

**A MOTIONLESS CHILDHOOD:
MEMOIRS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD IN RURAL POST-WAR PHILIPPINES**

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For Benjamin, Jordan and Sarah.

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SYNOPSIS

The initial despondency that followed my mother's death and the realisation of the total erasure of the landscape that featured in my early childhood propelled my need to recover it all. Writing down my story seemed the only recourse to transform it from mere memory into tangible material encapsulating the Philippines, that beloved home of my birth, its people and its landscape.

There are two parts to this project. The first is the creative component comprising four chapters of a memoir that aims to reclaim the world of my early childhood: its colours, scents, sounds and the beloved voices of the figures peopling it. This is a world reconstructed from fragments of memories, collected and collated with the imagination in order to paint with words a portrait of a time and place that hopefully captures their beauty and innocence. The first three chapters of Part One are a grouping of memories strung together to tell complete narratives of my "Pre-school Years," the "First Year of School" and the three years spent in "Bamban" with my grandparents. Chapter Four is intended to be a coda to the early childhood memoirs. This coda is reflective writing about the now-adult narrator, who is an immigrant in Australia. In this chapter, two childhoods from the past are interlaced through flashbacks. It is also a story of the interplay of the lives of two immigrant friends as they carve new lives in their adopted homeland of the present.

Part Two is comprised of an exegesis in two chapters. There is also a prologue which describes the beginnings of this literary journey: of my trip back home with the passing away of my mother and the decision to write my memoir in English, which is the language of my Pilipino/Australian children and the language of my adopted home, Australia.

Chapter One is a short study of the definition of the memoir and the use of memory and imagination in the writing of this reflective autobiographical genre. There are discussions on why we write memoirs and to illustrate these, the works of St. Augustine, Edmund Gosse, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Mark Doty and Maxine Hong Kingston are discussed.

Chapter Two is a discussion of the writing process. This chapter includes brief analyses of the styles I used in my memoir: of multiple points of view, which is the interlacing of the child's and the narrator's voices and the integration of the second person point of view in order to involve the reader. There is also a discussion about the use of dialogue.

The Epilogue includes a brief personal evaluation of the memoir and the writing process.

A MOTIONLESS CHILDHOOD:

Memoirs of Early Childhood in Rural Post-War Philippines

The house, like fire and water, will permit me, [...] to recall flashes of daydreams that illuminate the **synthesis of immemorial and recollected**. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening. In the order of values, they both constitute a community of memory and image. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days. And when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of **Motionless Childhood**, motionless the way all Immemorial things are. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost. (Gaston Bachelard 5-6; first emphasis is mine; second emphasis in original.)

CHAPTER ONE:

THE TAMARIND TREE: THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS

I can recall a fragment of memory from the distant past which I believe was my first awareness of having arrived. It was about the same time I realised I was responding to a word that referred expressly to me. It happened naturally as though it might have been that way forever. That word and I were one entity. No one else in my world answered to it but me. It could be said with fondness and affection in my direction; or it could be a call to play, to smile, to eat or drink; or it could be called out with the note of threat or anger. In whatever way it was called out or spoken, it defined my presence, my cognition, my primal distinctiveness.

I remember this time clearly, as though I'm looking down at it now through a lens in my mind. I wake up next to Mother. I'm in a familiar place, and I know instantly that I belong there, am glad to be there. Mother is lying on her side facing the other way. She's breast-feeding a little baby. Father is sitting next to her, an arm hugging the curve of her hips. Realising that I've sat up, he smiles. "Little Julia is awake," he tells Mother.

There is also another chip of memory which comes from very far away in time—so far away and so long ago, it seems like a dream. I know it happened because I can see it plainly through the same lens in my mind. The lens is focussed into a little room in another part of our house. I am very small and have to pull myself up to get onto my feet. And there I am, standing in front of another figure. We are looking at each other. We are of the same height and this figure seems to be doing every movement I'm doing. We are slapping at each other's hands. Now, I'm trying to press my mouth at her face but my lips can only feel the hard surface between us. It feels cool and smooth in the warmth of the day.

~

I must have been very naughty at times—and Mother had a quick temper.

Sometimes, I would climb up onto the window sill in the main room of our house, pull myself up on top of the armoire and go through the little manhole directly above it and hide in the ceiling. It was dusty and small up there and the unpolished

whole bamboo poles were rough, I had to move carefully or they'd move and turn, but it was a grand space nevertheless because it was secret. Up there you could cry quietly, feel resentful. And then you thought you would stay up there forever—they would soon be looking for you and they'd be so sorry not to see you ever again. And if you stayed quiet, no one would ever guess where you were. No one else would make you feel better, no one else loved you, except that somebody, that someone in your mind who was always present with you.

But soon the sun would burn through the corrugated tin roof. And heat like a sweltering cloak pressed heavily on you, making you sweat profusely and your eyes would sting from the salty oil and liquid that seeped out of your skin. The heat would set your head to pound and pins and needles would run down your ears and your neck and you could hardly breathe. You couldn't fall asleep if you tried because there was that someone in your head telling you to go down before you caught fire and stopped breathing altogether. "Let's go down and climb up the tamarind tree instead," it said.

Up the tamarind tree was a good place to be—a private place where you would soon forget what it was that upset you in the first place. The cool breeze was soothing and all was fine again. Up there you were a part of, and at the same time, distant from everyone else. From up there an eloquent landscape would open for you, where everything and everyone seemed to be where they should be. Laid out long before your own story had begun: the sky, the mountains, the trees in the garden, the house, the neighbourhood, the smoke from the wood burning clay stoves, the smell of cooking before mealtimes, the animals that lived parallel lives with you, the sonorous hum of the river beyond. This was all part of the unending cycle of life; in its birthing and dying, in its joys, sorrows and pain, the good and the evil woven into it, the tension between enlightenment and ignorance; the exquisite ordinariness of the human condition.

One evening while Eldest Sister was helping prepare supper, she suddenly fell unconscious on the floor. When she came to, it was found that her foot had been stung by a scorpion. Mother rubbed her foot with Vicks then used strips of clean rags to bandage it. The next day Father went to town and bought a large tin of insecticide and a sprayer and treated all the nooks and crannies around the house and especially under the house between the bamboo slat flooring.

This was the time when I stopped climbing up into the ceiling to hide—for fear of scorpions lurking between the bamboo pipes. Up in the tamarind tree which overlooked the backstairs of our house was safer and more pleasant. There were clusters of branches in the middle of the canopy where I could sit on one branch, lean forward against one and lean back against another. I was small and the tree was strong. The distant mountain range was a constant feature on the horizon—rooted on to the earth in its tranquil watch, holding on its back either the weight of heavy clouds or the dark sapphire emptiness of a summer sky. I liked being there observing the mountains' changing hues—from green, to purple-grey and then, at dusk, the golden light of the melting sun.

One could think about so many things when nestled up the tamarind tree. You could dream and plan what you could do when you grew up. You could imagine climbing to the highest peak and touching the arched roof of the world, ruffling the flimsy clouds with your hands or feeling the velvet blue of a clear sky, and at night getting as close as possible to the moon or the stars, because when you grew up you would not be scared of the darkness of night. And those were always comforting thoughts when one kept watch over all of God's creations. That's what Mother would always say when I asked her who made this or that; God made everything. And it was always good to be perched up there and listen to Mother and Aunt talking or singing while doing their chores, or to hear Mother singing a lullaby to the baby, or hear and smell the chopped garlic and onion sizzling in hot oil when Aunt was cooking.

Most times, I'd be sitting up the tree and nobody noticed I was up there until I started singing. Mostly, though, I just sat there quietly and watched the world go by beneath me. One afternoon, there were little boys playing with marbles under the tree. I watched with interest for a long time until they started squabbling and arguing with each other. I dropped a heavy twig in the middle of the large circle drawn in the dirt, and the crystal spheres scattered in all directions. Disgruntled, they picked up their precious marbles and walked away regrouping in the yard next door. The smallest boy started crying because he wanted his marbles back. Soon they started another game. I wished they had stayed playing under my tree and did not box each other.

There were also women who came to fetch water from our artesian well for their cooking and drinking. They had rolled up rags twisted like crowns atop their heads on

which they balanced large buckets or tubs of water. Sometimes water slopped off the rims of the containers and onto their faces and backs. But most of the time they'd walk back home casually because they were accustomed to carrying heavy loads on their heads—like bundles of firewood, buckets of wet laundry or small sacks of rice.

Vendors also carried large clay pots in the same way. There was this woman who was well known for her dessert-cooking, especially *ginataan*. She walked around the neighbourhood hawking her delicacy in a huge pot atop her head. You would hear her coming from a distance and as she got closer to the tamarind tree you could take a whiff of the sweet custard of coconut cream with glazed jackfruit, soft sticky rice dumplings, tapioca and diced baby taro. And you would get hungrier and keener when you looked down and saw the steaming contents of her pot. "*Ginataannnn!* *Ginataannnn,*" she chanted, and people called her to their doors if they wanted to buy some. She had a plastic tumbler with a handle to ladle out a portion or two.

Male vendors carried even heavier weights on their shoulders. Baskets filled with aluminium pots, kitchen utensils, knick-knacks – such as combs, bobby pins, needles and threads—were balanced on opposite ends of a pole made with a thick slat of bamboo. The baskets would bounce up and down as the men walked along, their legs bowed with the weight they carried. Every now and then they'd stop and move the load onto the other shoulder. Sometimes, the pole became like a yoke balanced across the back of their shoulders, an arm resting on either side of the pole as though they were carrying a cross.

Every few months or so, the salt vendors came in their rickety van driving slowly through the narrow lanes. You would hear the motor grumbling from a distance and a woman calling out "*Asinnnn, dies ing pati, asinnnn!*" (Saaalt, ten centavos a measure, saaaalt!)

"Mother, Mother, the salt vendor is coming," I'd call out as I climbed down the tree.

Then, people and children and dogs would come out and crowd around the van and the neighbourhood bought their bit of salt to last for a month or so. There were not a lot of motor vehicles coming through our neighbourhood in those days and the coming of the salt vendor was always an exciting event. Children would run along the van or

hang onto the steel bars on its windows and get a free ride. During lean seasons, many families would live on just rice and salt and water. I heard Mother telling Aunt how one of the laundry women she knew would hold a bit of salt in her mouth to ease the pangs of hunger. She said people did that a lot during the war.

In our house we had a good supply of vegetables from the garden and Father always brought fowls he had shot with his air rifle in the woods or fish he had trapped with bamboo woven baskets from the creek running along our rice paddies. But there were the seasons when the migration of birds had finished or when long droughts or tempestuous monsoon rains had ruined the harvest, or when Father had enough of the vegetable dishes and dried fish that Mother or Aunt cooked. Then he would crave for rice porridge with a bit of salt for supper. Or just freshly cooked rice and soy sauce. Or hot rice and tomatoes and salted fish. Hot rice and lard and salt.

“Sometimes, rice porridge with salt is all I want,” Father said one night. “Now, children, eat all your supper then wash and get ready for bed.” He slurped the porridge from his deep white enamelled bowl. We all ate and enjoyed our meal, except for Mother who didn’t look happy.

When I was all grown up I overheard Father talking with one of his friends about the hard times in the past, just after the war and how at one time, there was no rice for us to eat that week and how he went to Great Uncle Felipe who lived closer to town and borrowed a bag of rice. On his way home while negotiating his steps along the sodden paddies, he tripped and his bag of rice was thrown into the mud. He scooped as much of the rice as he could back into the bag and walked home weeping. Mother had to wash the rice several times to get rid of the mud and dirt and we had rice porridge with salt for the next few days.

Men would pass by my tamarind tree on their way to the fields. Thin arms and feet crept out of long-sleeved shirts and ragged trousers. I could see their rough bare feet, their toes arching forwards and sideways— feet so suited to walking steadily on muddy or sun-baked earth. They carried their tools with them: sharp long *bolos* or machetes in their cases tied with rope around their waists or scythes during harvest time. You heard them coming from a distance. At times they sang or just plodded steadily along looking ahead towards the fields with deliberate and resigned strides—their

lunches of rice and salted fish wrapped in banana leaves in canvas bags, slung behind their backs.

