

Who wants to be British?

Copyright J. S. Raynor 2012,2017

Chapter One : First Meeting

Dawn breaking, as seen from thirty thousand feet, must surely be one of the most spectacular sights and a poignant reminder that nature far exceeds man with such marvels. Even my defective vision was sufficient to fully appreciate the spectacle of inky blackness being penetrated by steadily-growing strands of gold, as I peered through the window of the Singapore Airlines flight from Manchester to Singapore. It was the second time I had travelled on the thirteen hour flight to the beautiful, far-eastern country. This, and the much shorter connecting flight, were to take me, in January, nineteen ninety three, to a land which would change the course of my life.

Mactan Airport in the Philippines was a shambles. Unlike the spacious, carpeted and orderly areas of Singapore's Changi International Airport, this place was noisy, disorganised and full of confused passengers squeezing their way through the cramped spaces which should have been a welcoming entry to thousands of visitors from abroad. Lack of any sound-insulation exaggerated the noisy chatter of hundreds of tired passengers.

There was a strong emphasis on baggage inspection and many travellers were standing next to their open cases, nervously watching stone-faced officials picking carefully through their contents. I did not escape this inspection, but felt that the official was not as rigorous with my baggage, taking just a few seconds to run his hands through the clothes in my suitcase.

My escort carefully guided me through the bustling crowds until we reached the main entrance hall.

"Do you have transport to your hotel?" my escort enquired.

This was the difficult part. I had to explain to him that a representative from the hotel would be holding a card with my name written on it and this person would have a hotel voucher for me, possibly even transport to get there. On top of this, I would not be going anywhere without my friend, Aleth, who was meeting me at the airport. Somehow, I managed to convey the situation to him and he left me while he searched out the hotel rep. This did not take long and he soon returned grasping my hotel voucher.

Now, somehow, I had to find Aleth. As we left the entrance hall for the pavement area in front of the airport, there were hundreds of people crowded into the immediate area.

This was to be our first meeting. A business colleague who was married to a Filipina, had been helpful in providing my first contact with Aleth back in May, nineteen ninety-two. We had been writing to each other since then and, now, eight months later, we were to meet, at last.

A porter approached me. "Can I help with your luggage?" My escort felt that the porter would be able to assist in my search and asked if I had a photo of Aleth. I quickly opened my overnight case and removed the treasured picture.

The porter had a good look and then set off to search the crowds of people. He very soon returned, his face displaying a triumphant grin. "I've found your friend, Sir. She is coming now."

My heart leapt at this news. As I watched, the crowds of people in front of me parted and a lone figure appeared in the gap. Even with my indistinct vision, there could be no mistake. A diminutive, colourfully dressed, beautiful young woman stood only feet away from me. The photographs she had sent me over the past few months did not do her justice. We both moved closer together and our arms grasped each other in a tender, emotional embrace.

At that time, everyone else around us became invisible as we kissed and hugged for what seemed like an eternity.

I then became aware of another figure standing nearby. "John, this is Aunt Dolly." Aleth's voice was warm and gentle. I had already spoken to her on the telephone, but, voices over a long distance line invariably lose some of their warmth.

Aunt Dolly gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I had not quite been certain what to expect of Aleth's aunt. She looked as though she was in her early fifties, about five feet three tall, quite a well-built woman with long, black hair tied in a pony-tail.

Satisfied that I had found my friends, the escort wished me a good holiday and returned to the airport. The

porter then eagerly organised a taxi for us. As we were heading towards the car, he said to me, "Don't forget the porter, Sir." There was no doubt that I was now in the Philippines. Unlike Singapore, where tips are not expected, they were a way of life in this poor country.

I felt guilty since he had found Aleth for me, but I had not yet sorted out the currency enough to give him an appropriate tip.

As we tumbled into the taxi, he hung close to us, repeating the same message, "Don't forget the porter, Sir." Aleth came to the rescue and gave him a note. I do not know how much it was, but he did at least allow me to shut the door of the car. As we pulled away into the traffic, Aleth sat close to me, clinging on to my arm in a way which was so endearing, so comforting that I already felt certain that I had made the right choice. I looked sideways at her and noticed her long, black eyelashes fluttering gracefully above a cheekbone structure of which most women would be envious. I did wonder if this was my mind playing tricks on me, as I knew my eyesight was not good enough to make out such fine detail. It would not be the first time when my imagination had filled in such gaps.

