

The Restaurant on the Rocks

Ten years ago I had the good fortune to find myself in route to Phuket, a lovely island retreat off the west coast of Thailand. I had been living and working in Tokyo, Japan and was more than ready for sun, surf, fresh air and natural beauty. The five days that lay before me felt like exquisite jewels waiting to be discovered. Little did I know of the mystery that awaited us.

My friend, Yoko, had made arrangements for us to stay in a lovely hotel where we were to meet. She had been working there teaching the Thai staff how to serve Japanese food. When I arrived I was struck by the beauty and graciousness of my surroundings. Swaying palms, fragrant tropical flowers, lovely people and the sense of peace nearly overwhelmed me after the noise and bustle of Tokyo. Yoko explained that there were many beautiful places on the island to explore and that we should eat at a different place every night because the Thai cuisine was superior on this island. And we did exactly that. The food was delectable; the fresh lemon grass, coconut milk perfectly flavoring the catch of the day. Yes, this vacation was about culinary delights, rest and relaxation.

On the third evening, I arrived at our meeting place in front of a hotel a half an hour early. I decided to wander a bit and see if I could find a place to eat the following night right on the water where we could really enjoy the beautiful sunset and hear the surf. Yoko had been making all the arrangements and I wanted to treat her to a surprise. I walked through the manicured gardens of the hotel in awe of the beauty of the landscape and the exotic tropical plants. I wove my way through until I came upon a little footbridge that led to a lovely restaurant situated over a jetty. It was perfect for seeing the sunset. It was all open and every table had a red and white checked tablecloth, a vase of flowers and candles. The smells were delightful. It was rather formal and the waiters had white linen napkins draped over their arms. I noticed a German couple seated at the back, candle light flickering, very much in love and lost in each other not at all interested in the sunset. I loved the wooden bar with shiny brass, tropical drinks lined up for customers. The whole place had such a warm and happy atmosphere. I checked my watch and it was nearly time to meet Yoko so I hurried back through the lovely gardens pleased at my discovery. When I saw Yoko, I told her about the restaurant on the rocks. She was surprised she hadn't heard of it but loved the idea. I sensed she was secretly relieved not to have to do the planning. So our dinner plans for the following evening were set.

The next magical day unfolded with walks on the beach, a Thai massage, and lazily reading by the pool. Tokyo seemed a million miles away. Yoko and I met in front of the hotel where we had the evening before as I wanted to show her the lovely gardens. We were so looking forward to sitting right by the sea. She had received some unfortunate news from home and I sensed it would be soothing to be by the water. We shared what we had each done during the day as we strolled

through the gardens. I began to feel a bit uneasy for some reason and wondered if it had something to do with the news she had received. When I saw the little bridge that led in to the restaurant, I gasped and stopped dead in my tracks. Yoko stopped, looked at me incredulously and asked, "Is this the restaurant?!"

I was speechless and totally unable to explain what lay before my eyes. I looked at her and stuttered, "But just last night...I saw... I remember...the smells..." A cold chill began to run through me. The 'restaurant' was in ruins. Chairs were overturned. The wooden bar aged from years of wind and sea. Cobwebs hung heavy in the corners. It was totally deserted and looked as if it had been for months. I was grateful Yoko knew me well because if she hadn't she may have rushed me to the hospital at once! As we walked further into the restaurant, we both felt an oppressive weight on our shoulders and a foreboding unwelcome. The breeze turned chilly. At the same moment we each were seized with the urgency to run away and without saying a word to each other we ran like marathoners back to the safe haven of where we had dined the night before. We panted trying to catch our breath as we waited to be seated. When we sat down, we guzzled our water trying to calm ourselves. The same waiter we'd had the night before approached us all smiles and full of friendliness. When he saw us more closely, his smile vanished and he asked us what was wrong. We explained as best we could what we had experienced and what we had seen. The color drained from his face. He knelt onto one knee so he could speak with us more privately. He explained that the restaurant we had just been to was haunted. Everyone on the island knew that and no one went near it. Not one business had been successful there. There was a rumor that some people from Hong Kong planned to redo it but he doubted it would happen. Apparently, he said, long ago there had been a shipwreck on the rocks there and many people were drowned. He advised us to go the temple the next day and be cleansed. Needless to say we had a somber meal that evening.

When we awoke the next morning, we indeed decided to go to the temple. We both had had fitful dreams and a restless sleep. After breakfast, we walked to the Buddhist temple and were greeted by smiling monks in orange robes and the comforting smell of incense. We offered flowers and fruit and said some prayers for the souls of the dead. We then sat on a bench just outside the temple and talked. In our discussion, we decided to go back to the 'restaurant' on the jetty and bring incense, flowers, fruit and make a little offering for the disturbed spirits there. Apparently, the energy of the temple had emboldened us. When we arrived, we sat in the middle of the 'restaurant' and set up our little offerings. We said some prayers and noticed that the energy of the place felt much different in the light of day. We then heard some footsteps behind us and turned to see three workmen entering. They looked Chinese and I remembered what the waiter had said the night before about the people from Hong Kong. The workmen looked at us and smiled and we felt awkward sitting there with our candle, incense, fruit and flowers but we finished our little ceremony and moved our offerings to the rocks

by the sea, smiled at the workers and left. We had a plane to catch later that day so we had to get ourselves organized and prepare our minds to reenter the high paced world of Tokyo.

Ten years have passed now. When I allow my mind to drift back to these days in Thailand I think about the island and the restaurant and wonder if indeed there are red and white table cloths on those tables now, with candles burning, good smells coming from the kitchen, and waiters with nice linens over their arms. I wonder if there is a German couple sitting in the corner, with the candle light flashing, not at all interested in the sunset. I wonder if I what I 'saw' was a slice of the future after the souls had been healed. I may have to go back and find out.