There were also friends of Mother who came to do their laundry by our artesian well. Mother and Aunt would join them and they all helped one another with the pumping of water, washing and rinsing. They talked about many things I did not understand, like the horror of the war, which was still raw in their minds, but this was rare because they didn't like talking much about that time. When they did, it was only for a short time in which case they became sombre. Or they talked about mysterious stuff like who the father of the Mute's baby was—her uncle? Her brother-in-law?

I remember curious times when the women found great amusement at the expense of a woman who lived with her family on the other side of the river. She was a vegetable and fish peddler who passed our way with a friend every afternoon on their way home. They quenched their thirst and washed their faces and hands by the well. They would exchange gossip and at times banter rowdily. But every so often, two or three of the women would start nudging the woman roughly or talk loudly in her ears and start jumping and dancing around her.

“*Aiii*, comadres (fellow mothers), don't do it, I beg you!” she'd say, but the women would persevere until she too was singing and dancing, mimicking every song. If someone lifted their skirt or struck poses, she'd do the same until she'd fall into a kind of trance with her dancing and singing. Round and round she went in a frenzy twirling her *panuelo* and skirt around, her arms flailing wildly, her face flushed, and her hair became damp with sweat. And everyone was merry and their laughter kept her going.

“O, that is enough now, let her be.” Mother or another woman would intervene.

“That's enough now, poor creature.”

“Get some water and let her drink.”

“She's exhausted, come now.”

“*Maria Santisima* (Most Holy Mary), that's enough.”

It would take some time to get hold of her and snap her out of her frenzy. She would be panting and groaning as they held her down and calmed her and gave her water and sometimes, some food to eat. Or a lit cigarette, which she would take eagerly, inhaling the smoke in long deep breaths.

“*Haiii, Por dios, por santo!* - By god, By saints!- Ha ha ha ha!” she’d sigh, catching her breath. “*Haii, dios ko po.*” - Oh, My god - . And she’d gradually calm down. Sapped of energy. Sapped of dignity. Then everyone was happy that they had had their big amusement towards the end of a long, hot day. And soon the woman and her friend would start their long trek towards home.

“*Haiii*, the things they make me do. They don’t have mercy!” she would sigh as they left. She had a delicate face and she always had a *panuelo* over her head to shelter her face from the wind and sun and from others who might be tempted to make her an object of amusement. The *panuelo* was threadbare and smelt of sweat and old soap. Her skin was golden brown. She had Tourette syndrome.

Sometimes, I’d climb up the soursop tree next to *Indang Juana*’s property to see what was going on in that side of the neighbourhood. One afternoon, I watched *Indang Juana* or “Mother” Juana, the midwife, coming with an old shovel and start digging a little hole under the soursop tree and then gingerly lifting her *saya* or long traditional skirt. She was squatting and quietly puffing her long black cigarette, but then sensing someone was watching, she looked up.

“*Aiii, hija de puta!*” - Child of a whore!-. She cried. “Get down from that tree at once!” Alarmed, I climbed down.

“*Dios mio* - My god -, I got you out into this world, but what grief you give me in return!” she bellowed. “I say, you’re a terrible little girl! Now, go away!”

When the call of nature came whilst I was up my tamarind tree, with just a little bit of adjustment and change of perch, I relieved myself from up there. I’d watch the turd falling down. Depending on what consistency it was, it would either flip a few times in the air before landing splat on the ground or go down with a thud. When the dog or the pigs had got rid of it and the chickens scratched and pecked at the sandy soil, there was no trace that excrement had just landed there moments before. One time Aunt caught me in action and screamed.

“O Elder Sister, come and have a look at that daughter of yours. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Wild, odious girl, come down here at once!” Aunt yelled.

Then she went and got a long stick and threatened to poke me. I climbed higher.

“*Aiii punieta* (little bitch), you’ll fall!” she shrieked and threw the stick aside.

“I’ll count one to ten and you’d better be on the ground when I’ve finished!”

She called out. While I was climbing down the tree, I heard her and Mother laughing in the kitchen.

While the adults in our family used the little outside hut in the bottom of the garden when they went to the toilet, we children could do it any time in the back garden and then either Mother or Aunt would go around with a shovel and clean it up afterwards if the dogs or pigs hadn’t already consumed it. But I would always find interesting places in the thicket to do it, away from every one and I’d clean myself with dried leaves or twigs afterwards. One afternoon, I came home with thick itchy welts on my bottom.

“Filthy, filthy girl,” Mother scolded. “If you had washed yourself after you’d done your poo, this wouldn’t have happened.” She gave me an almighty pinch on the tender flesh close to the armpit.

“She must have wiped her bottom with a leaf with the hairy caterpillar on it!” Aunt said in dismay.

After that, I always went to the river and washed myself. There were always women washing clothes there and children to play with. We would swim in the shallows and sit on flat boulders on the riverbed. Some hundred yards downstream lay huge boulders around which water from the shallows fell in a rush creating sprays and little waterfalls. We never went there because adults said it was too deep. Adults hardly ever ventured that far because none of them could swim. But brave GI soldiers sometimes came down the river and swam happily there and we’d watch with wonder at their boldness. After they’d gone, that area of the river would tend to its ruffled dignity and become dark and mysterious again.

One time, not long after we had a new baby in the house, Little Brother had whooping cough and Eldest Sister and I took him to the river early one morning. Mother wanted him to have some fresh air to clear up his lungs so he could be well again. No one was about at that time of the day and the sound of the rumbling cascades downstream was loud yet languorous, as if the river was singing a ballad it alone understood.

“Can you hear the giant singing?” Eldest Sister asked.

“Giant?” I asked.

“Yes, the giant who lives in the river.”

“Where is he? I can’t see one.”

“Of course you can’t, silly. He lives under the water, over there where it is deep.” I listened intently.

“I can’t hear it.”

“Listen.” In the stillness of the morning, the drone of the moving water filled the senses as it hung suspended between earth and sky.

“Mmm, yes I can hear him now.”

“Can you see his heartbeat?”

“Where?”

“See the water rippling? His heart is so huge the river shivers with every beat.”

“The laundry women and the men with buffalos don’t hear the giant.”

“That’s because he sleeps during the day. He rests deep under the riverbed.”

“He will not drown?”

“Of course not, silly. He’s a spirit. You could only hear him and feel him and see his heartbeat.”

“Does he like us?”

“He doesn’t mind us, I suppose, but if you fall in the deep, you’ll never come up again. He’ll keep you with him.”

“Does he live in a house under the river?”

“I think so.”

“I don’t want to live down there, Eldest Sister.”

We listened to the song of the giant spirit of the river and felt safe sitting a few metres from the water’s edge. Every now and then Little Brother would fall into a spasm of coughing. His eyes would bulge, spit and tears drenched his face. The roar of the river spirit faded away in the background. I would move my face close to his, inhaling his breath wanting the sickness to leave him and come to me instead. But it never did.

We took him to the river wrapped in warm clothes many more mornings just as the golden haze of dawn melted on the distant hills. We did this until he was well again.

Eldest Sister told me more tales about spirits. She was always very clever and I believed everything she said. And it was fine that she did not like insects and animals and was scared of them, perhaps because of the scorpion sting. As a medical student later on, she once fainted when she saw live intestinal parasites during a dissection procedure. In the end she became a successful obstetrician because that was cleaner and babies were beautiful. Her patients held her in high esteem and parents often gave her the honour of naming their babies. Eldest Sister loved that and sometimes she would choose some interesting names for baby girls, like “Princess Charm,” and “White Swan” which I thought, were crazy names for little brown babies.

~

When Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister finished primary school, they were taken by Grandfather and Grandmother to live with them and Second Elder Sister in the presbytery where Uncle Felipe was posted. They attended the school close to the church. Mother and Father were not happy when they had gone but no one complained about the decisions Grandfather and Grandmother made. Besides, Mother had me, Little Sister and Baby Brother to care for and there was another baby on the way. Around this time, Aunt Miguela got married and moved with her husband to the city and Father was

always away working in the fields. At supper time on the day they left, Mother wept quietly at the sight of the two empty places at the table.

They left in May, which meant that the arrival of beetles was imminent. The days were humid and the afternoons were dull and lonely. Little Sister was too young and was not much fun to play with. I missed my Eldest Sister who at that time of year would take us along to the back garden very early in the mornings, before school, to hunt for beetles. You could see the beetles clinging onto the undersides of leaves but more prominently, from banana leaves. We would shake the trunk vigorously and they'd fall to the ground. The large black ones were the bulls and they were lazy. The green and gold ones would only fly for a little while before giving up. We'd collect all the brown ones because they were the most industrious. You could tie a long piece of thread at the base of their wings then swing them around until the beetle started to fly around and around over your head, until it expired and flew no more. Then we discarded it. Sometimes, you would have as many as five brown beetles tied to the clothes line flying wildly around and around the wire. We would watch with excitement and Eldest Sister would be so pleased with herself.

I also missed Eldest Brother and all the games he organised with us. One time he built a billy-cart and we all had a ride up and down a grassy slope. Sometimes, in the evenings he made a train by laying down all the cast iron chairs end to end and we sat on a pillow in our very own carriage. "Vrooom, Vrooom!" he called out as he pushed the train around the main room. When supper was ready, he packed up the train and stacked the chairs neatly at one end of the room. We were so happy.

~

Women and professional laundresses with their pre-school children flocked to the river on sunny days carrying bundles of dirty clothes on top of their heads. Most would bring their lunches and *segundas*, or mid-morning snacks, with them. They'd huddle together in little groups under the shade of the bridge overhead. At regular intervals the sound of pounding would break the din of chatter as women hit soapy and sodden clothes with wooden paddles on flat boulders, dipping them into the water then pounding them again and again. While coloured clothes were being paddled then rinsed, the white soapy laundry was left bleaching in the sun atop low shrubs or on sun-bleached rocks by the banks, before these too were pounded and rinsed. When the

women tipped up their large aluminium basins we'd try to catch the bubbles from the soapy water as they wormed downstream circling around the rocks and around us.

“O, stay away now children. Play further downstream,” the women would call out when it was time to rinse their laundry.

Most of the women would finish with their laundry before lunch to catch the sun for drying at home. Women with more loads to wash stayed on, stopping only for lunch and perhaps a brief siesta. The shrubs and wide sun-bleached rocks and boulders up the wide embankments would be strewn with drying laundry.

There were times when American families who lived and worked at the nearby Air Base stopped by with their cameras and took pictures of us from up on the bridge. Sometimes they came down to the riverside and took some more pictures and talked to us children. They were tall and fair. Their blue eyes made you wonder how they could see. They spoke kindly and spoke a language we did not understand but which sounded exotic and mysterious. We children cried out excitedly and jumped up and down when they handed out candies before getting back in their cars. And then, off they went like gods in their chariots, speeding away into the distance, leaving us and the river as though we had been touched by an exotic wave of benevolence.

In the late afternoons when the river was rid of washer-women, men and boys trekked down the banks with their water buffaloes. You could hear the sound of the feet of men and beasts as they thundered downhill and you had to stay out of the way as the great animals eagerly headed for the water. They would settle down into the river drinking and snorting away and dipping and swaying their weary heads into the water. They were washed and scrubbed. There was so much calling and splashing about as men and boys hopped from the back of one animal to another. How bold and strong those giant animals were, yet how gentle. When they were done, washed and refreshed animals and men came out of the water and trekked up the hill towards home, leaving the river to its solitude as the evening slowly crept in.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

There were mornings when I wondered if some kind of pain would come my way that day. There were those days when from out of the blue I found myself in trouble with Mother. Or Eldest Brother or Eldest Sister, in the past, might get in trouble with her. I would always cry when someone cried even if it was the baby crying with pain when it was sick, or if they were slaughtering a pig in the back garden. Or you could fall off a chair or trip while running; maybe bump your head against the side of the dining table; or catch your finger when you shut a drawer or closed a window. I smacked a large orange and brown wasp against the window sill with Mother's slipper one day. Then, wanting to inspect the colourful insect more closely, picked it up, and put it in the palm of my hand. And then, the world darkened as a sharp pain hit me, numbing my hand for the rest of the day. That pain. That terrible pain!