Her long, black, silky hair rested gently on narrow, feminine shoulders and cascaded down in swirling curls. She had a small beauty spot on her right cheek and her skin was a natural golden tan in colour. Many British women would kill to have skin the same colour as hers.

Aleth's posture was good and she appeared to be self-confident, even though it was our first meeting.

From his description, Aleth must have been the woman who Roger Dorset, the psychic, had seen in my future in August, nineteen ninety-two, but was she the one who I would spend the rest of my life with?

I had been surprised how passionately Aleth had kissed me as we had met, displaying a talent which I enjoyed immensely. I found it difficult to believe that I was fortunate enough to have the love of this beautiful, unspoilt young woman.

She had chosen me in preference to a native Filipino, a fact which never ceased to amaze me, although I would, later, discover the reason.

As we headed towards my hotel, we talked excitedly about meeting each other after corresponding for such a long time.

The Cebu Plaza hotel was much bigger than I had expected. A porter assisted us with my luggage from the taxi and into the impressive reception hall. I handed my hotel voucher to the young woman behind the long desk. She slid a registration form over to me and asked me to complete it.

"Do you think you could fill it in for me, please? I don't see very well." I had become used to making such requests at hotels. Aleth and Aunt Dolly waited patiently as the receptionist filled in my details.

She looked curiously at the two women with me and asked, "How many are staying in the room, Sir?"

"Only one", I answered in embarrassment. "My friends are not staying."

I could not tell whether she understood the situation, but she said, "Enjoy your stay, Sir. Your room is seventeen zero four." She handed me a key attached to a bulky piece of plastic and called a porter to carry my baggage.

Aleth clung tightly on to my hand as we followed the porter to my room on the seventeenth floor. I felt certain that she had not seen anything as luxurious as this hotel in her entire life and, yet, compared to those in Singapore, the Cebu Plaza was nothing special.

The room was fairly spacious and, to my surprise, had two quite large beds. Aleth wandered around the room and, much to my amusement, slipped her shoes off and jumped onto one of the beds in a way that showed her youthful innocence. She lay there looking very happy and very beautiful. How I wished that Aunt Dolly was not there acting as chaperon.

"Do you know, this is the most expensive hotel in Cebu, John?" Aunt Dolly seemed to make this more of a statement than a question. "Why did you choose this one?"

"It was recommended by the travel centre and, compared to British hotels, it isn't expensive. Ah, now I have a present for both of you." I reached into my overnight case, removed the two small parcels and handed them to the two eager women.

I had put fancy ribbon and a heart-shaped label on Aleth's present to give it that 'extra special' treatment. This simple gesture seemed to please Aleth and she proudly showed her aunt the parcel. Neither of them seemed to be bothered about actually opening their presents, until I said that it was alright to do so.

Aunt Dolly appeared to be pleased with her fancy handkerchiefs and Aleth was very enthusiastic about the deep pink, silk tee shirt I had chosen for her. She gave me a warm hug of appreciation.

"Make yourself comfortable while I unpack some of my clothes." I did not bother removing everything from the suitcase, but hung my trousers and shirts in the wardrobe to let the creases fall out. While I was busy, I

noticed that Aunt Dolly had switched on the television and both women were watching it intently, Aleth now sitting on the end of the bed while Dolly relaxed in a chair.

When I was satisfied that I had done enough tidying, I sat on the end of the bed next to Aleth and put my arm around her slender waist. I pulled her close to me and, without much subtlety, showed that I wanted to kiss her. I was not going to let Aunt Dolly stop me from showing my feelings and felt certain that, as long as I kept control of myself, she would not interfere.

To my relief, Aleth's response was better than I had expected. She put her arm around my shoulder, clung tightly and pressed her moist, soft lips gently against mine in a long, passionate kiss. It took me by surprise that she was not only happy to embrace me so warmly in front of her Aunt but that she showed real passion in our kiss.

My hunger for Aleth being temporarily satisfied, I suggested that we all went to the Hotel's restaurant for a meal.

