



Larry Cashman, the
Incorrigible Coward

Chapter 6

The Whale Shark and the *Kris*

I am deathly afraid of sharks, which should not surprise the reader as Larry Cashman is terrified by most things in life. In addition to sharks I am frightened by insects, lizards, rats, snakes, spiders, scorpions, clowns, ghosts, and tax collectors — you name it and I'm probably afraid of it. What do you expect from a coward?

You can imagine my dismay when, on our first trip to Bali — our dream destination — Sabrina announced that we should get certified as scuba divers. The eastern islands of Indonesia have some of the world's best diving sites, and Sabrina wanted to explore them firsthand. Unfortunately, scuba diving would increase the probability that I would meet a shark exponentially; a prospect that scared the living daylights out of me and caused terrifying nightmares.

Bali is the entre to the eastern island chain of Indonesia that extends eastward from Bali for more than 1000 kms. to the island of West Timor. Sabrina and I had always wanted to visit Bali. When we finally arrived, we were not disappointed. The island of Bali is a cluster of high volcanoes whose craters are studded with lakes set in hardwood forests; and whose slopes have been carved into lush, terraced paddies that burgeon with golden rice stalks at the semiannual harvest. The island has a steamy tropical climate that is relieved by the cool sea breezes wafting in from the ocean; and magnificent white sand beaches with enormous waves that draw surfers from around the world.



Terraced rice paddies in Bali

It is the colorful, magical, and spiritual Hindu-Buddhist culture, however, that distinguishes Bali from the rest of Indonesia. The diverse and vibrant Balinese culture is characterized by its pervasive temples, countless festivals, and mystical traditions populated by gods, demons, and shamans waging a perpetual struggle between good and evil. Only in death do the Balinese escape this struggle, at which time the soul is released from its corporal prison. Balinese cremations, celebrating the liberation of the

soul from the body, are colorful events extending over several days and involving thousands of people; whose costs can be extravagant. Tourists flock to Balinese cremations for the gaiety, frivolity and the colorful spectacle.

Bali was a destination that Sabrina and I had fantasized about even before we married. Having finally reached our goal, we eagerly soaked up its culture and tradition. Before long, however, Sabrina insisted that we get down to the business at hand; namely, getting certified as scuba divers. I had grave reservations about pursuing such a foolhardy adventure, but before long we had enrolled in a diving certification course that taught students about buoyancy, nitrogen absorption and how to handle ourselves in an emergency. When I heard the word "emergency," I wanted to know just one thing — "What the heck should I do if I stumble upon a shark?"



Titan Triggerfish can be nasty

"Sharks are no threat to scuba divers," the instructor replied nonchalantly, clearly having heard this question before. "They are skittish animals that will ignore you at worst and avoid you at best." This was easy for him to say while we were sitting safely on land. He continued by warning, "You should worry more about Titan Triggerfish during mating season and poisonous sea snakes. Both can be trouble." This was quite reassuring. Now I was not only worried about sharks. I was scared shitless of triggerfish and sea snakes.

Our instructor's response was little consolation to me. After watching *Jaws* then seeing one-armed surfers in Hawaii whose other arm had been a meal for a shark, I approached our first two ocean dives with fear and apprehension. Surprisingly, both dives were concluded without incident. We observed some red snappers and yellow fin tuna, but these creatures wanted nothing to do with divers. During the next two ocean dives we saw a moray eel and a Napoleon Wrasse, but once again no sharks. Perhaps the dive instructor was right. Maybe I was agonizing needlessly and should start to enjoy this new underwater world instead.

With renewed courage following four uneventful dives, I jumped into the water for our fifth dive. The three of us— Sabrina, the dive instructor, and me — descended down to fifty feet in a channel between two islands and were experiencing a gentle drift dive. Swept along by the current, it felt like we were flying. For the first time I felt that "...this diving is actually lots of fun..." At that exact moment I noticed five sharks swimming in a horizontal line directly at us.

