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# Reporter's Paradise

*Side-Bar:*

## **Alan C. Robles**

*Freelance Writer, Manila*

I am sometimes asked by friends why, with the Philippines in the shape it is in, I do not join the queue heading for the United States, Australia or Europe. I can't. As a journalist, I am hopelessly addicted to my country.

The Philippines is a reporter's paradise, brimming with stories that transcend the pitiful humdrum which passes for news in other places. News here goes beyond the merely sensational and exciting. Yes, we have coup attempts. We also have epic disasters, such as fires, maritime catastrophes, destructive typhoons, floods, killer earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. And let's not even talk about corruption, murder and political violence.

In most countries, when you sweep such mayhem aside, there is not much left in the way of hot news. But not here.

For instance, how does one classify what I like to title: "*Jellyfish ate my power plant*"? One night in 1999, the entire island of Luzon, where more than half the population lives, was suddenly blacked out. It turned out that a horde of jellyfish - several dozen truckloads were recovered - had swum up the cooling ducts of one power plant, gumming up the machinery and plunging millions into darkness.

Then there is the story of the government investigating fraud in the sweepstakes lottery. To allay fears of rigging, one of the highest-ranking police officials drew the lots, only to find he happened to have a winning ticket. Although he was urged to forfeit the prize, he declined. End of investigation.

Or how about the terrible explosion that killed seven people and destroyed a building in the National Bureau of Investigation compound? Terrorism was suspected until experts deduced that the blast was caused by one agent putting out a cigarette - on a bucket of dynamite being kept as evidence. That won a 1999 Darwin Award, given to "those who improve our gene pool by removing themselves from it".

The Philippines had another Darwin winner the year after, with the story of a man who hijacked a plane, robbed its passengers at gunpoint, (he also had a grenade - apparently security must have been having an off-day) then attempted to jump out using an improvised parachute. As he was having second thoughts about the skydive, a solicitous flight attendant gave him a helpful push. His body was found, minus the money he had stolen.

That year, while covering another notable story, the Love Bug computer virus, I met a reporter sent all the way from Seattle by an American daily newspaper. I asked him what was the most exciting story he had covered up to then. He replied: "Salmon swimming upstream to spawn." I doubt I would be happy working in Seattle.

I recently challenged a Kenyan sub-editor to tell me the weirdest story her paper had run. She recalled a binge where some guys drank a lethal chemical, mistaking it for hard liquor. None of them realised, even though they steadily went blind.

Nice, but by my country's standards, ordinary. Easily trumped by my account of a Manila fire: a man went to a fireworks factory and bought one of their rockets. When he stepped out on to the street, he wondered (so he said later) if the product was any good, so he decided to test it. He lit the device and it worked perfectly - flying straight into the open door of the factory, before bursting into flames.

Now, I would like to point out that I don't write many of these stories, although one did appear in this paper ("Policemen told to plant bombs" - apparently as an exercise to test security). But I do enjoy collecting them. They make life bearable in between the times we have to write the mundane stuff - like the usual disaster. Or coup attempt.

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