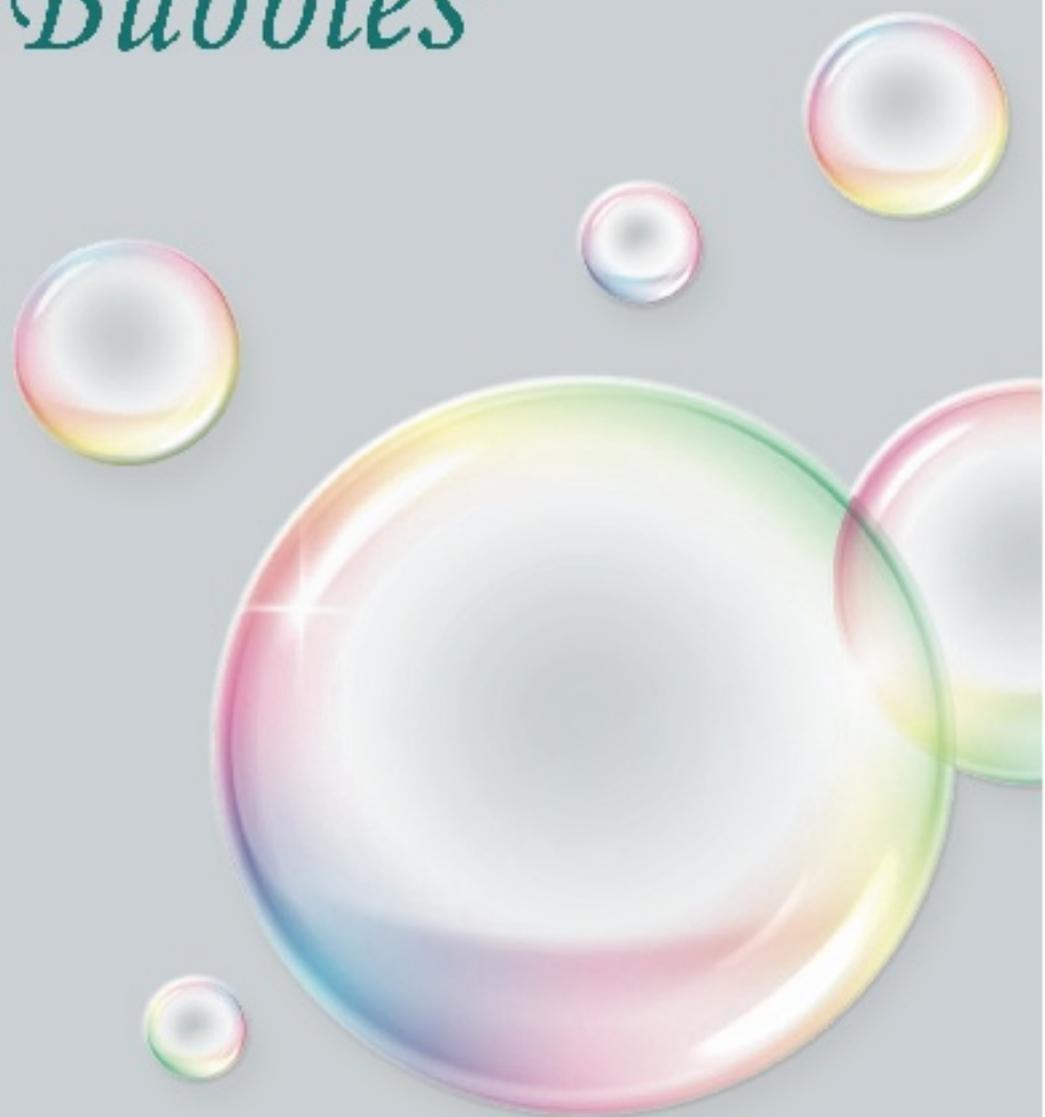
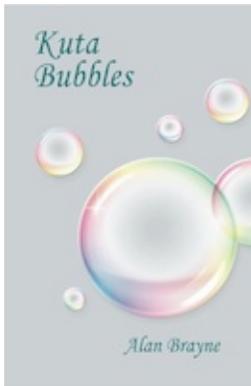