Both eagerly agreed to the idea and, once each of us had freshened up in the bathroom, we took the lift down to the ground floor. Aleth showed such great care of me, holding my hand tightly and guiding me to the restaurant. We all decided to have a meal from the buffet which displayed a vast array of foods and, again, Aleth helped me to fill my plate with a reasonable selection. From the amount she had piled onto her plate, she obviously had a good appetite. It soon became abundantly clear that I would be footing the bill for all three of us and I had a feeling, no, a certainty that the three of us would not reduce to two for the duration of the holiday. At first, I did think that Aunt Dolly was just there on our first day so that she could meet me, but I felt certain this was an optimistic idea. I wondered why Aleth had not made it clear in her letter that she had a full-time chaperon. Had she thought that it would deter me from making the journey? It would not have, but I felt a little annoyed that I had not been informed.

After our meal, we all returned to my room and, once again, relaxed. Aunt Dolly said, "We won't stay late, tonight, John. I think you need to get a good night's sleep after your journey."

Her idea was not unreasonable, but I would be sad for Aleth to leave me after being together for such a short time. A final, lingering kiss for that day and the promise of her return at eight thirty the next morning was consolation.

Once they had disappeared along the hotel corridor, I returned to my room and finished my unpacking. The main shortcoming of this hotel soon became apparent as I lay in my bed. The air-conditioning unit was of a quite old design and was under the window not far from my bed. It was far too hot to turn the unit off, but the noise from it kept me awake for most of the night. Of course, the excitement of the occasion did not help. To have actually met Aleth after writing to each other for eight months was one of the best high-points of my life.

As I was relaxing in bed, I thought of the superb Rodgers and Hammerstein film musical, "South Pacific" where the American marine, Lieutenant Joe Cable had fallen in love with a beautiful, young native girl. I smiled to myself as I realised that Aunt Dolly was the larger than life equivalent of "Bloody Mary", played by Juanita Hall.

I remembered her line as Lieutenant Cable met the young woman for the first time. "You like?" Just as in the film, I liked very much.

Chapter Two : An anxious wait

Early next morning, I called room service and ordered something to eat. I had just a light breakfast of croissants, fresh tropical fruits and mango juice. Hoping that something could be done about the noise of the air-conditioning unit, I complained to the porter about it. He assured me that he would organise a repair and left my room.

I made certain that, by eight thirty, I was suitably showered and dressed, ready for my visitors. There was little I could do as I waited, the minutes passing painfully slowly. By nine o'clock, I was becoming very anxious. Had Aleth changed her mind, now that she had met me? Had she been disappointed with me? Was I never going to see her again? All these fears plagued my mind, torturing me as the minutes dragged by.

At about ten past nine, there was a knock on the door. Excitedly, I rushed to open it wide. I was stunned to see a man standing there. "I have come to repair the air conditioner", he said in faltering English.

"Oh, come in, please." He must have noticed my disappointment, but said nothing as he unscrewed the casing on the unit.

He lifted the condenser out, looked carefully at it and said, "I will have to replace this part. I'll come back in a while with a new one." With that, he left me to continue my worried thoughts. I sat in a chair with my head buried in my hands, wondering what on earth I was going to do with myself. Why is it that everything I had wanted in life had been taken from me?

When there was another knock on the door just after nine thirty, I assumed that it was the engineer returning. I opened the door with a complete lack of enthusiasm, but, to my relief, the diminutive figure of Aleth rushed into my arms. We hung together so tightly, kissing and showing our emotions very openly.

Aunt Dolly squeezed past us, saying, "Did you think that we weren't going to come?"

"I was so worried," I answered truthfully. "I didn't know what to think."

"I had to do some work for my employer before I could leave to come here." Aleth was now smiling and holding tightly on to my waist as she explained the reason for her delay. We did not waste any more time. My new Canon EOS100 camera, some money and sun-tan lotion were all I needed as we left the room. As well as looking after me, Aleth took charge of the room key. At the long desk in the entrance hall, she handed the key to the receptionist in a casual, almost carefree manner. I had the feeling that she was enjoying this temporary uplift to her status.

That morning, we walked through the large grounds surrounding the hotel. The Cebu Plaza was built at the top of a hill and commanded a good view of the surrounding area. Aleth and I walked in front with Aunt Dolly trailing behind us like the proverbial lamb following the sheep, only in her case, her bulk was greater than either of ours.

The two of us talked happily and, although there were many gaps in her understanding of English, I was pleased that she was trying hard to communicate in my language. After hearing the dialect spoken by the inhabitants of Cebu, I realised that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for me to understand any of their language.

I had hoped that it would bear some similarity to Spanish, but it was strange, fast and almost incoherent to my western ears.

