



## **Blessed by a Gecko**

She was beautiful -especially for her species. I stepped gently closer to the wall and looked up at her, splayed there. She had some intricate lines on her body, which was shaped more like a bug than the typical longer form, and her chubby feet actually looked quite cute. I stared and thought to myself, maybe I can understand why my boys find these creatures cute.

Geckos as they call them. A cute name, too.

But I knew them by their more ferocious name...Lizards!

Stuff of childhood nightmares. I remembered so many nights watching them, quiveringly, scrunched under the bedsheets, as they slowly moved across the wall towards the bugs in the tube-light area. Knowing that if the light got turned off, they would not be there. But yet wanting to keep the light on, because at least you knew where they were! There was no right answer.

And then, sometimes, there would be the scramble to shoo them away. Such a messy operation. Lots of hitting and banging with a stick. And if the stick struck it, horror of horrors, it would just drop its tail and dart away.

That wiggling tail on the ground created its own separate set of childhood nightmares.

Here, in my room in Gianyar, Bali, I stood, wondering what was the smartest and kindest thing to do. Vipassana meditation had taught me to not kill any insects intentionally (except mosquitoes!), so, on my tropical Southeast Asia trip I had mostly been co-existing with all the critters - sometimes quite uneasily. With the lizards I had an awkward pact. I let them have the run of the walls, while I just pulled my bed to the center of the room. As long as they stayed on the walls, what they did was their business.

But this lizard - this Balinese cousin of Indian lizards - was a more adroit creature! She did not - as they should all do - stealthily move or stay in one place on the wall. Instead, she was all over - darting, jumping...almost flying! That was scary. Moving the bed would not work here, as she could easily land into it - on me. I shuddered.

Then I hurried downstairs to get the night guy on duty at the reception. But when we came back to the room, of course, she was no more to be seen.

She popped out again as soon as he left, so I rushed out and caught him at the stairs. Slowly we crept back in. Again she darted behind the curtains. I tensed.

Then this guy suddenly left the room. I became anxious; I knew our communication was not the smoothest because of the language barrier, but I hoped it was clear to him that I needed him to do something about this creature, and not leave me stranded.

But he did return, to my relief. This time he had a broom, which he held backward, and a feather brush.

He pulled back the curtains, and gently tapped the glass. She reappeared, and he took the stick close to her.

“Don’t kill her!!” I yelled.

He paid no attention to me, and gently tapped the stick at a point on the wall close to her body. She skipped to the adjoining window. Miraculously it was on the wall that had the main door out. Wow, progress! I flung open the doors to hasten her exit, not worrying about potentially inviting new creatures in.

Again he tapped near her, and again she moved...again, and again...a couple of inches at a time. I could see he was guiding her in the right direction.

Then she came low to the ground.

“Use the brush!” I jumped up and down. “Use the brush!”

He paid no heed to me, and gave another tap, which brought her to the floor. Promptly, I jumped up on the bed.

“Use the brush!” “Sweep her out!” I went on.

Instead, he reached out with his hand and, with precise two fingers - “Don’t kill it! Eeks, don’t squeeze it!” - he gently held lifted her by her head, carried her outside, and released her.

Whew. I signed with relief and amazement. Never in my life had I seen a lizard operation carried out with such finesse. “Wow, you are very good,” I exclaimed. He grinned, and folded his hands in a Namaste.

I was later told that, in the Balinese Hindu beliefs, geckos are considered to be highly spiritually significant.

A few weeks later, I was at a different place in Bali, and found myself sharing the night with an even bigger gecko, which, mercifully, I did not see since it was in the roof beams.

But right above my head, he kept me awake the entire night, calling out in a mournful tone, “*oh...no... oh...no...*”

This would go on for some five minutes every twenty minutes, preceded by some kind of woodpecker-like scraping sound, that would wake me up in a start as soon as I began nodding off.

The locals said it is actually called “ToKo,” as in, “*to...ko...to...ko...*,” and that I should feel particularly blessed.

I changed my room anyway.

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The Balinese philosophy for a harmonious life is called “ *Tri Hita Katana*”, or Three Causes of Goodness, which are the three key relationships: with the Divine, with fellow Humans, and with Nature. I love that nature is placed on equal footing with the deities, in fact I learnt that Balinese temples do not house any idols, instead provide empty space to pray to the divinity all around.

One of the most beautiful spiritual practices is that of the daily offerings to the earth and space. These offerings, made of gaily colored flowers, rice, water, food, and fragrant incense - all arranged in a beautifully woven bamboo basket - are offered everyday, placed on multiple surfaces in all directions, in front of stores, doorways, at the edge of pavements, on tables, on the steps to the beach... One has to be careful not to disturb them while walking on the streets.

Making those bamboo containers seemed to be a thriving cottage industry, I would see many shopkeepers sitting on a stool to the side, busy weaving bamboo strips, even while selling other goods - like shoes or clothes. I loved seeing how much natural, hand-made manufacturing is still happening here!

It felt like a bygone era from India - where, sadly, plastic and synthetic materials seem to have invaded the shops. What used to be easily obtainable cotton clothes, have been replaced by synthetics, their prints yet of those evoking summer freshness or brocade silk. It feels like cheating. Even the retailers often do not know the difference, as there are no labeling controls.