I was used to playing on my own at home, sitting in the tamarind tree and keeping to myself. Mother was always busy. From very early on I had the intuition to get out of the way and find my own space. I sought amusement outside the house. I was a child with a curious mind and a vivid imagination and found novel ways to occupy myself and explore—to stay out of Mother and Aunt's way. Out of the way, out of trouble, negotiating between pleasure and pain, between love and anger, between care and abandonment.

"Hiii, I'm busy, let me be."

"You're asking too many questions, little girl. I don't know what the family name of the cat is. Nor the dog's. Or the trees."

"We all have the same family name because we belong to one family. And that's that."

"Go out and play."

"How high is the sky? Maybe a thousand lengths of bamboo."

When I asked why a certain woman was mute, Mother said: "Her tongue is short...yes, that's why she can't speak. Her tongue must be very short. Now leave me alone."

There was a mute woman who lived with her family at the far side of the bamboo forest. They seemed to live apart from everyone else and never ventured our way. We would see her often in the distance gathering fire wood. She was dark and plump and had thick wiry hair that stood up in a frizz. Her eyes were small slits on her chunky round face. She was a mysterious figure to me and I wondered what her name was. I thought that if I had the chance to get close to her, perhaps I'd find her to be nice and pretty. There were times when I saw her gathering firewood in the bush with her family and I watched with interest the way they communicated with their hands and fingers. She would scream or squeal to get the attention of the others. It made you wonder if she could sing, and how terribly sad it would be if she didn't. It could not be possible—one could not just scream. It could not simply be the only sound one made.

One day, I spotted her sitting on a tree stump near a thicket with a baby in her arms. She looked content, yet so alone, and then I thought perhaps she wouldn't mind if I get closer—and look at her face. If I smiled at her, then she would smile back at me and then I could take a glimpse of her short tongue. Be friends. I wanted to sit with her and play with her baby. But when she saw me approaching, a blood-curdling screech exploded from her mouth, and birds in the leafy canopy took flight. The Mute and her child—confined in a mysterious world one could not enter.

During that time, relative calm and normalcy were often disrupted by sudden tempests. Tempests which, blissfully, a child did not understand. As long as Father and Mother were fine, all was well in the world. They were the constant in my world—my daily rice and water, sometimes measly, sometimes plenty. When confusion and distress were about, I only had to look at them and stay close by to feel safe and confident again.

Like that time when Mother miscarried early in her pregnancy and a little parcel of matter and afterbirth was wrapped in old rags and buried under the house. No one could decide whether something not yet fully formed had a soul or not. Everyone solemnly went on with their tasks. Mother was in bed for several days, visited and nursed by *Indang* Juana as though there was a real baby there. Not long afterwards, heavy slabs of teak wood Father had bought to build a new house one day were stacked over the spot where the parcel was buried.

The chickens and the dog took shelter under the house like they had always done, picking on bits of food that fell between the bamboo slat flooring at mealtime, or

on Little Sisters' poo when she did her toilet from the little square hole on the floor in the corner. Mother and Aunt put up a hammock under the house close to the back stairs with an old rice sack, each end secured by two lengths of rope tied from one of the strong timber frames that supported our kitchen floor. It was a perfect swing where you could fly in and out from under the house—except when Baby Brother was asleep because I sang too loudly and the ropes groaned against the timber.

One time, Aunt Inocenta stayed in our house towards the end of her pregnancy to be close to *Indang* Juana, who lived next door to us. When the time of birth came, a long strong rope was tied from the central rafter of the roof. It was a lengthy and intense labour and with every contraction, she calmly pulled tight on to that rope, never letting out a cry. *Indang* Juana, Mother and Aunt hovered around her, and Little Sister and I sometimes watched with curiosity or played together close by. It was late in the day when the baby was born, but instead of cheerful excitement, a wave of horror seemed to have struck our home.

Indang Juana had never seen anything so terrible nor had anyone else in the neighbourhood.

“Merciful God,” *Indang* Juana exclaimed as she held the baby in her wiry, bloodied hands. The umbilical cord was severed and the little body was washed and carefully wrapped in swaddling clothes.

“It’s breathing lightly,” Mother said. Aunt Inocenta was dumbfounded with exhaustion and sorrow, holding her rosary to her chest.

“Mother of Mercy, help us,” said Mother.

“What are we going to do?” Aunt asked. But everyone knew that the baby would die. No one born in that condition had ever lived.

“It has to be baptised...make haste, please,” begged Aunt Inocenta. She was too weak to move and the rags and sheets she was lying on were soaked in blood.

“I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost,” Mother whispered as she made the sign of the cross with a little warm water on the baby’s forehead. By that time the infant had stopped breathing.

“Amen,” Aunt Inocenta whispered. She did not expect her baby to live either. Nor would she have wished it to.

“Now you have your own special angel in heaven,” said *Indang Juana*.

“Yes, sister, that’s the truth,” said Mother.

Aunt Inocenta’s delivery created an atmosphere of wonder, terror and sadness in the house. The news travelled quickly in the neighbourhood and people came to give comfort and support. They tried to find reasons and make sense out of what had just happened.

“I wonder what message from the Lord is being sent to us,” said one woman.

“Is it good luck or a bad omen?” some wondered.

“That was because the mother went to see the circus while pregnant,” one woman whispered to another.

“The flying trapeze... truly incredible...”

“Maybe so *comadre*, all that twisting and contortions could affect the baby in the womb.”

“It’s the devil itself interfering with our lives!”

Many more reasons were given but a decision had to be made quickly. It was decided to preserve the tiny figure just in case rich people of science would be interested one day in purchasing it for medical studies. Aunt Inocenta and her husband were very poor and they calmly agreed. It was God’s will. *Indang Juana* carefully placed the tiny figure inside a large candy jar in embalming liquid.

In the meantime, Aunt Inocenta was cared for in the normal way. For fifteen days, she stayed inside the little room away from drafts and the bustle of the curious people who came to see her and to offer sympathy. For fourteen days, *Indang Juana* gave her sponge baths using water from the big vat of herbs and guava leaves that had been boiling for hours and then topped with more water and re-boiled every day. It was all normal procedure except there was no baby by Aunt Inocenta’s side. On the fifteenth day, she was given a proper wash sitting on top of the boiled leaves piled on a heap on

the floor. *Indang* Juana doused her from head to toe with the entire contents of the vat that were mixed with warm water. The water washed through the slat floor, scattering the chickens under the house. All the doors and windows were shut tight as a strong gust could be harmful to her fragile state. Our house was filled with a pungent mist.

When Aunt Inocenta was well again she and Uncle went back home. But no rich and learned people came to give them good fortune and life gradually became normal again. The large candy jar was stored on top of the armoire or tall wooden chest in the bedroom. There was only one bedroom in a bamboo and thatched house in those days and it was used mainly as a storage room where clothes, beddings and other belongings were kept. The family slept together in the main room of the house. The armoire held the family's best clothes, linens and other valuables. Items that were rarely used and that you wanted out of the way were kept on top.

When we were visiting Aunt's house with Grandmother, I sometimes entered that room when no one was looking. I would pull up a chair and drag it to a chest of drawers next to the armoire and clamber up. There was a sphere of silence in that space where that candy jar and its content were kept, a silence that evoked feelings I did not understand. Then I would leave the room in stealth, taking with me a gloom that only disappeared with play.

I was staying at Aunt Inocenta's house one school vacation when I fell ill and Aunt laid out a little mat for me in that room. I could hear her and Grandmother talking outside the house when I drifted into a deep, deep sleep. When I woke up Aunt was shaking my shoulders and slapping my face lightly. Grandmother was holding a glass of water. I smiled and they smiled back.

"You were screaming in your sleep," Aunt said.

She placed a wet cloth on my forehead and then gave me some warm gruel to eat, but I kept spewing it up. Afterwards I was tucked back into bed and they went out to resume their work in the garden. I floated, it seemed, in and out of a long dream for a few days. Aunt or Grandmother would check up on me regularly and sometimes I was given half of a tablet of *Cortal* to bring my temperature down. No doctor was called.

"Just normal children's illness, many children are having the flu," the woman next door said.

“An epidemic.”

When I was all grown up, I became conscious that it must have been at that time when I had a rheumatic fever that damaged the upper chamber of my heart.

Many years later I asked Aunt Inocenta about the baby in the jar. She said it had been formally buried in the family plot. Not a word was said about it again. That baby. That infant boy. That baby boy in a large candy jar. A tiny and completely perfect figure in its watery sleep—its little hands enfolding his entrails close to his heart, his face bowed as if in deep reflection of a life that could have been. He had been with me in the same room when I was sick as a child and I loved and blessed him then. I will love and bless him all my life. All my life.

~

There was a lot of fuss at home one summer which preoccupied Mother and Aunt. There was an infestation of mites in the village and many adults and children were covered with rashes and sometimes festering sores. When Baby Brother came up with sores all over his body, Mother boiled all our clothes and beddings in large vats normally used for cooking large amounts of food at Christmas or during our town fiesta in September. Aunt washed the floors and furniture with soap and kerosene in the water. For a few days, we were not allowed to go out and play and Mother did not let anyone from the village enter the house.

They said Second Elder Sister got diphtheria when she was very little and nearly died. Since that time, Mother had been fearful and vigilant. When Second Elder Sister was healthy again, Grandmother took her in her care and they lived with Uncle Felipe during his first assignment as a parish priest in a remote village called Telabanca. Mother said that she was a beautiful little girl with a plump round face, and everyone was besotted with her. Mother could not say ‘no’ when Grandmother took her away after her illness. She was pregnant again. Second Eldest sister lived with Grandmother until high school age. For this reason, my memories of early childhood do not include her.

When Little Sister was a toddler, she too got very sick.

“Little Sister is sick. Smelly poo.”

“*Santisima Trinidad* (Most Holy Trinity)! Dysentery,” *Indang Juana* said with terror.

“Little Sister will die?”

“No, God have mercy, you are not to say that again, *loca!* - Silly! - She picked me up and walked hurriedly towards our house.

“Your sister must be brought to the hospital.”

“I like to go to ‘ostipal, too.”

“*Aiii*, do not say that, child. *Por dios, por santo*. Do not tempt the Devil!” With her fingers she removed as much as she could of the green slime that constantly blocked my nasal passages and then wiped her fingers on her *saya*.

“Too many babies have died,” she said quietly to herself.

For a few days I stayed with Uncle Cien and his wife in another town. It was a long time before Little Sister was playing again.

~

When epidemics and natural disasters like floods or droughts struck our area, people like Mother and Aunt always tried to find reasons why.

And always, the women gathered together by the artesian well at the back of our house and the washer women by the river would be exchanging gossip and rumours. One time there were rumours that the Devil was about in person.

“It came in the night, killing whole families.”

“It bashed big men to death.”

“Babies were stolen from their cradles.”

“Dried up the milk of nursing mothers.”

“Children snatched from their parents and gone without trace...”

“Only the cross could stop it.”

During that time, you would see crosses drawn and painted by the door frames and around the windows of houses, and on fences in the neighbourhood. There were crosses drawn on the trunks of fruit trees so that no poison or evil spirit could enter them. We children played together and stayed inside the house when all was quiet in the afternoon, while people were resting and having siesta, just in case the Devil in the guise of an ordinary man would come and steal us. Doors and windows were locked at night so that this man could not force himself inside. The fear in the village was palpable. Mother and Aunt were quietly worried and our prayer time at angelus hour became longer until we little ones would fall asleep.

“Mmm, that’s enough, let us have our supper now,” Father said one evening, after spending a long day in the fields and Mother was about to say another length of the rosary. He had had his warm shower and was in his pyjamas.

“Bless you, Their Father, how can you say that when everyone is in mortal fear of the Devil?”

