

SINGAPORE SLING ■

Frank Richards

I sat at a table in the Long Bar at the Raffles Hotel, watching the overhead fans move back and forth, wondering who designed them. The fans were shaped like individual palm fronds projecting from a long rod that moved them back and forth, as if a line of servants stood waving the fronds up and down. Singapore was an odd place.

As I waited, I sampled a bright red drink, a syrupy, ultra-sweet blend of liquors. I wondered whether I should order something else. At last, Chris Pierce, our head of operations, sauntered in, just like he owned the place. We would be attending a business conference beginning with a dinner that evening and had both arrived about 2:30 a.m. local time. It hadn't given me much time to adjust.

"How are you doing, Devin? Did you get any sleep?"

"I think this is the worst case of jet lag I've ever had," I said. "Terrible headache." I held up the drink. "This is just making it worse."

"A Singapore Sling? No wonder. Let's get some food in you." Chris waved at the waitress who'd brought me the drink. "You can't beat the food in Singapore. And let's get a couple of beers. You'll feel a lot better."

The waitress brought us small menu cards. Chris pointed to the third item on the list. "I've had this."

“The Singapore Sampler. Vegetable Samosa, Fried Chicken Wings, Spring Rolls, Curry Puffs, Lamb Satays, Chili Sauce,” I read out loud. “That’s eclectic.”

“That’s Singapore. Wait until you taste the chili sauce. The population is eclectic. People here are from all over this part of the world. But they are a practical and materialistic people. This is, after all, one of the world’s great commercial capitals. Everything seems to come together here. You never know what you’re going to find.”

The waitress came back with our beers and stood ready to take our order.

“Look, I’ll prove it to you.” He turned to our waitress. “Miss, can you tell me, what are the five C’s?”

She smiled. “Car, cash, condo, credit card and country club. The Singapore Dream.”

“I rest my case,” Chris said.

After we ordered, he unfolded a map on our table. “I assume you saw the main part of the city, the ritzy stores and such, from your taxi on the way over here.” He pointed to the middle of the map, then looked up. “You did take a taxi, didn’t you?”

“No, I thought we were close enough to walk.” It had only been eight blocks. I hadn’t counted on the heat and humidity. It had been a mistake.

“No wonder you look drenched. You may be used to the heat, but you’ve got to watch out for the humidity. This isn’t Phoenix, you know. Anyway, I’m gonna go out of the city to visit some tropical fish farms. They’re off the map, right about here.” He pointed to his napkin. “Want to join me? You’ll see most of the island.”

Chris had several fish tanks in his study at home, stocked with colorful fresh and saltwater fish. No one knew why he put a massive fish aquarium in the lobby of our North American office. Then one morning we had several visitors from corporate. When I came down from my office to greet them in the lobby, they were all gathered around the aquarium.

“Look at that. Can you believe it?” one asked.

“Just perfect,” another said.

They’d noticed all the fish in the tank were blue, black, and white, our corporate colors. Attention to detail like this was part of our culture. This deft touch impressed our visitors and got their review of our operations off to a great start.

Having nothing better to do, I agreed to the excursion. I always like to see as much of the country as I can whenever I travel, and this would be my only chance to see Singapore, as I was heading on to Osaka the day after the conference ended.

“We’ll leave from here.” Chris attacked his Singapore Sampler with gusto. He shook a chicken wing at me. “Give

us more time at the farms.”

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We left right after lunch, in a taxi without air conditioning. The driver had rolled down his window, so at least we had warm air blowing in our faces. We were soon driving down an unpaved country road, lifting a cloud of dust behind us. I was disappointed at the lack of jungle. I expected jungle in this part of the world. I always think I might see a tiger in the wild. I remembered driving through Malaysia, the country just to north of Singapore, and being disappointed at the palm oil plantations that pushed the jungle back and away from the highway almost out of sight. I wasn't going to see any tigers today, either. Nothing dangerous here.

The driver stopped at a cross street in the middle of nowhere. We got out. Chris paid the driver and the taxi drove away. We were alone.

Some sort of emerald-colored sawgrass covered the ground. It was a couple of feet high in most places. Tall, skinny trees poked up here and there, as if they were fighting a losing battle with the grass.

“The driver said the farms were up this road.” Chris began walking, and so I followed. It seemed even hotter here than in the city. We came to a house set back from the road on the right. The house was surrounded by deep-green trees. I wondered where all the fish were.

I followed Chris up to the door. Chris knocked, and we

waited in the silence. There were no city sounds, no traffic; not a bird chirped, not an insect buzzed. What did we think we were doing at this strange house out in the middle of nowhere? I checked my cell phone to make sure we had service. After all, I was going to have to call a cab or book an Uber back to the hotel.

God, it was humid. And it was still hot, even though we stood in the shade of the porch.

I felt the sweat trickling down my face and droplets of water seemed to be forming on my forehead from the steamy humidity.

A slender, small man opened the door. He wore a white, lightweight shirt and tan pants. His black hair receded from his forehead. His mouth was a slit. His face bore no expression whatsoever.

Chris spread his hands. “We’re here to see your tropical fish.”

