The First Lady Boy Imam

On my last day in Bali I was invited to meet the First Lady Boy Imam. I almost didn't hear the call as the loud crowing of the rooster next door was drowning out the buzz of my cell phone. I had never seen the rooster, but it was always there, calling from deep inside each green tattered tropical morning.

It was my friend Marc on the phone, telling me I had to meet this Lady Boy person, but I was hesitating.

It was just the kind of invitation I had been waiting for during the whole year I'd been teaching in Bali, a story that needed telling, a cross cultural wonder. But now I was leaving, going back to San Francisco where I'd left my son and husband. Now I had to finish packing my shadow puppets without breaking their arms, find someone to rent my motorbike, the refrigerator needed cleaning, I'd been up half the night.

"Had you asked me last week Marc I would have been there in a minute, but I'm out of here now. They'll have to go ahead and pave over the rest of this tragic little island without me watching."

I had only met Marc once before. A mutual friend in New York had introduced us via email, as we were both in Indonesia. He was a painter, worldly, and articulate, slightly outrageous. We met one dark and stormy night in Java, at a Jogjakarta hotel when I was there with my 7th graders on a school trip to Borobudur. He had driven around the old city twice before he realized my hotel was around the corner from where he lived. I had fallen into the pool fully dressed on my way to greet him at the front desk. One of my students was sick in bed with a raging fever that might be malaria, and my assistant Salim had "gone out" with his boyfriend.

Perhaps none of that was significant or maybe it was. We had drunk vodka together under the bal roof by the poolside with lightning flashing overhead. When my boy students walked by, Marc had greeted them with friendly remarks like "Darling you are gorgeous, why not come have a swim with me?". Luckily none of the students reported any of this to their parents back in Bali, probably because they knew what I knew about their three-hour truth or dare game behind the Shiva Temple in Prambanan. Like I always told them "Knowledge is power." Still it had all been a little nerve-wracking. I'm actually a dedicated teacher, in my own way. I had come to Bali to start up a middle school program at a private-expat school and it was done. Teaching adolescents is sort of like living inside *King Lear* every single day; good girls, bad boys, mental breakdowns, and at that moment I was weary.

"But I need you, who knows something about Islam is why!" Marc was pleading. By "knowing something" he meant only more than he. I've taught comparative religion, and make it a point to include some Islamic history in school curricula since the stark absence of it in most schools strikes me as problematic. Marc went on to explain how his "partner" (a word he pronounced with exaggerated respect) Kahmie, was about to take on the role of Imam from his Javanese family, which included a long line of Imams. He would become the main teacher at his mother's Koranic boarding school near Jogjakarta. Kahmie was also a Lady Boy, Southeast Asian slang for queer or queen. The way Marc saw it, Kahmie could be a key force in the redemption of radical Islam around the world, by first incorporating the masculine/feminine queer world of tolerance and inclusivity, with the devotion and moral uprightness of Islam. He would be the First Lady Boy Imam. We just needed to tell his story.

If this all seems slightly overblown and farfetched, it was. Living in a foreign culture inoculates us somewhat to what is strange. If the operation of the commonplace seems exotic and mysterious, the music in the bushes, the spices in the chicken, the giant procession of corpses in

the cremation ceremony in front of your window, then how can you tell when something is really off? It's tricky.

Plus, I had my reasons for believing in the Lady Boy. I had just read of a group of "waria" or men living as ladies, in Jogjakarta, (the old capital city of Java) so Marc's story seemed plausible. There were some 300 waria in one community who had founded their own mosque because the traditional separation between men and women during Islamic prayers was so problematic for them. Which side were they supposed to sit on?

"Alright, I said. I'll meet you. Where?"

"The Hotel is Panorama 1 in Legian, Room 24, We'll be there all day. Bring your computer and a recorder."

The traffic on Jalan Seminyak was usually crammed at this hour, a belching jumble of trucks carrying bare chested Javanese workers to a hundred construction sites, tinted buses carrying Australians from Perth, and families of five on motorbikes carrying ladders and TV's But today, obviously in honor of the sacred nature of my pursuit, the way lay open in front of me. My motorbike raced forward into the current of the shimmering asphalt like a loud silver shark.

I leaned through the warm ocean of shining commerce. Sequences of glass fronted boutiques that repeat in magical spawn all over the south island, Rip Curl, Lily Rose, Bamboo Blond, 69 Slam, Havianas, batiks, Buddhas, bags, belts, warung, temple, café. The woman selling flopping fish from her styrofoam cooler on the broken pavement in front of the temple, the man grilling satay a few feet away. After a few kliks it begins all over again Rip Curl, Lily Rose, fish woman, satay man, warung, temple, café, these sites reproducing like Hindu gods and their avatars and their avatars' avatars in every direction.