“It’s all superstition, Their Mother. How can you believe in superstition and then go to church?”

“It’s about time *Aamong* visited us again and we can ask him to bless our house at the same time.” *Aamong*, or “The Reverend” is Father’s elder brother.

“He will visit in his own time. Besides, he’s a priest and the last person to believe in superstitions.”

“No matter, I will not be happy until our house is blessed with holy water again. What with the children getting so ill and now this rumour.”

“It’s all superstition, I’m telling you again, Their Mother. If there’s sickness in the air then children will get sick and if it’s bad enough, we take them to the doctor. For sure *Aamong* would tell you so. He would also tell you not to call the shaman first. Now let’s eat.”

“How could you be so irreverent? The brother of a priest, too! You don’t care at all! May God forgive you!”

But the rumour persisted. In the neighbourhood, older children talked endlessly about it until we were all gripped with fear and horror. In the evenings I was restless until Father came home from the fields. He was strong but the Devil could be stronger. Our house was one of the very few that didn't have crosses drawn on its doors and windows. The other houses belonged to families of the Jehovah's Witness faith.

One morning I found some blocks of chalky material under the house, probably hardened lime Father hadn't used in the rice paddies and cast off charcoal from Mother's ironing. And so all morning and afternoon, I set about drawing crosses around the exterior of our house. White crosses inside black crosses and black crosses inside white crosses. They were the best cruciform drawings in the neighbourhood. Mother sighed and smiled and I was left decorating the outside of our house. My work adorned our house all through summer until the ensuing monsoon rains washed most of it away. One sunny day Aunt and Mother scrubbed away the remaining traces of lime and charcoal with soap and water.

~

When Aunt Miguela got married and went to the city to live with her husband, Mother took in an adolescent girl to help her around the house and to keep an eye on Little Sister and me. Aurora was very shy. She had long black curly hair and her eyes were like the darkest shadows. The hair on her arms and legs was fine and downy. She did not say much and if you pinched her skin or hit her with a stick, she'd cry and you'd feel sorry for her and you'd promise yourself not to hurt her again. Then she'd play with you and carry you around when you asked and you'd fall in love with her.

Mother worked very hard to rid Aurora's head of lice. She washed her hair with some kerosene in the water, and then raked the hair with a special comb until Aurora was nearly in tears. When I too had lice, Mother set about combing and picking the vermin off my hair as soon as she finished her work in the afternoon. I had my head resting on her lap and I'd fall asleep every time because her fingers working gently on my head soothed the itch and tenderness of my scalp. I wished those afternoons had lasted forever.

~

Indang Juana and I were friends. I would always go to her for a cuddle when she came to our house, which was frequently as we were neighbours. She would smell of sun and earth and vinegar when she came in from the outdoors. She often took me along with her when she visited women who had just given birth or who were soon going to. She held my hand as I tried to catch up with her long strides or I held on to her *saya*. When we visited one of Mother's distant aunts, *Apung Maria* or Grandmother Maria, *Indang Juana* would pick me up and set me astride her hip. *Apung Maria* kept chickens and turkeys in a large pen in her backyard, all except for the "bull of a turkey" which often had the run of the property and whose goal was to chase little children away.

"Ka ka ka kaaaak!" it would cackle threateningly as it approached you with its blazing red coronet, the feathers on its back bristling. *Indang Juana* would cackle back brandishing a stick in her hand and the turkey would scurry away. You would not go alone inside the yard if it was about. Unsuspecting guests or callers could sometimes be seen or heard screaming and running away from *Apung Maria's* yard, with that turkey cackling and nipping at their heels, its wings clenched tightly to its sides and brushing the ground.

But all was well when the brute was kept in its own pen and I could visit on my own. *Apung Maria* was a widow whose children were grown up and married. Only her two orphaned nieces lived with her. They were taught how to cook and sew so that they could marry well. Her house was large and sat loftily on strong posts of hardwood. There was a wide front veranda with cool bamboo seats and wide window sills. The tall, leafy fruit trees surrounding it made it very cool and fresh during even the hottest days of a tropical summer. It was a perfect place for an afternoon siesta and it felt like sitting or sleeping in a grand treehouse. From there you could watch her and her nieces embroidering baby dresses for the American market, darning old clothes or preparing fruits for preserving in pretty jars. Most of the time, but especially in the afternoon, friends such as *Indang Juana* called in for a chat and a little *merienda* or afternoon snack.

The veranda looked out onto a thick lantana hedge which was constantly in flower, and on the lush hibiscus bushes that were always decked in pink and reds blooms. *Indang Juana* sometimes came to collect hibiscus buds to cure people's boils or infected sores. She pounded these into a paste, wrapped the gooey and pungent paste in

muslin and then applied her concoction on the affected area of a torso or limb. In situations when the inflammation was truly bad, the poultice was tied securely with strips of old rags and left for a day or two until the boil or sore came to a head and burst. And then *Indang Juana* couldn't be thanked enough.

Throughout the year there were fruit trees in Apung Maria's yard ready for picking. The fruits were then sold to the markets. Caimito, santol, custard apples, guavas, pomelos. There was always fruit to eat at her house, although you couldn't go to her house as you pleased because of her pesky turkey and when you were there you couldn't always leave as you pleased because that feathered dragon would be waiting at the bottom of the stairs, cackling away.

There were cherry trees at the boundary of her property, which was located next to a vacant lot. When the cherries were ripe and the day was windy, Eldest Sister and I, along with Little Sister, would go to the vacant lot and pick red berries from the grass or dirt. We'd wipe the dirt off with our clothes and eat cherries to our hearts' content. When Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister were at school, I was always on the lookout for bright red cherries on the ground. One time, after a solitary indulgence, I came home with a bloated and tender belly. Mother called *Indang Juana*, who promptly took a coconut bowl and pretended to scoop away the excess cherries I'd eaten.

"Here have some of her food, kind spirits," she said. And she gave the rest to other imaginary creatures. And then I felt better.

COLLECTING

The neighbourhood was a wonder world that continually beckoned to me to come and explore. I set out on my own and entered houses where doors were open and watched people. I sat around watching women doing their chores or suckling babies, eating, chatting while picking nits from each other's hair. When I got bored, I would set out again looking for more interesting activities. I liked watching boys collecting spiders, which they kept in empty matchboxes, and which they used for spider fights. But these boys didn't like curious little girls around and I set about collecting pretty things instead, like shiny seeds of mature tamarind pods, perfectly formed Coca-Cola tops, or the black and red cansasaga seeds. Collecting was more interesting and you could do it

on your own. Sometimes I'd bury my collections in the backyard to see what would happen to them if I left them buried for a long time. But I couldn't help digging them up every day to see if there was any change. Until I'd lose interest and accidentally discover them all rusted and rotten much later.

The best things to collect came from *Apung Paku's* little grocery store, where I liked to stop and linger often. I could watch for hours while she set up newly delivered items on the shelves—cigarettes, tins of assorted sardines, laundry soap bars. However, the best time to watch was when she sorted out candies and little chocolate bars in identical clear candy jars. Sometimes, if I was lucky, she'd give me a chipped candy or some small empty boxes to take home. We called her "*Apung Paku* or Grandmother Paku" because she was very old.

"Grandmother," I asked her once, "is your real name 'Pakunda'?"

"Ha, ha, ha, what a silly little girl," she laughed. "Pakunda? Pakunda! Ha ha ha. It is Paskuala."

"So why do they call you 'Paku' then, grandmother?"

"Do you know what, little girl, I can't remember." She tied her long, thinning grey hair in a bun on the back of her head.

"Maybe your mother grew a lot of ferns like my Mother? Ferns. *Paku*. Maybe, that's why."

"I wish I knew— I wish I asked my mother when I was little."

"You are very, very old, Grandmother." I could not imagine her as a little girl. Although, when she laughed, you could see mischief in her eyes and then you'd think maybe she had once been a child after all. But her face was wrinkled and her cheeks hollow, especially when she didn't have her teeth on and the deep lines on the side of her mouth were moist with spittle.

"Aiii, bold little girl. Ha, ha, ha. Now be a good girl and put these empty boxes in the trash for me," she said.

The rubbish from her store was thrown in a pile at the back of her house and burnt once a week. Mostly the rubbish comprised soiled and torn boxes and wrapping

paper. But every now and then you could find one or two boxes that were nice and fancy and you could take them home with you. Sometimes it was a box that had held chocolates, or fruity-scented and sugared candies. If you were lucky you'd find sweet bits of sugar and cocoa left at the bottom of a box. And if you were really lucky, little red ants hadn't got to it before you did.

"Eldest Sister, do have a look at the tip of my tongue. It's sore." I begged her one evening.

"*Aiiik!* She exclaimed. "There's a red ant stuck there!"

"Take it away! Take it away! Pleeeease."

"I'm too scared," she said. I remembered how she hated worms and insects and so it was useless to beg further. I went to Aunt for help.

"*Aii*, greedy little girl, your belly is a bottomless pit! Come here!" she picked out the ant with her short blunt nails and pinched off a bit of skin too. My tongue felt hotter and sorer than before.

"Now, that should be a lesson to you!" she added sternly.

After that incident, I agreed with her that my boxes with sugar and crumbs in them should be used as kindling for our clay stoves. The good, clean and fancy ones I kept and stored away carefully under Mother's dresser, where she kept her best crockery. I loved the way you could store treasures in the boxes, and then look into them when you pleased. Colourful feathers, choice shiny seeds in different shapes, Coca-Cola bottle tops, polished stones from the riverbank, and ylang-ylang blossoms that left their perfume in the boxes they were kept in. When there was not much to do in the evening, or when it had been raining a lot, you could look into the boxes to check on your treasures. Sometimes the scent they had would remind you of special people you loved.

The ylang-ylang would remind you of Grandmother, of course, with her perfumed pink face powder. The long cigarette boxes which held feathers would remind you of Great Uncle Feliciano, who was kind and gentle and who smoked and blew smoke rings in the air when you asked him.

“Great Uncle, Great Uncle!” Little Sister and I would cry as he got off the bus in front of our house. We’d both seat on his knees as soon as he sat down.

“Please, Great Uncle, can we have some coins to buy candies?”

“Aha, you have to work for it first,” he’d say.

“We can pull out more of your grey hair…”

“Mmm, alright then, but let me speak to your mother and father for a while.” Then he’d take out a cigarette, put it between his lips and light it.

“Great Uncle, we can start pulling out your grey hair now!” We’d beg when they finished talking. He only liked black hair.

“Make sure roots and all come out,” he said. “One centavo for every five grey hairs!”

“O, Great Uncle, Little Sister’s pulled out four black hairs.”

“Ahh, I’ll end up bald if she’s not careful. Now, let your big sister do the pulling and she’ll share her candies with you.” I rubbed some cigarette ash between my thumb and forefinger so the grey hair didn’t slip off when I pulled it out. He was smiling and puffing while talking with Father.

“Twenty-five!” I counted. “You owe us five centavos, Great Uncle!”

“Ahh, that’s five candies each for both of you.” And off we ran to *Apung Paku*’s store.

Great Uncle was a widower and didn’t have children. When he died, only our Grandparents, Mother and aunts wept for him. Little Sister and I waited for him to visit again for a long time, especially when we opened my collection of cigarette boxes.

“I want candies.” Little Sister would say. “I want Great Uncle.”

“He died,” I’d say. “But he’ll come back one day.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“He’ll have much, much grey hair next time and we’ll have lots of candies.”

“You have to pull out lots of grey hair, Big Sister.”

“Yes, and we can buy chocolates, too.”

“And kropic.”

“Yes, prawn crisps, too.”

“And popped rice.”

Sometimes, people you love who had gone away took too long to come back. Until you quite forgot all about them.

Many years later, when I was around thirteen, Mother bought me my first Spanish veil. One evening I was looking at my image in the mirror with my very own beautiful veil over my head, my shoulder length hair was shiny and my eyes were as black as the black lace on which white flowers were embroidered with silk on my veil. I thought I looked very pretty. Over my shoulder I thought I caught sight of some smoke rings. I remembered Great Uncle Feliciano well for a long time. I would see him in my mind, his round gentle face looking out beyond my material world and beyond time. Motionless, until he slowly faded away through most of my formative years. He was beyond my recollection until I started writing his story; he'd been with me all along.

