

Geoffrey Bewley

PARIS IN THE SUMMER

He pressed her apartment's bell a minute before two, and there was no answer. He waited outside the big timber door in the sun and she came up the street a few minutes later, looking smart and pretty in a light summer dress. They walked together to the place she knew, around the corner and down the quiet street toward the Place Victor Hugo. He looked for a sight of the Eiffel Tower's top over the steep roofs ahead.

At the bistro she picked an outside table. A waiter in a waistcoat and white apron took their orders for salad and a coffee and salad and a Coke. Three girls got up from another table, and he saw her watching them walking away down the block.

"American college girls," he said.

"Yes," she said. "How do you tell?"

"Oh, posture. Sort of slack. Mouths open. Big white teeth. French girls are different."

"What are German girls like?"

"Oh, well. Tall. Blonde, Hefty. Valkyrie types."

"I'm not so tall or blonde," she said.

"You're not that German any more. You've been away too long."

"Did I look different when you saw me yesterday?"

"No, not really. Bit thinner. I was just a bit surprised."

He'd had her address from Java the year before. He'd been in Paris a week before he'd finally decided to look her up. He'd checked in the telephone directory, but instead of calling he'd taken the Metro to the Charles de Gaulle-Étoile stop and walked down. He'd found the house, but her name wasn't by any of the buttons on the panel by the door. He'd been ready to push the buttons without names in order, when the door opened and she'd stepped out.

He'd been prepared for her to be surprised on seeing him. He hadn't expected to be surprised himself. He hadn't been able to guess how she'd react to it, but he'd seen then from her wide eyes and changing expression as her mind changed gear to talk in English that she wasn't hostile.

She'd said, this is very unexpected. What are you doing here?

He'd said, calling on you.

She'd been on her way to lunch with a party of other teachers. He'd suggested lunch or dinner later. They'd arranged to meet there for lunch at the new bistro she knew nearby today.

"But you must have expected to see me," she said.

"Well, I wasn't expecting you to pop out straight away like that."

The waiter came back with the salads and drinks. He slid his khaki bag off his shoulder and put it over the back of the chair, for comfort.

"Camera's in there," he said. "Didn't want to look too much like a tourist."

She laughed at that. "You couldn't look like anything else," she said.

"You were a tourist last year," he said. "What happened then after we split up? What happened after you got to Sumatra?"

"Well, nothing happened," she said. "It was really very simple. I went to Lake Toba, and in spite of all your advice and warnings I met some other nice people and I had a very good time."

"Where did you go, just Medan and Lake Toba? Not anywhere else?"

"Just in to Lake Toba. Then I flew back to where was it, Penang, and then I went to Bangkok and flew home."

"That sounds pretty much like what I said you ought to do."

"I don't know," she said, smiling. "I don't remember, you see. I didn't pay any attention at all to all the things you said about the buses and the people and the jungle roads. I made up my own mind and did what I wanted to do, and as you see it worked out quite well."

"Well, that's okay," he said. "I wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

He asked about Lake Toba. She'd stayed at one of the bungalow places on the island shore in fine weather. She'd bathed in the cool lake and visited the local village on the other

side of the landing place, and bought carvings at the market for souvenirs. She asked about his trip, and he told her about the southern Thai island beaches.

"Like Bali," he said. "Not as touristy, developed, but not as good surf. Same sort of food. Lot of crime, theft, robberies. People are about the same. Lots of Germans there."

"I know the limitations of my fellow countrymen," she said.

They talked about Bali, and places where they'd been separately. They didn't talk about the time together in Java and on the ship.

They'd met up Jogjakarta, both travelling to Jakarta to catch the bad old Indonesian ship north. He had to go to Singapore. She was taking it farther north to Medan in Sumatra.

He'd told her he wanted to get a cabin this time. He'd been deck class on the ship before, crowded in with a few other whites travelling and hundreds of Indonesians puking and piddling in the scuppers and over the rails. It had been fairly interesting but one go of it was enough. She'd said he wouldn't be able to, they'd changed the rules and you couldn't get a cabin now unless you booked ahead. But she'd heard of this in Bali and booked a cabin at the Pelni Line office there. It had cost her extra, because of Bali office had telephoned Jakarta and charged her for the call, and the Pelni agent had also had a long personal conversation on the line. But she had a receipt for the booking, anyway.

She'd said, it's for one place in a two-bed cabin. So if they haven't put someone else in with me, you're very welcome to share it.

