

# GEOFFREY BEWLEY

## THE BLACK BLOW

Bruce and I had the boat up near Lovina, near Singaraja on the north coast. We were staying at Nini's family's place, the bungalows they were running, and Bruce was their Australian son-in-law, so of course they couldn't do enough for us there. So Bruce and Nini had one of the two-storey places and I had one at the end of the row near the beach, on my own to start with, but then I got to know Yani and she moved in with me. She was some sort of cousin of Nini's. We stayed there and we worked on the boat in the creek, about half a mile away down the beach.

The boat was a 32-foot prahu, and Bruce had bought it in Macassar for about five grand. We'd gone shares and the idea was we'd fix it up and then use it carrying stuff to Darwin, batiks and carvings and things like that. Bruce had done it before but on a bigger boat with local guys, and this was one we'd be able to sail on our own.

Sometimes Nini would come down and watch us work. Sometimes she'd try and help us, handing Bruce tools and things. Other times she'd stop on the sand, sitting with her chin on her knees and just watching Bruce. She didn't like the idea of the boat, really.

Sometimes she'd talk about coming with us. "I can cook, can wash," she said.

"Maybe we'll try it one time," Bruce said.

Nini always talked English with us. Bruce knew Indonesian and a bit of Balinese, and I knew a bit of Indonesian. But she talked English because she wanted to get better at it.

Anyway, Bruce was just telling her that. She really wouldn't have been very good on board. She wouldn't have been able to do much and she would have just been one more to feed. But she didn't like to see Bruce going anywhere without her.

Yani was a bit the same with me. She was always wanting to know what I was doing when I had to go anywhere, down to Den Pasar or anything like that. It was sort of nice having somebody that way, but sometimes it was a bit annoying too. She was always keeping track of me like that.

I think Nini's family weren't really all that happy about seeing Yani go in with me. They'd sooner have seen us get married straight off like Nini and Bruce. But then I guess they thought, if we were left alone we'd get round to it eventually. The main thing was for Yani to hang on to me. Getting married to an Australian was quite a big deal for a Balinese.

Yani was even talking about it one night. We'd been down to the next bungalow place with Bruce and Nini, and we'd come back along the beach in the moonlight holding hands.

"Getting married is good for Bruce," she said.

"He's lucky," I said. "She's a nice girl."

She was doing something with her hair. She stopped and looked at me.

"You think I am a nice girl?" she said.

If she'd been smiling it would have meant something else. But she was being serious about it.

"No," I said. "You're a really nasty girl."

I gave her a very stern look, so she could see I didn't mean it.

"I am nasty?" she said.

I had her fooled. She didn't know what to say next.

"Not all the time," I said. "Only sometimes."

"You mean, I am nasty now?"

"No, not now," I said.

Yani was still looking worried about it, so I went and put my arm round her. Then after a bit it was okay again. I didn't feel good about putting her on like that, but I didn't want to get pinned down.

It was different for Bruce. He and Nini had only been married in a local wedding, but he said that as soon as they were in Australia he'd get it done again properly. He was that serious about it. But as far as I was concerned Yani had wanted to move in with me, it was her idea and I wasn't making any promises. Half the time I thought, well, I could probably do a lot worse. I wasn't too rapt in a lot of the Australian chicks if it came to that. I wasn't going to say straight out, no. I was just happy with the way things were going.

I talked about it to Bruce, anyway.

"Well, she's okay," he said. "What's the problem?"

"Yeah, but you know what she's after," I said. "Get away to Australia. Get away from all this. Get a big shiny house, lots of money, no work. That's the way it goes."

"Not with all of them," Bruce said.

"Well, a lot of them."

"Well, I don't reckon Yani's really like that."

"It's not just her," I said. "It's the family. It's the way they're all sort of watching. They all think it's going to be like with you."

“Well, maybe it would be,” Bruce said. “I mean, she really likes you.”

“I don’t know. I mean, how can you really tell?”

“You can tell in the end.”

“How can you tell with Nini?” I said. “I mean, what is it that really sort of gives it to you?”