When we opened my candy boxes, we thought of Uncle Cien's visit. Uncle Cien was a poet and was very gentle. He also had a good singing voice. He was just married then but had something wrong with his lungs from an old illness, and as a result, could not get a job. Mother would always give him some rice and a few notes when he came to visit. But he visited only to see us and I'd run into his arms when I saw him. I always beat Little Sister to it.

“Oh Uncle, let me sing to you!” I'd offer when he was all rested. Sometimes, he laughed when I cleared my throat before I sang and then he listened intently. It was always sad when he left. Many years later one of his older sons who joined the US navy sponsored Uncle Cien and his wife to go to America to start a better, more secure life. It took about ten years for the other children to be allowed to join them. He was seventy-two when I saw him again in California and he still had the finely tuned voice of a gentleman I had known as a child—deep, articulate, almost melancholy. His skin stretched tightly over the frame of his handsome face.

“Despite all that rubbish I was told in the past, I have the lungs of an ox, after all,” he boasted as he carried my luggage to the car when I was leaving. “It is not my lungs but my heart that might kill me.” He was gearing his mind to his forthcoming heart bypass surgery.

“But it’s quite a common procedure now Uncle. Everything will be fine,” I assured him. “In a few months’ time you’ll be driving your grandchildren to and from school and you can travel again with Auntie.”

“Then I shall not worry,” he said. “I don’t want to leave their mother yet. Nearly fifty years, we’ve been married...we worked so hard all these years, now we must enjoy the fruits of our labours,” he said with pride, referring to his talented grandchildren.

“But of course you will, Uncle. No doubt about that!”

“You’ve grown and you make me feel so old!”

“Goodbye,” I said with a brave grownup smile. “Parting is such sweet sorrow...” I recited a few lines from the well-known verse in jest. He laughed.

He died from post-operative complications. Pneumonia.

~

Father had an air rifle which he used to take to the fields at times and he’d come home in the evening with fowls slung over his shoulder. Sometimes they were beautiful birds with feathers grander than the brightest of rainbows. My brother and sisters and I would gather around and look closely at the birds before Mother or Aunt started dressing them. Because they had a stronger taste than chicken, they were mainly cooked in cumquat juice, soy sauce, garlic, pepper and bay leaves. But it was the feathers with their striking bright colours that I remember most vividly. Sometimes the feathers fitted nicely into my long cigarette boxes, and there were those that were too long which I kept carefully on their own. And it was good that long after enjoying the tasty dish Mother or Aunt cooked, you could open the boxes over and over again and admire their exquisite colours and then imagine birds in full flight against a still blue sky. Then you’d dream of having a pet bird one day... but your bird would not be for food. A beautiful pet bird... what a treasure it would be!

“How lucky birds are to be able to fly, aren’t they, Mother?”

“Mmm, yes they are.”

“If I were a bird, I would fly so high...but where do they sleep?”

“On trees deep in the forest.”

“But, if I were a bird, I should fly back home here every night.”

“Maybe it’s better you’re not a bird then.”

“Yes, I’d like to be home here with you and Father every night.”

“If you were a bird, you may be shot for food.”

“They don’t feel pain?”

“No, they’re animals. God made it so.”

I understood then. If your pet dog got killed on the road, and Father’s tenants took the carcass home to cook for lunch, it was alright. It was not your dog anymore when you looked at it before they took him away. It was dead and didn’t feel pain. When you saw a man hitting a skinny dog over the head with a club, you were glad when it was all over and it stopped howling and felt pain no more. There was a sick man in that house and his family needed meat to get him better and working again to feed his children. But somehow, he still died. When there was a good reason why something cruel was done, it was easy to start playing again.

After Father had blown out the little flame in the kerosene lamp and the clothes hanging from the pegs on the wall seemed to fall asleep too, you closed your eyes and fell into a deep restful sleep. You slept between Little Sister and Aurora, whose back felt warm next to you, fencing you from all the mysteries that lurked in the dark. It felt as snug as being inside a warm cosy box. And our house was a fine big box that held us all close together.

The most wonderful box I ever saw came wrapped up in thick shiny brown paper. It was tucked securely in Father’s arms. He put it out on the table for Mother to see. She stood back in awe and gave a little cry when he placed it in her hand. She seemed frightened. She said it was heavy. He said it was light. It fitted snugly into his

strong hands. He ran his fingers around the shape as he had when he held Baby Brother minutes after he was born, his forefinger brushing his little nose gently, his soft cheeks and around his ears, then his slumbering eyes that were yet to open.

“It’s a colt 45 revolver,” he said.

“Is it safe?” she asked.

“Safer than the rifle and not as heavy. You can wear it in its holster around your waist and no one needs to know it’s there.”

“Be careful with it, Their Father.”

“I’ll keep it as a prize. Some American soldiers wear them around their waist. It’s perfect, really impeccably made.”

“Now you have your toy, Their Father, keep it safe.”

That shining metal left its impression in its satin casing inside its box. Father ended up showing it to a few chosen friends and shot some fowls on occasions. The man servant said he shot a python as it slithered up an ancient acacia tree in the forest.

But sometimes when no one was about in the little room between the living room and our kitchen, I’d open the armoire and look at that empty shiny white box where Father’s gun was kept. I wished it was mine, though I knew it was too fine a box for me to keep. After a while, the gun was kept elsewhere in the house, wrapped in one of Mother’s old shawls.

A few years later, Mother finally handed that box to me. I had received my first Holy Communion a month before and I needed a box in which to keep my new treasures: my little black Spanish veil with its silvery white floral embroidery, a pretty hanky, a prayer book and my beautiful red rosary beads. I placed a single ylang-ylang blossom in the bottom of the box. There was nothing more in the world I wanted.

THE MERRY TIMES

Sometimes, I’d enter a house where a woman was having a baby and *Indang Juana* would be there orchestrating the activities and there were always a lot of other excited

people either helping or just enjoying everyone's company. Or perhaps they were there because the birth of a baby was a memorable thing and it was good to be around when it happened. There was of course always excitement and entertainment when a group of people were gathered around. They talked loudly, as though they were conversing with friends from the far end of a rice paddy.

"Oh, the grief we women have to go through. *Dios mio*, it took nearly two days labour for my first born," one woman said.

"Oh, the pain of being married!" said another woman, the mother of several children. She looked older and worn out and her smile every now and then showed traces of her once-pretty face. She had sunburnt and wrinkled hands from washing other people's clothes at the river every day.

"Ah, that's life," another wife said.

"Dear wife, do not complain," retorted her husband. "You can't live without me, for sure ... *Abah*, you haven't said 'no' yet when I entered your chamber at night!" And everyone laughed wildly.

"*Aiii, hijo de puta*, don't listen to him!" the wife said, covering her face with her *panuelo*.

"*Compadre*, there are children listening," *Indang Juana* remonstrated.

"Ah, innuendos they could not understand yet, *comadre*."

Sometimes, I played with children in the yard of a house where women wept and moaned so loudly, some fainting on the floor from grief and exhaustion. Inside the house, in the middle of the main room, on a long dining table or in a bamboo bed someone in his or her best Sunday clothes would be lying peacefully. Sometimes, it was a baby or a child lying still on top of a small table, dressed in its white christening robe and a mother sitting close by weeping. But we children were not interested in the affairs of the adults. They did not explain anything and it was best not to ask tricky questions because they just sent you away. Or they'd say he or she went to heaven and that had to be good.

In fact, it was a happy time when a figure, whether a child or an adult was lying still on a bed or table in the main room of a house. During those times, especially in the evenings, our parents would meet together and chat for hours at a time. We could play hide and seek in the moonlight. Men came with their guitars and serenaded the young women and sung lively ballads and other people played cards. There was a lot of carousing and at times men got intoxicated with home brewed rice and coconut wines. There were scuffles which the elders quelled with muffled curses.

In the kitchens or outside, in makeshift kitchens, women cooked all day while many pairs of hands served food and refreshments. Then suddenly, amidst all the festivities, from out of the blue women would start crying and wailing from inside the house and everyone would be quiet. The atmosphere would be sombre for a while.

“Be still and be comforted, for the love of God,” an elder would tell the bereaved women.

“It’s the will of God, it’s all in His hands,” another one would add.

Still, we children played until our parents called and took us home.

During these lively events, Mother was often asked to lead prayers and litanies for the dead. By that time she had memorised pages and pages of these special prayers by heart. It was mainly the women who gathered around the still figure on the bed or table and prayed with Mother. They prayed so intently on bended knees or sitting respectfully, their eyes closed or looking intently beyond the here and now—into what seemed a state that was keenly hoped for yet fearsome at the same time. I would watch the faces with interest for a while until it became tiresome. It was better to go out and play or just watch and listen to the spectacle—the tapestry of lights and shadows, the laughing and the weeping. How exquisite it all was!

Sometimes, Mother and the women got lost in the fervour of their supplications and, as if in a trance, lingered and recited all the litanies written in her devotional. One night, the prayers took too long and Father went home ahead. I stayed behind and waited under a bush close to where a young man was playing a guitar and entertaining a group of young women. I thought that the guitar made the best sound in all of God’s earth. I wished the music would never end, but of course too soon Mother and Aunt were approaching. There were only kerosene lamps and torches to light the moonless

landscape and they couldn't see me sitting in the shadows as they unhurriedly walked by. Aunt was humming quietly with the music. I picked up a handful of sand and threw it at their feet. And again. They hesitated for a moment and then to my surprise, they started running off towards home. I followed behind them, not saying anything.

“Do we have to go home now?” I asked finally.

“*Aii, dios mio*, I thought you'd gone home with your Father,” Mother said.

“*Haii*, hurry along girl, it's late,” Aunt said. She took my hand. She looked terrified. We walked hastily home along the deep shadows of unlit lanes.

~

They said Great Uncle Felipe, Grandmother's brother, was dying. Father and Mother visited him and Great Aunt Vincenta every evening, with all of us in tow. During the day, Mother often spent a few hours helping with the chores and the care of the invalid while we children played in the yard. One afternoon, having played enough for a while, I went upstairs to see what the adults were doing. Mother, Great Aunt and Grandmother were busy tending to Great Uncle's needs; wiping his brows with a warm damp cloth, propping him up on several pillows and trying to feed him some rice porridge. It was very hot and he was lying on a thick mat on the floor of the main room, where the wide windows were half shut so that he could rest in dimmer light. They were talking quietly and solemnly.

At the other end of the room, by a large window with a wide window sill, I climbed up Great Uncle's rocking chair and started rocking and singing quietly. I was lost in my own world, rocking and flying, higher and higher. Then, I stood on the chair and rocked and flew even higher and the chair flipped forward.

“*Jesu Cristo!*” cried Great Aunt, crossing herself.

“*Aiii, sinvergenza!*” - Shameless!- Grandmother exclaimed.

“*Dios mio*,” Mother cried, startled. Great Uncle moaned from his torpor. I lay on my belly, stunned, and then started crying. Mother pulled up the chair and set it straight. After a brief inspection, I was given a smack on my backside and sent downstairs.

Great Uncle Felipe soon died and they were the merriest few days of that time. Pigs and fowls were slaughtered to feed guests and mourners. All my cousins and relatives came and stayed until the third day after the funeral, when there was a lot of praying and more feasting done. There was a full moon during all those evenings, and we played till late in Great Uncle's yard.

"Oh, how lucky you are someone died in your family!" one of my playmates said.

"Yes."

"All your family and friends are here. So happy," she said.

"Yes, and there's so much food!" I boasted.

"You must be so rich," she said.

"Great Uncle and Great Aunt are. They have pigs, carabaos and a *Kalesa*. (A horse-drawn carriage.)"

"Ah, but you are so rich and so lucky someone died," she said again when I gave her a piece of my sweet, sticky popped rice.

