

A Tale of Two Weddings

I was on my way to find a gift for my daughter's birthday, when my motorbike hit a hill of construction dirt and sent me hurtling barelegged into the merciless jaws of the pavement. In a daze, I looked up from the street and saw an angel standing over me, offering a hand back into this world. The hand was that of Tuti, a lovely woman I had recently met online. I was happy that, in the short time she'd known me virtually, she had recognized me and decided that I was worth rescuing.

After I asked Tuti for her cell number, I noticed that it had three sets of the same number sequence: 613613613. The numbers added up to 30 — and not much more. After struggling for days to crack the code, it occurred to me that “six, one, three” could mean June 13.

I knew that the Balinese recognize certain dates as auspicious times for many different activities — roofing a house, castrating a pig, or getting married. I consulted Wayan about the date. He told me that June 13 is, indeed, an auspicious day for marriage. It's the day Tuti and I met in person.

Should I call her? I was ready again for an intimate relationship, but was anyone ready for me? I had a failed marriage, a list of physical problems, a history of rootlessness, and questionable ability to handle a motorbike — my only means of transportation. Still, I dreamed of my match and the life we might celebrate together. I held, in my mind, the image of Tuti.

At that time, she wore her jet black hair in a braid. I admired the flawless bone structure of her face. The noble edges on her nose and cheeks indicated, to me, a knowledgeable and thoughtful person. My memory traced the high, v-shaped slant to her eyebrows. Her eyes shone darker than burnt coals; a place where my reflection might enter and never be seen again. I appreciated the natural color of her rich brown skin, in contrast to the lily white Scandinavian women who baked themselves on the beach. The attraction, though, was more than skin deep. I dreamed of having this intriguing woman in my life.

Tuti came over from eastern Java. She spoke the national language of Indonesia, various dialects from Java, and 10 words of English. I spoke less than 10 words in Indonesian, English, and a dialect from the Upper American Midwest. I picked up the phone.

From there, our numbers game evolved: one word, one phrase, one Google-translated sentence at a time. We played Q and A at the keyboard. She asked me about my daughter, and how my parents had died a day apart from each other. I asked how her Muslim family would feel about her being involved with a foreigner, and how that might affect our relationship. At one point I typed in my name and asked her to list three things that she didn't like about me. She typed, “suka,” meaning all good. (She was just getting to know me.)

When we met, Tuti was employed at a motorbike repair shop in Ubud. Unlike Muslim women, Balinese women have daily religious duties that would interfere with work outside the home. Therefore, most of the women clerks come from Java.

Tuti was the first Javanese woman I met. As such, there was a lot I didn't understand about her world. I was barely grasping the complexities of Balinese Hinduism and now I was on a crash course to understand Javanese Islam.

She was caring, humble, and *malu* (shy) in public. She felt self-conscious about not meeting standards of western appearance, as she perceived them. The first time I took her to a restaurant

she froze at the door, thinking that her hair, makeup, and attire weren't up to fashion code. She looked perfect. When the menu came, she ordered the least expensive item listed. Then she turned the dinner table on me, when I tried to order in her language. Although I met "the foreign dress code," she cringed with embarrassment at my attempt to order a smoothie. Quite imperfect.

In working through the challenges of communication, I suggested we try sports, which didn't require speaking. She had worked 10 years as a caddy on a top PGA-level course, where she learned golf from the pros. I soon learned that she could drive a ball over a volcano. When we played billiards, she wiped the table clean, and badminton sent me tripping over my feet while trying to return a volley. "The agony of defeat," needed no translation.

Tuti had never heard of Wall Street, the Occupy Movement, or home foreclosure. She knew little about the United States, except for a few pop stars and the name of the president. I didn't care that she couldn't read my biography and understand where I came from. In time, I believed, we would come to understand and embrace each other's worlds. At least, we both showed an eagerness to try.

One day, Tuti accepted an invitation to my villa. After admiring the garden, she crossed the threshold. I watched her look around and assess the general untidiness of the place. Her facial expression told me that my neat-freak days were a matter for opinion.

