

Puerto Galera

By Jason Donald

Rudi's Bar sold the cheapest San Miguel on Sabang beach. Their fried rice was half decent and the barmaid was perkier than a kiddies' TV presenter. Like every bar along the coast, Rudi's played a lot of Marley but they also put on some Clapton, the Stones, a little Hendrix. The bar and tables were varnished driftwood and towards the back the sloped ceiling was propped up by a couple of rusty scaffolding supports. Come midnight this area passed for a dance floor. Girls twirled around the scaffolding posts and men shuffled in their sandals. The bar at my resort hotel had a resident lounge singer who jabbed his splayed fingers at a Casio keyboard. Most nights I went to Rudi's.

I sat on a stool at the bar and studied the photographs stapled above the till. Shots of bygone parties with local girls posing on tourists' knees. Close up pictures of holidaymakers huddled together, cheering drunkenly, all teeth and sunburned cheeks.

The barmaid appeared from the kitchen and skipped up to the counter.

'Hello mister,' she said. 'I take your order?' She looked too small to work the bar.

'Hello again,' I said, taking my sunglasses off the top of my head and laying them on the bar. 'You know what? I'll just have the same as last night.'

'San Miguel and chicken fried rice?'

'You remembered.'

When she smiled her dimples formed soft slits. I wanted to suck each one right off her face. She turned her back and bent over, taking a beer from the fridge and shouted through my order in Filipino. The woman in the kitchen shouted back. A lot of the girls in

this town weren't girls. You could tell by their square bony shoulders, their muscled tits shaped like apple halves shoved under their tight tops, the narrow slope of their hips. I had even seen one guy with stubble poking through his make-up. But this barmaid was properly packaged and ready for unwrapping. She placed my beer on a coaster and said, 'Sorry, we have no more chicken. You want pork fried rice?'

'Pork's good,' I said, making steady eye contact.

She flashed her dimples and disappeared into the kitchen. I sipped my beer and turned to face the breeze coming off the ocean. The bar was filling up. People drank Mindoro Slings and watched the sunset, others idly poked forks at their noodles. A heavy set man raised his hand and snapped his fingers. He pointed at his table. The barmaid hurried over with two more drinks. She gently placed each glass on the table while he stared out across the beach. As she walked back to the bar he eyed her ass, then forced his pinkie into his ear and wriggled it. I could tell he was German. Something in the bridge of his nose, the set of his brow, gave him that German look. I reckoned he was about sixty despite his green surfer's vest and wilted ponytail. The slight girl beside him was vacantly pretty. Her face paled by cream, the rest of her dark as a coconut husk. They sat alone at a table for six, up close, not speaking. His pink arm hung over the back of her chair. He stroked her bare neck and shoulder, his broad fingers exploring her ear, her throat, the corner of her mouth. Apart from sipping her drink, she didn't move. Her eyes were fixed on the horizon, watching each boat as it left the harbour. I could only guess at her age, anywhere between thirteen and twenty-three. It's hard to tell with Filipinas. Maybe she was twenty. But in the dark I bet she felt like a thirteen-year-old.

My rice arrived. I thanked the barmaid with a tilt of my beer bottle. As I ate I flipped through my PADI diver's manual and reviewed chapter four for tomorrow's exam. I memorised the symptoms of nitrogen narcosis and "the bends" and tried to make sense of the charts for calculating decompression time between dives. When I'd had enough I

pushed my plate of rice aside and lit up a cigarette. The packet read *HOPE, The Luxury Cigarette!* That always made smile. This country was too much.

The barmaid asked me if I wanted another San Miguel. I was diving at Reef Point first thing in the morning, but I took another beer anyway.

From behind the bar came the honking sound of a taxi.

‘Is that a mynah bird?’ I asked the barmaid.

‘Yes sir, he belonged to a jeepney driver. He speaks the noise of traffic.’ The bird hopped along the perch in the tiny cage, its black feathers glinting blue.

‘What else does he say?’

‘Many things.’ She tapped the cage saying hello, hello, hello in a cartoon voice. The bird cocked its head and remained silent.

I sipped the beer. ‘You’ll just have to talk to me,’ I said, smiling. ‘I might even answer back.’ She glanced at my mouth and she smiled too, her dimples sinking deep. She blushed and tucked a glossy black curtain of hair behind her ear. I started getting a hard-on.

‘Are you on holidays, sir?’

‘Yeah, you could call it that.’

‘For how long?’

‘A while.’ I took a drag on the cigarette. ‘I’m doing a dive course.’

‘You like diving?’

‘I like the coral reefs and the tiny fish. But I’m still getting used to the deep water.’

She looked at me.