# *Kuta Bubbles*



*Alan Brayne*



*Life is fab for gay white men on the beaches of Bali, where a beer or a boy is never far away. At the heart of Kuta's gay scene stands Klub Aloha, where Jack and his troupe of aging western queens perform tacky drag each week. But the arrival of a strange and secretive tourist, and news about the murder of one of the local moneyboys, shakes their complacent existence to its roots.*

*After eight years of sunshine, sand, and sex, and the constant flow of alcohol, Jack grows weary of paradise, and his circle of friends also finds that their lives are transformed forever.*

*Kuta Bubbles explores the complex relationship between east and west on the Bali gay scene. The freedoms of Bali feel like paradise compared to the oppressive worlds in which both tourists and local boys grew up, but to what extent can anyone ever really escape the drag of their past?*

*Alan Brayne lived in Indonesia from 1996-2002, including two years teaching in Bali. He likes film noir, Charlie Chan movies, smelly cheese, and the colour turquoise. He is currently living and working in Singapore.*

# Kuta Bubbles

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# **Kuta Bubbles**

**Alan Brayne**

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First Edition

## One:

*The accountant lost the plot completely tonight. He began to howl and collapsed to the floor. Ringo looked on, horrified. But then he got his act together, vacuumed up the accountant, and ushered him out of the club.*

*I don't know what it is about Aloha. It attracts every fruitcake in Asia.*

\* \* \* \* \*

I can't believe I kept a diary. Puh-lease! Only sad folk keep diaries, people who don't have a life.

But here it is, and I'm glad it's here. It helps me remember Kuta better than all my photos. Pictures pack an instant punch, but words dig so much deeper.

So this is a story about George, the accountant. The first time I saw him, he was wearing a nautical blazer. Totally out of place – in Kuta, where it's *de rigueur* to dress down. But George got the message soon enough and learned to look how a tourist should look, in his shirt with parrots and palm trees.

There was this poster all over town at the time. 'Bali Millennium', in garish letters six inches high, above a shot of a pristine beach and some coconut palms. When George saw it as he waited for his luggage, I'd bet my life he broke into a hum. Some middle-brow tune from K-Tel's popular classics.

I didn't really know why he hung around Aloha – he hardly seemed like a guy who'd spend his nights in drag clubs. But on the dot, at ten o'clock, he'd be there. Lurking like some voyeur from the vice squad.

I guess it's normal for the tourists to be ciphers – part of the game they play so far from home. But I'd never met a tourist who could fade into the background quite like George. His lips barely moved when he spoke, and his grey eyes gazed inwards, as if terrified some secret might slip out. George wasn't there when you watched him, like staring through a sheet of glass.

Until the night Monique – *crème de la crème* of the local drag queens – plucked him from the crowd and hauled him up on stage. *My Heart Belongs to Daddy* squeaked from the speakers.

Well, Monique was on tip-top form – burbling and pouting and stuffing Daddy's fingers up her skirt. Too tactile for a frigid Brit like George, and he sat, glassy-eyed, in her lap, like some mouse being teased by a cat. By the time the song was over, the shirt of many colours had been clawed off his back and Monique's scarlet nails were scratching a line through his chest hair.

And what her *other* hand was doing at the time? Don't even go there.

George skulked off the stage to a thunderous whoop. Everyone felt sorry for the duffer. Except for me. Because there was something about George that gave me the creeps. The pod people were in town.

I could cope with the usual oddballs. The straight guys from Oz, for example, stinking of booze and BO. They'd spot our flashing lights and swagger in, expecting to find Suzy Wong. Then jaws dropped like a row of dominoes when they saw the local drag queens. Or I'd be on the stage in my beehive and my platforms, Dusty in her darkest hour, mascara engulfing my eyes like a panda on acid.

