

# Troppo

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MADELAINE DICKIE  
Troppo



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# 1

The first story I hear about my new boss is in a brothel in Bandar Lampung. I don't realise it's a brothel at first. From the outside it looks like a typical Indonesian beauty salon: pink curtains tacked up in a prayer arch over lace, a gritty 'Salon Kecantikan' sign out the front and a becoming ladyboy at the door, with toilet paper moulded into boobs.

'Hello Missus!' the ladyboy sings, thrusting sideways a sequined hip. 'Bisa saya bantu?' Can I help you?

'Bisa!' The ladyboy leads me to a room furnished with hairdressing chairs and cracked mirrors. There's a girl at one of the mirrors smoothing out a yellow dress that falls just below her undies. She wears cream gloves and stunningly high heels. In a beauty salon in Perth you wouldn't think twice about her outfit. But here in East Sumatra, most women have been covered from head to toe.

She smiles, warily. 'Do you do manicures?' The ladyboy and the girl look at each other; the girl holds her hands behind her back.

'Sorry,' the ladyboy wags his finger from side to side, 'no have manicure.'

'Cream bath?'

'No have.'

'Waxing?'

'No have.'

‘Facial?’

‘No have.’

‘How about a haircut?’

‘A haircut?’ The girl sounds incredulous.

The ladyboy pouts and picks up a pair of scissors. ‘Haircut have!’

Last time I had a cut at a hole-in-the-wall salon my hair looked like the dirty blond wool around the arse of a sheep. ‘Well, Pen,’ said Josh, ‘they made a mess of that.’ But Josh isn’t here and the bus south to Batu Batur doesn’t leave until tomorrow morning. I’d rather spend the afternoon in a beauty salon than nursing my hangover over cups of sweet, weak coffee. ‘Alright. Haircut.’

The ladyboy taps his lips with the tips of his pale fingers and murmurs, ‘I make you beautiful.’

The girl rolls her eyes and arranges herself on one of the frayed seats.

‘So where you from, Missus?’ asks the ladyboy. ‘Already long-time in Indonesia? You already marry? How many children you have?’

A window drops a sud-coloured square of light onto the floor. Outside, two smog-stunned palms shade a courtyard. Doors are arranged around the courtyard in a similar style to a losmen – a motel – only none of the doors are numbered.

The girl stares through the window.

The ladyboy lifts and looses flaps of my hair.

‘Well?’

‘Australian. No husband, no children.’

‘No children, Missus! Hopefully soon, ya?’

A rattle of hot rain hits the window and the ladyboy glances up. Then he goes back to my hair. ‘So where you been in Indonesia?’

'Bali, then a night in Jakarta, now here.'

The ladyboy's eyes blaze. 'Bali! There's many-many party in Bali, ya? Party-party every night!'

I planned on avoiding the Kuta vortex this time, or at least planned on just flirting at the edges of it. Instead, fifty Bintang and a police chase later ...

'Yeah, Bali definitely can be wild.'

'So kenapa kamu disini?' Why you in Lampung? For holiday?

'No, for work. I've got a job.'

'A job? You teach English?'

'I'm going to be managing a surf resort. I don't start for a couple of weeks but I thought I'd come down early, check out the town, have a bit of a break.'

'A resort here in Bandar Lampung?'

'No, Batu Batur.'

At the mention of Batu Batur the girl's head jerks around and her nostrils flare.

The ladyboy casts her a sly look. 'Yuliana used to work in a resort in Batu Batur. Yuliana used to work for Mister Shane. But big problem, ya. She run away here.'

I feel uneasy - Shane's the name of the guy I'll be working for. 'What happened?'

The ladyboy lays down his scissors. The girl bursts out in an angry, rattling dialect. He answers: placating, convincing. Then they fall quiet. The girl tilts her head, just slightly. The ladyboy continues, but softly, 'Mister Shane's Australian, same like you. Yuliana work for him. She work for Mister Shane three year.'