I was getting closer to Legian. The tropical sun brushed my bare legs and arms with it's familiar sting. The Balinese ride in jackets and long pants despite the heat or because of it. But I liked feeling what was in the air, hardy American that I am. Layers of volcanic grit and dust blowing off the construction sites collected on my skin, and every night I showered off a little progress. Between the flat where I lived and the school where I worked there had been five multi-story concrete hotels built within the year. The school itself was moving to get away from the "congestion in Seminyak," to one of the last stretches of rice paddy in South Bali. The handsome English head of the school board had taken me in his Land Rover to see the site one day.

The rice hung heavy on the bright green stalks, bent over with their own weight, shimmering in the breeze. Channels of clear water purred between the burms of earth heaped up to make walkways. When the rice begins to ripen in Bali the farmers string a network of wires across the field and tie rags to the wires. An old woman's job is to sit in the small hut in the middle of the field, where one of the wires runs, and to shake it periodically to keep the birds away. In the verdant field the rags were fluttering, while giant black kites buzzed overhead like movie vampires. Butterflies, indigo and neon blue caught the light. All around life quivered in wind and water.

I was supposed to show excitement at the prospect of the new school covering all this over, but I could only mourn the loss of the rice field; it's delicate green geometry, mirrored in water that mirrored the sky. This field now, then the one next door. Strangely, they seemed to have no sense that this Umalas location would of course, in a matter of a few years, be exactly like the former one in Seminyak, too crowded and hemmed in. These were not locals, whom it could be argued had never seen the long term damage of overdevelopment, and thus could not predict it's consequences, but urban folk from London and Tokyo. Like my guide that day, James whose clothing business was reliant on the tourist industry he was in the process of killing off. Had the natural logic of cause and effect somehow been suspended here? Was it the seen and unseen, spinning out of balance again? Was it something about Bali that made them blind? Blind

greed? I tried to be agreeable at school, because I really was grateful for the chance to be there, but I kept getting caught between the expat admin and my conscience. My husband said I rebelled no matter what culture I was in, but it wasn't that. And it sounds snobby I know, but a lot of the white people there seemed strangely stupid. Like their brains had been taken hostage by a local demon.

Much has been written of the Balinese concepts of *sekola* and *neskola*, roughly translated as the seen and unseen. Anthropologists use these ideas to describe the vast network of loyalties & laws that govern the spiritual universe of Balinese Hinduism. The daily offerings, in a hundred thousand doorways of tiny palm baskets filled with gold and magenta flower petals are left for unseen gods and goddesses. The island's architecture is itself designed to hold the invisible; a myriad of mossy stone temples with empty niches just waiting for spirits who might want to come and nest. *Sekola* is all that is visible, the flower offerings, the dancers' glittering sarongs, the stark black outline of the wayang puppets against the white screen, moving by an invisible – *neskola* - hand. But in my experience I found that this dynamic is also used in reverse. In Bali sometimes what can easily be seen, is imagined to not exist at all. It's a shifting dynamic and hard to know which side of it you are on at any given moment.

This willful un-seeing-ness happened in many ways. One Saturday morning, I was headed to the beach near Ku De Ta, (a popular club), not far from my flat. As I approached a bevy of Australian tourists warned me that high tide had covered the beach. The ocean was up to the stairs that lead down to the sand and something else was there too. About three hundred plastic water bottles floating in the swirling water, apparently spilled from some container at the club. These bottles would, in a very few minutes, be swept out to sea with the outgoing tide. I looked at the knot of tourists certain that everyone was about to take action, right? They were just getting bags? I waited a few minutes. Ecological emergency here? Was there something I didn't

understand? Then it dawned on me. I jumped into the knee deep water and began pitching the bottles up the embankment of the beach, I grabbed arm loads and pitched, I grumbled and cursed. I felt crazed, and frightened by the drone-like apathy around me. Finally, a young man from the club brought some garbage bags and began gathering with me. Soon the beach was clear. I knew that it hadn't been the pollution that had pressed the club into action, but the problem of this crazy white lady making a scene. Seen and Unseen. Were those plastic bottles a type only I could see? What forces of denial were working on the other fifty onlookers? Neskola? The island is not choking under an onslaught of pollution and rampant over development. No. There are no endless traffic jams, no hare-lipped four year olds begging in front of the Polo boutiques. Bali is a paradise after all.