The highway ran past Great Uncle and Great Aunt Vincenta's property and it could get busy even during those days. Although at night motor vehicles that took to the road were few and far between. When Eldest Sister told Father that I lay down in the middle of the road for a while that evening, he looked at me with disappointment but said nothing. A look that said, you should not do it again no matter how hard your cousins dared you. But I noticed the sadness in his eyes, which I had never seen before, and for the first time I felt that it might not have been a merry occasion after all, when someone died.

~

A quaint little hut was built under the canopy of a great duhat tree close to where the winding lane going down the river began. Not long after the family moved in, I became friendly with Sonia, who was very nice and very pretty, too. She also didn't go to school yet and so we spent a lot of time together. Her father worked in the fields and her mother mostly stayed at home.

Sonia's sister was a dressmaker and always wore beautiful clothes she sewed herself. Many women came to their house with clothing materials. They looked first at catalogues and chose designs for their dresses, tops or skirts before their names were written down in a thick notebook. Their measurements were then taken and written down. We played around while Sonia's sister drafted pattern after pattern, and then the brightly printed materials were cut. With another seamstress to help her they'd be pedalling their machines all day. If a festivity was close at hand, they'd work deep into the night.

Sonia and I hardly played outside their house because it was far more interesting watching clothes being made than being outside in the heat. We collected and played with remnants of materials and pretended to be seamstresses. Sonia's sister made beautiful dresses for her, using bits and pieces of cast off ribbons and trimmings. I watched, mesmerised, when a particular dress for Sonia was being sewn. It was in yellow and had puffed sleeves and a flared skirt trimmed with deep brown buttons sewn along the length of the back seam. The hem of the skirt was decorated with long black bobby pins in alternating groups of threes and fives. That lovely dress!

Sonia's grandmother was very old and thin. Her eyes were white at the centre and she was blind. Her mother spoon-fed her and she bathed her with a large bucket of warm water, first washing her hair with a bar of white soap, then wiping her face and back with a little wash cloth. The water would fall through the slat bamboo floor directly under the house where the chickens were roaming and a pig was tied to one of the posts. She never left that room and her mat except when she needed to go to the toilet and then she crawled towards the hole in the corner where she did her poo and her wee. Sometimes she'd sit over that hole for a long time. One time, while playing under the house, Sonia and I took turns in poking her bottom gently with a stick and then running away squealing when a turd came falling down and then we watched the pig eat it.

Sometimes, I'd sit by her grandmother's door and just watch her. She was small and wiry and bent. She'd lie sleeping on her back and her cheeks were hollowed, and the skin on her face seemed to drip down onto her pillow and onto the mat. She had lost all her teeth and her gums were purple, her hair was grey and thin. At times, she'd wake up from her sleep and cry, "Mother! Mother! O come and help me!" If Sonia's mother

was around, she'd come and comfort her, comb her hair then tuck her neatly. Sonia's sister would leave her sewing and go to calm her when their mother was away washing clothes at the river. Often, the grandmother would be lying on her side, talking to herself.

The time came when Sonia and her family had to leave. The government had opened new territories in the south islands of the state and plots of land were given to families willing to migrate, work and help build new communities. For several days, Sonia's family packed their clothes and belongings into large boxes and wooden trunks. I watched as Sonia's pretty dresses were stored neatly in a large trunk with all the family's clothes. She was excited because she was going to see the ocean and that they were taking a large ship to Mindanao.

“We will have our own land there and we'll be rich,” she said.

One bright morning, a few brave families and their belongings were loaded onto the backs of army trucks to be driven to the port in the city. People, including Mother and Aunt, came to see them go. They were weeping and embracing each other. “Come back one day soon,” people called out, even though they knew none of them would return. Sonia was looking at me from the back of the truck. She looked so small. Her grandmother was hoisted up to her family and was settled in a rickety bamboo chair with her pillow and a warm cotton sheet. She wore a neat dress.

“Oh, Mother, where are we going? Oh Mother, I'm scared,” she cried repeatedly.

After lunch that day, I climbed up the tamarind tree and stayed there for a long time.



Figure 1. Mother with Baby Brother, Second Elder Sister, Little Sister, Aurora and me.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE SCHOOL AT THE OLD RICE MILL

Lourdes, *Indang* Juana's daughter-in-law, pulled me out of the river one day and took me home to my mother.

"She nearly drowned," Lourdes said. "It was just as well I looked down from the bridge and saw her head bobbing up and down in the water."

"I was swimming... jumping up and down in the water," I said. "I was not drowning, Mother, just getting back to the shore on my toes, jumping up and down."

"O, how will you be when you're grown up...wanderlust, not becoming for a girl! I cannot bear the thought of it!" Mother moaned.

Mother and Father were talking about me that night. "She's ready to go to school," Mother said.

I dreamt of Lourdes and me that night, in an endless spiral of falling and rising in the bleakness of a monsoon downpour. She plucked me out of the tamarind tree where I had watched her coming home with her husband two years before. A bride—tall, ageless, with a demure smile, her black hair cascading down the back of her neck, swirling and flowing to her slender waist. She pulled me out of the muddy waters of the canals by the roadside, from the countless rivulets that sprung from sodden hillets in the paddies. She plucked me out as I fell into the shimmer of her hair.

"If you died," Eldest Sister said, "you would be in a box now and on Wednesday you would be buried." She said it like it was a fact.

"No, not true."

"But it would be so, if you drowned."

"But I didn't...so, there!"

She never lied. I imagined myself wearing my finest birthday dress Mother bought at the market, a veil over my face, lying still inside a box. Mother and Aunt would be falling about weeping. Little Sister would be crying because Mother was crying. For a long time the fear of death filled my mind with frightful imaginings—of

being locked up in a white box and thrown into a dark pit. No, I wanted the sun, the light! I imagined myself kicking and screaming until I was free and I'd go to the river to wash off the bits of wadding and dirt from my mouth, before returning home to my mother and Father. To *Indang* Juana. To climb up my tree again and sing. To hear the church bell at dawn announcing a new day and then in the evening, during angelus hour, confirming the ending of another day and the red sun rolling quickly into night.

"I'll go to the grave with you when you die, Mother," I told her one day.

"Will you?" she said smiling but not looking away from her sewing. She didn't have Baby Brother on her lap that time. She had her new Singer sewing machine which had a foot pedal unlike her old one where you turned the wheel with one hand and worked the material with the other. When her new Singer came, she was very excited to use it and she had Baby Brother on her lap. He watched with fascination for a while and then suddenly grabbed the pedal foot. The needle and thread went through one of his fingers. Mother danced with him around the room for a while and he finally stopped crying when she gave him her breast. Eventually, he fell asleep.

"I will always be with you. When they put you in the pit, I'll jump in with you. "You will not be alone when you die, Mother."

"Don't think about things like that," she said. "Go and play with your little sister." After a while, though, Little Sister and I were fighting over the stick broom.

"Give me that, you little cunt," I shouted, "or I'll fuck you!" Mother dropped what she was holding and she slapped my face. She said, "don't you ever say those words again!"

"She learnt those words from those horrible carpenters next door," Aunt said, doubling up with laughter.

Earlier that day, my playmates and I were watching some men weaving the thatched roof of a hut being built nearby. Two were on top of the pitched beams placing bundles of long reeds neatly in place. Two other men were underneath, helping to tie the material down with *bat-bat* or dry vine twine. The swishing sibilant noise of the reed worked into submission by toughened hands, filled the building site. The sounds of labour and voices drove the curious child that I was to leave friends playing hopscotch

to go inside the unfinished hut and watch the thatch construction from beneath the scaffoldings. After a while with neck aching from looking up, I lay down on the shavings and straws in the corner and soon got interested at the sight of testicles dangling loose inside baggy old shorts until the droning sound and chatter overhead became like a lullaby hushing one to sleep.

“*Aaio*, get away from there, you little ‘*kutung gabon!*’ – ‘Dirt louse!’” One man called out. “This mallet will fall on your head any minute if you didn’t scat! Shoo! *Aiii yaii, yaii!*”

~

“It’s time she went to school. She’s picking up things she shouldn’t” Aunt said.

There was a primary school in our village which was conveniently located just up the road from our house. The only problem was you have to cross the highway to get there. It was decided that someone had to walk me to and from school until I was old enough to do that on my own.

The teacher was Mother’s distant cousin, and she taught a composite class of Grades One and Two. Miss Inez Balagtas was beautiful. She had fair shining skin and blue-black hair. Her eyes were brown and seemingly aflame in bright sunlight. She lived in the part of town where businessmen and other important people lived.

That Saturday, Mother took me to visit Miss Inez at her home. A servant let us inside her family’s bungalow, which had polished parquet floors and shiny teak furniture. Miss Inez was playing the piano. I was enchanted.

“Would you like to learn to play the piano?” she asked kindly.

“Maybe later on...but do you think you can take her in your class? She just turned six,” Mother said.

“Officially, she needs to be seven, but she can sit in and learn. She’ll be in kindergarten!”

“Do you want to be in kindergarten, *Neneng*. (Little girl)?” she asked.

“Oh yes! I can write my name; in running writing too. Mother taught me.”

“Can you indeed?” she said. “Show me please,” she said, handing me a sheet of paper and a pencil.

“Look, my ‘J’ looks like the ‘J’ in Johnson’s Baby Powder, with the hook at the top and at the bottom. I learnt that all by myself,” I said proudly.

“Very good! But when you start school on Monday, you must learn to write your name in print.” And then she told Mother that I needed a pencil, a Grade One writing pad, a ruler, a box of crayons and a pair of scissors.

“Have you been going to the river again?” she asked as we were leaving.

“No, Miss Inez.”

She had seen me wandering in the neighbourhood a few times when she came to our area to visit a sick pupil or inquire why some children hadn’t attended class for a while. On those occasions, she’d stop by our house to talk to Mother. This excited me so much, I’d climb up the tamarind tree, and sing loudly.

With my box of treasures close to my chest, Mother walked me to school one bright Monday morning and left me with my beautiful teacher. The swish of her full skirt, her white arms and elegant hands...you couldn’t help but smile when she looked at you and she’d always smile back.

“Ah, that’s very good,” she said when I showed her my printed name on my writing pad. I had learnt to write it that weekend before school.

“Now you must learn to write the alphabet.” Taking me by the hand she led me towards the end of the row of desks and sat me next to a girl in a floral dress.

“Alicia here will show you. She’s learning to write and read them too and she’s getting better. Aren’t you, Alicia?”

“Yes, madam,” she answered shyly, almost in a whisper.

Alicia was sitting, it seemed, in a bushel of small flowers and she smiled timidly when I sat beside her. The fine red and blue flowers printed on her cream cotton dress with its full sheered skirt looked as though they were strewn on and around her. Her hair was parted from the top of her head to her nape; each half braided neatly from just

around the back of her ears winding down over her shoulders to her chest, the tips touching the desk in front of her. Her wan face was clean, her nose dry unlike my nose, that was forever moist and blocked up. “Oh, if not for that smile on your face, you’re not a pleasant sight to look at,” *Indang Juana* would sometimes say before pinching my nose clean and then wiping her fingers on her *saya* or on leaves of shrubs close by.

Alicia had a thin yellow pencil with which she wrote so neatly while my plump black pencil wrote bold and smudgy letters on my paper. Her letters were like the dainty flying trapeze performers I saw at the circus during the fiesta that year, which stood straight and tall on the exercise beams, while mine were the bold clumsy clowns that kept falling about their hoops. The head of her tall letters touched the top line neatly, the waist cut through the middle line, and the dainty feet rested cleanly on the bottom line.

“Your pencil writes so much better.”

“Don’t push your pencil too hard on the paper,” she said. “And your pencil is large so it writes large letters.”

“Please, can I borrow yours for a little while?” She gave it to me, but the lead broke after writing just two letters.

“Madam, my pencil is broken,” she told Teacher.

“You must not push your pencil too hard, you must learn to write with a light hand so that your pencil will glide easily on your paper,” she told Alicia.