I remember trying to find a cotton bag in India, to replace one that I had picked off the streets in Mumbai a couple of years ago. Now, nothing - only synthetic bags. It was very frustrating.

In Bali, I got a cotton bag right away. The plethora of fabric options was quite breathtaking. In fact, it was all a shoppers paradise for me, with all things natural and handmade -finely woven cane products, intricately carved stone and wood products, bamboo crafts, leather goods, silver jewelry, beads, incense. I salivated my way through all the shopping streets of Ubud.



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## Scooter Adventures

One day I decided to rent a scooter and take a ride from Amed - the beach area where I was staying - to a couple of tourist spots in the mountains. It was a lovely ride up, along a well-maintained road, with lush greenery on both sides.



Soon I came up on the bright green terraces of rice paddies. I pulled over to a *warung* (a local restaurant) with a fantastic view of the paddies; it was overlooking a vast bowl-shaped scene of rolling green fields, as far as the eye could see, cradled by blue mountains. I ordered a fresh young coconut, and spent a lovely hour sipping it, watching the breeze rippling through the fields.

Then I drove ahead to a supposedly famous tourist spot, the Tirta Gangga, but it was such a disappointment. I came out in five minutes - so far short from the four hours that the folks had said one could spend here!



It was too early to head back, so - after indulging in a long lunch - I decided to take a longer way back, going down the other side of the mountain, and driving along the water, lopping around the island to come back to Amed.

On the way down, I came across a stunningly beautiful area, and couldn't resist pulling over for an impromptu stop. It was the Taman Jung Water Palace, infinitely more gorgeous than the Tirta Gangga - laid out with serene ponds bordered by ancient trees and terraced flower gardens. The palace itself blended Dutch, Chinese and Balinese architecture in an interesting way. I spend two hours there, quietly

walking up and down; there were not many crowds, which was really nice. I was so relieved and happy that my trip was not wasted, and floated out of there, ready to head back after a lovely day accomplished.

Unfortunately things went downhill from there. Or maybe that's not quite the right word - since downhill was exactly the direction I was seeking... but the road kept taking me uphill!

Indeed, the road that had looked parallel to the water in the map, was quite parallel... only it was two thousand feet



above it! Not something that is shown in a Google Map, and I rued not checking it out with someone local.

Nevertheless, I started on the path, hoping that I would soon reach the beach level. But the road went on and on, deeper into the jungle. My scooter was a measly 10 HP Honda Scooty, and she groaned at the steepness. Soon the road started getting poorer too, with pot holes that I bumped over, and even washed out in many parts. I started getting worried. There were not many other vehicles either —the cars that were with me at the beginning had dropped off some ways back, and now only an occasional motorcyclist crossed me.

But there was yet daylight at 4 pm in the afternoon, so I continued on.

At every curve where the road tended slightly downwards I felt a surge of hope - now, *now*, we are finally going to the beach level! But alas it relentlessly curved back into the hills, and I would grit my teeth and climb up yet another curve. The sea shimmered sometimes in the far distance, giving me a

clear idea of how far away I actually was! The scenes were gorgeous, yet I didn't stop to take any photos...couldn't stop actually because there was no way I could slow down that scooter on that incline without it rolling backwards.

Then I started getting worried about the fuel, which was dipping below the 40% mark. But there were no petrol stations to be seen on the way - how did the people who live here get petrol? The couple of Pertamina stations that I had passed on the way looked broken down. I rode on, keeping an anxious eye on the fuel tank, and telling myself I have no choice - was there any other direction I could go?

Reassuringly, I also periodically passed small clusters of hamlets and some shops, people sitting outside their homes, nonchalantly chatting, some glancing up at me - a grim faced woman in a helmet, a rare sight on that road. Seeing them comforted me. I told myself that in the worst case scenario I would just stop at one of the hamlets, throw myself at their mercy, and call the rental company to pick up the vehicle...from who knows how many feet up in these godforsaken mountains!

Finally after an hour or so of driving, and now feeling really scared and worried about the petrol, I pulled to a stop in front of a small shop selling an assortment of snacks, plastic goods, few fruits and vegetables. A man stepped out wearing some kind of uniform, and thankfully he knew a bit of English. I showed him my map and asked if I was on the right road to Amed.

“Yes,” he said.

I was quite shocked to hear that actually. All the weird contortions I had done so far were indeed part of a legitimate road? It did not seem so!

Then I asked him about the petrol stations and if there was one coming up soon, as I was running out of petrol.

“Right here!” he said, and pointed to a set of plastic water bottles lined up on a table, filled with some kind of greenish-blue liquid.

Aaah.

This was what was done in these parts. Petrol sold by a bottle.

I had passed so many of such shops! Duh.

Promptly, I bought one bottle and poured it into the fuel tank of the scooter.

Feeling steadier after this small victory, I calmed down, and soldiered on. It took me another one hour of jolting and bumping before I finally reached an area I recognized. When the first signs advertising “Spa Massage” and “Dive Shop” appeared, I welcomed them with immense relief.

It was late evening by the time I returned the scooter, my legs trembling.

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