Just ask the folks at the Last Gasp of Colonialism Club (as I call it). The "club" is a vast white McMansion with pillars and a smoking room; thin blond women with personal trainers on the green lawn, large men with British accents in wicker chairs on the verandah being served cold drinks by dark skinned local men summoned with a snap of the fingers. This was where my supposedly very progressive dedicated to world peace school, held all it's meetings. Joseph Conrad would feel at home there, no one in San Francisco would believe me if I described it. I understood how it could happen but I had trouble understanding why the locals put up with it.

My Balinese friend Komong tried to explain, begging that I wouldn't take offense. The things is that from a Balinese point of view a bule (white person) like myself is not exactly a real person, so not held to the same standards they hold for each other. I'm guessing that by extension, the things bules did, like pave over all the rice fields, pollute the air and water, choke the beaches with plastic bottles, and pay Balinese workers a quarter of what they paid other whites for the same work, was also not exactly "real." Bules were in the same realm as ghosts or other demons that shared the island; beings who had to be constantly placated, recognized, and tolerated.

Invasions of demons are a familiar theme in Balinese culture, their presence is enacted in the Barong dances, the Wayang shows, and especially on Nyepi, the New Year when giant effigies, Ogoh Ogoh's are paraded through the streets. Heroic in size and sprouting bloody fangs and pendulous breasts, Ogoh Ogoh's are helpful demons, visible ones, chasing out the sneaky crooked demons hiding in the alley ways. Each neighborhood makes an Ogoh Ogoh. The boys at my neighborhood temple had started a month before the holiday, in front of the temple you could follow the construction as they bent bamboo stalks into a skeleton complete with delicate palm stalk fingers and toes, then later wrapped in layers of plaster, foam or papier mache. I happened to ride by the day they were painting it's tusk-like white fangs with red blood or paint that dripped onto the pavement and onto my tire, where a spot stayed for a few days.

Nyepi, is the ultimate Balinese holdiday. Everything comes to a screeching halt. The radio and TV stations shut down, the airport closes, traffic stoops, streets are cleared. A night and day of silence is enforced across the island. It was a miraculous day for me, a day when the machinery of the modern world was unplugged, turned off. People stay home in the spacious quiet of shifting sunshine. At night, no lights are lit. Silence and darkness is imposed to trick any lurking malevolent spirits (who have just been expunged from the island in a great series of purification ceremonies) from noticing that any living beings are left on the island. Seeing nothing of interest the evil passes on. I sometimes wondered if my Balinese friends weren't applying the same strategy to the real onslaught of their island, waiting for it to pass with a "keep quiet and hope that it goes away," attitude. And yet for the Balinese this is not a hopeless or lazy impulse, rather a quality of the utmost strength. An attitude that says "I will withstand whatever development occurs. I will remain whole and proud within this, continuing to do what it is I have always done." After all, these are the folks who thoroughly freaked out the invading Dutch army in 1906, by marching toward the army in burial clothing, in a uniquely Balinese mass suicide ritual known as a puputan. Humiliation is not an option. Going on within an unseen but greater scheme of things seems almost tangible in Bali.

Like the traffic I was in that day, which was flowing on (relatively) effectively without stop signs, or traffic lights, and few rules of any kind. Suddenly, out of an alleyway a man came on a motorbike with a giant plastic tank of fish on the back, the fish swimming as they rode. Drivers entering from a side street wait for an opening and go, drivers coming the other way let them in, each driver has the right of way, no horns blow. In Bali's traffic no one person's destination is more important than another's in this sense of a larger flowing community of give and take.

A ceremonial procession led by the clanging gongs of a gamelon was crossing the street up ahead, the traffic stopped. I could see the banners waving, the sea of white clothes, the pyramids of fruit and offerings towering over the women's heads. I thought of my friend Santi, I had been up late with the night before. She called me her other mother. She was recovering from the recent breakup with her fiancé. A young professional woman with a masters degree from the university in Bali, she is beautiful and elegant, speaks perfect English, texts on her cell phone constantly and is dedicated (as are most of the Balinese women I met) to her Hindu religious practice. "I can't give up my religion" she says "ever." She is always visiting a water-shrine here or there, a plastic bag full of offering baskets hanging from the handlebars of her pink motorbike. Independent as she is, Santi lives in an unseen web of ancient restrictions, trailing far into the dim lit realms of the dead and departed. If there are no sons in a Balinese family, a daughter has to take on the son's role, and as the second daughter in her family she had been given the house with the temple that contained the ashes of her father's parents. The problem with the fiancé, an IT director she had dated in college, was that if he married her he would have to move into this house in Denpasar, because she could not ever move. But for a Balinese man there is a huge loss of status to have to go and live at a house belonging to a woman. A man wants to go to his own house. This problem was intractable and he had called off the engagement after three years. I tried arguing.