This sounds like a recipe for disaster but we never got much trouble, because those beer-swilling hulks suffered a fit of the vapours when they saw the lipstick and the fake tits. Downed their beers in one and fled like we were contagious.

I studied George that night as he slunk off the stage. Whatever set him apart was something deeper. Oh, he did his best to hide it behind an unconvincing smoothness. But bit by bit it blistered. Until at last it cracked. On that night when he lay crumpled on the dance floor, howling like a dog. Even for a tourist, that was wacko.

This is also a story about a bunch of western queens and the gay boys here in Bali. First, the westerners like me, who'd put down roots. And then the tourists. Those old poofs who went gaga as soon as their plane hit Ngurah Rai. The moneyboys would fete them like visiting royalty, and the ugly fucking white ducklings would fall for it hook, line and sinker. They never seemed to realise that their wallets were the reason they were flavour of the month.

Vanity, thy name is pooftah.

It was eight years since we'd launched Aloha. Kuta's own three sisters – Ian, Frank, and Jack. Or, when we were in our glad rags, Glory, Francesca, and Jacqui.

Aloha's Faerie Queen, though it galls me to admit it, was Glory. She'd seen it all and done it all and worn it all in Melbourne, under her full stage name of Glory Hole. In the early days, on the other hand, Francesca had been fresh to ladies wear. Six foot tall and butch – well, almost – from some one-horse town on the Prairies. Think Curly from Oklahoma in a frock and a pair of heels. And then last, but far from least, came yours truly. Jacqui, the English rose. That sweet little soupcon of class.

“Posh fucking Spice,” Glory liked to call me, in her chain-smoking rasp of a voice. Purely to wind me up. I mean, *posh*, dear – Lady Beckham? Puh-lease! She may have bags of money, but the girl is hardly Grace Kelly.

In the early days, the drag was as dull as disinfectant. I'm not saying it lacked glamour, or the girls were unconvincing. *Au contraire*.

Javanese boys make drop-dead gorgeous girls. They're slim with delicate features and not a trace of body hair, so there's no tell-tale five o'clock shadow or shoulders from a building site.

But how many Whitney Houstons can anybody take in one night?

So we old white faggots made a rule – strictly one Whitney lookalike per show. Then tossed in loads of comedy, just the three of us at first, hamming it up to *Sisters*. We'd chirrup a cheery tune about our siblings, whilst making vulgar gestures behind each other's backs. Tacky drag from the 70s, which should have been laid to rest along with bell-bottom trousers and chicken-in-the-basket. But the tourists lapped it up. Nostalgia, I suppose.

And Aloha had somehow stumbled on its box of tricks. Frazzled white queens, gorgeous brown drag, and moneyboys to die for. A Kuta institution was born.

I was the only sister in the club on the night when George lost it. I'm not even sure I could have told you which night it was. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday – they all had me pinching myself to check I was still alive. I looked at the neon light flashing outside. *Klub Aloha*. What a stupid fucking name, when Hawaii was on the other side of the globe. In letters the colour of custard, at the foot of a neon-pink palm tree.

Then George slumped to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Lay there and wailed, thumping the ground with his fists. Not even the haze of a couple of spliffs and a fridgeful of beer could quite deaden my shock. This dowdy little chap, in one of those wannabe tropical shirts, had lost the plot completely beneath the spangle of my glitter balls. Accountants didn't do this sort of thing.

At once a flock of twinks had swooped, to minister the kiss of life, and the great white whale was swallowed in a gaggle of brown. Death

by chocolate. Until Ringo came to the rescue, shooed the flock away, and assumed control.

Whenever we had a crisis, Ringo assumed control. You see, unlike most fairies, who flail and flutter when they change a light bulb, Ringo was unflappable. He liked to claim that it flowed in his Javanese blood. Who knows? – perhaps it did. One thing was for sure – I’d lost count of the times he’d kept the club up and running, when we sisters were so blotto we could barely stand. Then it was Ringo who counted the cash and turned off the lights and locked up the place for the night.