As usual, my first inclination was to cut and run. However I wouldn't get very far fifty feet underwater and I definitely wouldn't be able to out run five sharks. I nervously glanced at the dive instructor, who motioned for us to stay calm and keep still. I was paralyzed with fear so keeping still was no problem. I wanted to grab our dive instructor by the neck and whisper "I thought sharks were supposed to be skittish animals and avoid us." No such luck with this crew! They kept coming straight towards us. They came so close that I could see their eyes staring at us. Then one shark passed me on my left while another swept by me on my right. The same thing happened with Sabrina and the dive instructor. The sharks totally ignored us and continued swimming right by.

On the next dive I was swimming at the bottom of the reef looking underneath coral overhangs for marine critters hiding in the reef. At one point I looked under a coral shelf and there was a white-tipped reef shark staring right back at me. His snout was no more than twelve inches from my face. The

shark was hunkered down in the crevice seeking shelter. It didn't seem too upset to see me. I was frozen with fear, of course, and had no intention of bothering him. We stared at each other for several minutes, before I moved on.

It turned out that sharks were indeed skittish creatures that never bothered divers. If you made a sudden move in their direction, they slithered away. With renewed courage, we began seeking out dives with lots of sharks. First we dived in Indonesia – the Gili islands in Lombok, the Komodo Straits (home of Komodo Dragons), Flores, Alor, and Raja Empat before moving on to the Philippines – Tubbataha, Bohol, Puerto Galera, and Coron Bay. From there Sabrina and I dived in the Pacific Islands —Palau, Pohnpei, Kosrae, Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tahiti.

And did we ever see sharks in these places! In Palau we got so close to a bull shark that we could see the small fish cleaning its teeth. In Pohnpei we swam into a channel where schools of sharks congregated to feed. In Tahiti we spotted a twelve foot long hammerhead shark before it scampered away into the deep. In Tubbataha we saw sharks on every dive from the minute we dropped into the water until we finished the dive.



A bull shark in Palau

When I recounted these stories, people were in awe. They thought I, Larry Cashman, was fearless; a sentiment I did nothing to discourage. After all, an inveterate coward is rarely held in such esteem. To enhance my image I exaggerated my repertoire of shark stories.

“As the bull shark circled us menacingly, I could see the small fish cleaning its teeth.”

“As we glided into that channel, we swam right into a schools of sharks and were surrounded by threatening man-eaters.”

“The hammerhead shark stalked us relentlessly after we traversed its habitat.”

When it came to sharks, one would think I was “Cashman the Lionhearted.”

To further enhance my intrepid image, the next step was to chase the big daddy of them all, the whale shark. Whale sharks can easily reach 35 feet in length and weigh in at ten tons. They also have no teeth and are the most docile animal in the ocean. They are filter feeders who scoop up millions of plankton and small fish every day. There was no need to confuse my ardent fans with these needless minor details, I thought. As far as they were concerned, “Cashman the Lionhearted” was pursuing the largest, fiercest shark in the ocean.



Whale sharks are 35 ft. long and weigh 10 tons

While whale sharks are docile, they are also huge. I was not crazy about being underwater near a large animal like that. No worries, though. Given how rare it was to actually see a whale shark while diving, I was pretty confident that I would never see one.

Sabrina and I spent years chasing whale sharks – in the Maldives, Koh Tao in Thailand, Surigao del Norte in the Philippines, all dives sites renowned

for whale shark sightings. And every time we dived in these places, we came up empty handed. There simply were not any whale sharks to be seen.

This created a conundrum. Despite our best efforts, I was pleased we never found whale sharks. On the other hand, without a whale shark sighting, "Cashman the Lionhearted" could no longer boast about his shark exploits. So I did the next best thing. I made up a story about my first encounter with a whale shark and regaled my admirers with my daring.

"I was diving in Palau when I encountered a humongous whale shark. I approached the monster cautiously. As I got closer, I noticed a large hook embedded in one of its fins. Concerned for its well-being, I swam close to the whale shark and dexterously removed the hook. The whale shark didn't flinch. It seemed grateful. Impulsively, I grabbed the monster's dorsal fin, hitched a ride, and was swept along in the behemoth's wake."

This canard worked splendidly. It was sufficiently plausible so that friends and acquaintances not only believed it. They were impressed by Cashman's fearlessness. I got huge mileage out of this story.

