

Gede

A Life Carried Across Rivers

In the dry hills of eastern Bali, in Karangasem regency, where the soil remembers every season and the families remember every ancestor, a small boy used to stand at the edge of a river he was supposed to cross.

When the floods came, and they came often, sweeping down from the mountains in the wet season with the violence of a thing being born, the river thickened into a brown weight that had taken children before. The boy and his brothers stood on the bank with their bare feet in the mud, watching the water for a sign. Sometimes they waited for hours. Sometimes, when school or errand demanded it, they jumped in and swam.

The boy was the fifth of six children. His parents farmed a single hectare that belonged to someone else. Each year they paid their rent in cows, and the cows were reckoned in the only currency that truly mattered in the village: rice.

Their house, built by his grandfather from clay walls and timbers cut from the farm itself, held two rooms, each two and a half meters square. Eight people slept inside. They lived, mostly, outside, under a sky that gave them six months of rain and six months of dust, and asked them to live well in both.

There was no electricity. There was no plumbing. In the dry season, the river that had been so dangerous in the wet became the only water source. Every afternoon, after school, the boy walked four or five kilometers to the river and

back, his bucket weighted with the family's share. Rice and meat were rarities. The family ate cassava and sweet potato, whatever the soil gave when it gave anything at all. They lived, in the truest sense of the phrase, off the land.

And yet, despite the weight of the bucket and the danger of the river, the boy remembers those years as happy, and filled with love.

His name was Gede. Nearly forty years later, he would lead one of Bali's most respected charities, an institution that has restored sight to countless people across the Indonesian archipelago and reaches further every year. The path from one to the other was not straight, and it was not foretold. It was carried, like everything in his life, across rivers.

The Village

Gede was born in 1978 into a family that had farmed the land in Karangasem for generations. His ancestors were not only farmers; they were artists. His grandfather was a respected musician and dancer in the traditional Balinese arts. His father played gamelan. Coin was scarce in the household, but the family held a place inside the cultural life of the village, and that place was its own kind of inheritance.

There was one radio in the house, tuned to the Republic of Indonesia's single station, the thin thread to the wider world. The village had one television, run from a car battery, and once a month a traveling cinema came through with a projector and a generator. Whenever there was something to watch, the whole village gathered to watch it together.

Gede remembers all of it. The timing of the seasons. His mother working through harvests, bartering crops for variety in the family's diet, hard-working in a way the children understood was an act of love. He remembers his siblings, the games, the after-school adventures into the forest where the children fought birds for mango and wild fruit.

All six siblings did well at school, and Gede ranked first in his class.

But after primary school, the money ran out.

The Crossing

In 1990, when Gede was twelve, his older brother in Sanur, on the other side of the island, was expecting a second child. The family could not afford child care, and so Gede was asked to come live with them and look after his niece.

He fetched his bucket for the last time, said his goodbyes, and made the long journey south. It was a crossing more decisive than any river. He left the dry hills, the gamelan, the hectare of borrowed land, the two-room house, and stepped into a world he had only heard about on the radio.

In Sanur, Gede's brother lived next door to an Australian named John Fawcett, who, only recently, had begun to think about doing something for the cataract-blind people of Indonesia. Gede's sister-in-law kept his house.

John saw the boy in the garden, looking after the baby. He noticed him. And one day, he offered Gede a small job: water the plants in the villa, for a little money.

This is how the movement began: with a man offering a boy a watering can.

The Apprenticeship

What followed was an apprenticeship of a kind that has nearly vanished from the modern world, conducted at the side of a man who was building something extraordinary.

What John saw in the boy on the day he offered him the watering can, no one but John could say. But he saw something. And he set about, slowly and deliberately, drawing it out.

There were courses. English. Computers. Accounting, one short program after another. Whatever skill seemed useful, John found a way to teach the boy. The training took its shape from need: each course was chosen for what the foundation would one day require, and applied the moment it was learned.

Responsibility came too, given out in widening rings. The garden became the office. The office became the meetings. The meetings became the management of programs. By twenty-one, Gede was leading a staff of seven or eight. Each task earned the next, and he returned the trust with everything he had.

By 2001, when the foundation was formally constituted as a Yayasan, Gede was twenty-three years old and named its first secretary. He had entered the villa as a part-time gardener. He was now a senior officer of the institution that gardener had helped build.

The Office Years

For the next decade, three men ran the foundation. John was its founder and its conscience. Sukajaya, his right-hand man, was the operational soul of the sight restoration program, taking the cataract surgeries that became its signature work. Gede took everything else: cleft lip, tuberculosis, education, the daily life of the office. They were the trio at the centre of it all.

Gede set up the office network and the computers, learning the rest by doing. He became the institutional memory of the foundation, the keeper of every project, every staff member, every village they had ever visited. Whatever the foundation needed to remember, Gede remembered. Whatever it needed to do, he found a way to do.

The foundation grew. The first offshore program, across to another Indonesian island, was launched. The donor base expanded. Stakeholders multiplied. Gede was at the centre of all of it, the quiet axis around which the work turned.

The Losses

Sukajaya died in 2016. He had been with John from the beginning. He had been Gede's partner and counterpart, the man whose work paralleled his own. His death was the first great rupture.

John died in 2017.

It is hard to describe what John Fawcett's death meant to those who had built the foundation with him. He had been not only the founder but the gravitational centre, the man around whom the entire enterprise organised itself. For Gede, the

loss was personal in a way those outside the family could only guess at. John had taken a twelve-year-old boy from a Karangasem village and, over twenty-five years, taught him everything an adult man needs to know to run an institution. There is no single word in any language for what that relationship was. *Mentor* is too small. *Father* is not quite right. *Guru*, perhaps, in its full and original sense.

A meeting was called. All the stakeholders came. A speech was made. Gede would take over. The foundation would not stop here. John's legacy would continue. Everyone bore witness.

But the truth that made the moment possible was simpler than the speech. There was only one successor anyone could imagine. It was Gede. He had always been the one.

The Inheritance

It has been nearly ten years since John died, and the foundation has not only survived. It has grown.

When Gede took over, the foundation ran one or two offshore eye care missions a year. Today it runs fourteen to sixteen. The model has shifted from Mobile Eye Clinics alone to a hybrid that partners with regional hospitals across the archipelago. New stakeholders, the Indonesian Red Cross among them, have come into the orbit. A new flagship Mobile Eye Clinic launched in 2019. The donor base has deepened, and the staff has grown from twenty to thirty-two.

What Gede returns to, when he reflects on the last decade, is the weight of what has been placed in his hands. *I don't want to let anyone down*, he says. The foundation is a trusted institution. People rely on it. The blind in remote villages, the people who, like Gede's own family once did, live with little, they rely on it.

The Next Crossing

Gede is in his late forties now. Asked what he wants for the next ten years, he answers without hesitation.

He wants to help more people. He wants to grow the foundation. He wants to adapt to new technology. He wants to engage stakeholders at a higher level. He wants, very much, to finish his secondary school certificate, the one missing year, and then to go further.

You can hear, in this list, the boy who was first in his class at the village school. The boy who never finished his certificate because the foundation needed him too much. The boy whose potential John saw, on the day of the watering can, and spent twenty-five years drawing out. He understands what he received and where the gaps remain. He means to close them, in service of the institution that raised him.

The boy from Karangasem is still crossing. He is still carrying the bucket home. He is still, in the deepest sense, the one his family and his foundation can rely on to make it across.

And the river, like every river, will keep flowing.