"Santi can't you like, move the ancestors? Are they in like an urn or something? Can't you take them with you?

"You can, but it requires a huge and expensive ceremony, and they may not want to move. It could upset them."

"Well can't the fiancé get over himself, if he loves you? And just move in?"

"He could but his mother controls him and won't let him."

"But that can't be right, that you can't marry the man you love because of dead people, it's not right! "

But it is. What has gone before is in control of now. In America we like to wax romantic about the social cohesiveness of traditional cultures, mostly because we never have to make the personal sacrifices that those cultures require.

Scholars differ on the dates when Hinduism came to Bali, though the faith was well established in Indonesia by the 5th Century CE. Buddhism followed, and Islam came later, in the 14th Century. While these faiths swirled across the islands, the Balinese retained their particularly artistic version of Hinduism; which was mixed with ancestral and animist practices from the start. Now there is a growing Muslim population in Bali (about 10% of the total) most of whom come from Java, or other parts of Indonesia to work in tourist related industries.

When Marc called I had almost suggested he call my friend and co-teacher Salim instead. Salim knew a lot. His Muslim family had been part of a goverenment sponsored resettlement project in the 1980's from over-crowded Java to Sulawesi, they had carved out a rice field from the virgin rain-forest. As a child Salim had played in the jungle with mouse-deer and monkeys. After primary school, he had been educated at a Koranic school, the only school available in the jungle. His teachers were so dedicated that they taught students for free after their day jobs. Salim regaled me with stories of traveling to school in a rowboat across an inlet of the South China Sea during a tsunami; how he spent his mornings before school gathering rattan vines out of the

jungle to pay for books. The Koranic school helped get him into university and thus to this teaching job in English, in Bali. Salim likes to participate in Balinese Hindu ceremonies in full traditional Javanese dress, yet still leaves school every Friday afternoon for prayers at the Mosque. He also likes to play the violin, watch Japanese movies, and other men. Being Muslim in Indonesia has a fluid cultural nature that is totally unlike the Islam I lived with when I taught in Morocco. It is also a way of Islam we rarely hear of in the West.

I turned off the main drag into a green tunnel of a road to Panorama 1, an old style hotel of brick bungalows scattered among a lush green garden. I parked my motor-bike under a giant banyan tree, its lower trunk wrapped in black and white checkered cloth. The cloth represents balance in Bali, dark, light, seen, unseen. It seems strange at first, the dressed up banyans, but after while big trees without skirts look naked, almost obscene.

My doubts about the Lady Boy Imam were brought to a point when I asked the smiling Balinese woman at the front desk, for Marc Weismann, Room 25.

She frowned and shook her head. "No one that name."

"That's strange, he said room 25"

"Are they locals?"

" No, not from here."

"No, no men this name check in."

"There were two, two men."

"Check in when?"

"Yesterday.

"No one check in yesterday. Look no one. " She flipped through the handwritten pages of a giant old ledger book to show me. Most of the pages were empty.

"Room 25 is empty" she said. She repeated pointing to her empty ledger. "Noone in that room."

Is this a ploy I wondered, could there be a reason this woman doesn't want me to meet the First Lady Boy Imam. Does she suspect me of being an angry wife perhaps, a family member? Suddenly I doubted the whole undertaking, had Mark left, was it the wrong address, was he drunk? I tried the concierge one last time.

"Are you sure. Two men, one bule, one Indonesian, from Jogjakarta."

"Oh from Jogja." Her expression changes, "I asked local, you say no local. I know Kahmie, my friend. I show you." She led me through the lush garden of the mango trees, heliconia, a hedge of banana bushes, and then a brick bungalow # 25. The door to their room, to their tryst, to their intereligious consummation, stood open onto the balmy afternoon; they lay together on shabby unmade bed in the middle of the room.

As I greeted Marc, Kahmie, clad only in boxer shorts bounded up and quickly disappeared into the bathroom. "He's so modest," Marc added, so proper about everything."

