

The background of the cover is a vibrant tropical sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and red, with the sun low on the horizon. Silhouettes of palm trees are scattered across the scene, with one particularly large one on the left. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of a man and a woman are walking hand-in-hand along a beach. The water of the ocean is visible, reflecting the colors of the sunset.

***STORIES  
FROM THE  
7000  
ISLANDS***

***MARTIN RAVAS***

## ***Stories from the 7000 Islands***

*During my travels around the world in the '1980s and '90s, I took a trip to the magical Philippines, among other countries. It is here where these stories take place.*

### ***Meeting Gina***

*It was a searing hot day in Laoag City, the capital of Ilocos Norte province, at the height of the hot season in late April, when I first laid my eyes on Gina. She was giggling happily with a small group of her friends in front of a local Sari-Sari store. I wish I could have taken my eyes off of her, but I just couldn't. I pretended I was reading a local newspaper, while in reality, nothing could have been further from the truth. I was not even remotely interested in the headlines featured in it.*

*I pretended to read, but I stared at her at every opportunity I had, whenever the people nearby were*

*occupied with other things and were not looking my way.*

*I liked her cheerful demeanor, her playfulness, and even her not so fashionable outfit. I thought it was cute and unpretentious. There was definitely something about her that intrigued me. I didn't think it was love at first sight. Lust might have been a better word if I really had to choose.*

*Seeing that her group started walking away from my café, in the direction of the local, Spanish-built Christian church, I quickly slipped a 100 peso note in the waiter's shirt pocket, so I wouldn't lose sight of her. To my nicest surprise, that little gesture brought out the best in the waiter, who told me he noticed I was watching her, and that he knew where she lived. I felt a huge sense of relief, so much so that I slipped another 100 peso note in his pocket. We seemed to have become instant friends thereafter!*

*My panicked fear of losing track of her suddenly stopped right there. I sat down again, in peace, and ordered, in the absence of any burgers or sandwiches, a dish of Chicken Adobo, a local favorite.*

*It was late in the afternoon and I started thinking about a suitable way to meet Gina, or at least see her again, the next day, if possible. Since I was on an eight-week holiday, time was on my side.*

*I wasn't rich, but the money I had with me was enough, even for an unplanned adventure.*

*I wasn't that old, in my early thirties, with a full head of hair and still relatively slim, but she was probably in her late teens and my biggest fear was whether the girl would be even remotely interested in someone my age. My fear was understandable, if not fully justified.*

*I thought I'd compensate for that with a good sense of humor, an easy-going personality, some money in my pocket, and a sense of adventure.*

*I was usually well-liked by both my past girlfriends and my random one-night stand conquests alike. So I thought I had a good chance with Gina, too.*

*The trouble was that the most common form of lie is when one is lying to oneself. In comparison, lying to others is relatively unusual. The German philosopher Nietzsche said that and I was afraid he was right.*

*Still, like a hopeless romantic, I was determined to give the prospect of being with Gina a try, no matter what the odds or costs.*

*It's hard to believe how much power such a romantic feeling can have over a man, and maybe over a woman, too. Somehow, though, I feel that women are more immune to this phenomenon than men are.*

*Satisfied with my own delusions and full of hope, I finished my dinner, had another San Miguel beer, and went back to my hotel room.*

*I took one more look out the window in the hope of catching the last glimpse of her for the day, however unlikely that seemed.*

*Sure enough, she was gone, and off to bed, I went.*

*I think it wasn't even 4:00 AM the next morning when I started hearing intermittent but intense cock-a-doodle-doing, mixed with an occasional subdued barking and mooing. Those sounds could easily have doubled as an alarm clock of sorts, come to think of it. And perhaps it even was, for some people. Most of it was coming from the nearby houses of this provincial town, despite the fact that Laoag City was the province's capital city – not farming country.*

*Even though the noise kept me from sleeping any more, I liked the idea of it. It felt so normal, natural, even liberating, if you will.*

*The only downside was I wasn't fully rested, yet could no longer sleep. And the same thoughts about Gina that had awakened from last night started going through my*

*mind again. So I tossed and turned in bed for a while more.*

*Pretty soon it was seven and I descended to the hotel restaurant for the free breakfast I was entitled to, with the price of the room.*

*Afterward, I put on the best clothes I had brought with me, had my hair cut at a local beauty shop, and went to the same café from which I had seen Gina the day before.*

*Josh, the waiter I had met there yesterday, had not arrived yet and it made me feel a bit nervous and insecure. After all, he was probably the only hope I had to ever get to see Gina again and meet her.*

*Hoping to see her in the same spot, at the same time, on another day, was a far-flung proposition. So I had my first, second, and third espressos, and I saw neither Gina nor Josh the waiter.*

*I didn't like the way things were developing.*

*However, hope was revived when the morning waiter informed me that he was coming to serve lunch. And sure enough, 20 minutes later, he arrived, to my immense relief.*

*He obviously knew why I was sitting there because he approached me and whispered in my ear: "In a while, I'll invite Gina and her friend to join you at your table." He added that he had sent a kitchen staff member over to her house, to summon her.*

*I was overjoyed and thanked him. Actually, I was more nervous than overjoyed.*

*After about an hour, Gina, her friend, and the kitchen staffer arrived in a jeepney.*

*Josh ushered the two girls to my table and introduced us.*

*To my great relief, Gina did not seem to be nervous at all. She was a bit shy, but she wasn't nervous. She gave me a big smile, shook my hand gently, and introduced*