“It’s like, it’s a sort of a bargain. There’s her and me together. We both trust each other. We know that’s how it’s always got to be.”

“That’s not how it is with me and Yani,” I said.

“Well, you’re the only one who can decide that.”

“I mean, I could change my mind about it,” I said.

I didn’t really think I would change my mind about it. But I thought Bruce might like to think that.

“No, don’t rush into it,” Bruce said. “See how things work out.”

That was how it was with Bruce. He reckoned Nini was the right girl, and he was going to stick with her. And I reckoned Nini would realise the sort of guy he was, what a good wicket she was on, and she’d do the right thing by him. But I couldn’t see that it’d ever be like that with Yani and me.

Anyway, all this time we were getting the boat finished. The hull and the mast were good but we had to renew all the rigging and get new sails cut. Inside the hull there was no floor, just the timbers and ribs, so we made our own floor with planks over beams, all cut to fit and removable, so we could lay the cargo down there and put the floor back over it and sleep on mats and airbeds on top. We had to do a bit of caulking around the deck, and we put on a bracket for a little outboard on the counter. There was a bit of corrosion in the rudder post so we put new bolts through there. We had to do a few things like that.

Finally we heeled her on the sand at low tide to put another coat of paint round the hull. Then we got her out of the creek with everybody armpit deep in the water, pushing to slide her over the sandbar. Then we had everybody on board for a first sail along the beach up to windward nearly to Singaraja, but a couple of miles out, and then a long reach back. That gave us an idea of how she handled. With a long keel she was quite steady and she held a course easily. She was slow tacking, but then we weren’t planning on any races.

The family thought it was great. Nini’s uncles and brothers wanted turns on the tiller. Her little sister was climbing everywhere. Bruce got Nini to have a go on the tiller with him next to her.

"I think I can't," Nini said. "This is too strong."

"No, it's easy," Bruce said. "It's on the right course. All you've got to do is hold it like that."

"This is too hard."

"No, it's okay. It's dead on course. You're doing fine."

"No, hard, too hard here."

Nini looked pretty, but she twisted up her face to show she really didn't like it. Bruce put his arm round her but she wriggled away.

"Okay, that was good," he said. "I'll take it now."

"Yes, you take," Nini said.

She went and put on her shirt. It was one of Bruce's old ones. Then she went right forward and sat by the bowsprit, looking down. She said something to her sister and the little girl came back aft.

Then Bruce left me the steering and went up with her. He was there talking with her for quite a while. I gave one brother a go, and then I gave Yani a go. She was quite happy to try it. She generally did what I said about things. We sat with my hand round her resting on the tiller, and Nini's uncle smiling at us.

Up forward Bruce was talking and Nini was looking away. I had a pretty good idea what was going on there. I could imagine it like that one day with Yani and me.

"Nini doesn't like the boat," Yani said.

"All boats or this boat?" I said.

"I think all boats. But this one too."

Back at the bungalows we anchored off the open beach. Then that night Mama cooked up a couple of big fish specially, and we cracked a few cans and had a bit of a party with the people staying there to celebrate getting the boat done. I was talking to a couple of American girls, but Yani was sticking close all the time. She was a bit jealous about things like that. In the end they went back to their place, and we went out to our cabin.

"You were good on the boat today," I said to her.

"I was good?" Yani said.

"Yes, very good."

"I want to do what you like, you know," she said.

She was lying on the bed in her sarong, looking over at me.

"Well, I liked that," I said.

"So, you think I can go on the boat now?"

“Well,” I said “it wouldn’t be easy, you know. I mean, I told you that before.”

“But I can do. You said.”

I thought, if I hadn’t had a few beers I might have been a bit more careful about telling her that.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s up to Bruce, really.”

“What does Bruce say?”

“He might want Nini to go.”

“I think Nini not want to go.”

“That’s up to them,” I said.

Yani was watching me. I didn’t need any clues to what she was thinking.

“I go, I do what you want,” she said in a different tone of voice. “I do anything you say.”