Until Sabrina confronted me, that is. "I was just with some friends who told me how impressed they were with your bravery with the whale shark. You removed a hook then grabbed it by the fin and went for a joyride with a whale shark? You've never been within 100 Km. of a whale shark. And if you did see one, you'd probably have a stroke. What is going on, Cashman?"

Sabrina was super-pissed when I told her about my fabrication. "You made up that story to impress people with your fearlessness!!! Everyone knows you're a coward. What possessed you to do such a thing? Have you no shame?"

She caught me red-handed. I didn't know what to say. I was feeling a bit sheepish, so I said meekly, "Sabrina, do you think I'm a bad person?"

"Cashman, that ship sailed a long time ago. You are an incorrigible cur, a pestiferous prevaricator. With this latest lie, you have sunk to new depths of iniquity. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I admit that adding the part about hitching a ride on the whale shark's dorsal fin was a bit too much. Otherwise, I thought it was a pretty good lie."

Sabrina has little patience for my mendacity. To teach me a lesson, she decided to make me experience a real dive with a whale shark. She found the perfect site in Kaimana Bay on the island of Papua in Indonesia.

Papua is the easternmost island of Indonesia. To get there we had to fly four hours to the island of Ambon then get on a live aboard dive boat¹ for seven days to reach Kaimana. When we arrived, we found the strangest site. Local fishermen had built a floating platform in the middle of the bay from which they used night lights and nets to attract squid and snare them. In the process they caught large quantities

¹ Live aboard dive boats are mid-size yachts or schooners that can accommodate 16 people. They are equipped exclusively for diving. The live aboard can reach the most remote dive sites and divers can make up to five dives per day. A typical dive excursion on a live aboard last seven to ten days. It is the best way to do intensive diving at the most remote dive sites.

of small inedible fish as bycatch. According to Papuan custom, if they fed the bycatch to whale sharks, their squid catch would be more bountiful.

When we reached the platform, we could see the whale sharks' huge fins slicing the surface of the water. Since most of the action was taking place near the surface and the water was crystal clear, we just donned masks and snorkels and jumped in the water. There were five whale sharks gorging on the small fish. They ascended to the surface with their mouths wide open, consumed a mouthful of small fish, then descended back into the deep. The whale sharks would suddenly appear to our right or left or below us, without notice. Divers have no peripheral vision because of the dive masks. One second there was nothing, the next second a giant whale shark would appear directly next to us. They never touched us, but having a huge monster that size so close scared the shit out of me.

I snorkeled to what I thought was a safe vantage point and silently watched the show — huge whale sharks scooping up small fish with open jaws then descending to the depths. There were small fish everywhere, with larger fish coming in for an easy meal. All of a sudden, I was enveloped by a school of fish feeding on the smaller fish. The school was so dense that my vision was obscured.



Cashman and the Whale Shark

What happened next nearly caused me to have a heart attack! While blinded by the school of fish, I felt something huge ram my side below my hip. It hit me so hard that I was actually thrown right out of the water. Sabrina was resting in our boat on the surface when she saw my body fly out of the water. At first I thought a boat hit me.

But it wasn't a boat; it was a whale shark. The monster had apparently lunged for a meal into the same school of fish that enveloped me. Its vision was obscured the same as mine. When it rammed into me the creature was probably as surprised as I was at what had just occurred. But it was Larry Cashman who went flying out of the water; and ended up with a huge black and blue mark below my right hip that took weeks to heal.

What was all of that gibberish about giant whale sharks being docile, benevolent creatures? They also happen to be 35 feet long and weigh 10 tons. Being rammed by a whale shark is like being hit by a freight train. I decided then and there that Larry Cashman should avoid animals of that size in the future.

After getting smashed by the whale shark, my bravado was definitely deflated. I hurried out of the water and took refuge back on our live aboard. And that was the last time I boasted about Cashman's encounters with sharks. No more bull sharks, no more hammerheads, and no more whale sharks. I'm fine with sharks that scurry away when I see them. It is another thing when a ten ton behemoth head butts you out of the water. As the avid reader may recall, I'm a lover, not a fighter.