As he rose from the bed wearing his orange striped swimming trunks, Marc put on his rose tinted sunglasses. Marc is never clear about his origins, he is Jewish; Dutch, or German, grew up Amsterdam, mother an aristocrat in Jerusalem. He has some small inheritance that allows him to live and paint in Jogjakarta, to travel with Kahmie.

"Just wait until you talk to him," Marc said referring to Kahmie in the third person even though he could hear us. Marc went for a swim. Kahmie was about 25, a skinny boy with fierce eyes and a spikey-topped haircut, an unfiltered cigarette in his hand. We sat on the stoop, in front of the room talking. "Yes I might take over the school from my Mother, now that my father is gone. Would you like see it?"

On a laptop, he was showing me his "movies." Footage of the Koranic school in Jogjakarta came on. On the screen one of the girls from the school was getting married, she was dressed in a heavy "jilbab" (Indonesian for the hijab) and layers of blue and lavendar satin. She looked hot, another girl was fanning her as she sat in a doorway. The camera followed the young

girls in the school as they walked around the compound in their long blue skirts, white blouses, coming and going to some mythic destination. Cut. The next film was of Kahmie in black leather pants and tight black jacket singing lead in a rock band in front of stone wall, to an invisible audience, strutting, swaggering. Cut to a sort of spacey biopic of Marc talking, next to one of his atmospheric sky paintings about his work, then a close up of his face, and then a close up of his cup of espresso, then his face. And the end.

"You like film?" I ask.

"Yes I like make film, but when Marc is here" and here he gives me a conspiratorial look, rolls his eyes, "I have no time."

I begin to like Kahmie then. Marc is in his way. He tolerates Marc. Who tolerates who. Kahmie is embarrassed he says by Marc's Stories. Maybe he said, I will teach at the school. Maybe not. Not sure. He lit another cigarette and went on.

"My father, he was traditional, students come to learn Koran but also to learn old values, not to be too proud to work in the rice field, like some students are who go to school. Our school teach old ways are OK."

Marc returned still in the third person. "Did he tell you about walking around Jogja with his mother? Tell that story Kahmie"

When he walked around Jogjakarta with his mother she wore a jilbab, long sleeves and a long skirt. He wore a tee-shirt that said "F me I'm gay" Only a few people could read the English, those who could laughed and the mother asked "Why are people laughing?" And Kahmie, feigning innocence said, "I have no Idea."

Our conversation was in turn awkward and easy. "Did he tell you what happens when certain men from Afghanistan come to visit the compound." "Tell her" Marc urges. "Who?" asks Kahmie apparently puzzled. "When the terrorists come looking for recruits, what does your mother do? "She says no, there is no-one who wants to go with you. Every child comes, she is

their mother, and they are like her children. She must give them back to their parents. Sometimes they want to talk, to boys my mother says the school is closed that day."

We walk to a nearby Japanese restaurant for lunch, Marc resplendent in an orange striped blazer, and Brooks brothers shirt with cufflinks, despite the intense heat. He is looking for a bank where he might pick up a money transfer from a gallery in Munich. Kahmie lags behind. "Oh my Gosh he likes you" Marc says, usually he never talks to anyone, but he's talking to you.

I want to ask Marc if he can know how this all looks to me. The wealthy older white man, the younger Asian boy. The implied prostitution, though no money changes hands. Is it just what it looks like? Am I bringing my own prejudice to bear, importing it from a place where things seem more clearly defined. The street is bordered by a stone wall, and beyond it an inviting canopy of vining jungle greenery that invites a closer look. I peer over the wall to discover a huge rotting pile of garbage, plastic bottles and bags. "I did the same thing" Marc offers. "You look at that view, and it's like Wow. Then you look closer and vomit."

Over lunch at the Japanese restaurant they sit on opposite sides of the table and I try to gauge their connection. The power is clearly in the hands of the older man. Khamie smokes cheap cigarettes, the stench makes me cough. He is what to Marc; a sociology project, an easy fuck, or perhaps a true love? Who am I to say. Here is a man intrigued with another man's history. Or destiny. The European sophist, hungry for the simplicity of the Asian peasant. But of course he's not simple. Is Kahmie burdened with Marc, Marc's need to advertise their relationship, or Marc with Kahmie; with his story, with his potential? Everything is in part at least what it looks like, but often more than it appears, or less than. Sekola, neskola? It is beautiful or tawdry. It is as it seems to me or very different than it seems. I ate teriyaki with the two men knowing there was really no story about the Lady Boy Imam. But maybe something else. I saw that Bali had taught me finally this beautiful uncertainty, in which all things were possible in any given moment.

I was going home tomorrow.

END.