He's told her about the ship and about travelling in Sumatra. She had a week and she was thinking about taking buses across to Bukittinggi and Padang. He'd told her when he was there a couple of years before the buses were slow, unsound and unreliable, the roads were largely unsurfaced jeep tracks and the Indonesians always put whites in the back seats to put up with the worst ride and watch the local passengers puking out the windows. She'd be lucky to get to the west coast towns and back inside a week even without stopping anywhere



on the way. She'd do better to take a bus to Lake Toba, in the middle of the island, and turn back from there.

They'd got on well in Jogjakarta. It had seemed they had a lot in common. They'd spent all the first day together, with dinner in a place on Jalan Malioboro and a walk in the hot night through some of the badly-lit narrow back lanes outside the losmen and batik gallery quarter, and cold beers at a rooftop place after. They'd kissed good night at the losmen and then met again a few minutes later outside the showers, and spent the night in her room together. In the night train to Jakarta she'd sat by the window with her head on his shoulder.

In Jakarta they'd left their luggage and taken a taxi to the Pelni office to confirm the cabin for the boat next day. The first office had sent them to another. The second office sent them, after a long wait, to a third. The third office appeared to be closing. Only one of the counters on the verandah was open and the girl there was putting papers away. They'd pleaded with the girl but she'd paid them no attention. They'd shown her the receipt from Bali, and she'd taken it away for a couple of minutes and then handed it back without a word and made to pull down the window.

He'd deliberately lost his temper then. He'd yelled at the girl and grabbed the window and held it open. He'd leaned in and banged his fist on the counter so the Indonesians at the desks inside all looked up, and then shouted at them until one came over. He'd shown the receipt again.

The Indonesian had said, no, no.

He'd said, okay, then, where? Where?

Finally another Indonesian had pointed to a place at the end of a long yard between warehouses. That one looked open. They'd walked down to it and showed the receipt, and this time one of the clerks had produced a passenger list. Her name was on it and the other berth was empty. In a dark side office he'd paid for it with thousands of rupiah, and they'd taken a bus back into the city.

On the way back she'd been very quiet. Finally she'd said, you know, it was terrible of you to behave like that. These people find it terribly offensive. You lose face. Do you know

what that is? You lose so much face if you behave like that in front of them.

He'd said, I'd sooner lose face than miss the boat.

She'd said, you get much better results if you remain calm, and you're polite and reasonable with them.

He'd said, we were being polite and reasonable and they were closing the window.

It had continued like that between them. He'd told her he knew all the guide books advised people to act the way she said. That had turned out to be a mistake. He'd tried to explain his motives, but she'd been unable to accept them. In the end they'd agreed to stop talking about it. But late that night when he'd made to kiss her in their room, she'd resisted him.

On the ship their cabin had turned out to be a bare metal box with upper and lower berths, a shower, a basin and a single square port. There was no shower head, only a tap filling a barrel with a mandi dipper. There was a bucket to flush the lavatory. The pipe under the basin leaked into the cabin carpet. The port opened on to a deck full of deck class Indonesians who wanted to peer in, so it had to stay shut with the curtain drawn.

He'd had the upper bunk. The first night at sea, after the meal he'd waited on deck while she went below. Going down he'd found her in her bunk already with her face toward the bulkhead, and he'd looked at her and left her alone and climbed past her. The cabin's fan hadn't worked and he'd lain awake a long while in the hot sweaty dark, wondering if she was awake too. Neither of them had spoken.

Next morning she'd padded naked in and out of the shower without a word to him. She was civil but distant all day. The second night he'd showered and got ready for bed first, and hoisted himself up.

Suddenly she'd said, thank you for your dirty feet all over my bed.

He'd looked down. His feet had been wet from the wet carpet, and when he'd balanced on the edge of her bunk his toes had left marks on the sheet at the side.

She'd said, I suppose I should have expected some little

gesture like that.

He'd looked at her and said, d'you think I did it on purpose?

She'd said, it's the sort of thing you do, isn't it?

He'd turned his back on her and pulled up his own sheet.

In the morning they hadn't spoken. Late in the morning the ship had stopped off Tanjung Pinang to drop passengers for Singapore. She wasn't around when he packed and he'd gone down the side without seeing her again.

The next time he'd seen her had been in Paris for a few minutes the day before. Then now, for an hour over lunch.

Now she was talking about living in Paris. Time was passing. It wasn't what he was there to find out.

"Tell me, though," he said. "Getting back to the trip for a minute. What exactly was it that went wrong? I mean, what made you turn off like that?"

"Well," she said. "Well, I can tell you that in one sentence. You were too overbearing."