The Cashman family spent 10 years in Indonesia. During that time we added another member to our family. Our second daughter, Katerina, was born in 1985 while we lived in Jakarta. Her delivery was

much more civilized than the nightmare we experienced when Carmencita was born in New Mexico.² Sabrina delivered Katerina at a hospital in Jakarta assisted by an obstetrician trained in North Carolina. The horror of 15 hours of labor without anesthesia and a forceps delivery were replaced by 6 hours of labor, spinal anesthesia, and an uneventful delivery.

Sabrina and I also no longer had to worry about taking care of a newborn baby either. Mira, our full-time nanny, Sulastri the cook, and Sukiam the housekeeper competed for newborn baby-care time. Sabrina breastfed Katerina and the staff changed and bathed her. I had few child care responsibilities, which was probably for the best because I was the least competent member of the household. On one occasion I reluctantly changed Katerina's shitty diapers so I that one day I could remind my daughter that "I changed your shitty diapers."

Katerina's first language was Indonesian, which she learned while spending every day with our staff from the time Sabrina and I left for work until we came home at night. She only heard English spoken when she was with Carmencita, Sabrina, or me. But she absorbed everything she heard, and by the time she entered the International Play School in Jakarta, when she was four years old, she was fluent in English too. Unfortunately her English vocabulary was liberally interspersed with graphic four letter words she learned listening to her father run his big mouth on most topics under the sun. I didn't think this was a problem until I received a call at work from the headmistress of the International Play School.

"Dr. Cashman, I need to speak with you about your daughter Katerina's behavior." I immediately corrected her. "Just call me Cashman. Everyone does."

"Well Cashman, Katerina's behavior in school has become disruptive. She called one of her classmates 'a nasty fucking brat' after a schoolyard altercation. On another occasion, when a teacher disciplined her for being too rowdy during playtime, she told her teacher to "blow it out your ass."

I knew where Katerina learned these profanities as they were two of my favorites; but I nonetheless expressed outrage and indignation. "I am shocked that my daughter would use such language. I can't imagine where she learned it. I will take the necessary measures to prevent a recurrence of such coarse language."

When I got home, I had a talk with Katerina. "Did you call your friend at school 'a nasty fucking brat?' You shouldn't say that to your friends."

"But Daddy, she was being mean to me, and anyway isn't that what you call kids all the time?"

She had me there. But I admonished her "It might be better if, when your friends are being mean, you call them 'naughty little urchins' instead."

And when your teacher scolded you, did you tell her to 'blow it out your ass'?"

"Yeah Daddy, I really love the way you say that."

"That's OK for your Dad to say, but it might be a little harsh to say to your teachers. The next time your teacher disciplines you, it would be better for you to tell her to 'stick it where the sun don't shine.' It's more subtle."

I felt pretty good about giving Katerina such sound paternal advice. Perhaps Carmencita, who was now pushing 15 years old, could use some sage advice from her father as well. When Carmencita was an awkward pre-teen, she thought boys were disgusting, a notion I did not try to dispel. She thought they all belched, snored, and farted like her father and hence wanted nothing to do with them.

² See Volume 1 Chapter 8 for the excruciating details surrounding Carmencita's delivery.

As she approached 15 years old, however, she was turning into a rather charming young lady and began to attract interest from the opposite sex. I had some difficulty coping with the post-pubescent, acne-laden boys now vying for my daughter's attention. If their intentions remotely resembled mine when I was an acne laden 15 year old, I was in for some big trouble. It is difficult for a father to properly counsel his daughter as she emerges into adolescence. Sabrina explained the proverbial birds and the bees when Carmencita was ten years old, so I had no role there. Then came puberty, once again the educational domain of the mother.

Finally it dawned on me. The best counsel a father can provide to his teenage daughter is how to fend off the lascivious advances of post-pubescent boys when they stealthily try to "cop some tit." I explained all the subterfuges used by ill-intentioned 15 year old boys to get some action — The Hidden Arm Trick, The Hand Casually Placed On The Shoulder That Slowly Moves South, The Hammond Maneuver. Using Sabrina as a model, I vividly demonstrated how each ploy was executed and just like when I was a 15 year old, I came up empty handed each time. Some things apparently never change.

