

## THE END OF INNOCENCE

BY ELISE HLASEK

**She runs down the steep steps** of the old wooden Sumatran losmen, pops her head into the kitchen and says, “I’m going for a trail-run along the peninsula, down and back. *Sampai jumpa nanti*,” like she’s done for ever.

This day, Pak replies, “Keep an eye out for vipers – you know that forest is full of ’em”.

“No, I didn’t, actually...” she replies. After 20 years of flat days spent gallivanting up and down this island’s trails, through jungle and thickets, palm flats and old-growth forests the Japanese army had spared in WWII, she’d never seen a viper. She’d seen them in Jawa and Bali, but not here, and she knows exactly what Pak is talking about.

*Trimeresurus* is otherwise known as “the 100-pace snake”, because you’re not going further than 100 paces from that snake once it sinks its fangs into you. Heat-seeking missiles from above, they lurk in the trees and drop by their tails upon mammal prey below. They’re only little buggers, generally, and can’t devour anything larger than a rodent, but humans give off 100 times the heat of a rodent and are massive blips on the viper’s reptilian radar.

The trail leads out of the village at the top of the hill above the surf. Locals were never stupid enough to live right on the beachfront, where mosquitos hummed in the stagnant palm flats, where palm fronds provided hiding places for scary creatures, where evil spirits from the marauding sea met and mingled with ghosts.

At the village, the trail veers left along the crest of a peninsula that leads seven kilometres to its end. There’s a finger bay to the right, where the rivermouth provides an abundance of prawns, and land’s end to the left – the very southern tip of this savage island. She remembers years ago, the first

time she made it out to land’s end, only to see the beach lined with a dozen white crocs – albino in their alabaster majesty. They’ve long since been hunted out, but that was when she knew this place was magical.

She comes to the end of the ridge and drops down a trail she knows by heart. This forest looks like jungle, but look again: On inspection, one will comprehend that this land is finely tended by human hand. The teak and mahogany trees protect the clove, nutmeg and mango trees, coffee and cacao bushes intersperse the brush, banana trees line the narrow foot trail. No, that isn’t a weed, it’s tapioca leaves and tubers – it only looks like marijuana from a distance. Even the thick swathes of treacherously slicing elephant brush are there for a reason, and that is to make perfectly climate-adapted roofs out of.

She runs through this Eden, barely daring to stop, hopping and skipping down the steep, rocky path. Twice she hears an object fall behind her. Twice she turns to see a miniscule viper on the ground behind her. She slows in a clearing and gathers her thoughts. This paradise she thought she knew intimately has still kept secrets from her for this long.

She hits the palm flats and cautiously steps upon the dropped fronds, layered one upon another, hiding the verity of the earth below them. She’s shivering now, under the equatorial heat, dripping with sweat. Palm-flat ghosts’ voices chant in her mind in an ancient tribal language she barely understands.

Bounding to the safety and sunshine of the sand on the beach, she looks down and sees a pit viper, a big one, hacked in three by a machete, scorching in the sand. Innocence has run its course.

## THANKS

BY TONY WARRILOW

**It was about three months after the fact** when the short letter is published in the paper. A few grammatically broken sentences.

It was one of those beautiful sou’west days that surfers love. Clean, moderate swell with all the spots lighting up. Big enough to get everything breaking, but not that big that the small-wave spots were maxed out. The sun was shining and the offshore held up all day. Crowds were well spread. Perfect.

Midafternoon and I’m walking back along the beach from my second session, fatigued but feeling good. My mate was about 100 metres ahead and as he got closer to the end of the beach he made a mad dash for the rip in the corner. I had a quiet laugh to myself. Obviously the bank was firing and he was heading out for one more.

But then I saw the girl. She was running up the beach towards me, her expression panicked. In broken English she told me her friend was in the rip and being carried out to sea. He couldn’t swim.

As far as rips go this one’s a beauty. It doesn’t just feed out to sea, it roars, and there’s a bank at the end of it where every swell dumps hard.

My mate got to him first. Somehow he found him in the impact zone. He wasn’t breathing, his skin was white, his lips were blue and his eyes just stared blankly at nothing.

The next 20 minutes were hell. Our only way in was against the rip, diagonally, but still against the rip. It was the longest 70 metres of my life.

By now there was three of us. Two held him on his back on a surfboard, side stroking and kicking like crazy to get to shore. The other one controlled the boards dangling behind us. Every swell put the boards on to us. As best we could we kept his head above the water, but in doing so put ourselves

under. Sounds like nothing, but we were already breathing hard. We stopped on several occasions to do CPR and every time we did this we lost ground to the rip.

Finally one of us got a foot wedged into the reef. We held our ground until the next swell picked us up and gave us the final surge towards the shore, where some of the gathering crowd jumped in and dragged him up the beach.

For half an hour they worked on him, to at least give him some sort of fighting chance. At no time did he show any signs of life. Just that white, blue colouring and wide, staring eyes. In all honesty, I thought he was gone.

The crew on the beach did a stellar job. They never faltered, and when the ambos turned up with the resuscitating gear they did another half hour before they carried him off the beach.

We all dispersed. Strangely I felt detached. Emotionally cold.

I heard the local hospital had been able to get his heart and breathing going and he was transferred to a major hospital in Perth. Last I heard was about 10 days later and at that point he was on life support, but still going. I was still remarkably unaffected by the whole thing.

And then the letter.

Through the grammatical errors the message was clear. It was from his mum. She lived in central Italy. She thanked everyone involved. She made mention of the ambos, the hospital staff, the police. She made special mention of the group on the beach, and she thanked the crew that went out and brought her son in from the ocean.

And finally she wrote, “Thank you for giving my son back to me”.

Mate, I cried like a baby.