One of my biggest fears before meeting Aleth was that she did not understand the problem with my eyes, since she had never questioned me about it, even though I had told her in several of my letters to her. From the way she was taking great care of me, it was obvious that my fears had been misplaced. She held tightly on to my hand, watched my feet closely if the path was uneven or too narrow for both of us and, most surprisingly, placed her hand above my head when entering a taxi to avoid bumping it.

Her understanding of the problem was far greater than I could have expected and a sharp contrast to my previous British girlfriend, Carol, who had badly hurt me by saying that she could never marry someone with a handicap such as mine.

The other uncertainty was whether Aleth's affection for me was of her own choice or dictated by her aunt. It was obvious that Aleth thought the world of Dolly and depended upon her greater experience for guidance. It was difficult to objectively decide which was the case, but, after talking to her for a while, I felt that her love for me was genuine, even though Dolly had, I felt certain, played the part of an oversized Cupid in bringing us together.

The gardens were beautiful with richly coloured flowers and lush, green grass and foliage, in sharp contrast to the starkness of Britain in the middle of January. There was brilliant sunshine and the temperature was in the high twenties and yet, somehow, I did not find the heat oppressive.

The company and the setting were perfect for testing the abilities of my new camera and my skill as a

photographer. Thankfully, Aunt Dolly offered to take photos of the two of us with a backdrop of colourful vegetation. She even encouraged us to cuddle up close to each other while we were posing and, one photograph caught us having a deep, lingering kiss.

Aleth was so openly affectionate that I felt elated and had a complete lack of embarrassment, when with her. After talking for quite a while and enjoying our walk around the hotel, we decided to have a meal in the restaurant. With our hunger satisfied and my wallet nine hundred pesos, about twenty two pounds sterling, lighter, we returned to my room.

Aunt Dolly suggested that we rested for a while before going into Cebu city. She lay on the spare bed, happily listening to tapes on my Walkman, while Aleth and I lay together on the other bed. We held each other close, kissing passionately in a way which, again, surprised me, considering that Aleth's aunt was just a few feet away. I was determined that her presence should not impede my romance, but felt certain that she would exercise her duties as chaperon should we get carried away in our passion and engage in sexual activities.

Many times, Aleth would whisper in my ear, "John, darling, I really love you." I felt certain that her words were genuine and, hopefully, that she was the elusive woman I had been searching for over the past few years. Someone who was prepared to accept me as her husband without condition or complaint.

Occasionally, our tongues would touch excitedly as we indulged in French kissing. Her body was so warm and youthful that physical contact with it aroused me quite noticeably. I felt certain that she would look even more superb without clothes, but would have to wait for that pleasure.

From the contact I already had with her, it was obvious that there was very little spare flesh on her body and her young muscles kept her figure trim and firm.

Over the past two or three months of writing, we had both expressed our hopes and wishes for the future and, it was obvious to both of us that, our first meeting would either confirm or dispel any hopes of future marriage possibilities. For me, she had proved to be everything I could have hoped for.

I did not see any reason to delay the question any longer and said, "Aleth, will you marry me?"

She did not seem surprised at my question and replied, "Yes, Darling. It would make me so happy."

I looked down at her sweet face as she lay back on the pillow. A smile must have lit my face as I heard the words I had longed to hear. When I had separated from my ex-wife, I had enjoyed the freedom it provided, but, after a while, I yearned for the love of a good woman.

It had taken me four years and several girl friends, but the search was now over. I kissed her once more and then lay back on the bed with Aleth snuggling up close to me. In this position, we both drifted off into a happy, comfortable sleep.

When I awoke, probably about twenty minutes later, Aleth was still sleeping, her warm breaths gently brushing my cheek. Aunt Dolly was also asleep, judging from the steadiness of her breathing.

What a strange situation I was in. I had met Aleth and her aunt less than twenty four hours earlier and yet they had accepted me readily into their strange world.

After a short while, Aleth awoke and gave me a tender kiss and hug. "Shall we waken Dolly?" I whispered. She replied by springing off the bed and boldly touching the reclining Dolly, who, as a result, awoke with a start.

Now that we were all awake, we freshened up and prepared for our journey. Outside the hotel, a porter whistled for a taxi. Within seconds, a cab pulled up and we all tumbled in to it, Aleth and me in the back seat, Dolly next to the driver.