Indonesia is comprised of 300 different ethnic groups, each possessing distinct traditional art, music, dance, and cultural artifacts, so it came as no surprise that Sabrina was hell-bent on collecting traditional art from all of them. As she traveled the archipelago, she collected furniture, wood carvings, paintings, crafts, statues, and textiles from the many indigenous cultures living on the different islands; and tastefully decorated our home with her collection of these attractive items. When people visited our home, it felt like they were visiting a museum.

I, on the other hand, could care less about art and culture. During my vast travels to an endless array of out of the way locations I can proudly declare that "I never purchased a single piece of art." The one time that I did, Sabrina immediately threw it into the garbage, reasoning that if I liked it, it must be trash. As far as I was concerned, all of those artifacts were just junk littering our home. The only reason I tolerated them was to make Sabrina happy.

After returning from one of her many trips to Lombok,³ Sabrina was unusually exhilarated. "Cashman, I just purchased the most amazing Christmas present for you. You are going to love it."

I was delighted by this news. Soon my mind started wandering, as I tried to guess what Sabrina could have gotten for me. Was it a new tennis racket... a bottle of single malt scotch whiskey.... some Cuban cigars.... a video featuring Michael Jordan highlights? Soon I began to ask myself, "... how did she manage to find one of these items in Lombok?" Sabrina was absolutely certain that I would love my gift, so I waited for Christmas day with breathless anticipation.

When Christmas arrived, Sabrina couldn't wait to give me my gift. It was in a long narrow box, about 18 inches long and three inches wide, covered with festive Christmas wrapping. It certainly wasn't a tennis racket. If it was cigars, it was a strange way to package them. It could be a bottle of whiskey, but

³ Sabrina developed a project to test the Hepatitis B vaccine among newborn infants in the island of Lombok. It was one of the first research studies to demonstrate that the sequential immunization of infants with Hepatitis B vaccine beginning at seven days post-partum could prevent children from becoming carriers of hepatitis B; and also prevent liver cancer among hepatitis B carriers. She visited the island of Lombok frequently during the 6 years that the study was implemented.

when I held the box and shook it, there was clearly no liquid inside. With great expectations, and by now some trepidation, I opened the box.

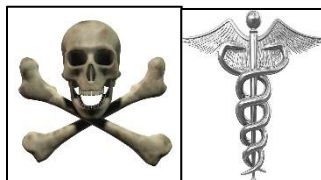


I was incredulous when I saw the contents. It wasn't whiskey and it wasn't cigars. It was a long, ornately decorated sword called a *Kris*. These were quite common in Indonesia so I knew what it was. A *Kris* is a distinctive, asymmetrical dagger indigenous to Indonesia. It is simultaneously a weapon and a mystical object having a spiritual essence, with some blades possessing good luck while others possess bad fortune. *Kris* blades are usually wavy sinuous metal made from layers of different annealed ores

and meteorite that can take years to make. The handle and sheath was a decorative amalgamation of wood, ivory, and gold. This was obviously a very unique *Kris*.

Sabrina was absolutely ecstatic when she saw the *Kris*. I, on the other hand, was flabbergasted and disheartened. I lack a scintilla of artistic curiosity or appreciation for an artifact like a *Kris*, and Sabrina knew that fact better than anyone. Why she would buy me a gift like a *Kris* was a mystery, when I was hoping for whiskey and cigars. I tried to hide my disappointment from Sabrina. As soon as Christmas was over, I threw my *Kris* in the closet and never touched it again.

I resumed my normal routine of working, resting, watching basketball, bullshitting, drinking whiskey, and relaxing, and never thought about the *Kris* again. Then some strange things started happening. During a regular medical checkup, the Embassy doctor told me that I had an inguinal hernia that needed to be surgically repaired. This was a nuisance more than anything else because it meant traveling to Singapore for another engagement with my nemesis, the surgeon.⁴ Since the surgery was not urgent and I am a coward by nature, I let the surgery slide. Several weeks later, on a scuba diving trip to Komodo Island, I geared up with tanks and buoyancy device on the shore for a beach entry dive. When I stood up, I suddenly heard a pop in my left knee. By the time I finished the dive, I couldn't walk. I had torn the anterior cruciate ligaments in my left knee. It was a freak accident.