I had an urge to tell her that sometimes, out under the waves, I’d lose sight of the ocean floor. A deepening blue extended in all directions. My breathing would pull, short and fast, through the regulator. I’d search left and right for a reference but everywhere stretched into murky nothingness. And despite the stern warnings from our instructor, I’d

fin straight to the surface. Instead, I told her, 'I don't like any fish bigger than a dog. You know what I mean?'

She placed both elbows on the bar. 'I haven't been swimming since I was a little girl.'

'Really? I thought everyone here swam.'

'I have not the time. Every day I work.'

'Every single day?'

'Yes. I want to make money, go to America, but it's too expensive.'

'Don't you like it here?'

She looked down at her fingernails, began chewing her lip. 'All my life I want to leave.'

'Really?' I exhaled out the side of my mouth to avoid blowing smoke at her. 'I love it here. Seriously. You don't know how lucky you are to live in such a gorgeous place.'

The music stopped and I heard the CD player whirr and click, selecting a new disc. I finished my cigarette and stubbed it out. 'So, how much do I owe you for dinner?'

She reached for her note-pad, calculated the total, tore off the slip and placed it in front of me. I took out my room keys and wallet and laid them on the bar. The keys had a green leather tag with my hotel logo and room number branded on it. I opened the wallet, took out three thousand pesos and placed the notes on her handwritten bill. 'This is for the meal and the rest is a tip. To help you get to America.'

Her eyes widened. 'This is too much. You cannot give me this.'

'I want to.' I held up my hands, showing I wouldn't accept disagreement.

'You come from America?'

'No. Never been there.'

'Which country do you come from?'

It was my turn to look away. I scratched the label on my beer bottle as I figured out how to phrase the next bit. 'I've travelled all over, but my own country is the most beautiful. Better than America.'

She frowned and smiled at the same time.

'You don't believe me, do you?'

She swung her head girlishly to the side.

'Well, if you're not convinced I can show you pictures and clips on my laptop. You could come over when you finish work and you can decide for yourself?'

She ran a moist lower lip through her teeth as she stared at my room number, then at my wallet. I watched her considering, imagining possible outcomes. She lifted the three thousand and folded them into the pocket of her jeans. 'I don't finish work till late,' she said, her dimples gone.

'That's okay, I hardly ever sleep.'

She lifted a tray from the corner of the bar and I watched her weave from table to table collecting empties.

The German downed the rest of his cocktail and spat the slice of pineapple on to the floor. He rolled his head back and yawned straight up into the air. His girl sat passive. He leaned in and kissed her neck, his heavy arm curling round her shoulder and tickling her breast. No one took any notice. Touching became groping. She turned and playfully bit his ear then eased her way out of his arms. He laughed too loudly and smacked her backside as she left. She strode towards the ladies room and didn't look back. As I turned around to face the bar the German's stare brushed over mine. Real casual, I reached for my beer and gazed out across the bay. The sun had set. The sky and ocean were becoming the same colour, the horizon disappearing. I turned back to the bar and studied my dive book. The barmaid returned and rinsed a few glasses. Jimi Hendrix riffed through *Red House*. The mynah honked at bird-brain traffic offences. I was halfway through my beer.

The German appeared at my left shoulder and said, “Give me a Slow Comfortable Screw.” He laughed out loud at his own joke. The barmaid bowed slightly and fixed the drink. The German placed both hands on the bar as if to steady it, or attempt to steer it. ‘You,’ he said, ‘you are English, yes?’ His face was potholed by long gone acne, most of it hidden under a short beard shaved neatly from ear to chin giving the impression of a jaw line.

‘Not even close.’

He eyeballed me sideways. ‘South Africa?’ The German eased himself onto a bar stool. ‘You still have the accent,’ he said. He lifted my sunglasses and marked himself in the dark lenses.

‘You haven’t lost your German accent either.’

‘You think I am German?’ He snorted and shook his head.

The barmaid put his drink in front of him. He tilted his head till his neck clicked. ‘It was a good country, South Africa. I was there for business in 1978, in Rustenburg. You know this place?’

‘I know it.’

He closed the stems of my Oakleys and hung them on the neckline of his vest. ‘But now everything is going to hell, yes? Because you allow your country to be ruled by...how do you people like to say? Kaffirs?’

The barmaid disappeared into the kitchen.

‘Some people might say that.’

‘Some people do say that.’

I stole a look at my sunglasses hooked onto him. ‘Well, in any case it doesn’t matter,’ said the man. ‘The whole world is finished.’ He plucked the paper umbrella from his drink and the slice of fruit and the straw and dropped them on the bar. He drank straight from the glass, wiped his wrist along his lips. ‘People come to this island, to

Puerto Galera, only for two reasons,' he said. 'For something you can't get at home or to get away from something at home. Which one are you, Mr. South Africa?'

I tasted my beer and thought about just leaving. That would be the smart move.

'Maybe, you are both, yes?'

'Look, I'm just here for the water sports.'