I just nodded.

“I do anything you like,”

“Anything?” I said.

“Yes, anything.”

She was playing with the edge of her sarong. I thought I wouldn’t keep her waiting any longer.

“Okay, show us what you can do,” I said.

She was all right at that part of it. She wasn’t as good looking as Nini, she had a bigger bum and her face wasn’t as good, but then Nini was really quite beautiful for an Indonesian. Yani wasn’t beautiful, but she was okay. Anyway, generally we both really enjoyed it. Only sometimes she’d be a bit difficult, holding off, playing hard to get. But generally she’d never say no to it.

So anyhow, that night it was okay. Then the next day we got the boat ready to go round south to Benoa, where the touring boats tied up. We were getting cleared out of the bungalow cabins, and once it was my turn to take a load out to the boat, and Nini was waiting there.

I handed her up some stuff and I climbed on board, and she watched me stowing it.

“Nearly ready,” I said.

“You leave today or tomorrow?” Nini asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Why, what does Bruce say?”

I thought it was a funny question. She’d been with Bruce just before. She’d been with him all night, anyway.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Today, tomorrow. You want I come tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. What does Bruce say about that?”

“All the time you say, Bruce,” she said. “What you want, you?”

“I don’t mind either way. So it’s up to you and him.”

Nini didn’t say anything.

“Okay?” I said.

She nodded and looked away.

That night I saw Bruce in the bungalow restaurant when neither of the girls was around. I told him how they’d both been on at me about it.

“I told them they could come down to Benoa,” Bruce said.

“It sounds like they want to go to Darwin,” I said.

“Look, we’ll give them a ride down to Benoa. That’ll show them what it’s really like. They can stay on board there, and then when we’re going they can get a bus back up here. Then we can go and get them again when we come back.”

“I don’t think they like the idea of waiting for us,” I said.

“Yeah, well, we’re sailors,” Bruce said. “This is work. That’s the way it’s got to be.”

“Nini sounded like she really wanted to go,” I said.

“Well, I wish she could. There’s nothing I’d like better. But it just wouldn’t make any sense that way.”

Then Yani came back and we stopped talking about it.

That night we had a party again, but we quit early so we’d be ready to get away early in the morning. That night Yani was quite happy about things, sailing round to Benoa, so with one thing and another we didn’t get to sleep until pretty late after all. Then the next thing I knew was Bruce banging on the door bright and early, calling me up.

We had one last big breakfast from Mama, and then we all went out to the boat. It turned out six of us were going, the two of us, the two girls, and one of Nini’s brothers and her little sister. Everybody else stood on the beach and waved as we sailed off.

It was a pretty slow start. We got out on the land breeze, but afterwards the wind was light and shifted and it was very hot. We had to make a long tack to the north and it was about the middle of the day before we were even past Singaraja, and we were a bit pissed off. But then the wind came round a bit more from the north, so we could make a long reach down the coast south-east toward Lombok Strait.

There still wasn't much wind, but there was a choppy sea in toward the strait. So Nini and her brother and her sister were all sick, and they had to let go over the side. Yani wasn't that sick, but she lost interest in steering for a bit. But late in the afternoon we were about halfway down the north-east coast, and we were set to stop at a little place on a beach where Nini had some more relations. We were going to have a night there and then finish to Benoa the next day.

It was a bit hot and hazy in the afternoon, but then going into the bay there the wind started up again, just when it was too late to be any good to us. But the others all started looking happier, because we were heading in to dry land finally. The little sister was crawling about all over the place. Even Nini looked a bit happier.

We anchored off the beach and put the dinghy over the side. It was just a little rubber thing, and we had to make two trips to get everyone off. We were both going in on the second trip, and Bruce had a look at the weather again.

"I'd be happier if we had another anchor out, you know," he said.

We had two anchors. One was a plough type that was good for sand or mud and the other one was a little stockless thing that wasn't too much good for anything. We had the plough out now.

"I'll do that," I said. "You go on in."