“You’ll go to heaven,” I’d lay it on thick, on the following day.

“Not on the wages you pay, boss.”

“Don’t get fucking lippy. You may be indispensable. But you’re strictly backstage, dear.”

Indispensable? That night, without a doubt. I blinked and Ringo had vanished. And whisked away the blubbering white wreck.

So one more mid-week evening was seeping away around me, and I could feel my mood slipping down faster than a cottage queen’s trousers. Now, I’m not averse to a nice spot of gloom. There’s nothing I like more than an evening alone *chez moi*, with a vat of cheap red wine and a bottomless abyss of Billie Holiday. But that’s a pleasurable sorrow, lush and self-indulgent, like marshmallow. Nothing like my feeling then, as if someone were filing my teeth.

At least the beers kept flowing – the boys behind the bar were topping me up. The usual trade-off at that time of night. They kept me merrily drunk while adding fictitious bottles to the tab, which they’d later sneak away and flog elsewhere. I couldn’t get worked up about it. That was the deal in Kuta – you paid them sweatshop wages and they ripped you off in return.

For some reason I kept thinking about my arrival in Bali. Because this is also a story about how we try to escape the past but it always catches us up. I'd been heading for the Mardi Gras in Sydney, and due to transfer planes at Ngurah Rai. Well, I transferred smiles instead, across the aisles of the duty free, with a Balinese boy so cute he made me shiver. And emerged in the Bali sunshine a Kuta cowgirl.

“The story of my life,” I sighed aloud. “I’ve doodled my way through fifty years on this earth.” I banged my bottle on the table and some tourists next to me jumped. “Oh come on, you old fucking queen!” I squealed, soaking up the attention. “Wednesday night before Christmas! Welcome to the twilight zone!”

It seemed like an eternity, but eventually Ringo returned.

“Well?” I asked, trying to hide my curiosity. And failing miserably, I’m sure – Ringo could read me like a well-thumbed book. “What seems to be the problem?”

He flashed me a pained look, as if struggling to express things that were far too complex for words.

Nice try, Ringo. But it would take much more than *that* to fob me off. “Was he drunk?”

“George doesn’t get drunk.”

“Surely he doesn’t do drugs?”

“Of course he doesn’t do drugs. He just has a lot of stress.”

“We all have lots of stress, dear. I’ve got a show on Friday and my beehive’s collapsed.” I said this in my finest camp voice, but I failed to raise a smile. “For fuck’s sake, the guy’s on holiday. What’s he got to have stress about?”

“There’s a boy he likes.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“And the boy has disappeared.”

“Which boy?”

“Someone from X Bar, I think.”

I gave a mock yawn. “One of the Javanese hustlers – *quelle surprise!* Anyone we know?”

“He calls himself Tony.”

We looked at each other and shook our heads. Seemed like another new kid on the block.

“One morning he didn’t show up. And George doesn’t know where he’s gone.”

“I’d have thought it was pretty obvious where he’s gone, dear. Some other tourist made him a better offer.”

Ringo cocked his head to one side, to give the impression he wasn’t greatly bothered. But he didn’t fool me one bit – the two of us went back too far. He’d always had a weakness for lost souls. He was sweet on this accountant.

“So what have you done with him?” I asked.

“He rents a villa on Batu Belig. I got a taxi and took him home.”

“Tell me, Ringo, what is it with you and accountants? The balding head? The wire-rimmed specs? The absolute lack of dress sense?”

But this snippet of camp repartee was greeted as glumly as the first. He frowned and prised open a Bir Bintang, like a dentist pulling a tooth. It was passed to me in silence, without his usual smile.

“Have you arranged for a doctor?”

“He doesn’t need a doctor. He has pills to help him relax.”

I gave a click of the tongue. “You mean this guy’s on medication?”

“Yes, but – ”

“*Ooh la la*, another crazy Daisy! How *do* they track us down?”