"Steady Hands" had a skull and crossbones rather than a Caduceus above his shingle

Since I couldn't walk, delaying surgery was no longer an option; and because I also needed the hernia repaired, the Embassy doctor recommended sending me to Singapore to have both surgeries done at the same time. The Embassy made an appointment for me to see my trusty orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Yee Kwan "Steady Hands" Yeo for my knee; and a general surgeon for the hernia.

Because this was my third knee operation since arriving in Jakarta, and Steady Hands had been the perpetrator, I mean "surgeon," both previous times, I should have known what to expect. However, I was always unnerved by the skull and crossbones insignia that Steady Hands hung above his shingle rather than the more common *Caduceus*, two snakes wound around a winged staff, the traditional symbol of the medical

⁴ Because the quality of medical care in Jakarta was so uneven in the late 1980s, all Embassy personnel had to go to Singapore for surgical procedures.

profession. Nor was I reassured by the way Steady Hands surreptitiously nipped on a tiny flask wrapped in a brown paper bag when he examined me. When Steady Hands mistook his knee for my knee and began examining it for lateral mobility, I knew this was not going to be one of his better days. Before I knew it, however, I was whisked to the hospital and was being prepped for surgery.

Having been through surgery many times in my not-so-short and not-so-illustrious lifetime, I knew what to expect — the needles, tubes and instruments inserted in every orifice; the blood tests and physical exams by incompetent residents; shaving the surgical area (with an inguinal hernia, this procedure was of some concern in light of the anatomical structures of strategic and physiologic importance in the proximity of the surgical area); and the proscription not to consume any food after midnight. The surgery was scheduled for 11 AM the next morning since Steady Hands usually didn't sober up until 10 AM.

I was apprehensive the next morning as they wheeled me to the operating room. Being a quintessential coward, my first inclination is always to cut and run if possible. But I wasn't going to get far on crutches, so I had to face the music. My anxiety level was increasing exponentially when, to my surprise and satisfaction, the nurse came in with my pre-operative sedation meds. Instantaneously, my anxiety and apprehension were replaced by a big shit-eating grin. I didn't care what they did next as long as I got more of that tasty cocktail.

When I arrived at the OR in this drug induced euphoria, I spotted the anesthesiologist. This was as good a time as any to discuss my post-operative pain meds, so I summoned her for some negotiations. She offered 2.5 mg. of morphine as needed for pain. I countered with 10 mg. of morphine with a 10 mg. Valium kicker. We settled on 7.5 mg. of morphine with 10 mg. of Valium for 72 hours post-op. As the sodium pentothal dripped into my veins and my mind faded into oblivion, I was content knowing that, although I was going down for two surgeries at one time, I wasn't going to feel a damned thing for three days.

Regaining consciousness from general anesthesia is like waking up from the dead. The mind senses but does not process. The first thing that the mind senses is pain, in this case emanating from the four inch incision in my abdomen and my surgically repaired left knee which was now the size of a bowling ball. I rang the buzzer and, as I had negotiated, my pain meds were forthcoming. As the pain subsided, I settled into a blissful slumber.

When I awoke four hours later with the same dull, gnawing pain, I pressed the buzzer for more pain medication. Only this time the nurse said, "There are no orders in your chart for any additional post-op pain meds. If you like, I can get you some aspirin."

Taking aspirin for post-operative pain is like giving a glutton a few celery sticks to slake their hunger. It was 10 PM on a Saturday night, no doctors were around, and Big Nurse was guarding the pain meds like a DEA agent. As the gravity of my predicament sunk in, I further injured myself when I lunged at the jugular veins on Big Nurse's neck in an attempt to choke her to death. She was too fast and agile and evaded my grasp. Without any other options, I took the two aspirin and slumped into my bed for the longest, most agonizing, night of my life.

When Steady Hands walked into my room the next day, I lunged for his jugular so that at least one of my nemeses could be strangled. Observing my obvious displeasure, he quickly called in the nurse and told her to give me what I wanted. I partied for the next two days until my release from the hospital.