*herself in limited but understandable English. I followed suit.*

*Her friend, Mei, and Josh the waiter managed to break the ice perfectly. We all quickly relaxed and two beers, four fruit shakes, and 3 meals later, we were happily talking about everything from our favorite singers to our most disliked house chores. Gina's cheerful personality and my best efforts seemed to have blended nicely. I could hardly believe my luck and at that moment, I even began to doubt Nietzsche's theory about self-deception. My hopes about Gina seemed to have been insufficient for the actuality that had developed.*

*Her English was very basic but it was just enough to allow for communication to be possible, with a little help from body language, hand gestures, and smiles. The most important thing was that we hit it off and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves - even Josh the translator!*

*We continued with a double espresso for me and two huge ice creams for Gina and Mei. And we ended up with smiles, handshakes, and an arrangement, again brokered by Josh, to meet again the next day.*

*As she stood up to leave, Gina looked deeply in my eyes, smiled warmly, said goodbye, and got in the waiting trike taxi we had hailed. As it was departing, she looked back, smiled again, and waved her hand.*

*At that point, I knew I had succeeded. She liked me! I could not have been happier.*

*I also realized that without Josh's help the meeting would never have been possible since introductions arranged by middlemen are extremely important in Asian societies.*

*I had another two San Miguel beers and chatted with Josh for a while longer. As I was leaving the café, I slipped 1700 pesos into Josh's pocket. That was enough to cover all the drinks and the food and leave him at least 600 pesos as a tip. He thanked me enthusiastically.*

*Judging by the look on his face, he was more than happy with it. Six hundred pesos went a long way in those days.*

*Our meeting for the next day had been arranged at a shopping mall restaurant that was near a cinema.*

*It was agreed that Mei would come along again, which I not only did not mind but was happy about. She provided the perfect comfort zone for both me and Gina. I suppose that without Mei, both Gina and I might have felt a bit uncomfortable in this early stage of our relationship.*

*In the restaurant, we ordered large cokes and a large pizza, which we devoured quickly. It seems that wherever one goes, pizza is present and popular, especially among the young.*

*Gina continued to enjoy herself, giggled, and mixed her limited English with Tagalog, whenever she spoke with Mei. I did not mind it one bit. I felt it was genuine and innocent. In fact, it allowed us all to have small breaks*

*from attempting to communicate strictly in English, which got a bit tiring for us when it continued for too long. The pauses worked well for all of us.*

*After we finished the pizza, we ordered ice cream again but this time for me, too. Their naturally cheerful demeanor made me feel young, less inhibited, and even a bit childish. I genuinely enjoyed myself in their company. I also noticed that Gina touched my hand and shoulder several times when we laughed as if to indicate her fondness for me.*

*We finished our desserts and went to check what they were showing at the theater.*

*It was a comedy starring Tom Hanks, called *The Money Pit*. We got three tickets, a big basket of plain popcorn and three large cokes.*

*Fortunately, the theater was only about sixty percent full and we could choose our seats. The girls came up with a plan to seat me between the two of them.*

*The movie turned out to be hilarious and all three of us had a lot of fun. Gina kept placing her hand on my shoulder and once even touched my hand as well. I loved that but didn't want to scare her off by grabbing her hand. She might have wanted it but I played it safe and restrained myself.*

*She even took a popcorn or two and casually put it in my mouth while we were watching the movie.*

*There is no question the movie helped me advance my relationship with Gina. We walked out of the theater in great spirits and agreed to meet the next day at Josh's café.*

*The following day, I arrived earlier than the appointed time, just to have a quick chat with Josh about my pleasant meeting with the girls the day before. He was glad to hear that it had gone well and that he had been a help. He also thanked me again for the generous tip.*

*He even suggested that if I were really interested in Gina, I should meet her parents. He explained to me*

*that good girls in The Philippines are usually virgins until their marriage. So in case, I had other ideas, he explained, I'd better drop them right there and then.*

*Clearly, he had a good point and I understood the situation. I had had similar experiences elsewhere in Southeast Asia and was already vaguely familiar with the local social/cultural norms.*

*What Josh said made me think. On the one hand, I felt I was not yet ready for marriage, for a number of reasons. On the other hand, I liked her very much. What should I do? After some consideration, I thought that if we could wait another year, I could land a steady job in the United States and my financial situation would improve.*

*But when I expressed those thoughts to Josh, he said I was needlessly worried. In particular, he seemed puzzled by my "excessive" worries about money.*

*Maybe he thought all Americans were rich. Many Filipinos tended to believe that. The truth was that*

*although we were richer than Filipinos, the cost of living in America was far higher, too. Our education costs were far higher, as were our housing costs, In fact, everything was more expensive in America. We only appeared to be rich because we were in the Philippines, where the cost of living was far below that in America. I may have seemed rich in the Philippines but my purchasing power was barely average at home.*

*So what was I supposed to do? Give up on her and break my heart or try to proceed with the budding romance? I did what most men would do. I made a plan with Josh to meet her parents and even ask them if they would allow Gina to accompany me on a trip to the Philippine island of Boracay. I had heard many great reviews of it and I longed to visit such a tropical island paradise. It was on my itinerary anyway, but now I'd take Gina along if she were interested and her parents approved.*

*Josh thought it was a good idea and we planned to ask Gina once she came to Café Ilocano.*