“He isn’t crazy! He’s stressed!” Ringo stared up, forlornly, dishcloth in hand. “What can I do to help him?”

“May I suggest a good blow-job?”

He fixed his eyes on the counter and polished the chrome till it gleamed.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Ringo – this is not *Brief Encounter*. This is some horny old tourist who’s got the hots for a rent boy.” The hairs stood up accusingly on the back of Ringo’s neck. “Look, if you’re *that* concerned, take him into X Bar and get out his wallet. Just make sure you stand well back to avoid the crush.”

“*You* wouldn’t understand. George is in love with this boy.”

“Puh-lease! How old is this accountant? Twelve?”

The row of washed-up glasses caught the light and gleamed. I glanced at Ringo with fondness. Something about his hands – they were flapping around in a frilliness most unlike him – told me this was more than a passing fancy. The boy was smitten.

And I suddenly felt guilty as hell about ribbing him, because I could see he felt troubled inside. I smiled in his direction. He hoisted up his chin and looked away.

“Do you want me to start clearing up?” he asked.

I glanced around at the remnants of the evening. Three tourists remained – too hideous, surely, even for the rent boys to contemplate. I sat up on my stool and switched off the camp facade. It was time to play it straight. Or as straight as I could manage.

“Yeah, why not?” I said, and started to stagger from table to table, gathering empty bottles.

“There’s no need to help,” he said, coolly, snatching them out of my grasp.

I watched him line up the bottles. Four by four on the counter – so neat, so geometrical. It made me want to hug him. What a perfect little rice-wife he’d make for some saggy potato.

So how come he never inspired such *amour fou*? OK, he wasn’t as scrumptious as some of the twinks, with their dinky hips and bubble butts and parma-violet smiles. But he wasn’t the Elephant Man. I watched him wring out the dishcloth. Yes, that was it, of course – his decency put them off. Not the first thing the tourists were looking for when they parachuted into Kuta. So the passion was always wasted, and the tears were always shed, over some shallow shit from X Bar.

“Ringo, I was only joking,” I said, guilt oozing out of me by now. “About the blow job, I mean.” His cheekbones remained frozen. “You like this guy a lot, don’t you?”

It seemed to take forever but at last the shoulders relented, and I think I got a hint of a grudging smile.

*Alan Brayne*

I tousled his hair. “Much better, darling. Now, let’s get rid of this riff-raff and shut down the club. Then I’ll buy you a beer, and you can tell me all about it.”

But, Ringo being Ringo, I knew he wouldn’t.

## Two:

*It's impossible to know another person. Deep inside his heart. We all have secret selves we keep firmly locked away. As a gay guy I should know that better than most.*

*In any case, we don't even know ourselves. Not really. This thing we call a self is a tangle of knots and dead ends. Then deeper than that there's a void, which we cover with a flurry of masks. Some of these masks are deliberate. Others grow so habitual we forget we're wearing them. And perhaps, when we look very closely, there isn't a person under these masks after all.*

*Oh Jesus, listen to me. The amateur philosopher. Eat your heart out, Jean-Paul.*

\* \* \* \* \*

I wrote those words in my diary after thinking about George. I'd been pumping Ringo for info, but like most Javanese, if he decided to clam up, there wasn't a crowbar on earth that would prise him open. Only later, as the pressure built to bursting point, did Ringo finally crack and open up. But that comes much later in my story.

So, when I piece together the tale of Ringo and his accountant, I'm having to fill in gaps, and I'm talking about big ones. I'm having to embellish, to embroider, to sew on thousands of sequins. Which is something, as an old drag queen, that I really rather enjoy.

But at least I can start my story with two incontrovertible facts. George broke down in the club that night. Then, a few days later, a cop showed up at his villa.

George squinted through the gap in the door. Two stagnant eyes stared back.

“I come from Bali police.”

The figure lumbered in without waiting for an invite. A thick-set man in khaki, he ground to a halt in the centre of the room. His gaze swept from side to side like a radar scanner.