So Bruce went up the beach with Nini and the rest, and I went back and got out the stockless. Then I had to paddle out to seaward and let it go, and then paddle back and take up the slack. The wind was blowing up a bit and it took longer than I'd thought.

Then I had a look at the sky again, and all of a sudden it was turning into a real black blow. It had been hazy out to sea, but now the clouds were building up and there was a black squall with a sheet of rain under it like a big grey mouth. It was blowing up a sea, the boat was pitching a bit and the dinghy was bumping alongside. The wind was blowing straight on to the beach.

I was thinking about the anchors. The plough was okay, but we really wanted something bigger for a bow anchor. The stockless wasn't much good for anything but a dead calm. We wanted to get one in Benoa, but it had looked easier to sail down and pick one up than to carry it all the way up on a bus or something. Now we really needed one, though. The stockless wasn't going to be much help. Instead of going in to the village, I reckoned I'd better wait a while and see what happened.

I was thinking it would be better to get under way and get more clear of the sand, but it turned out I'd waited too long. I could feel the drizzling rain already, and then the hot suck of wind off the shore and then the cold blast, and then the real wind hit us. The boat was pitching

and bucking in the white chop, and there was no way I could have got her out of there on my own in conditions like that. The wind and the rain were lashing at us in buckets. And then I looked back at the beach and across at the headland, and it looked like the anchors were dragging.

I think it might have been the boat jerking, loosening the plough. I think the stockless would just have slid over the sand. But anyway, there wasn't anything I could do about that. I couldn't sail her. It would have needed one guy on the tiller all the time, and the other guy handling the rig. If I'd tried it on my own, with that amount of room she would have been ashore before I could have got her under control. But all the time, every time she pitched she was tugging the anchors another couple of feet. I could imagine the sand boiling round down there, and the two picks raking through it.

I started figuring what was going to happen to the boat. She was all right as long as she was bows on to the wind and sea, but as soon as she touched the sand her rudder would smash and she'd go over on her beam ends and swamp, and then maybe spring some planks and ribs and start breaking up. She was quite a strong-built boat but I didn't know how she'd take that sort of a beating. And I knew that by then I'd have to be off her, I'd have to jump for it before she touched.

I thought of hauling her up toward the anchors, but even if I could have done it in that sea, shortening the cable like that would have weakened the plough's grip even more, and it probably would have put us on the beach sooner in the long run. And all this time whenever I looked back I could see the beach getting a bit closer, and all I could do was lean on the tiller and try and keep her straight into the wind and sea, to ease the pull on the anchors as much as I could. I was soaked already and I was trying to figure when I'd have to start swimming. I was wondering why Bruce didn't notice how the wind was blowing, and head back. I was wondering what shape the boat would be in after it went ashore.

I looked back at the beach again, and then I saw Bruce and Nini and a couple of the others in the trees at the end of the track. We'd already dragged more than halfway in to the beach, and I could even see the looks on their faces. Bruce was carrying something, but I didn't see what it was, because he dropped it and started running straight down into the surf.

He was a better sailor than me by a mile. As soon as I saw him I felt better about everything, and I gave him a hand and pulled him up the side.

“We've got to try and power out of this,” he said.

He didn't mean with an engine. We had a little outboard, but that was at Benoa too. He meant we'd have to try and make a long reach across the front of the squall, with the wind abeam, and then past the headland if we could and out of the bay. It looked like we'd end up on the beach as soon as we tried to get her head round, but on the other hand if we didn't try it we'd be on the beach anyway.

We got the mainsail up together. Neither of us could have done it in that wind on his own. It was flapping and cracking like a whip, and it was more drag on the anchors then, but we weren't pitching so hard. Then we looked over the jib with the bows seesawing under us.

"Cut the anchors when I say," Bruce said.

He went back to the tiller, and as soon as he waved I hauled up the jib and our bow started to swing to starboard. Then we heeled under the wind with the sea on our beam, and we were sort of pivoting on the anchor cables, and the deck to leeward was nearly awash. We were just outside the waves where they started to break in on the beach.