Without a word, the man came out and went around the side of the house toward the back. Chris and I looked at each other and followed. We walked down a sidewalk under the shade of trees, and then came to a line of very large aquariums or fish tanks under a low hanging canopy. We stopped at the first one. The tanks were labelled in Chinese characters. The tank contained dozens of bright orange fish, darting here and there around in the tank.

“I’ve seen this kind before in the States,” I said.

“Common platies.” Chris gestured toward the man, who had continued down the line of aquariums. “I want to ask him about an arowana.”

Chris left, and I followed slowly, looking at the aquariums. The next one also contained platies, but these were slightly smaller, I thought. Then the next tank, yes, definitely, these were smaller than the first. As I walked the line, each tank contained smaller fish of the same type, until I got to the end. The fish in the last tank were little more than a pair of black eyes, like two flakes of pepper, fronting a transparent fish.

Somehow it had gotten even more humid under the canopy, and I realized all that water was adding something to it. I thought the humidity must be approaching 100 percent.

Chris had been speaking to the man. He pointed to the tank in front of me. “Those are the fry. They breed them over here.” This time he pointed to a concrete pond with raised sides. It was parallel to the aquarium tanks. The water in the pond seemed full of barf-green algae. I looked down a whole row of such ponds, one at the end of each line of aquariums. The place was laid out in a grid of lines.

Chris continued his tropical fish conversation with the old man. Deciding to get back under the shade, I headed down the second line of aquariums. They were laid out in the reverse of the previous line; starting with the smallest fish and getting larger with each tank. I recognized a kind of fish I thought was called an angelfish, but it was silver with black vertical stripes, so perhaps it was a zebrafish. The

Chinese characters were of no help.

I began to feel a bit light-headed. I felt my forehead. Dry. I'd finally stopped sweating. I suppose I was getting used to the heat, although the thickness of the air made it difficult to breathe. When I got to the end of the line, a woman, probably the man's wife, as she wore the same sort of clothing, stood holding the hand of a little girl, six or seven years old. The woman smiled and handed me a bottle of what appeared to be a soft drink. The bottle had odd writing on it and contained a vermilion-colored liquid. I thanked the woman, and she walked back toward the house. The little girl followed me down the next line of aquariums. These fish were a smaller species: cerulean-blue backs and tangerine bellies.

The little girl's eyes were fixed on the bottle in my hand, so I gave it to her. I wasn't thirsty. I felt nauseated. I wondered why I had given her the drink.

The girl took my other hand and led me away from the aisle toward a shed. Beside the shed stood another aquarium, this one larger than the others. Murky water obscured whatever might be inside. She led me up to the tank and tapped on the glass with the side of the bottle.

At first, I saw nothing. My vision was obscured; the tank seemed to move in and out of focus. Then something appeared in the murk. A tiny horse's hoof at the end of a conical leg. Some sort of impossible creature bounced up and down from the bottom of the tank as if its leg were a pogo stick. Its head appeared duck-like. I looked closer.

The body was not a fish's body; soft, down-like hair rather than scales covered a circular torso. The creature had three tentacled arms ending in tentacled hands, two of which now pressed against the glass opposite my one hand.

I heard the man cry out. I felt an electrical shock. The girl jerked back and tugged the edge of a tarp over the front of tank. Chris and the man seemed to be running toward me, but I felt woozy. I swayed as I reached out to the girl. Later I was to remember the sensation of falling, not carefully, as one does when slipping, but more like the dead weight of a huge tree falling in a forest. I also remembered the pattern of the gravel coming up to meet my face.

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I awoke to the hee-hawing of an ambulance. Two men dressed in white fussed over me. Cobweb-like lines obscured my vision. "What was that thing?" I mumbled, but they didn't understand me. I think Chris was there too, riding with us in the ambulance.

When I was gurneyed into the hospital, the cobwebs worsened. Some lines receded in the distance; others turned at impossible angles away or toward me, getting bigger and thicker. They sported dark colors, mostly emerald, purplish-violet, and flat black. It was as if some sort of colored map hung in front of my eyes. I looked closer, and saw things moving along the lines, more crazy-looking things. I tried to blink them away, but they only grew stronger in my sight. I saw another world superimposed over this one. Had this other world been here all the time and I had been blind

to it?

I awoke again to tubes and wires connected to my arms and chest. A doctor bent over me. “You suffer from heat stroke,” she said. “Very dangerous.”

“No,” I grabbed at her arm. “A thing did this,” I shouted. “In the tank.”

“You were hallucinating. An effect of the heat stroke.”

“But there are lines, I see lines—”

“You must rest.”

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I missed my meetings in Osaka. I realized if I continued to talk about the lines, they would think I was still sick and never let me out of the hospital. So today I told the doctor the lines had disappeared.

“You are apt to be able to leave tomorrow,” she said.

I still see the lines, of course. I’m watching one now. There’s something on it, hopping toward me. It is the same type of creature I saw in the aquarium tank. Maybe it is the same one. It stops, leans forward, and looks at me, perhaps in disbelief, seemingly surprised that I can see into its world. But I do see into it. I even reach out to the place of lines and grab at a tentacled arm. Alarmed, the creature pulls back its arm and bounces away along the line that

brought it toward me.

“Yes, I can see you.” I say. “And next time, I’ll catch you.”