“This villa very *exclusive*,” he said, toiling over the English.

One thing Ringo had said about George stuck in my head – it felt as if two people shared the same stretch of skin. The first George was haunted, chased by invisible phantoms. But then a different George emerged, disciplined and stiff, a man in total control of himself. And he could flip between the two with bewildering speed, as if at the flick of some switch.

At that moment, in front of the cop, the phantoms were loose. George felt marooned in this room, exposed in just t-shirt and shorts.

The cop eyed him up and down. “You reported missing person.” He reached into his pocket. “Boy in picture.”

George blinked at the photo in the outstretched hand. It was the snapshot he’d left at the police station – Tony in front of the temple at Tanah Lot.

“Would you excuse me, please, while I put on some clothes?”

Halfway up the stairs, concealed from view, George took time to catch his breath. Then he scurried into the bedroom and locked the door. He told himself to slow down, to take his time. Something forced him to hurry. He made his way back down the stairs, in a long-sleeved shirt and fawn trousers. The cop was rifling through the papers on his coffee table.

His attention shifted to the book beside the papers, George's guide to Bali and Lombok. Already it was dog-eared. The policeman wedged it open and flicked through the pages.

"Why have you come here?" George asked. "Do you have some news about Tony?"

The hand held out the photo again. "I want you look."

George took the picture, glanced down, and stifled a gasp. Tony was sporting the t-shirt he'd worn on the day when they met – burgundy red against the dark brown of his skin, with a pencil stripe of cream across the chest. He looked shockingly handsome.

"This is the picture I left at the station," George said. "This is Tony."

"He is more younger than you."

"Twenty-two, I believe."

"Perhaps."

The cop sank down on the sofa and stretched himself out like a tomcat. "You lucky man. This villa very *deluxe*." He pronounced the word with precision. And yet it sounded incongruous, as if he shouldn't know it.

George hugged the photo in the palm of his hand. "Will you need this any further?"

The arm shot out. It took the snapshot back and into a pocket.

"How you know boy?" he asked. "What was reason?"

"Reason?"

“What you do with him?”

“One of your men took a statement.”

The shoulders shrugged. “I not read it.”

“Tony and I were friends.”

“Friends,” the echo came back, with a smirk.

He hauled himself to his feet and began to pace the room, an animal marking its territory. He picked up the carving of a bird that George had bought at one of the craft stores in Mas and cupped it in his right palm. The hand moved the bird up and down, as if weighing it on scales.

“Your passport.”

“I’m sorry?”

He dragged phlegm from the back of his throat. “Your passport. I will see it.”

George peeped at him from the corner of his eye, a look I’d often seen. It made him appear very shifty, a man who had something to hide.

“If you don’t mind waiting.”

Alone again in the sanctuary of his bedroom, George studied the visa in his passport. It seemed to be in order. He needed to be careful with this cop. He was a man who abused his position; that much was plain. And yet, beneath the khaki, George thought he might sense weakness, something he could exploit. This cop had the swagger of a playground bully, and bullies often crumbled if they were challenged.

George toyed for a moment with the notion of refusing to show his passport. But this spurt of courage faded with each step back down the stairs. The cop was seated once more, splayed out on the sofa. The pendulum of the clock swung back and forth.

“My passport,” George mumbled, with a bow of the head.

The cop snatched it from his grip and flicked through the pages. A smirk spread over his face.

He pointed to an inky smudge. “This is tourist visa.”

George stared ruefully at his passport clutched in the bloated hand. If only he had listened to Ringo’s warning – never get involved with the local police. But westerners always imagine they’re in control. Even at the station George would have clung to this illusion, as they’d demanded fifty thousand *rupiah* for ‘*administrasi*’.

The cop snapped the passport shut and banged it several times on the back of his hand. “You are here already two months. You must exit Indonesia.”

George gestured towards his guide book. “I can fly to Singapore and come back in.”

The passport was laid on the table, like bait in a trap. “Plane expensive. Two hundred dollars.” He glanced at George to gauge how much this mattered. “And perhaps difficult.”