I didn't know if the timing was right, but I took a brave gulp of air and nervously invited her to stay. I promised to clean up my act. She reacted to my question with an affectionate smile of "yes," and we kissed, awkwardly, for the first time. Out lips met, a bit crooked and unsure, like the first time a boy and girl kiss, experimenting, searching, longing, and dreaming. It was a hard kiss, too; one refusing to let go, bonded by wet magnetism.

Tuti moved out of her tiny, beat-up, rental room and moved in with her one suitcase full of shoes. The next day, she volunteered to do all of the domestic chores, which left me free, apparently, to write and to fight demons.

My travel clothes were meticulously washed, ironed, and folded or hung. I had forgotten the comforting smell of a steaming iron on clean clothes. It took me back to childhood, when I would sit for hours by my mom while she pressed through a week of laundry.

Each part of the day became a song of Tuti's routine. In the morning, before I could rub the dream sand from my eyes, she put a cup of hot coffee in my hand. Before I could take a sip, she was sweeping under my feet. When I became absorbed at the computer, she would tap my shoulder for lunch.

Tuti shopped for groceries and filled the kitchen with tantalizing aromas that led me to a healthy weight gain. Her favorite TV show was Master Chef, and if I blocked her view she would pull me onto the couch to watch with her. Eventually, I had to put the brakes on chocolate cake.

She fretted over me, almost like a mother — cutting my hair, clipping my nails, and making sure I looked nearly flawless before going out in public. I felt embarrassed for myself. For too long, I had no one in my life who gave a rip about my needs or feelings. Now I was being treated like a prince, and rendered helpless in the midst of such loving care and attention. She genuinely seemed to enjoy the activities and role she had taken on. I did not want her to be a servant, but I wanted her to be happy. I knew that she deeply cared about people. Often, while watching a TV show about a celebrity in Jakarta who helps the poor, she would watch with a tissue in hand, holding back her tears.

Tuti ended up taking charge of housekeeping for the guest house, as well. I had been maintaining it, but she kept it in better shape. In return, I shared earnings from the guest house, and she was able to quit her job in town.

Once when she sat off by herself, I thought she was really tired or bored. To the contrary, she held up her cell phone to reveal her “addiction” to Sudoku, and puzzle solving. It took me back to our numbers game. Tuti was 36 and I was 59. Going forward, though, the age gap didn’t matter. We had already figured out that part of the puzzle.

In a few short months we were living happily together and building our dream vocabulary. Then, unexpectedly, came the question of marriage — from Tuti’s family. Living together as an unmarried couple on Bali was not a problem for us. However, living or staying together as an unmarried couple on Java was unacceptable to her Muslim family. And we did plan to spend time there.

The prospect of marriage posed many questions for both of us and pushed the limits of our go-to, online translator. First, were either of us ready to commit to marriage? Second, what would we be committing to within the framework of Javanese Islam?

Tuti’s father was Muslim, and her mother was Christian. They were open to different religious beliefs and lifestyles. Tuti chose not to follow any religion. Although I am interested in aspects of Zen, I abandoned organized religion long ago.

When her parents died, Tuti’s Uncle Matt ended up with the family home and raised Tuti from late childhood. Uncle Matt adheres to Muslim beliefs and customs of Java. If we wanted to visit and stay there as a couple, we would need to comply, if not agree, with Matt’s insistence of marriage. Tough puzzle.

We had fallen in love and wanted to be together. Tuti had strong connections to her extended family and did not want to strain or break ties with them. For me, running away from home was a matter of survival. Reconnecting with my family was a matter of survival, too. I understood her need to maintain that bond. I also understood the need to follow my heart.

In the end, the decision came down to me. I had not planned to marry again in a traditional, “legal” sense, and needed more time to think this over. Tuti and I had grown closer, but the cultural chasm between our worlds remained wide. I was unsure of whether I could adapt my western thinking to traditional roles of men and women as practiced by her family. And how would I fit as a bumbling foreigner in their lives? For Tuti, and for myself, I was willing to take the risk. In time, I set out cautiously, like stepping out on an old suspension bridge of rotting rope and missing planks. I hoped that her family would accept me on the other side.

