

The Letter from Bali

By Rob Lynde

A light truck bounced over the rubble of the building site, and the driver, a young man unshaven and with more than a day's growth, guided the vehicle through the usual mess of a construction site with its stacks of timber and bricks and discarded material lying where it had been haphazardly thrown. Slowly bringing the truck to a halt he alighted, then, catching sight of another young man working on the uncompleted open roof of the building, he called "Hi Cat, thought you were going on holidays?" The shirtless bronzed young man wearing only torn shorts and boots standing on the framework of the building acknowledged the call with a wave of his hammer, "Tomorrow mate I'm gone, 10.30 plane will see me away from this lot for a month." He slowly lowered his muscular body down to his haunches." And when we get back we're getting married. Suppose you heard about the stuff up with the tickets?" "No", came the reply. Cat Stevens hooked his hammer on a convenient nail and adjusted his body to sit on the framework, "Yep, I fly out tomorrow but Chris can't leave until Tuesday, all because her old man insisted on buying her ticket" "The old man doesn't trust you I suppose" from his mate. "Nah, it wasn't that, anyway I'll have two days to make sure everything's O.K. before Chris arrives but I wish we could have flown over together."

The two young men had been friends since High School and had served their apprenticeships together, however although Troy Martin preferred not to climb around the dizzy heights of roofs, his mate Cat had earned a reputation for being unafraid of heights, hence the name Cat had been with him since school days. Continuing their small talk, the two boys returned to the job after agreeing to meet for a drink that evening, but Cat was adamant that it would only be for two beers as he had to get home and pack. He kept to his word and left the hotel at 6 p.m. much to the chagrin of Troy who had been looking forward to a much longer session, however that was the last he was to hear of Cat until some weeks later.

Christine Pearson was an attractive blue-eyed blonde who at the age of 24 had proved her ability to hold the title of Finance Consultant at the National Bank. She had met Peter Stevens eight months previously at a college for advanced computer skills and the immediate mutual attraction between the two quickly grew into love. He soon became one of the family, her Mum & Dad accepted him as the son they'd never had and he practically lived at their home, his welcome always assured, especially as he became such of "fixer" of the little jobs about the home that Mr Pearson had never seemed to be able to get around to.

When the holiday at Bali had been decided by the young couple, Charlie Pearson had insisted he would pay for Chris's airfare, and even though she refused point blank, he went ahead and bought the ticket. Unfortunately he had somehow mixed up the dates, and her booking was for the Tuesday, whereas Peter had already purchased a ticket for the preceding Saturday. Much to the consternation of the young couple, they found the bookings could not be changed, so resigning themselves to the fact Chris saw Peter off on the Saturday morning, assuring him the time would go so fast and besides it would give him a chance to suss out the best places to visit as it was the first time in Bali for both of them.

The Qantas Flight 713 for Bali-Singapore was well underway, and the passengers were enjoying their cold drinks when Peter retrieved a note pad from his hand luggage to write to his bride to be. After relating all that had happened since they'd said their goodbyes, he finished off with "My darling, I miss you already and we aren't even in Bali yet. I love you so much, I feel we should have postponed everything until we could have got on a later plane together. I will always love you, my life took on a new meaning when I met you and now I don't think I could live without you. Yours always, Peter".

As the pretty dark little Hostess walked up the aisle towards him, Peter thought of a way he could get his letter to Chris before she left. "Excuse me;" he said, "If I put a stamp on this letter do you think you could post it for me when you get back". All smiles the young girl answered, " Yes of course, but we won't be back before next Friday". "O God, I forgot, you're going on to Singapore aren't you". "Yes, then we have two days before we bring another flight back". Peter realised then that there was no way he could get his letter to Chris in time. So telling the lass not to worry, he put the letter in his back pack with his wallet passport and keys etc., and decided to have a little doze, and only woke as he

heard the pilot's voice announcing their imminent arrival in Bali.

As he walked on the tarmac towards the waiting bus, he was reminded of a visit he once made to Cairns, something about the humid air and really intense heat, but as the bus wove its way into the town, he soon realized the vast difference. The landscape, the smells and then on alighting, the brown faces with the, lovely wide smiles showing those white teeth, and all so helpful. "No, definitely not North Queensland" he thought to himself

The hotel he had booked was about a kilometer on the other side of town, so after dumping his bags in his room, he set off to explore. He soon realised visiting holiday makers from all over the world appeared to outnumber the friendly Balinese; however everyone was on holiday and friendly and ready to help in whichever way they could, and after talking to a few young males, he was assured that the Sari Bar was the best in town. At this stage he felt his thirst was greater than his need to explore further, so made his way to this popular bar.

On entering the noisy dim interior he started looking for a spot to settle when he was startled to hear a familiar voice call out "Hey Cat, Cat Stevens, over here". Pushing his way through the crowd he recognised the older man with whom he had worked only a few months ago, Vern Williams had actually been the boss on the site.

"How the bloody hell are you and what the hell are you doing here?" A few cryptic sentences were all that was needed to satisfy the older man's curiosity. "Get me a beer will you Vern, I'm busting to go to the loo". "Sure thing mate, no trouble, go right over to the back, out the door and turn right. Peter nodded and slipping off his backpack handed it over to the older man. "Hold on to this for me mate, it will be easier getting through this crowd". Vern nodded, and taking the backpack started pushing his way back to the bar.