Yuliana is perfectly still. Out in the courtyard one of the doors opens. A man stumbles towards the rear door of the salon, holding a towel over his head.

The ladyboy flicks his tongue over his lipstick and drops his voice to a murmur, 'One night Mister Shane get very, very

drunk. They have a big fight, yelling, yelling. Mister Shane think Yuliana stole money from his guests. So he take a knife. Mister Shane take one big knife –’

The man kicks open the door, throws the towel at the girl, then sees me. He stops, his mouth drops. Then he shakes himself.

‘Hello Missus!’ he says. ‘Where you from?’

Fifteen minutes later I pay for the haircut over a counter at the front of the shop. It’s better than the last one I had in Indo – just a trim of dead ends with no length lost. Through the open door, steam lifts from the road. There’s the smell of roasting satay sticks, of motorbike exhaust and slow-moving sewage. I look back to the ladyboy and lay down an extra fifty thousand rupiah.

‘So what did Mister Shane do with the knife?’

The ladyboy’s smile flattens. He gestures to Yuliana. Yuliana hesitates, looks at the money, then steps forward and peels back a glove.

She’s got no fingers.

## 2

On the bus south to Batu Batur I vomit for eight hours straight into sandwich-sized plastic bags.

Halfway into the trip, I shit myself.

‘Oh fuck. Tell the driver to stop.’

‘Sebentar, sebentar.’ The conductor up the back waves his hand, palm-down, and lights another kretek cigarette.

He obviously hasn’t smelt it yet, but by the time we finally stop at a roadside restaurant, his head is out the window and the seats around me are empty. The restaurant toilets reek of old, pissed-on porcelain. Jumping off the bus here with my gear isn’t an option – there are no rooms and no village nearby, only the hazy midday stretch of rice fields and pandanus palms.

If Josh were with me, he’d hold back my hair while I threw up. Then again, if Josh were with me, we wouldn’t be travelling by local bus. Despite the explosive bout of Bali belly, I’m glad to be alone.

The bus rattles to life. When you hear the bus start up, it’s a sign to get back on. Before long, we’re climbing through a chain of viridescent mountains. The sky is pale, moist, the colour of smoked lemon peels. We reach a straight stretch of road and the driver accelerates. The bus goes faster. And faster. And faster. The windows chatter. The women clutch baskets and children on their laps. To our left, there’s a long drop into a valley and to our right, a crumbling cliff. Up ahead: a blind

corner. The bus groans. We're hurtling toward the corner. My throat tightens. I curl my fingers around the seat in front of me. We swing hard and hit a truck.

\*

It takes a couple of hours for the blokes to fix the bus. I sit hunched on the side of the road with a bleeding cheek and a heaving gut, throw bags of vomit into the valley and watch them explode on the rocks below. By the time we reach Batu Batur around midnight, I'm too weak to lift my rucksack onto my back. A man on the bus helps me, then points me in the direction of a losmen.

### 3

It's hot out on the street. A motorbike sails past, lifting a wing of mud. Across the road a young boy pisses on his toes. I start walking, still dazed with sleep and sick. A wartel. I need to find a wartel to phone Josh. I haven't been in touch since a perfunctory call on my first day in Bali – and the day after, I lost my phone. No doubt he's left messages. No doubt he's worried sick.

Some people lift a hand and yell the ubiquitous and genderless greeting, 'Hello Mister!' Most just stare. Up ahead, the empty racks of a market are wound with plastic and rotting fruit. I quicken my pace when I spot a wartel on the other side.

'Can I call Australia?'

The bloke out the front nods, stubs out his kretek with a toe and leads me inside to the phone box. The walls of the box are on worrying wooden diagonals and the bench inside is chequered with kretek burns and spots of old blood.

'Sebentar,' he says, as he connects the line. Then he gives me another curt nod, 'Sudah.'

A receptionist answers – young and bright and happy. 'I'm sorry. He's just stepped out of the office for lunch. Would you like to leave a message?'

'Can you tell him Penny called?'

