

2.3.02 Lives



The Mark of an American

In 1994, we went to the Philippines in search of adventure, never imagining that we would meet the future of terrorism. By Cullen Thomas

His English was almost perfect. As we passed a row of low houses, a Filipino boy called me a "white monkey," calmly and hatefully. He was young, maybe 16. He had appeared out of nowhere and was standing with his friend in front of us on a broken street in Isabela, the brooding capital of Basilan island. "Why did you come here?" he asked.

My friend Che and I paused in the twilight. The town felt intimate, hushed with local secrets; below the poor yet placid exterior something waited. "To . . . to see the island," I stammered. "It's beautiful here." There was no way to explain what I meant. All the honest answers were the wrong ones.

"What's so beautiful about this?" he demanded, pointing up the street. His face was tightening. "Is this a zoo to you?"

It was 1994. I had been traveling in the Philippines for two months and had gone down to Mindanao with the vaguely romantic notion of skipping islands down the Sulu Archipelago — Basilan, Jolo, Tawi-Tawi. I knew about Mindanao's fiercely proud Moro tribes and their resistance to any outside force, be they explorers sent by the Spanish crown, American G.I.'s or the Philippine government itself. We had been warned from Manila to Cebu: Mindanao is lawless. A Russian sailor had just been shot dead in Zamboanga; foreigners had been kidnapped. These islands of pirate and rebel intrigues seemed to hold the promise of adventure. We wanted to see what we would find.

With the angry boy and his silent friend still trailing us, we walked up to five government soldiers standing roadside. "Palestine has been wronged," the boy shouted. "You hate brown people." I kept trying to respond, but his grievances and enmity kept coming. The soldiers watching our exchange said — and did — nothing. It was just a boy after all. "I want to go to America, find some shiny white boy and make him lick my boots," he said, getting in my face. We started talking to the soldiers, hoping to lose the kid's attention, because if we didn't, a fight was inevitable. I figured I could take him out, even with his friend there, but I was unnerved by how brazen he was, as if he knew he had unseen help close by.

The soldiers asked our names and where we were from. After giving them in turn, Che joked, "Is that so you can identify our bodies?" With their hands on their M16's, they chuck-

led. "It's not so safe for you," one of them said casually. We headed directly back to Casa Negrette, a small family pension run by a sweet older Filipino named Mrs. Negrette. It seemed as if the boys had given up on us, but just as we reached the front of Mrs. Negrette's, they rode up on a moped. The pug-nacious kid jumped off and continued his tirade.

Being driven indoors by a 16-year-old was humbling but also frightening. Now I was sure that wherever the boy was coming from, he couldn't be alone. His anger was too pointed to be random, too persistent to be an isolated episode.

"All you're talking is hate — just hate," I fired back. "I'm not standing here and listening to it." I walked quickly into the house. Sleep that night didn't come easily. I kept looking up at the screen windows to the balcony, thinking about what to do if someone came for us. I eventually fell asleep, waking near dawn to something that sounded like the call to prayer.

The next morning, in the hot sun of the balcony, we met another lodger, a Filipino journalist named Steve Lim, and told him about our run-in. "He wasn't just a boy," he said. "He was a young recruit of a violent group called Abu Sayyaf. Basilan and Jolo are their home base." It was the first time I had heard of them. That would account for the boy's good English and his knowledge of world affairs and history, however distorted it was: the cause of Palestine and the evils of Israel and "the West."

"Their symbol is a man with a Koran in one hand and a gun in the other," Lim explained.

Just then, Mrs. Negrette came upstairs. She was flustered. Somebody had repeatedly thrown rocks at the house the night before; she had been startled awake. She pleaded with us to leave — not just her house but Basilan as well — for our own good. "Please, go back to Zamboanga. Don't go outside for breakfast. We are afraid for you." Lim agreed.

We took the next boat back across the Basilan Strait to Zamboanga, moving toward safety. Whatever access being an American had afforded me in my travels, it had driven me from Basilan. There was no argument against the hatred we had met; there were only lines drawn, and I was the enemy.

The next day in Rio Hondo, a village of shacks suspended on stilts above the waters near Zamboanga, a worn but sturdy Muslim man watched us from a wooden bridge with a hard gaze. "Time to go home," he whispered to us over his cigarette. "Some people won't want you here." ■