After leaving the hospital, I immediately went to the airport to return to Jakarta. My faithful driver Tolu met me at the airport in Jakarta and packed my pained and sore body into the car for the drive home. Ten minutes later, while stopping at a toll booth, a Land Rover Jeep plowed into the back of my car almost sending me through the roof and back into the hospital. Talk about bad luck! I managed to salvage something from this dilemma. Using my New York City wiles, I feigned serious illness and extorted a handsome compensation from the driver of the Land Rover.

After two surgeries and a car accident, Sabrina was worried about my string of bad luck. She had a friend named Koos who sold antique batik clothing. Koos was a Javanese princess from the royal family of Jogjakarta who was steeped in Javanese mysticism and traditions. When Sabrina related the events surrounding my surgeries and car accident, Koos became very concerned.

“These events are too coincidental to be random bad luck. Do you have any weapons in your house? Javanese weapons can be possessed and are able to cast a spell on the owner.”

Sabrina was confused. “Of course not.... we don’t have any weapons in the house.”

“By any chance, do you have a *Kris* in the house? A *Kris* is a beautiful ornamental antique but it is also a weapon. Javanese Shaman often cast a magical spell on an unsuspecting person by using a *Kris*.”

“I bought a *Kris* for Cashman and gave it to him as a Christmas present. I bought it in Lombok at a Sasak⁵ antique store. I wasn’t shopping for a *Kris*, but the storeowner insisted that I see it. He sat on a cement floor and balanced the *Kris* on its pointed edge. I was mesmerized by it and purchased it on the spot. It was very expensive. I don’t know why I gave it to Cashman. He has no appreciation for things like that.”

“Where is the *Kris* now?” Koos was becoming frantic after listening to Sabrina.

“Cashman tossed it into the closet and he hasn’t touched it since.”

“That *Kris* is possessed with an evil spirit. That’s why Cashman has had all of these freak accidents. You have to get the *Kris* out of your house. It may seek out your daughter Katerina and try to harm her.”

“What should I do with the *Kris*?” It was Sabrina who was frantic now.

“You have to take it back to the shop owner who sold it to you,” Koos replied emphatically. “You must pay him to take it back. He will give you seven Javanese silver coins in return. You have to line up the seven coins at the entrance of your house and Cashman must walk past them as he enters the house. Then you must have a *Selamatan*⁶ at your house to cleanse it from the evil spirit.”

When Sabrina returned from Koos’ boutique and she related these events to me, I was incredulous. “Don’t tell me you believe that nonsense! That’s the craziest story I ever heard.” I have no time for possessed swords and magic spells. It’s all a bunch of rubbish to me; in the same category as religion and mystics.

“What you have described,” I continued, “is one big con; a scam, a hustle, a ruse. You have been swindled. You buy a *Kris* thinking it’s an expensive antique, pay a hefty sum for it, and then you have to pay the proprietor to take it back in return for some ‘enchanted coins.’ Give me a break!”

⁵ The Sasaks are the indigenous inhabitants of the island of Lombok.

⁶ In the Javanese tradition a *Selamatan* is a communal feast in which members of a group participate to sustain, maintain or instill order. It may be held when a new home is occupied, after recovery from an illness, or to reinstall harmony after a string of bad luck.

“I forgot to mention the Selamatan,” Sabrina added. “We have to have a Selamatan at our home to break the spell and exorcise the evil spirit from our home.”

This was getting better all the time. In addition to a huge feast for the surrounding community, a Selamatan entailed contracting the services of a Javanese high priest and Islamic mullah to expel the evil spirit. These services didn’t come cheap, especially for foreigners.

“Sabrina, my surgeries and the car accident were a mere coincidence, nothing more. Let’s get rid of the *Kris* and forget this hogwash about evil spirits.”

But Sabrina was having none of that. Koos had brainwashed her. In her sternest tone signifying that she broached no objection, my darling wife stated very clearly, “Cashman, YOU can think what you want, but I am going to return the sword and THEN we will have a Selamatan.”

Accordingly, Sabrina flew to Lombok and returned the sword to the proprietor. He was expecting her. She had to pay him the purchase price of the *Kris* to take it back and to get the Javanese coins. What a racket!

I had to arrange the Selamatan and engage a Javanese priest as well as a mullah. When they heard that the object of their incantations was a *Kris*, they stopped dead in their tracks. “A *Kris* contains powerful spirits. We can't possibly perform this ceremony by ourselves. We will need senior elders and specialized invocations to expel these spirits.” And the scam continued.