'Sure. Penny who?'

'He knows who I am.'

'Okay ... So would you like to leave a number?'

‘No. No number.’

I hang up and go and sit on the doorstep of the wartel. The owner lights a kretek for me and passes it down; it leaves a sweet, clove taste on my lips. Opposite the wartel an old woman is crouched under the shade of a bit of plastic. She swings at a bare-bummed child with her cane. Beyond her there’s a row of shops packed with curious clutters of detail: curling cigarette ads, faded fertility bottles, teabags of shampoo, grey gallons of Aqua. Outside the shops is a line of becak riders, folded up in their bicycle taxis. Their dust-coloured legs are cricked and ricked, their hands shade their faces from the sun. Behind the market, behind the suspended, midday town, towers a mountain range.

It’s eerie, empty, beguiling.

## 4

Ibu Ayu and Bapak Joni run five clean bungalows that leave last night's windowless jigsaw of a losmen for dead. The bungalows are on stilts, leaning among stands of frangipani and enclosed by walls of concrete and broken glass. From each balcony there's a view of the heaving reef-ripped ocean.

'There's only one other guest. He's a surfer. French.' Ibu screws up her nose. 'But no problem, you need motorbike? Board hire? Beer? No problem for this, Missus Penny, we happy you to be our guest!'

Ibu Ayu wears a navy jilbab – a headscarf – and the bell curve of a baby swells under her shirt. When she turns to speak to her husband her voice lifts in light, fluty tones, and she touches his hand. It's rare to see gestures of affection between Indonesian couples in public. Bapak Joni takes her fingers and smiles. He has a mouthful of butter-coloured teeth and his t-shirt strains over a rice-big stomach.

By the time I'm finally settling in to my bungalow it's late afternoon. Squalls of salt and spray lift from the ocean and sweep through the palms and window shutters. Despite still feeling sick, I'm happy to be high up, to feel the afternoon moving, gusting around me. And I like the bungalow: its crooked balcony, the white mosquito net that spills over the bed, the geckos in the thatch.

In the top of my rucksack is a pile of clothes still beer-sour from Bali. I'll wash them tomorrow with a bar of soap and a nailbrush. I pull out my medicine bag. Josh would be aghast if he knew it stocked only a single, poisonous bottle. Betadine Cina is legendary among hardcore Indo travellers and surfers, a dark brown liquid that smells like rust and stings like fuck and heals reef cuts, motorbike burns and even sea-ulcers in a matter of days. Next I pull out my high heels, my hair straightener and finally, a few volumes of poetry.

Once everything is in its place, I feel better. To inhabit a temporary space like this, you have to make an imprint, have to neutralise the energy of all the other travellers who've slept there before you. Although it's only been an hour, there's more of me here than in a year of living with Josh. The interior of his apartment in Scarborough was nearly bare, the furniture spare, the paint job neutral. But it smelled good, like finely ground coffee, citrus, Calvin Klein.

I crash on the bed. The fan turns slack yellow circles in the air. Josh is probably at home cooking dinner. He's an epic cook, turning out contemporary gourmet dishes that put my slapdash stir-fries to shame. If I were home we'd be eating together, then doing the dishes and settling in to watch the ABC's *Foreign Correspondent*. Josh loves the quiet rituals of domesticity. Sometimes it's too much. I end up out midweek, loose and wild at a work party or with the girls at a bar, throwing my eyes and talking to strangers, unable to bear the thought of another unvaried evening. He says it's fine, says I should go out with the girls and do some more solo travel, says he understands how important it is to do this at my age. He's fourteen years older than me. Says he'll wait.