"That was it? That was the whole thing?"

"That was all there needed to be. You see, you should have understood that I like to do things my own way, at my own pace, in my own manner, making up my own mind and deciding for myself what I want to do. But you didn't see that, you told me and told me what I must be doing, you behaved abominably at the ticket office, so that in the end I just, like that, switched off."

"Okay," he said. "Well, that's okay then. I just wanted to be sure about it."

"You see, you tried to take over my whole trip," she said. "So everything must be done your way, you made all the decisions, as if you knew everything, and how to do everything, and I was under your orders. And my cabin, it was my cabin and you were only a guest in it, but you took that over too, you took which bed you wanted, you put your things everywhere and water all over the floor, it was my cabin but there was hardly any room in it for me."

"I thought you wanted that bunk. You could have had whichever one you liked."

Her face was reddening. "It was my cabin and you were only there because I invited you, and you completely took over," she said. "And the way you behaved when we were getting the tickets in Jakarta was beyond belief. I was absolutely ashamed for both of us. I was ashamed that I was with you there."

"Well, we got the tickets," he said.

"And so I couldn't take any more and I just stopped, like that, off. And then, you know, you reacted like a little child. You pouted and sulked like a little boy."

She was smiling, but her face was red and her eyes were wide. He decided this wasn't a good time to give his side of the old argument again.

"When I climbed up to my bunk that time, and my toes got on you sheet," he said. "Do you still reckon I did that on purpose?"

"That was what I thought, yes."

"What d'you reckon now?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you meant to do."

"I see," he said. "Well, okay then."

"You see, you were being so childish about the whole thing that I wasn't surprised at a childish thing like that. First you wanted everything your way, and then, no good, suddenly the sulks. You were really very childish about the whole thing."

"Yes," he said. "Okay. Well, I guess I can live with that. Because I wasn't sure what it was, whether it was that or whether it was something I hadn't thought of that might be worse. But as long as it was just that I was being a bit too protective, boy-scout about things, that's not too bad."

"Oh, it wasn't boy-scout," she said. "It was simply childish. And you were so insensitive the whole time, you never once stopped to think that I might like some say in the proceedings, when after all it was my cabin that you were a guest in, and it was my trip that you were trying to control. You never stopped to think that perhaps since I had come so far already on my own, that I was quite capable myself of deciding what I wanted to do for myself. You never allowed me to get a word in for what I might think or what I might want to do. It was always

you talking and you deciding for both of us.”

“Well, you see, I was acting for the best,” he said. “And if you didn’t like it that’s too bad, but it’s not anything I’m going to lose any sleep over.”

He’d finished his salad and she seemed to have forgotten the last scraps of hers. He sipped his Coke with an appearance of unconcern. Her coffee was probably getting cold.

“But you see, you were so insensitive about it,” she said. “And then when I stopped, you were like a spoiled sulky little child, pouting because his mother had taken a toy away from him. You took over my ticket and my cabin and my whole trip. You even tried to tell me what to do after you’d gone. And then in the end you were so unbelievably spiteful about it.”

“Yes,” he said. “Well, I guess I was pretty awful at that. Anyway, are we finished here, or what?”

It was twenty past three already. They signalled the waiter over. He made to pay, but she started talking to the waiter in rapid French.

“No,” she said. “I can afford to buy you a salad.”

He lifted his hands in surrender, with his wallet still in one. He realised it meant something to her.

He walked her back up the sunny afternoon street to her apartment. Outside the big front door he made to kiss her forehead goodbye, but she pushed him back.

“No, no more of that,” she said. “It was lovely the first time. But now no more.”

He decided against trying to explain he hadn’t been thinking of any more. He stepped back and raised his hand to wave, and then turned away down the street. She already had her key in the door.

He walked back down to the Place Victor Hugo, then through the slow traffic to an avenue leading down toward the river. He was thinking, it was just like before, only this time she’d gone through the whole change of moods so much faster. It wasn’t what he’d expected. No, it wasn’t what he’d hoped for. Actually in the end it was pretty much what he’d originally expected.

He'd hoped to find her the way she was at first. He'd hoped to find enough of that to build on. That was up to her though. Now it was all finished. She'd written it off today.

There was the flat roofline of the Musée de la Marine. He could see the top of the Eiffel Tower beyond it, between the trees. He thought, her bad luck in the end, anyway.

Judy Cluss

THIS TREE

Is not dead.
Artist hands
Stretch upwards.
Etch impressions
On the clean
Papered sky.