“Yes, madam, I’ll be gentler and take more care,” Alicia said. Teacher turned the wheel of the sharpener clamped at the edge of her table and like magic, the pencil had been sharpened. I started writing more gently with my thick black pencil.

“That’s very good, little girl. Soon, you’ll be writing your first words! Like Alicia here.”

“She is my friend,” I said.

Because Alicia was a proper Grade One pupil, she soon started copying sums from the blackboard, while I continued printing my name until the page was full and then filled up a few more pages copying more letters of the alphabet from the blackboard. For several days this was all I did, learning to read and write the alphabet;

the capital letters and their minor counterparts. Their graceful twists and curves and the architecture of the angles fascinated me intensely and with my nose close to the paper, at times dribbling on my work. I soon learnt to write and read the alphabet. When Alicia asked if I'd like to learn to write numbers, I wasn't interested.

Writing my name and the letters of the alphabet with my new thin yellow pencil was much more exciting. In the evenings, I'd lie on my belly by the kerosene lamp and print my letters until they were nearly as good as Alicia's. I wrote my name everywhere I could—on the wall with a piece of charcoal, graffiti which made Mother mad, on the sand by the river, and on the ground where we played.

“Aiii, go away, little girl!” women cried out when I wrote my name with a stick on the rice that was spread out in the sun to dry.

“Aiii, *punieta*, go away, go away!” they cried when I wrote my name on the freshly fallen chaff where women were winnowing.

“Go to sleep now,” Mother would call out, when the tiny red glow of the kerosene lamp had died. I carved my name with my finger onto the deep darkness of night, until I fell asleep.

It wasn't long before Teacher decided that I would be a proper grade one pupil too. She wrote “very good” on all my little test papers, even with my arithmetic tests, which I proudly showed Father.

Every school morning was a time of excited anticipation. Perhaps Teacher would have new words to teach us to write, read and spell, or a story to read from a book while I sat close to Alicia. It was a grand day when I was given my first English reader. It was called “Pepe and Pilar.” Every page had a picture of the little boy, Pepe, or the little girl, Pilar. Pepe and Pilar looked very nice and clean and their house inside a neat picket fence was very pretty. There were two simple sentences on every page at first and then up to three and four sentences towards the end. The first page read, “My name is Pepe. I am a little boy.” The second page read, “My name is Pilar. I am a little girl.”

My “Pepe and Pilar” book became an intimate companion and every re-reading was an invitation to imagine fantastic stories in my mind as to what little Pepe and little

Pilar could be doing and saying and where they might go visiting after I closed the book. They became secret friends I could play and talk with when I was on my own.

“Mother, where do Pepe and Pilar live?”

“They live in that hut in the book, but it’s only a story.”

“Not so, Mother, they live somewhere very clean and very pretty. They’re my friends. They wear shoes at all times. Today, they’re away at the market with their mother. They’re buying new clothes and lots of candies!”

“Yes, they sell money and coins in their store,” I continued.

“*Haii*, child, do not play pretend too much. Now play with your baby brother.”

There was also a picture hanging on the wall in our main room or *sala* which fascinated me. It was a picture of a beautiful tall figure with creamy pink skin in long flowing gown with wings that were nearly as tall as her. She was looking kindly over a little girl with fair skin and golden hair in a filmy pink dress and they were crossing a little bridge. There were flowers weaving in and out of a lattice screen close by and the skies were a fading blue. It was an image and a landscape so beautiful and mysterious—but seemed so far away, it made me sad because it excluded me and all the people I loved. And Pepe and Pilar.

“What’s the name of that figure with wings, Auntie?”

“*Abah*, that’s a guardian angel. She’s looking after that little girl.”

“Where’s that place?”

“Ah, it’s a magical place in America, of course.”

“Do I have a guardian angel, too?”

“Certainly, we all have our guardian angel.”

“Do they look as beautiful as that one in the picture?”

“Of course, silly.”

“Will I look like that little girl if I were in America?”

“No, you’ll look just as you are. But you must be good at all times and must not make your guardian angel cry, or it might leave you.”

“Where will it go if I make it cry?”

“Aiii, *dios mio*, will you never stop asking questions?”

Some of the happiest times at school were when Teacher taught us a new song which I added to the list of songs I sang to Baby Brother to put him to sleep. Often, I’d sing them all quietly by his cradle until he woke up again. I’d sing them to Little Sister as we hopped and danced around the house. Sometimes, when I’d wanted to be alone and I was in trouble with Mother or there was nothing else I wanted to do, I would sit on my favourite perch up the tamarind tree and sing my repertoire.

Alicia’s favourite dress was the one she had been wearing when I first saw her and she wore it to school over and over again until the material was nearly threadbare. Sometimes when we played around her yard and saw the dress hanging on the line, we’d check if it was quite dry and if it was, she was sure to wear it the next day. Alicia had other dresses passed on to her by her older sisters, but they were either too big for her or not as pretty. Alicia was very thin and small for her age. Her special dress with its full skirt made her look really neat and pretty even when its florid prints started fading when the rainy season started.

There was a song from her song-book that Teacher taught, us about a princess whom I thought was how Alicia looked in her floral dress:

When I grow to be a lady

I’ll be a queen, a lovely queen.

Walking in a garden shady

In gowns of green with silver sheen.

Maids in gold and white shall follow me,

And suitors of a high degree.

When I grow to be a lady

A finely noble queenly lady.

Then my prince will come to claim his own

And love will crown me on my throne.

We thought the melody was nice and we all liked the picture of a princess in a magical world of frills and lace, flowers and music. It conjured up a landscape so far away from our school at the mill, where mice raced up the rafters and where the hole in the ground for a toilet at the back of the mill often gave off an odious smell with certain wind gusts. This school was a place where some children were frequently sick and came to school in worn-out and ill-fitting clothes. Teacher would have played the melody often on her piano at home. Sometimes, you'd wonder if she had imaginary friends as well and then you'd think, maybe she imagined herself being a princess too, but she did not have to, because she was just as pretty as a real princess would be. And when later on she left for America and lived there, I was sure she did become a real princess. After all, everyone thought America was a magical place.

But Alicia and I were happy with our own village. Our school was the only school we ever wanted to go to. Our school building was a rice mill before the war but was abandoned when the conflict was over and a new larger mill was built in the centre of the village. Large wooden beams supported the high and massive roof. If you looked up, you could be distracted by birds making their nests overhead or spiders patiently weaving enormous webs. At harvest time, mice from the rice fields close by came and raced up and down the tall posts and across the chunky beams.

Two large blackboards were fastened onto posts that supported the middle of the roof line, a blackboard each for the two classes. Teacher's desk stood in the middle.

Behind the partition where the blackboards were hung, was a large corridor where we played at recess while monsoon rains drummed endlessly outside. Some of the boys attempted to climb up the internal posts and were severely scolded by Teacher when caught.

"Get down, you little monkeys," she'd cry and you'd always wonder how such a shriek could emerge from her pretty face.

It was here where she taught us folk dancing for the Independence Day and Presentation Day celebrations. During those times the superintendent from the big school in town and the mayor came and gave awards and speeches.

On my first presentation day, Teacher asked me to learn and recite a poem. It was called “Cadena de Amor” or “Chain of Love.” The poem was about the beauty of the flowers of a hardy evergreen vine with heart-shaped leaves and pink flowers that hung like delicate clusters of berries.

Like the bougainvillea and the jasmine, the robust Cadena de Amor was common in the village—clambering over fences or growing wild on a hillside. Before I started school, and then during school vacation, I’d run along these vines mindful of my shadow running almost beneath my feet as I hurried to meet up with Alicia and other playmates. I’d either leave from the front door while Mother and Aunt were doing the laundry at the back of the house or while they themselves were having a siesta. Sometimes, I’d climb down the window, sliding down the side of the wall while holding on to the window sill and then letting go, landing gently on soft sand. Somehow, Mother never seemed to find out how or when I left. In the late afternoons when I heard her calling out my name, I’d run back home with my tall shadow running across the height of the Cadena de Amor.

Teacher asked Mother if I could wear a pink dress on the day. But after failing to find a pink dress that fitted me at the market, Mother bought a yellow dress instead. On Presentation Day I saw Teacher’s disappointment behind her smile.

“Little Julia, If you believe in what you say, people will believe in you, too. They will believe it in their mind,” she said. “Recite your poem like it comes from your heart.”

When I heard my voice ringing out clearly from the amplifier that hung from a forked branch of the great acacia tree in the quadrangle, I felt even more inspired to perform better. I saw Father watching and listening intently. He looked proud. It did not seem to matter to him that I was wearing a yellow dress while reciting a poem about the beautiful pink flowers of the Cadena de Amor.

“Did you see? No one noticed you were wearing yellow, because you performed your poem so well! You did it from your heart!” Teacher said when our presentation

was over. But I wished I was wearing a pink dress. Maybe in organdie or organza, because I had heard the dressmaker admiring these materials before, and the names sounded like a dance or a song. Teacher would have been happier, too.

On Independence Day, Teacher taught a small group of us a hula dance. She brought a portable phonograph to school and played a song from a small record. We had never seen or heard anything so magical. “*By dee layit ob da silbery moon, I wun to spuun, to my unny I’ll croon, love tunes, ah-ahunneemoon...*” We swayed our hips and arms and twirled our fingers to the music, even though we did not understand most of the words.

Alicia was too shy to dance and Teacher didn’t press her. “Why don’t you like to dance with us on the stage?” I asked.

“*Aii*, I’m shy... and my mother doesn’t have money to buy the costume.”

“And maybe you’ll be sick again on the day and then your partner won’t have anybody to dance with.”

There were times when Alicia did not come to school for many days because she was ill. That was how it was. Children were often sick, or they worked in the fields at harvest time and would not attend school for a while. I knew that sometimes little babies and children were taken away in boxes, never to be seen again. Like the baby next door who was taken away in a box one day. I used to look after him while his mother was helping Mother with her ironing or laundry. I carried him around the house singing to him, pretending he was my own baby. Once *Atey Belen*—big sister Belen—was too busy to stop her ironing and she let me feed him a small bowl of rice mixed with the tomato sauce from a small tin of sardines. The smell and taste was so good and the baby took too long chewing, so I ended up eating most of it.

“Did he eat all his food?” *Atey Belen* asked.

“Oh yes. I think he’d like some more.”

“You’re such a good girl and such a big help.”

“He really would like some more. He’s still hungry.”

“No that’s fine for now. That’s a lot for a little baby.”

When after a while he started fretting, *Atey* Belen stopped her work and put him on her breast.

“O, my baby will be such a big boy soon. O, he will be big and strong and he will look after his dear mother and father one day. O, lovely boy!” she cooed.

Every time *Atey* Belen came to help Mother, I played with her baby. I loved holding his hands when he attempted to make his first steps. One day, he fell ill and Belen came to Mother for help. He had a fever and could hardly breathe. Mother hailed a *kalesa* and they took the baby to the doctor in town. *Atey* Belen and her baby stayed for two days in the hospital. When they came home a subdued crowd had gathered.

It was a weekend and Alicia and I were watching under the madre cacao tree when they took the baby away in his own little white box. *Atey* Belen could hardly carry the weight of her desolation and her husband had to hold her up.

Atey Belen was soon coming back to our house to help Mother with the housework. Every now and then she'd stop and go outside to wipe her eyes and face with her skirt.

It was just as well there was school to go to everyday and I had friends to play with afterwards and on the weekends. At night, I'd be too tired to ask questions or ponder on dark avatars on the wall that transformed back into ordinary clothes or palm hats in the morning. I'd hear dogs barking under the house and cats screeching at each other so frightfully up the roof or in the garden and babies crying in the neighbourhood. But I'd soon fall into a good, deep sleep. In the morning I was eager to go to school where Teacher was waiting to ring our school bell, which was not really a bell.

Our school had a broad wooden awning at the entrance of the building. Hanging from the front beam by the left post was the stainless steel rim from the wheel of an old army jeep. When the Teacher struck this a few times in the morning with a small stainless steel axle, children gathered around the flag pole. We had an artesian well by the back stairs of our house, and many classmates stopped by the well to wash their feet after their long treks across the paddies. Then we all walked to school together. Many came barefoot, though some like Alicia and I, wore our *bakya* or wooden clogs.