On the following June 13, our auspicious wedding day, I woke up in Tuti’s rickety bed in what used to be her bedroom at Uncle Matt’s. The pink cement walls showed their age by the length of cracks from floor to ceiling. A century-old, black-and-white photo hung sideways above the door. The one low-watt ceiling light cast a pale twilight across the room. Tuti spent little time there; her only clothes cabinet was stuffed with moldy-smelling shoes. Before she met me, Tuti had dated a Swedish tobacco salesman for seven years, and lived in nice hotels.

The house vibrated with a dozen women, young and old. Wearing traditional Javanese headscarves (*hijab*), the women sat in a circle on the kitchen floor. They chopped chicken and vegetables into meticulously assembled gift-wrapped boxes of food. Others cleared furniture and rugs from the living room, to create space for the ceremony.

By the time I drank my first cup of coffee, Tuti was off to a salon appointment.

During the early hours, my only morning task was to bathe — with a bucket of cold water. So, I took a stroll through Tuti’s village. I tiptoed carefully down a busted up pathway of chicken

poop, and out to the main road. I avoided, as much as possible, the creek of raw sewage that crisscrossed my path. To my surprise, I did not see any wild dogs as seen in Bali. Here, feral cats seemed to rule, and keep down the rat population.

In stark contrast to the lush botanical garden of Ubud, the village was made up of small, houses, standing side by side. Flower pots, and colors of red, blue, pink, and green, helped to brighten up the weather-beaten buildings. Terraces, and front yards with laundry lines opened to the neighborhood.

I felt welcomed here. Children, playing badminton without a net, greeted me with some English they knew: “Gerd m-o-o-ning, Mizrrr.” Women held their babies out to me, smiled, and blushed. I can only begin to imagine what they thought. Who was this stranger, and why was he here? For the first time, a white man came out of their TV set and stood in their village. I got a rock star treatment that I never took for granted. The thought of getting married again did not weigh on my mind. I was too overwhelmed trying to absorb what was happening.

When I turned a corner to circle the village, I ran into a *pengamen*. This is a type of street performer, similar to the street guitar players who sing at taxi windows. Here, the entertainer goes door to door, hoping for a donation. This young man was dressed in drag, singing with a portable karaoke machine in his hand. How, I questioned, did that person fit into this Muslim culture?

I didn’t need a watch to know when I needed to head back. Each day is divided into five prayer times. The ubiquitous mosque speakers remind everyone of the time to wake up, eat and break for prayer. I got the message, loud and clear.

Hour by hour, the house slowly filled with family and relatives. They had only one new name to remember: Arlo. I could not remember or properly pronounce all of theirs. I greeted them in the best way I knew how. They arrived in their best sarongs, *peci* hats, and colored *jihabs*. Each smiled courteously, gave a slight bow, then took their place on the living room floor.

Tuti wanted to forego the groom’s traditional “Aladdin-looking” attire. Instead, she asked Uncle Matt to outfit me in one of his business suits. Had I known, I would have bought an affordable new, odor-free suit that fit. Instead, I squeezed into a jacket and pants that smelled like Tuti’s musty old shoes. Uncle Matt sprinkled me with cologne, which did not enhance my scent. I did have a pair of new black shoes and socks, and a gold-colored tie. I wore a traditional Muslim hat, edged with golden leaves. When I looked in the mirror, I saw a new me. Not a sorrowful man defined by his relationship failures. I straightened my tie and hat, and said to my reflection, “You’re a lucky man.”

Mr. (*Pak*) Modin, the elderly holy man arrived. He greeted me and asked for my vow. When I said it, he shook his head. I had learned the wrong vow, so he wrote a new version. Tuti’s English-speaking cousin said, “You have a few minutes to get the new one right, or recite it in front of everyone until you do.” No pressure.

Here’s what I practiced: *Saya berjanji, dalam kejujuran dan ketulusan, menjadi bagi anda suami yang setia dan membantu*. Roughly translated: “I, Arlo, take you, Tuti, to be my lawful wedded wife.” The mixup occurred because wedding vows, ceremonies, and rituals vary from region to region. Somehow I had been told to memorize a vow not customary in this area.

At 4 p.m., Tuti — in a white, lacy wedding gown called the *kebaya* — made her gala entrance into the living room. We sat before Pak Modin, and in the presence of her admiring family.

