

1-1-2017

High School Bar Hoppers

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Class of 2017

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Ramaiya, Jhanvi C. (2017) "High School Bar Hoppers," *The Mercury*: Year 2017, Article 21.
Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2017/iss1/21>

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Author Bio

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High School Bar Hoppers

Didi'z

Up the hill from my wealthy international high school on the peninsula of Dar es Salaam was Didi'z. My seventy-five classmates and I started our adventures there in the eleventh grade, escaping the guarded campus for an hour or two at a time during free periods, flashing our upperclassmen IDs like badges of honor to the *askaris*—security guards. It was only five minutes away by foot, but that didn't stop us from calling over a *Bajaji*, a three-wheeled open taxi, to take us up the hill for a *thousand shillings*, forty cents. We stepped out into the hot sun, whichever of us was up to pay on our rotational basis paid the driver, and we broke into sweat in the ten feet between the *Bajaji* and the start of the Didi'z *banda*—a semi-permanent tent with dried, braided palm leaves for roofs—that protected us from the direct sun rays.

When we walked inside, the darkness swallowed our vision. I can only remember making out blurry shapes in the minutes after we arrived. No one spoke to us, our uniforms marked us off as members of the elite, and so we were safe from the alcoholic uncles out for a before-noon beer. There was a small corner in the back of the bar, a separated section with three tables and stacks of chairs. We sat there, passing around the last ashtray (we had broken the rest, I assumed), grousing about classes, teachers, or other students. Aman was usually the first to arrive, and after him we would pile in one by one and start stacking the table with packs of cigarettes, beer bottles, books, papers, calculators, rumors.

After a year the rumors built up in that place. *Did you know, last week, Jana gave Yannik a blowjob behind the bathrooms and they got arrested? They had to go to prison, but of course their parents paid it off. Also, Abda broke up with her boyfriend by flipping him the bird and making out with another guy while they drove off—she's insane. Straight up crazy.*

Even in these white neighborhoods, conservatism reigned with a strict whip in this nation built half of Muslims (converted by the Persians) and half of Christians (converted by missionaries). As untouchable as we felt we were, we weren't.

In colonial Tanzania, the city had been divided into three clear areas by the British; there was a section called Kariakoo (name derived from the Carrier Corps, groups of men used like pack mules for the colonialists) for the black majority, Upanga for the brown folks, and the peninsula for the wealthy white. As the neighborhoods became whiter across the face of the city, they also became richer. The richer it became, the more freedom the rich had—bribery was a form of sport that we exchanged stories about after the fear of encountering a police officer faded.

We would take shots of everything during our daily breaks at Didi'z. We would take shots for luck, for students having to go back to class, for students who were happy with a grade, for breakups, for hangovers, for problems at home, for deaths in the family, for finally getting laid.

They renovated that bar the summer between the 11th and 12th grades,

a product of the heavy spending we did in our off hours. We drank a shot to that, too.

Tom and Jerry's

TJ's was a tiny hole in the wall in the brown part of town, Upanga, that us Asian kids snuck out to after-school in the blustery month leading up to summer. Fatimah begged her driver Patience not to tell her parents where she was going every day. The boys didn't have to make excuses. I tagged along for the experience, sucking down cigarettes and shots as I was offered them.

Things had stayed about the same in Upanga since colonial times, with a touch of social mobility: TJ's was run by a black family. But still, they lived in squalor.

Even though slightly richer, we couldn't forget, out of Swahili coast politeness, to say "Vipi mama?" *How's it going, ma?* to Mama Vicky who ran the place.

To which she would respond: "Poa tu!" *Pretty damn average.*

As one of our friends, Neil, parked his car on the dirt road outside, the rest of us entered. We walked in through a literal hole in the wall, a palimpsest of the door that once existed clearly echoed in the frame. We weren't concerned if chipping paint fell into our hair or snagged on our clothes, that was just part of the experience. These poster-plastered, paint-chipping walls would lead our weary bodies into a walled courtyard. Three *bandas* each held a plastic Coca-Cola branded table and chairs in red, white or blue (our patriotism to American consumerism clear). We brought our textbooks, sat on wobbly seats, and read through mild chattering in Kiswahili that filled the air like bird calls. Our teenage voices fell to a quiet hum after the first half an hour; we tried to avoid being heard from our homes which sat just on the other side of the wall. We brought these books to entertain ourselves, because no one else was volunteering to do it—we were all worried about our constantly impending exams.

About ten minutes in, Fatimah would order *chipsi* - fries loaded with oil, salt, and supplemented with a smattering of what I can only describe as a tomato salsa, because we had all skipped lunch at home. Kushal, famous for his ability to hold his own with our drunk classmates while remaining surprisingly sober, would break out his pipe—"I swear, it's not *ganja*, it's just tobacco, *bwana*—man." The dust rose and settled onto our bodies the longer we stayed there. This layer would be accompanied by another composed of smoke; we used to inhale and exhale ash-colored fumes from our spent lungs for hours until the darkness settled, at which point we'd ask for a round of shots of anything. Our last drinks of the school day were to face dinner at home with our families, and to prepare us for more sleepless nights of work to be done.

Maganga's

Didi'z and TJ's were in and after-school watering holes; Maganga's was where those of our class of seventy-five with the most liberal of parents went to pregame the nights.

The only time I remember going to MG's was a Friday night with Jazmine. Her parents had moved out of town, her friend that she had been living with had kicked her out, she was living with Fatimah, and thus we became friends by default. MG's side *banda* was a space diagonal to the main bar across an open

area and was made for smoking from elaborate hookah pipes in groups. The space was lit by a candle and a cheap red light when I first entered this claustrophobic space. A small section (the size of two beds pushed hastily together) was where we sat to smoke *shisha*. Clouds bloomed out of our fanned tent, moving the tapestries along the walls and in the door. A bottle of vodka stood open on the floor next to the crate where the *shisha* sat.

A crowd of boys that we knew vaguely from school surrounded the room, sitting on crates covered in pillow-tops. They all looked up as we entered, but one refused to break eye contact, and patted his chair, telling me to sit with him. I complied, asked for a cigarette, and looked away from his eyes because it was too much attention. I sucked down smoke until I was lightheaded and feeling that rush that only comes from being away from a cigarette for a couple hours when you've become addicted. The candle lit up his brown eyes as he teased, poking me in the side to enunciate, and I broke into laughter like only girls who are trying to flirt can. He said his name was Daniel. He tried to pronounce mine for thirty minutes.

The night was filled with blurry smoke, and we walked out in a flurry of activity to the main bar, chattering like we had known each other for years. We made introductions with mutual friends; I found out Ben had graduated a year earlier but we hadn't known each other. The bar was packed; the place was throbbing with energy. Questions were raised along with glasses, and as they clinked, I swear I could hear: *Where will we go next? What will we do?*