We still cuddled close as the car sped down the hotel's long drive and onto the main road. The hotel was in the 'uptown' area, but we were now heading towards 'downtown' to see the shops. As we drew nearer to the poorer parts of the city, the condition of the road and the traffic deteriorated. Cars were packed bumper to bumper along the narrow streets and every driver seemed intent on trying to flatten their batteries by sounding their horns continuously.

Eventually, after inching our way through this noisy, tangled mess of vehicles, we arrived at our destination. Aleth paid the driver, albeit with my money. As I climbed out of the taxi, I failed to notice that there was an open drain running along the side of the road.

Fortunately, it was only the toe of one of my trainers which dipped slightly into the muddy, effluent. I had realised the presence of the drain just in time to avoid immersing my foot in this slow moving stream of sewage. The inhabitants of Cebu seemed to accept these medieval conditions and simply took large enough steps to keep their feet clean.

Although it had been tedious to take anti-malaria tablets every day, I knew that it was worth the trouble to avoid this potentially lethal disease. I would have to continue with this treatment for a full seven weeks to ensure its

effectiveness, but I now had a very good incentive to persist.

Aleth took my hand and guided me through the maze of streets and rambling buildings. Although most pavements were covered and fairly wide, we made slow progress through the crowds of people.

We had to pick our way carefully between street traders displaying their goods at both sides of the pavement. Many of these traders were sitting cross-legged with their backs to the walls of the shops and vocally advertising their goods in this strange dialect.

All manner of items were on display, presumably many of which could be purchased, at a higher price, in the shops nearby.

We reached a department store and entered into the air-conditioned coolness of this large building. Its layout was much the same as could be found in most British cities, but there seemed to be far more people than I was used to.

Both Aleth and Aunt Dolly showed great interest in asking me how much various items would cost in Britain. We concluded, not surprisingly, that the cost of living was far lower in Cebu than back in the west.

There was to be a big celebration the following day to commemorate the founding of Cebu by Magellan and many shoppers were buying clothes to wear specially for the occasion. Aleth suggested that I buy a tee shirt as a memento of Sinulog, as the celebrations were called.

I chose a white shirt, richly decorated on the back with the emblems of Sinulog. I offered to buy one for Aleth, which pleased her enormously. She wanted a black tee shirt, which I had to agree would look better, on her, than white.

As we looked through the rails trying to find one small enough to fit her, I spotted one with a bright orange emblem on the front. I felt certain that this would suit her colouring perfectly and told her that this was the one I wanted to buy. She seemed happy with my choice.

The one problem we had was that it was now approaching closing time and the assistant for this part of the store was nowhere to be found. We were not prepared to give up so easily and searched for an assistant in another part of the store who was prepared to allow our purchase.

Eventually, our mission was successful and I paid the eager assistant, with the help of Aleth. As we continued our way, the sound of drums and chimes reached our ears. The rhythmic pounding of the drums became ever louder as a small group of people wound their way through all parts of the store.

After a few minutes, they entered the department where we were comparing prices against equivalent British goods. A clearing opened in the crowds of shoppers to allow the procession through. These were Sinulog dancers promoting the big festival to be held on the following day.

Six women, dressed in brightly coloured costumes, danced excitedly, almost as if they were possessed, in a never ending, yet quite organised pattern of movements.

The noise of the drums, now only feet away from us, was ear-splitting and repetitively hypnotic. This was enhanced by the steady chiming of a musical instrument which, I assumed, was similar to a triangle.

Occasionally, a bold shopper would temporarily join the group and, much to my embarrassment, one of the dancers approached me and invited me to dance with them. I suppose that I must have stood out from the crowd with my fair hair, but I did not want to make a fool of myself and, so, politely declined her offer.

As this little procession moved onwards through the store, we took the narrow escalators down to basement level. Aleth was always watching me to make certain that I did not trip over anything and even held on to me as we used these escalators which were only wide enough for one person.

The shopping units at this level appeared to be a bit more basic in design and seemed to be made up of a multitude of small shopping units.

Aunt Dolly pushed open the door of one such unit which was used by a hairdresser. Apparently, she knew the owner of the shop, who greeted us warmly. I was introduced as Aleth's special friend from England. I suppose I was a bit of a novelty, as I had not seen any other Europeans in this part of the city.

Aleth and I took a seat in the midst of the customers while her aunt had a lengthy conversation with the owner. By now, we were all quite thirsty and searched out a little cafeteria in this same basement.