Well our Selamatan required a choir of 14 elders chanting for half an hour to cleanse our home of the evil spirit in the *Kris*. The cost was a paltry \$1,000. If one, however, added up the price of the *Kris*, the ransom to take it back, the cost of the Selamatan, and the extortion I had to pay for the choir of elders, there's no doubt that Sabrina surely gave me one helluva expensive Christmas present.



Indonesian elders chanting at Cashman’s Selamatan

It was an ordinary day at the American Embassy in Jakarta in 1990 when the sirens began screeching. I knew exactly what this meant as we had been practicing evacuation drills regularly because of the recent attacks on US Embassies and other terrorist incidents around the world.

The decade of the 1980s was rife with international terrorism. It began with the takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979. Then in 1981 Muammar Qaddafi, the strongman running Libya, threatened to kidnap US Embassy employees in Rome and Paris. In 1983 US Embassies in Beirut and Kuwait were bombed, and a suicide bomber killed 241 Marines in their barracks in Beirut that same year. When TWA flight 847 was hijacked in 1985 an American hostage was shot and his body was dumped on the tarmac in Beirut.

In the same year the Achille Lauro Cruise ship was hijacked off the coast of Egypt. Leon Klinghofer, a disabled American, was executed and his body was thrown into the sea. The La Belle Discotheque in Berlin, known to be popular with American servicemen, was bombed in 1986 with evidence of Libyan involvement.⁷ In response Ronald Reagan ordered the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi.⁸ In retaliation the Libyan Government authorized the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988, killing all 281 people on board as well as 11 more victims on the ground. The international terrorist situation was tense and all US Embassies were placed on high alert.

In 1990 the American Embassy in Jakarta was on the highest terrorist alert level. Indonesia was the largest Muslim country in the world and a local extremist fringe was becoming increasingly vocal and aggressive. Threats against the US Embassy were received regularly so the frequent evacuation drills had become routine.

As all Embassy employees gathered in the courtyard following what we thought was a drill, the Ambassador's voice could be heard over the PA system. "The Embassy has been attacked. Two rocket grenades were fired into the Embassy compound, although neither exploded. All Embassy employees except for essential personnel must leave the compound immediately and return to your residences until you receive further information."

No one had to tell me to high-tail it out of there. I was the first one in the car and out the gate. I didn't want to be anywhere near rocket grenades. International terrorism had reached Jakarta.

As I drove home, I pondered the situation. Since 1978 Sabrina and I had realized our dream of living and working overseas. By 1990, however, living abroad in exotic Asian countries was no longer the idyll it used to be. After the attack on the American Embassy in Jakarta, it accentuated just how vulnerable we were. Now "Mad Dog" Qaddafi and "Madman" Reagan had ceased trading verbal barbs and were now raining down bombs on each other, with the inevitable result that terrorist attacks would probably increase; and it would be Americans living abroad, like us, who would be at greatest risk.

At this critical juncture in history Americans had two choices — either withdraw into fortress America and retreat into isolationism or continue to venture out to places like Thailand, Indonesia, and Europe, standing tall and undaunted. The former would be a victory for the terrorists and the latter a victory for the American spirit.

As the reader knows, Larry Cashman is a confirmed coward. I have demonstrated consistent spinelessness on every occasion when courage was required. I have also been a procrastinator and vacillator all of my life when faced with hard choices like this. However, for some strange reason, this choice seemed different. It required urgent, forceful action. On the drive home I decided that, if there were any more terrorist incidents in Jakarta, for the first time in my life I would take a decisive stand and fight — for the first seat on the first fucking plane out of this place. Discretion is the better part of valor, and Larry Cashman is no hero.

⁷ Three people were killed and 229 injured in the La Belle Discotheque bombing. Two of the dead and 79 of the injured were Americans. When telex messages from the Libyan government to its Embassy in Berlin congratulating them on a job well done were intercepted, Ronald Reagan ordered the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in retaliation.

⁸ There were 40 reported Libyan casualties in these raids. One of the claimed Libyan deaths was of a baby girl, reported to be Muammar Qaddafi's daughter.