"Cut," Bruce called. He was braced over the tiller.

I cut the plough's cable first, close to the bitt, and the end snapped away into the water. I thought about trying to haul the stockless in but I cut it too, and then we were bucking forward with the sea hitting us on our beam. We were running outside the breakers, parallel to the sand. I could see Yani and Nini and the others on the beach farther behind.

I saw Bruce put the helm down, and then I heard a big smack overhead that was the jib starting to flap, and I hauled it in so it would draw. I had to go with my arm round the mast and my feet jammed against the side rail, and a few bucketsfull hit me over the bow and my feet started slipping, and I thought I was gone. But I got it fast and I crawled back aft, hanging on to the cabin roof rails.

"What about the mainsail?" I said.

"No, that's right," Bruce said. "Just hang on there."

Then I saw we were about half a mile down the beach already, Bruce had cut the dinghy free and it was bobbing in the surf there, and somebody was running after us on the sand, and the point was coming up on our starboard bow. But we were clawing away from the beach, and then I actually started to enjoy it, because we were really scooting along, powering through the white caps and the spray. You could enjoy the feel of it without stopping to think what might still happen. It was so good even to have a chance of getting clear.

Anyway, we did get clear. We scraped clear of the surf on the point, and Bruce kept us on a long reach towards Lombok so we wouldn't get blown down the strait and have to work back. By then it was getting dark, but then the squall was starting to blow out. There was no way we

could get anywhere that night, so when it looked like we were clear of the land we took in the mainsail and put her under the small jib to steady her. We ate some bits of fruit and we took turns at the tiller until daybreak.

In the morning we found out we were down the strait after all. But we could see all the Bali mountains, and the wind was still from the north, so we made a reach north-west and followed the coast up to the right beach. We recognised the point and we saw our dinghy upside down on the sand just around from there.

I swam in with a plastic jerry-can and filled it with sand for an anchor, and I carried it out in the dinghy. By the time we finished that, Nini's little sister was running up and down the beach waving at us. We went in with the dinghy, and by that time her brother and a few others were there too. They were all smiles at us.

"Hey, man, we thought you go right away," Nini's brother said.

"No, no way," Bruce said. "Listen, where's Nini?"

"She is in village. She crying, man."

Bruce knew the way and we ran up the track. We saw the palm branch fence and the grass roof and chickens everywhere, and somebody was calling out, and then I saw Yani running down to us. She ran straight to me and threw her arms around me.

Bruce was calling Nini, and then she came out of the same place. Two old women were with her. She was standing sort of pigeon-toed, rubbing her face as if she'd been crying. Bruce went up, and then she put her hands over her face and she started crying again.

Then everybody was talking at once. Yani was saying something so good, so good, and I was patting her on the back and saying it was all okay. All the Balinese were talking. The two old women were having an argument. Bruce had his arms round Nini and she was howling her head off.

"She think you go, man," her brother said. "She think you go right away leave her."

"We had to do it," Bruce said. "We had to get away from the sand."

"She think you go, never come back."

We were both really tired and it took us a while to get hold of things. I thought the idea was, they'd thought we were going to get wrecked and drowned.

"She think you don't want come back," her brother said.

Bruce looked at him and then at Nini, as if he didn't know what to do for a minute.

“Nini,” he said.

One of the old women started calling out in a high voice. Another woman pulled her aside.

“She say, western man do that,” the brother said. “They take girl, then leave girl. No marry, leave girl.”

“Shit, man, they are married,” I said. “He married her, didn’t he?”

The brother grinned and shook his head. “People think, people say this happen,” he said.

“Shit, no,” I said. “There’s no way Bruce wouldn’t do the right thing.”

Nini’s brother just went on grinning. He wasn’t too bright, actually.

“What about you?” I said to Yani. “Did you think I was coming back?”

She looked at me as if she wanted to give me the right answer, the one I wanted, but she couldn’t work out which it was.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think so. I want you to come back.”

She was holding me very tight. I patted her again. Bruce was whispering something to Nini but her hands were still pressed over her face.