## 5

On Ibu's recommendation I head to town for a feed at the night market. I'm feeling a little better and reckon I can stomach something light. It's early evening and the market is being set up. Light bulbs flicker above warming vats of oil, and kaki lima are wheeled into place. From the outside, kaki lima look like wooden trolleys, but when unfolded, all sorts of compartments jump open, revealing gas bottles, pipes, drawers full of chilli, noodles, rice. Portable restaurants. 'Portable genius,' Josh said after his first thirty-cent meal at a kaki lima in Denpasar. He admired the Indos' inventiveness, though scowled over the unhygienic food prep. 'That woman just used her fingers. Jesus, Penny, do you really think you should eat that?' This sort of caution gave me the shits. As did his refusal to eat anywhere other than the tourist restaurants in the last two weeks of our trip.

After I've done a lap of the market, I perch on a wooden stool in front of a kaki lima selling bakso.

'Lima minut lagi,' the man says. Five more minutes.

The night air is sticky as cut mango.

A local bloke with a sparse but ambitious moustache comes and sits next to me.

'Hello Mister! Where you from?' he asks, resting the side of his foot on his knee and lighting a kretek.

'Australia.'

'You can speak Indonesian?'

'I can.' As a fifteen year old I lived with Dad in Bali for almost a year. Talk about going off the rails. But one good thing to come of it was a near-fluent grasp of the language.

The bakso seller looks up from his pot. 'Sudah pintar,' he affirms.

So we chat and I become animated, eager to move my tongue around the language again. When the man asks if I'm married and how many children I have, I invent three husbands and eight children. The bloke looks utterly bewildered. He shakes my hand without meeting my eyes, says, 'Good to meet you Mister,' and walks off.

That's when I notice him. He's leaning against the kaki lima stand, lifting my bowl of bakso, passing it down to me. 'Eight kids, eh?'

I grin and raise a spoonful to my lips.

'You mind if I join ya?' He pulls up a stool. 'I'm Matt.'

My lips are tingling with chilli. 'Penelope.'

'Nice to meet ya, Penny.'

By this time it's dark. The air is smoky with frying fish scales. Matt's cheek and jaw are kerosene-lit. Not quite handsome.

'You live here?' I ask, after a slow mouthful.

'Yeah, on and off. At the moment on.'

He's in his late twenties or early thirties. Older than me, younger than Josh. He speaks with a slow, sun-damaged drawl – one Aussie expats often affect in the tropics.

'What about yourself? You here for long?'

Work kicks off in a few weeks and then six months, a year? I told Josh I didn't know how long I'd be away.

Well what does that mean? he'd demanded. What does that mean for us?

I dunno, I said. I dunno. You tell me.

Matt's looking at me expectantly.

‘Ahh ... maybe like, maybe for a while.’

‘Oh yeah.’ He nods, like it’s a perfectly coherent answer. ‘So where are you staying?’

‘Just at those bungalows on the beach.’

‘Ibu Ayu’s, eh? She’s lovely. But steer clear of Shane’s Sumatran Oasis if you can. It’s the other main tourist accom here, bit out of town.’

There’s a tapping in my blood. I wasn’t convinced by the ladyboy’s story in Bandar Lampung about the girl’s fingers; I know how ladyboys can be inclined to melodrama. ‘Oh yeah? Why’s that?’

A couple of men crouch nearby in red, grease-stained singlets. Their hands hang between their knees, their heads are cocked.

‘To put it bluntly, the bloke who runs it is a real crazy fucker. Because of him, Batu Batur’s in a pretty tense state. The expatriates are barely tolerated as is, let alone blow-ins like yourself.’

The insult stings. ‘I’m *not* a blow-in! I’ve got a job here!’ But his attention has been caught by a bloke riding up to us on the coughing skeleton of a motorbike.

‘Permisi, Mister Matthew!’

The black heat from the exhaust scorches my shins. They’re hairy. They need a shave. Hopefully it’s too dark to notice.

‘Mister Matthew! Ayo pulang.’

‘Now?’

‘Sekarang, yuk!’

Matt stands up. ‘Righto, Penny. I’ll catchya later.’

He drops me a wink and swings his leg over the bike.

‘Seeya.’ I give him a casual smile and go back to my bakso.

But I’m still thinking about him later that night, as the rain slips cool down the thatch.