Lacking a wedding rehearsal, I must have looked like Mr. Bean goes to the Mosque. I misplaced the ring, handed the dowry at the wrong moment, and, to the delight and amusement of her family, reversed our roles. Everyone laughed, lovingly.

After my first attempt to recite the new vow, Pak Modin smiled in approval. Tuti's older brother, Kamid, stood in for the ceremonial role of her father. When her turn came, Tuti glowed like a goddess (*widodari*) and happily recited her vow. Apparently, we could now share Tuti's old bedroom without shaming the family.

The ceremony was followed by a prayer, and a reception line. I touched each person's hands to my forehead in honor of the almighty, Mohammad. We then relaxed into the reception.

Tuti's family sat on the floor, passed rice, made small talk (I was told), and shared gifts. I bought ice cream for all the children in the village, cranked up an old karaoke machine, and passed out modest gifts of money throughout the clan.

We hired a photographer, who turned the living room into a photo studio. First, he took formal photos of the kids, brothers, cousins, uncles, and aunts. The sessions lasted for hours. They were eager to pose, because it was the first time they had ever been photographed.

I was thrilled for Tuti that her family gathered for this occasion. But I pictured one more witness — my daughter, Danika. I wanted to see her and hear her say, "I am happy for you, Daddy."

The women (of course) cleaned up, while the men went outside to play cards — until 6 a.m. About 3 a.m. I spotted Uncle Matt 100,000 rupiah so he could stay in the game. I framed my favorite photo of Tuti and me. Number three was a lucky number, and I didn't look back.

For our honeymoon we returned to Bali, ordered pizza delivery, and snuggled up to our favorite *dangdut* singing contest on TV.

A year and a half later, when we returned to her uncle's place, Tuti was told by the village authorities that we were not legally married. Due to improper paperwork, we did not have the official *buku nikah* (marriage book) and were not allowed to live together.

Our requisite marriage book traveled through a labyrinth of government offices, ending up in the Department of Religious Affairs. There we faced the director, Mohammad Bejo, a stocky, middle-aged man wearing a batik shirt, and a black *peci*.

While Tuti went into a lengthy explanation of our story, I crossed my legs and spaced out on the ceiling fan. When the attention focused on me, Tuti slapped my leg to uncross them. I later learned that crossing one's legs in a business meeting is considered to be impolite.

"I'm from Hollywood, USA. You know, Tom Cruise, President Obama," I said. Bejo nodded approvingly. Tuti roughly translated that he wanted to wear my sunglasses.

"Those are Ray-Ban, American," I commented. He put them on and smiled, "Are you a terrorist?" Everyone laughed except me, I didn't get it. Our application had been denied three times. I don't know if the Ray-Bans tipped the balance in our favor, but he "legalized" us.

My marriage book was green and Tuti's book, red — like a couple's passport to Christmas. The photo looked like me, but the name of my dad, my birthdate and birthplace were misspelled. The documents claim that our religion is *Islam*. I did not designate that. Nor was I asked. I supposed that our previous wedding suggests that we are Muslims. I hoped this squared with the authorities now, because I've been to the Cave of Death and healed my Diamond Baby.

Tuti and I signed the *buka*, shook the director's hand, and thanked him.

We quickly set up a wedding date, auspicious or not. This time we dressed up in traditional Javanese costumes, and I got to look like a sultan. The "new" holy man who married us complained about my lack of Javanese and the time required to conduct the ceremony. Uncle Matt and the gang kept with their tradition of all-night poker.

Would we receive new wedding gifts? Did we have to return the ones we've been using for the past 18 months?

An upside to all the craziness was a change in my visa status, which reduced my fees by nearly half. Our holy union, however, did not grant me any civil rights to property, employment, or a process of dual citizenship, no matter how long I live in Indonesia. Besides tradition, what was the legal point of marriage?

Our marriage is not legally recognized in the United States. If we ever decide to live in America, I will have to file a marriage petition for Tuti through US immigration. I do not know whether we will marry yet a third time.

We retired the Google translator.
I do know this. Tuti reached out her hand to me, and I would reach out for Tuti's hand all over again.

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