Peter slowly made his way to the toilet and on opening the door found the toilets were of Western design, not Balinese as he'd half expected. Two tall young men who'd obviously been drinking for some time were adjusting their clothing as he walked in and hailed Peter in thickly accented German. "Hi, you would be Australian I think Ya", Peter nodded his head in acquiesce, "Zurich is our home, but we like it very much hot here". The words were hardly out of his mouth when the whole world exploded. Peter felt himself lifted up and thrown forward only aware that something hit his head as he went into the darkness

Sundays in any Australian home are very similar. Usually people are occupied with other things rather than watching T.V. drives, picnics, fishing cricket or football, gardening, mowing, and for the older generation maybe even the cooking of the Sunday roast after church. However, 12th October, a Sunday, will long remain in every Australian's memory. By mid morning most people had heard by some means or another of the terrible Terrorist attack by way of multiple bombs in the holiday playground of Bali, this destination frequented by some 30,000 Australians at any given time.

Christine was in her bedroom when the sound of her mother's scream panicked her, not knowing what to expect Chris ran to find her mother standing mesmerised in front of the TV set, visibly shaking and white as a ghost. Her mother couldn't speak, but pointed to the set and then hugged her daughter as the awful news sunk in. A sudden icy coldness gripped Chris and she could hardly breathe. Her father, sensing something was wrong ran into the room and caught her just as she was slipping to the floor in a dead faint. On hearing the cause of his daughter's distress from the distraught mother, he quickly grabbed the brandy bottle and firstly dosed his wife, then as his daughter began to come around he forced some brandy between her shaking lips, lastly taking a healthy dose himself.

For the next six hours they listened and watched every news broadcast hoping to see Peter on every visual, but as the morning dawned they listened with sick hearts as the numbers of confirmed dead and injured Australians grew with each passing hour. Chris could not face work and was given the Monday off as her holiday actually started on the Tuesday. Charlie Pearson had been quick to cancel her flight. All they could do was wait.

The horror that had shaken the Australian people was magnified by the hour as the images of the terrible burns and injuries suffered in the bomb blast and subsequent fire were visual in every broadcast. The Australian Government had quickly organised mercy flights out of Bali and set up

Information Centres both in Bali and Australia. Christine spent hours on the phone hoping for news, her despair growing daily as no news of Peter was forthcoming, she knew he would have phoned had it been at all possible, and gradually the realisation sank in, he was either dead or badly injured.

Six days after the news of the bombing, Peter's letter was delivered. Written on the back of the envelope in very black ink were the words..... This letter was found in a bag with personal possessions of Peter Stevens ... and signed by a Dr.M.Goldrick.

The receipt of the letter meant there was no more hope, and the whole family wept and mourned for what might have been. The agony showed in the face of Christine and she was inconsolable, spending the days lying in her room and rereading the letter, wishing that she had been there with him on the plane, even though it would have meant her death also.

The Qantas flights arranged by the Australian Government to repatriate English, German and Dutch Nationals flew first to Singapore, where the English and Dutch walking wounded were to be taken off and put on other flights, then on the next leg it flew to Zurich where it was met by an Ambulance to whisk away two men on stretchers. It then continued its normal flight to Heathrow.

Back in Bali Dr.Goldrick received a phone call from Mr Charles Stevens, thanking him for the letter and asking him if in fact Peter was dead. He could only reply in complete sincerity that he believed Peter Stevens was deceased but they had only found the one limb, i.e. the arm clutching the bag. Later he had to relate this final news to his heartbroken daughter.

It was a week later, in fact it was the Sunday following when Australia held a National Day of Mourning, when Christine and her parents visited the church where she was to have been married. The dark glasses almost hid the reddened eyes but could not conceal the swollen blotched face of the girl as her father literally held her upright in the darkened church. Another week was to pass before Chris could return to work. Her supervisor, a very understanding man suggested she return gradually by doing a few hours each day until she felt she could handle every situation. This she did, her total concentration being needed in her position and thus giving her the distraction she needed.

"Chris, you have two overseas calls, one from England and one from Germany, which one will I put through first, the switch girls voice broke into her concentration. "Thanks Merle, I'm expecting a call from John Kostas, put him on, I'll only be a minute with him'. The call from one of the accountants in London was concluded quickly whereon Chris signaled the switch girl to put the German call through.

"Christine Pearson speaking", but no sound came from the other end, "Hello, Christine Pearson speaking, can I help you?" Again no reply, but just as she was about to replace the receiver, a well remembered voice, breaking softly almost whispered "Chris, its me darling". The hand holding the phone went white as the pressure began, then with a strangled cry she slumped to the floor.

Christine was vaguely aware of being on a stretcher, and hearing the wail of an ambulance coming from a far place, as she again drifted into unconsciousness. Someone was bathing her face and an authoritative voice was saying "It might be better if you come back later". Then her mother's voice answering strongly, "No, I'm staying here". Again the darkness, deep, deep darkness, then waking up to sunlight, everything white, a hand smoothing her hair, her Mother saying, "Don't let the shock make you ill my darling, not now that you have everything to live for." Shaking her head in an effort to clear the fog, "What shock Mum, what are you talking about?" She could see her Mother now, tears running down her face as she replied very slowly. "My darling, he is alive, Peter is alive and on his way home".

Looking at her Mother's face she began to cry softly, tears of relief, tears of joy, her throat was so full she couldn't speak but just squeezed her Mum's hand as the full truth at last sank in, Peter was coming home, he was alive and was coming home!!!

One month later, Troy Martin cut a clipping out of the paper. *"Bali survivor who was mistakenly repatriated to Zurich marries local girl. Peter Stevens and Christine Pearson will be spending their honeymoon in Cairns."*