“Difficult?”

“You may not be granted entry when you return.”

These words eased out very slickly compared with the rest of his English. It seemed sure they’d been wielded as a weapon many times before.

George tentatively raised his chin. “I don’t think they’ll throw out a tourist, do you?”

The cop gave a shrug. He paused to crack his knuckles, one by one.

“You forgot to list missing items.”

“I’m sorry?”

He fumbled in his pocket to produce a piece of paper, the statement which one of his underlings had banged out on a rusty typewriter.

“What did boy take with him? When he go?”

George almost mentioned the money, but stopped himself just in time.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

The white man nodded, but too vigorously. It was a piffling sum of cash.

The cop skimmed through the statement. “These boys come in Bali. Have no job.” He reached into a pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

“Tony took nothing, I promise.”

“Of course.” He struck a match. “I understand.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t smoke in here, please.”

“They come from east of Java,” the cop explained, with a withering glance. “Most of boys like Tony.”

George watched the match burn down between the fingers.

“Tony came from Jakarta. And he wasn’t unemployed. He was a student.”

The cop sneered. “They always are.”

But he let the match burn down without lighting the cigarette. The charred stub hung between his thumb and a puffy finger.

A car sped past outside with a squeal of rubber. But, a moment later, the world beyond that room had ceased to exist once more, and it seemed sealed off, like a cell. George felt trapped. Nothing so far in Bali had prepared him for this – everywhere he’d gone, he’d been greeted with garlands of smiles. But as the cop pinned him down in his stare, George recognised for the first time that his white skin didn’t bring immunity. The opposite was true. He was helpless there, a foreigner who didn’t know the rules.

His throat felt so dry that it hurt. But he knew he had to fight back. “Why have you come here?” he asked.

The cop sucked up more phlegm. Then he shifted his attention to the ring on the little finger of George’s left hand.

“*Perak,*” he said, and pointed.

The white face flushed.

“*Perak,*” the cop repeated, with a gratified curl of the lips. His instinct had been right.

George twisted the silver ring around his finger. It was one of a pair he'd bought on a tour of the villages around Ubud. Rings in identical styles – one for Tony, one for himself. Then later that same day, they'd stood on the cliff top at Uluwatu, the ocean pounding below, and placed the rings on each other's fingers, in a pact, a private ceremony.

“*Perak*,” the cop said, for a third time. “Silver.”

“Yes, silver.”

“You buy here in Bali?”

“Celuk.”

“This village famous with silver.” He tapped the cigarette on the side of the packet. “High quality.”

“So I gather.”

“*Very* expensive.”

He squeezed out a smile. It was oily and ingratiating. He gestured towards another finger. He had George on a skewer and he knew it.

“And gold ring?”

“What about it?”

“Wedding ring, perhaps?”

The white head sank in an unconscious nod.

“Where is wife, Mr Blake?”

“England.”

“Oh. Long way.”

Once again George needed to stop himself divulging more than was wise – that he and his wife had separated and were going through the process of divorce.

“She’s not well enough to travel,” he mumbled, placing one hand on the other, to cover the ring.

“I see.”

And the bloodshot eyes glanced away, as if bored with George’s lies.

Suddenly the clock struck the hour with a fearsome chime. It was a sound from the west, from some dusty old house in the darkness and snow, completely out of place in the sultry heat of Kuta. It took the cop by surprise, and he jumped clean out of his skin.

George looked on and froze and blinked, as if a flash of lightning had lit up the room for a moment. This cop had jumped clean out of his skin. George’s mind was suddenly alight – perhaps the playground bully did not feel as self-assured as he was trying to appear.

At once the cop seemed to realise that he’d let slip signs of weakness and these signs had been picked up. He laid his hand on top of George’s, to wrest back his advantage.

“I *know* you and this boy,” he said, thickly.