Yet again, it was up to me to provide the money to pay for our drinks. I know they were supposed to be poor, but it disappointed me that I was expected to pay for all three of us, all the time. I did wonder if I was being used just as a free meals ticket for a few days, but felt certain that Aleth's feelings for me were genuine.

When we did, eventually, emerge once more into daylight, it was after six o'clock and dusk was approaching. The streets were still busy with people as Aunt Dolly tried to find a taxi. We stood at the side of the road, both women watching for a cab which was not already in use and, before long, one stopped in the middle of the traffic, allowing us to climb in.

Some cabs were air-conditioned, but this was not. I did not mind too much as the temperature had dropped a little by now, probably to the low twenties. One advantage was the reduced fare for cabs without air conditioning.

I noticed as we drove along, that Aleth not only held herself close to me, but her fingers were playing with the tips of my fingers, exploring every facet of my hands. It was a simple act, yet it gave me a feeling of being important to her. I guessed that she had not been shown much affection for several years and, now that she could feel my love for her, she was taking every opportunity to return the gesture.

When we reached my hotel, Aleth boldly walked up to reception with me and asked for the room key. Since we were still holding each other closely, I wondered just what the hotel staff thought about our relationship. Aunt Dolly's presence did, at least, lend some respectability to the situation.

Back in my room, we relaxed, watched television and enjoyed the occasional kiss. I felt certain that we were all enjoying the sharp contrast to our usual lives.

I did not realise just how different it was for Aleth, until I asked her what times she would normally manage to get to bed and rise in the morning. I was shocked to learn that she had to be out of bed by five every morning before the family woke up and yet had to wait until midnight before retiring to her own bed.

How I wished that I could take her back to Britain with me straight away, never to have to work such long hours again. Poor Aleth must have been exhausted with such a concentrated timetable.

We talked, for a while, discussing our plans for marriage. "So, John. You will return in a year from now, for your marriage to Aleth?" Aunt Dolly obviously thought this length of time would be necessary.

"Oh, no. It will be long before then." Both Aleth and Dolly were surprised by my response. "I think April would be a good time to get married." To my mind, a year would be an unbearably long time to wait. "It would be better if Aleth was able to travel to England during summer. Even then, it would seem cool compared to the heat of the Philippines, but if we waited for a year, Aleth would find the British winter too much of a contrast."

I realised that this would make all the organisation more difficult in such a short time, but we both felt that we did not want to wait any longer.

When it came to the time for them to leave, I told them that I would walk down to the hotel entrance with them. I had realised that, on the previous night, they might not have had enough money for a taxi. Aleth had said that it was very late when they reached their homes and I had felt guilty for not considering their needs.

This evening, I gave them enough money for a taxi for the two journeys. Aleth and I had a last, lingering kiss in the hotel's entrance lobby, completely oblivious to the crowds of people surrounding us. She promised to return at eight thirty the next morning.

I slept much better that night, happy in the knowledge that, in just a few months time, we would be man and wife. I still woke up in time to be ready for them, or so I thought. The breakfast, which I had booked the previous night, never arrived and it was obvious from the voice of the woman on the room service number, that my order had never reached them. I waited anxiously, hoping that it would not delay my schedule. It was only a light breakfast of croissants, mango fruit and pure juice and I probably could have managed, had Aleth and her aunt not arrived twenty minutes early.

I was decent, though not ready when I heard a knock on my door. As I opened it, only Aunt Dolly was standing there. "Good morning, John. Aleth's not with me, today." I felt certain that my face must have dropped like a lead weight, but it lifted instantly as Aleth cheekily emerged from around the corner of the door, where she had been hiding.

She ran towards me and flung her arms around me, kissing with a fiery passion. We remained like this for what seemed ages, with the room door wide open. Eventually, we eased our lips apart and closed the door.

They were both laughing at the 'hide and seek' game they had played on me. Aleth did not yet realise the dread that constantly gnawed at my soul. A dread that this dream of a romance, this promise of marriage to a wonderful woman could be taken away from me, just as many other dreams in my life had been turned into nightmares.

It would only take one change of mind by Aleth to shatter any illusions of my future happiness.

I could not rebuke her, as she did not yet know of my insecurity and inwardly pessimistic view of life. A view which would only end when we were both married and living together in Britain.

I was still suffering from the effect of my previous troubled relationship with Carol and I knew that it would take time and a settled relationship to calm my fears.

