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Non-Fiction Assignment  
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## **Finding Paradise Within**

After a series of unpleasant birthdays, I decided to travel to Bali in celebration of my thirtieth trip around the sun. I had never travelled alone, but I needed a change of setting as I was deciding whether or not to quit my high paying job to go back to school in pursuit of a writing career.

Two days before my flight, I started feeling a sharp pain on the right side of my abdomen. I thought it was food poisoning—damn that burrito—but the pain continued. I was wheeled into the hospital an hour later, crying and vomiting while giving my information to the indifferent lady at reception who just said, “We must follow check-in procedure.” I was left in the waiting room feeling as though a volcano was erupting from my insides, and howled much to my own horror, but couldn't control what my body was doing to my mind. I was quickly moved to a room in the emergency as I was scaring people in the lobby. After two hours of being shushed by nurses, the doctor finally came in with morphine to silence me, and after blood tests and an ultrasound, it was finally revealed: a kidney stone. The pain is said to be worse than childbirth.

I told the doctor I would be travelling in the next couple of days and he made me sign a form that advised me not to go until the stone passed. The worst that could happen was another crisis inside an airplane that could be prevented with medication, so I went to my family doctor

who gave me a prescription for Percocet, and off I went to Indonesia with a bottle of opiates—a country that has a death penalty for carrying drugs.

At the Vancouver airport, I went to the bathroom and noticed something similar to a grain of sand on the toilet paper. I realized I had just passed the stone and was glad I didn't follow the doctor's recommendations. When I arrived in Denpasar, the afternoon air dampened my clothes and hair, but I remained unbothered as the greenery on the side of the road and the dogs, chickens, cows and scooters crossing from all sides held my attention during the cab ride to the hotel. The next morning I sat in the eating area that opened to the road and munched on a delicious combination of rice, eggs and vegetables called Nasi Goreng. A young woman with braided long black hair who was wearing a simple dress approached me to explain how it was "Easy, easy" to get around the island on a scooter. I had never ridden a scooter before, but my dazed-self thought it was a plausible idea, so I put on the little pink helmet, rode down the wrong side of the tree-lined road, around the curve, and straight into a concrete ditch. With the surge of adrenaline, I didn't even look for injuries until a tanned man with rough skin and hands typical of a rice plantation worker stopped to help and winced as the blood gushed from my knees and elbows. A woman with long straight black hair dressed in a colourful sari and carrying several grocery bags stopped to help as well and they both walked the scooter and I up the hill. The man couldn't stop laughing, and I knew that "Tourist" was the word on his mind.

Back at the hotel, the three generations of the family-owned business ran out to meet me. The women covered their widened mouths with their hands while their eyes stared at me with concern, but the man marched towards the scooter and yanked it from my hands.

“You could damage the bike! You rich girl? You have money to pay for new bike?” he said as I stood in shock.

After confirming the bike sustained the crash, I asked if I could be excused and ran up to my room. I sat down on the edge of the bed noticing my shallow and rapid breathing. In a brief moment of clarity, while looking down at the red river of fear flowing out of my limbs, I realized I had two options: I could either let the adversities stop me from enjoying my trip, or I could make this the best adventure of my life.

I bawled for thirty minutes straight, feeling all the pain, despair, and loss in all its strength. I got up, got washed, and limped to the open lobby. The short and hunchbacked matriarch held a little bottle between her hands and motioned for me to sit beside her. The beautiful young woman who served me breakfast earlier appeared saying, “It hurts, but it good.” She held my hand while holding her small child around her lap and smiled while blowing on the raw pieces of flesh to make it feel better as the medication burned like fire.

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

“You’re running this place by yourself?” I asked in shock.

“Family helps.”

“When did he die?”

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

I stood in awe of this young recently widowed woman who still had the strength to smile and treat her guests well. She arranged for a family member to bring me to Pecatu where I had to hop through narrow gaps in the natural limestone formations down hundreds of steps to arrive at the hidden cave in Suluban Beach.

I stopped taking Percocet the next day and toured the island with a hired driver. I woke up to the sweet woody scent of incense and flowers as the residents lined the streets with offerings to their Hindu gods. I ate food in banana leaf plates while looking at rice fields coloured in more shades of green than my brain could gauge. I climbed up and down hundreds of handmade steps to arrive at different beaches and entered the clear water limping and cursing when the line of shells on the sand poked my feet and the salt made my wounds sting. I visited temples on land and in water, virgin forests, and other islands, while the driver (impressed with my determination) just kept repeating, “You a crazy girl!”

Still, for the first time in my life, I felt what it was like to be truly alone, and I wavered from feeling frightened to invigorated. I ate my meals alone, slept alone, and walked alone. I thought I would lose my mind. But then, a beautiful shift: I started being present in my body. I noticed the chirping sounds while I ate *bubur* (sweet rice porridge sometimes wrapped in banana leaves) the driver brought to my hotel as monkeys swung from trees and we stared curiously at each other. The peaceful feeling that staring at water lilies from every colour gave me, and the smiles and looks of concern when people noticed my injuries on the streets. The wrinkles on the face, arms, and hands of an aged lady who offered to give me a massage on the beach and turned out to be the best masseuse I have ever encountered as her hands were strong and skilled even though her body looked fragile. The sound of waves crashing, and the look of glee on Jakartans when asking to take pictures with me. I felt connected to the entire universe.

I decided to quit my job and go to university after seeing a flyer for a book convention that had just ended and wrote my resignation letter after taking a shower in a bathroom that had no ceiling. I made a point to appreciate my surroundings with my own eyes, taking the place in

through my five (or maybe even six) senses rather than through a camera lens. I learned to enjoy my own company and to feel comfortable to sit with my own thoughts.

As the plane took off after two weeks, I looked out the window towards the green landscape I had come to love, and I bawled for the second time. Not from pain, or despair, or loneliness now, but from the feeling of finally finding home: not a physical place, but a place inside my heart. I did not get arrested for taking prescribed opiates into Indonesia, but I became a prisoner of the island anyway. I left Bali, but Bali has never left me.