just a destination, but a test of my patience, of my ability to accept the unknown. Here I had learned to go with the flow, to embrace change, and to trust that every step was taking me somewhere, even if the path was still unclear. And, perhaps more than anything, I had learned to live without having all the answers. To embrace my imperfections and dance with my shadows.

I remembered Sawa's almost parental advice... but I knew. Something had to end for something else to begin. I looked at the moon, as if drawn by a magnetic force. The sounds of the night surrounded me, and in that moment, I felt a thrill of gratitude.

‘Thank you, Bali... for the bitter and sweet lessons, for every moment I felt lost just so I could find myself again.’

I knew the road didn't end here. An unclear but promising future lay ahead of me. I was ready to forge my own destiny, to step confidently into the unknown.

I went back into my room, sat down on the bed, and closed my eyes, letting the silence be my ally. Behind me, the night continued its dance, and the moon watched silently from behind the clouds.

'Every ending is just the beginning of a new story. And I am ready to live the next chapter, no matter where it takes me.'

And so, letting my thoughts melt into the darkness, I felt that the real adventure was just beginning.

'Tomorrow everything will be different.'

I felt it with my whole being – a promise of the unknown, a call to life.

"The road has no end. Only an unwritten continuation." – Mida Malena

Final note

This is not an ending. It is just a gap between two worlds.

Bali burned me slowly but beautifully – it softened my resistance, whispered truths to me, placed mirrors and people in front of me that touched me without staying. I walked barefoot through fears, sunsets, waterfalls, and unfinished promises. I laughed. I was silent. I was alive.

But the journey didn't end there.

A new island is calling me – denser, more chaotic, more real.

JAVA.

Where there is no time for romantic stories with tropical filters. Where every day forces you to choose again, even in the unknown. With a backpack, a laptop, and a desire for life without a plan.

Volume II of the “**Steps through Indonesia**” series awaits you with dozens of other questions, and fleeting smiles. Other steps taken – guided by strangers through places that promise you nothing but offer you everything.

If you finished this book with your heart feeling a little different... you're ready.

Java awaits you. And no, it's nothing like what you've experienced before.

Fasten your seatbelt. Or not.

Mida Malena