Aleth was wearing the black Sinulog tee shirt we had bought the previous day, together with shorts. I had been right about the colour combination. She looked absolutely stunning, even to my blurred vision.

I had to leave the two women for a few minutes while I finished getting ready. When I began to put suntan lotion on, Aleth took hold of the container and massaged the creamy fluid gently into my skin. This was sheer heaven. She certainly knew how to make a man feel good.

When we were all ready, the three of us took the lift down to the ground floor and, once outside the hotel, Aunt Dolly tried to hire a taxi, when the doorman pointed to a vehicle not far from us. After a brief discussion in their own dialect, Aleth eagerly pulled me towards this small coach.

Apparently, the hotel had organised free travel to the Sinulog for its residents. This was great news, especially as my two friends had been accepted as being eligible for the journey. There were Americans, Germans and Japanese tourists, all weighed down by substantial recording equipment, but I was the only man with a beautiful young woman from Cebu on his arm.

The journey to the centre of Cebu was slow, mainly as a result of the volume of traffic. Everybody had the same idea of driving into the city and kept their hands pressed firmly on the horns, making it a very noisy ride.

Yet another pleasant surprise greeted us at our destination. A covered, timber stand, raised up high above street level, was provided solely for the residents of the Cebu Plaza. This would give us a good, unobstructed view of the procession, which could last quite a while.

Aunt Dolly was in her element, walking up the steps as though she was the Queen of Sheba. She now acknowledged the benefit of staying in the best hotel in Cebu. Inside the stand, we chose the third of four different floor levels, where we felt the view should be reasonable.

Aunt Dolly dusted the floor before we sat, side by side, ready for the show. Aleth was excited and chatted happily to me, as we were sitting, holding hands. It was only then that she told me this was the first time she would be watching the procession. It had taken twenty five years of her life and a man who lived eight thousand miles away, to achieve this simple ambition. I could not understand why her employers had never let her attend this event before.

Between leaving the bus and entering the stand, I had, at Aunt Dolly's suggestion, bought us all a straw coloured sun hat. After a few minutes of struggling to keep these hats in place, giving Aleth a fit of giggles, we abandoned the idea of wearing them for the time being.

Aunt Dolly thought we had been cheated out of a free gift, when she noticed several people wearing Cebu Plaza Sinulog tee shirts and suggested that I ask for mine on returning to the hotel. She soon changed her mind, however, when she learned that they were not free and had cost two hundred and fifty pesos each.

It was another hour before the procession approached the road in front of us. Selfish human nature then took over as several people in front of us stood up, blocking our view. Aleth, in particular, at five feet three was dwarfed by a broad-shouldered six foot German tourist directly in front of her.

Feeling annoyed at his insensitivity, I tapped him on the arm and asked politely if he would move his not inconspicuous bulk to provide Aleth with a view. To my relief, he obliged and, occasionally, would turn around to check that my diminutive fiancé's view was clear.

The now familiar, rhythmic pounding of drums with chimes filled the air and gave an atmosphere of excited anticipation to the crowds of people watching the approaching procession. There were rows and rows of dancers moving in a wave-like motion, every so often running back only to move forward again.

All the dancers were colourfully dressed and, occasionally, would hold wide, silk streamers high above their heads. Their co-ordination was such that they appeared as a beautiful, swaying bed of colour, moving in time to the music.

This pattern of a multitude of dancers, followed by musical accompaniment, was repeated many times, each group being dressed in different colours. I felt certain that there was a great deal of competition between the different groups, each one trying to extract that bit more applause from the onlookers.

Aleth clapped excitedly as she marvelled at this spectacle which was as new to her as it was to me. Following the dancing groups, there were many commercial companies promoting themselves as well as the Sinulog, using highly decorated floats. In many ways, it was very reminiscent of the sort of processions taking place during May holidays, in Britain.

We must have stayed watching this spectacle for nearly three hours, as we had no choice but to wait until the complete procession had passed. During that time, we had food and drink provided by vendors, happily making money from their captive audience.

When traffic was allowed to move along the still-busy roads again, we wound our way through the throngs of people and caught one of the Cebu Plaza's buses back to my hotel. Progress was slow, but, at last, the distinctive, tall shape of the hotel came into view.

There was not much time, as we had a visit organised for the afternoon. We all freshened up and bought a

gift-wrapped pack of chocolates from the hotel shop.