George knew he had to fight back, to exploit that glimpse of vulnerability. But his face burned up with shame as he thought of the things he’d done with Tony. In the room directly above them, in this villa’s secret heart, on that snowsheet of a bed.

“Finding these boys takes time,” the cop was saying.

George fought to wriggle his hand free. The khaki clung on tight.

“And much police resources.” Each syllable was stressed, to the implacable thud of the clock. “It needs *money*.”

At last the fact struck home, and George’s mouth fell open, caught between laughter and shock. How obvious it seemed. And how stupid he had been not to realise at once. This cop had come in the hope of extorting some money.

From the street, a screech of brakes. A chorus of dogs started barking.

Who knows what flicked the switch – the clock, the brakes, the dogs? But something flipped the two people who dwelled inside George, the different characters that Ringo told me about. The white man straightened his body and stared the cop in the eye. “Have you finished with that?” he asked, with a gesture towards his passport. “I think my visa’s in order, don’t you?”

The barking reached a crescendo. Then the dogs fell mute. The judder of the clock.

The cop looked around the room, antennae licking the air. “I would like to help you,” he said, easing out the oleaginous smile. “But boy took nothing, you say. No crime.” He made sure that George was watching before he launched a shrug of his shoulders. But it immediately rang false – he was overplaying his hand.

George was sweating with relief. Ever since that night when he’d broken down in Aloha, he’d been trapped in a kind of limbo. Now this cop had pushed him to the edge and somehow the spell had been broken. Instead of feelings of dread he couldn’t grasp, and phantoms he couldn’t see, George was back in the physical world, facing down an enemy of flesh and blood. He walked slowly to the carving of the bird,

cupped it in his palms, and weighed it up and down, as the cop had done.

His voice was as crisp as a napkin. “I don’t believe you gave me your name.”

The cop’s eyes slid from side to side as he rapidly thought through his options. He had to be careful with tourists – they might complain to someone of high rank and land him in hot water. The cigarette went back into its packet. He wasn’t up for this fight. Suddenly he was scuttling towards the door.

Yet he couldn’t resist one final snatch for money. He lingered in the doorway and turned around.

“We can look for boy,” he suggested, rubbing his fingers and thumb together to signify cash. He patted his pocket – part offer, part threat. “Remember, I have photo.”

George took possession of his passport. “You may keep it. I have others.”

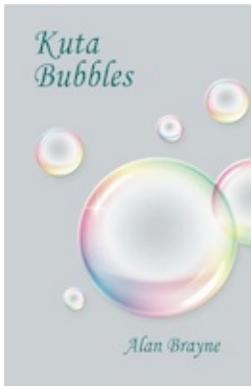
“And don’t forget. You must exit Bali soon.”

“Thank you, I won’t forget.” George walked across and offered the cop his hand. “Thank you for coming today. I very much appreciate it.”

The cop declined to shake. “I regret to have bad news,” he said, with a treacherous smile. Revenge flickered on his tongue, like a snake as it licks the air.

“What’s that?”

“Boy in picture. Tony. We found him dead two days ago.”



*Life is fab for gay white men on the beaches of Bali, where a beer or a boy is never far away. At the heart of Kuta's gay scene stands Klub Aloha, where Jack and his troupe of aging western queens perform tacky drag each week. But the arrival of a strange and secretive tourist, and news about the murder of one of the local moneyboys, shakes their complacent existence to its roots.*

*After eight years of sunshine, sand, and sex, and the constant flow of alcohol, Jack grows weary of paradise, and his circle of friends also finds that their lives are transformed forever.*

*Kuta Bubbles explores the complex relationship between east and west on the Bali gay scene. The freedoms of Bali feel like paradise compared to the oppressive worlds in which both tourists and local boys grew up, but to what extent can anyone ever really escape the drag of their past?*

*Alan Brayne lived in Indonesia from 1996-2002, including two years teaching in Bali. He likes film noir, Charlie Chan movies, smelly cheese, and the colour turquoise. He is currently living and working in Singapore.*

## **Kuta Bubbles**

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