'Water sports? Ha!' He slapped the bar. 'Yes me also, I like very much these activities.' He pushed aside his drink and turned on his stool to face me. He nodded at my dive book. 'You have examinations?'

'Yes,' I said. 'A PADI course. *Open Water*.'

'Ah, only *Open Water*? So for you it is all new.' He leaned right into my face. 'Mr. South Africa is a little scuba virgin,' he said, with a wheezy laugh. 'I show you something,' he said. From his pocket he pulled out a small tin box, laid it on the bar with a touch of ceremony.

'You go out with a boat, put on these special equipments and jump in the water. And you expect to have a good time, yes? See many pretty things. If you want you can make photos, but *no* touching. They are strict. They tell you down there things are delicate. Sometimes, only one touch and, paff, it dies,' he said. 'But to know a thing you must put your hands on it, feel the life on your fingers, yes?'

The mynah bird performed a surprisingly guttural mimic of an engine changing gear. He grinned and rubbed his beard, then shuffled his stool closer. 'Open the tin,' he said.

'What's in it?'

'Open and look.'

I pulled off the lid. A tiny stick of coral lay on a bed of cotton.

‘When I go places I take small things, for souvenirs. Pick it up,’ he said. ‘This is not coral. In your hand is a pygmy seahorse. Very rare. Very difficult to find. The warts on the skin are for camouflage. Exactly the same colour and shape with gorgonian coral.’

The dried corpse in my palm weighed nothing. Its eyes black dots, the tail coiled tight.

The man’s girl walked over. She slipped between him and myself, curled both arms round his waist and placed her cheek on his shoulder in a parody of sleepiness. She didn’t even glance at me. ‘I’m tired now, Mannie, let’s go.’

‘Soon, my tasty slice of cake, soon, but first I must finish with this man. He likes to look at you. What must we do about that?’

She considered me through black lashes under green eyeshadow. ‘Nothing. Leave him. He’s nothing.’

I gently placed the seahorse in its tin coffin and went to stand up. Mannie put his hand on the back of my neck and forced me back into my seat.

“Get your fucking hands off me,” I said. My fingers were jittery. I tightened my grip on the beer bottle. Without moving his eyes, he watched me do this.

‘I know what you are thinking. Maybe that bottle will help you?’ His face was broad and pale against the dark evening. ‘Relax, Mr. South Africa, we are only talking. It doesn’t need to get ugly, not here in the bar, in front of the pretty girls. But you must choose, talk with me or use the bottle.’

I sat straighter, uncurling my fingers from the bottle.

‘We were making conversation about looking and touching, yes?’

I nodded.

‘And we agreed together looking is not enough. So, if you look at my wife, you want also to put your hands on her, yes?’

Saliva flooded my mouth. Though the German's lips moved, his face housed no emotion. 'Yes, you want this. You want to pull her shirt over her head and pinch her little titties. You want to push your hand down into her jeans.'

'Mannie, come. Forget about him,' said the girl. She rubbed his chest with her tiny hand.

Mannie's eyes never left me. He kept talking. 'You want to peel her panties off, bend her over and bite her ass. You wish to hold her down, to feel her straight hair twisted in your fingers and push yourself inside. Yes? Yes, you do,' he whispered.

The girl wedged herself between us. 'Mannie, *bitte!*'

He pushed her aside and put his face right up to mine. 'Say you want this. When no one is watching, you like to touch. Say it. Or use the bottle.'

'Whatever man...I suppose so.'

You suppose correct. You are not so stupid as you look.'

The girl nuzzled in closer. 'Let's go, Mannie. I'm tired, baby. Take me to bed, honey, please.' She held his cheeks and stood on tiptoes to kiss him. He kissed her deep and slow then moved her aside. He opened the legs of my sunglasses and put them on his head. The girl was steering him out of the bar, but he leaned back and snatched up the tin box. 'If I see you again, I put some of you in a box.'

Arm in arm they left. Their shapes dissolving into the dark. She was only half his width.

I wrapped both hands around my beer bottle to stop them trembling. The barmaid appeared. She kept silent till I glanced at her. 'Would you like another San Miguel?'

My wallet and keys lay on the bar, my room number face up. I grabbed them and left, out the opposite exit, onto the beach. I stumbled across the uneven sand towards my hotel. The wind was thick with spray and shells crunched underfoot as I picked my way through the dark. I had to check out tonight. Couldn't have that fucker knowing where I

was or how to track me down. The surf raced up and I was instantly up to my knees in cool froth. The water waited for a moment and then the undertow pulled. Grain by grain the ground beneath me disappeared. As I lifted my leg my flip-flop came off. It bobbed to the surface and gently rotated on the face of the water before being sucked out to sea. I lunged at it, splashing and chasing through the surf. I waded into the glistening black sea, up to my thighs, to my crotch, chasing it, the shoe just inches out of reach.

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