“Children, please wear your *bakya* to school and mind where you put your feet. We don’t want worms in our bellies, do we?” Teacher would ask us.

“And make sure you do not do your poo anywhere. Do it far away from the house, in a hole in the ground and bury it. Ask your parents to help you,” she said.

“So what should you do before you eat?”

“We wash our hands, madam,” we’d answer.

“What do you do after eating?”

“Brush our teeth!”

“And if you don’t have a toothbrush, you get a short length of young bamboo and chew the soft end until it’s frayed. This will make a good toothbrush. You can also use fine ash from the stove and clean your teeth with it gently, and then make sure you rinse your mouth very well.”

“And what would happen if you did not brush your teeth every day?”

“We would have bad breath, madam!”

“We will not look pretty!”

“That’s right! You will also have tooth decay...and tooth aches, and the dentist will have to pull your teeth out!” She showed us her even, white teeth. “You can keep your teeth all your life if you look after them. Now do you want to lose your teeth later on, children?”

“No, madam!”

Every six months Mother gave Little Sister and myself some purgative and then washed the inside of our bellies with warm boiled soapy water using an instrument Uncle Felipe gave her. After the third time we were given purgative and it was my turn to lie down on my side and have my belly cleaned, I ran and hid and did not come out until Mother gave up and put the hateful instrument away.

“That daughter of yours!” she complained to Father.

“I don’t think she needs an enema, Their Mother,” he assured her.

I made sure I had my *bakya* on when I went outside. But you couldn't race in the gravel or run down a steep slope wearing them, in which case I left mine with Alicia for a while or I carried them with me.

We wore socks and shoes when we went to church on Sundays and on special occasions, like when we took part in a school presentation for instance, or when our class photo was taken. It was all activity and excitement that day and everyone came to school dressed in their Sunday best. Teacher's lips were painted red and she wore black shoes with pointy heels. She also wore a lovely cotton frock with blue and white polka dots with a full skirt and a belt around her trim waist. The girls looked at each other's dresses. The boys looked smart, their noses cleaned, their hair parted in the middle and some even smelt of pomade. No one came barefooted that day. Teacher did not have time to check their teeth because she got all of them to carry benches outside. Benjamin, the smallest boy in the class, was too excited, and he carried one all by himself. He tripped, and the bench fell on top of him, earning him a nasty bump on his forehead.

It was nearly midmorning by the time Teacher and the photographer got everyone in their places.

"Children, listen! The girls sit in front—tallest at the centre, smaller ones to either side," the photographer called out.

"Hurry along, children," Teacher said. "It will soon be too hot and you'll get sweaty. Come on, while you're looking nice and neat."

"Be quiet and listen to the photographer! Bienvenido, you're the tallest boy, stand in the middle. Benjamin, to this side, please."

"Now, boys' hands on their sides and girls' hands clasped together on their laps," the photographer said.

"Keep quiet, all of you, and be still!" Teacher called out.

The photographer crouched behind his camera ducking in and out of the black drape covering the instrument. When he was ready, he called out "smile" and it was over.

There was also another cause of excitement that day; a new pupil, Ludivinia, had joined us. She came from the city and was now living with her grandmother. She had a grown up smile and was wearing a smart cream dress with green trim on the hem, and shiny shoes. We all gathered around her with curiosity. She spoke Tagalog because she came from Manila, although she also spoke our dialect with a different lilt we found interesting. But Alicia and I had little to do with Luding because she was in Grade Two. Her grandmother picked her up as soon as class was finished and she never went outside her grandmother's yard to play.

~

There was one day in the dry season when the heat was intense and my panties chaffed against my skin while playing, so I took them off and hid them in my little school bag. After Teacher dismissed the class, everyone ran outside. There was pushing and shoving and I tripped. All the children behind me were laughing, except Alicia. From then on, I never removed my panties again to get cool, even when I wore the ones Mother made from thick bleached flour sacks.

Alicia would never have taken off her panties when she was hot, and she would never have tripped because she never ran. She only walked daintily or stood in the distance and watched me go up the small hill, then run down again with my arms outstretched sideways. I cried "Aaaah" all the way down, and every beat of my heart seemed to echo in my head. Alicia would clap her hands and squeal loudly because I could not stop running until I reached the bottom of the hill, sometimes falling in a heap.

After school we often played in our back garden. One time I climbed to the top of one of the tall guava trees. The bigger boys reached for the tip of the tree that I pushed down with my weight, and pulled it down to the ground, then let go.

"Again! Again!" I shouted. "Again!" Alicia stood away and watched excitedly. The boys took turns in flying, over and over again, until the tree refused to stand upright anymore. Mother wondered the next day why her tallest guava tree was bowed down.

Alicia never got dirty. When I sat in the shade after play and covered my legs and feet with the cool sand, she would stand close by or sit on her haunches with her

skirt gathered between her knees. When I went for a swim in the river with the other children she stayed watching on the banks.

When it was too hot or too wet to play outside, we sat somewhere cool or dry in the neighbourhood and talked.

“We must never swallow a tamarind or a watermelon seed in case it grows inside our bellies and leaves and branches would grow out through our mouths and our nostrils,” Alicia said one day.

“Yes, Eldest Sister told me that, too. Do you think we’d die if that happened?”

“Of course.”

“Nah, I don’t think it’s true. I haven’t seen anyone with trees growing out of their noses and ears yet.”

“My mother also said huge worms can grow in the belly and when they ran out of room, they’d come out through one’s mouth and ears!”

“Not true. Not true!” I’d cry. We’d scare ourselves silly.

And so Alicia and I agreed that we would wear our *bakya* when wandering around the neighbourhood because we wouldn’t want to get sick and then die. Also, I never wanted Mother to give us purgatives again. And we made sure we didn’t swallow any seeds. And we always said, “Please, let us pass through—*bari-bari, apo!*”— when we walk in the bush or by the bamboo thicket so we didn’t tread on any *dwende* or goblins which could make us instantly ill.

“Sometimes, they might like to play with you because they like you and then you get sick, but if you trod on them, well... they’d strike you back and then you’ll surely die,” said Alicia. “Mother said I had a baby brother who was so fine. He had light skin and thick hair. She took him along to the fields at harvest time. And you know, the *dwendes* must have liked him for themselves. *Aii*, yes, Mother woke up one morning and the baby was dead. He should have been our *bunso*.” Alicia told me this story many times and she wished she was not the *bunso* or the youngest child.

~

Teacher rang the bell for assembly at eight o'clock in the morning. We all fell into two lines, one for the boys, and another for the girls. In the mornings we would have the ceremony of the raising of the flag, when we sang the Philippines Hymn with our right hands placed across our hearts:

Beloved country, pearl of the orient seas.

O blest land, nurturer of heroes,

To oppressors you will not succumb.

In thy seas and mountains,

In thy cooling breeze and blue skies,

In our beloved freedom, there is beauty of poetry and song..

Land of the sun, of honour and romance,

Life is heaven in your embrace.

It is our joy when oppressors come,

To die for your sake.

After school, we did everything all over again, except this time the flag was lowered. Two boys, mainly from Grade Two, had the task of raising and lowering the flag. They stood straight and still while each held an end of the thin ropes that carried our flag aloft that morning and then they had to take it down again when school was done for the day. On windy afternoons, the flag swirled and slapped around their heads and faces and then Teacher took it carefully, untied the two corners and respectfully folded it. She placed the flag neatly on top of her desk where it stayed until the next day, when flag ceremonies would signal the commencement or end of another school day at the old rice mill.

One afternoon during a flag-lowering ceremony, the knots which held the flag got stuck in the small pulley on the top of the bamboo pole. Teacher did not know what to do. There were no other grown-ups around. One of the older boys, Bienvenido, offered to climb the pole.

“I could climb up the pole, madam,” he said. “I climb up our coconut trees all the time.”

“Aiii, but the flag pole may not be strong enough.”

“But I’m only light,” he said and started climbing up the pole like a real monkey. He was one of the older pupils who had missed some years of schooling during the war.

“Be careful, Benning. Do it slowly.”

When he was halfway up, the pole started cracking from the base. Then slowly the base gave way and pole, flag and Bienvenido came slowly inclining towards the ground, gathering speed as they got closer.

“Benning, Benning, child!” she cried. Luckily, some men in a *kalesa* were passing by and stopped to help. Bienvenido was awake but in pain when they carried him onto the *kalesa*. The men whipped the horse to a gallop and they disappeared towards town—the sound of horse’s hooves trailing urgently in the distance. That day, we went home without singing the national anthem. Teacher folded and put away the flag by herself.

Alicia and I walked towards home. We went to her house, which was close to the dense bamboo grove. Beyond, the rice paddies stretched out into the horizon as far as our eyes could see. We found her mother and two elder sisters nearly finished pounding the sack of rice they gleaned from the day’s harvest. They were working under a thatch awning leaning against the side of their hut. The mortar was made from a single tree trunk. And the three women had a long wooden pestle each.

Clip, clap, clop. Clip, clap, clop. Only one pestle landed in the centre of the trough every time. The muffled thud of the pestle on the grain echoed in the stillness of the afternoon and the sweet scent of fresh rice separating from the chaff filled our head. Clip, clap, clop. The three pounded in perfect rhythm, not uttering a word until they finished and then emptied the trough, then refilled it and started again.

When they were done, Alicia’s mother sat her on her lap, brushed her hair with her fingers. “Ah, *bunso ko*.” - “My baby.”- I felt envious. Mother and Father showered love and tenderness only to babies, never to older children. Alicia’s three sisters were a

lot older than her and treated her like their baby, too. They plaited her hair before school, washed and helped her get dressed and gave her trinkets they made themselves or bought at the markets. I thought Alicia was so lucky and to be the *bunso* must be best thing in this world.

“Ah, your *bunso* is growing up so quickly!” Alicia’s father would say, smiling. He was thin and pale and often ill. There were times when he coughed up blood. The shaman would come and rub his chest and back with herbed coconut oil and whispered incantations over him. After a while he was well again and working in the fields. Often I saw his gaunt figure by the window watching Alicia and I play or watching his wife and older daughters sitting around the well washing other people’s dirty clothes.

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Bienvenido came back to school after a few days. Teacher was delighted.

“Welcome back, welcome back Bienvenido,” she said and I thought she’d cry. Bienvenido meant “welcome” and Teacher said his name several times that morning.

After some months, a squad of American GIs installed a new flag pole. This was made of thick aluminium pipe and bolted with strong plinths onto the concrete. At its top was a new and larger pulley. The GI’s also brought sacks of powdered milk. People came to our school when news about the milk was made known in the village and the milk was distributed around. Each of us was also given a bag to take home.

The powder was very fine and I liked its creamy taste. On one occasion, a lump of powder got stuck in my throat and I couldn’t breathe. It was a relief when I was able to cough it up. After that, I mixed the powder Mother gave me with brown sugar, wrapped it tightly in paper, placed it under a foot of the table and ate it in little bits after a few days had passed. But Alicia had pains in her belly after drinking the milk and her mother threw the powder away, instead preferring carabao milk or the thick broth from almost-cooked steaming rice mixed with a bit of sugar.

We loved the GIs coming to our school and we wished they came more often. Sometimes they brought candies and took photographs. They also liked talking with Teacher, who spoke good English while being so pretty as well. We were amazed at their blue eyes and white skin. And they were so tall. Some of the GIs had black skin.

When we asked Teacher why we had brown skin and Americans had white or black skin, she told us this story:

One day, God became very lonely in his beautiful garden, the earth. He decided to create beings just like him. He built a great oven in the middle of that garden. Then he fashioned a man and a woman from the best clay there was. With great care, he placed these in the oven. He was so excited that he became impatient and took them out of the kiln much too early. Alas, these creatures were not baked long enough, and they were white. So he placed them far in the west, to live where it was cold. They had to clothe themselves heavily to be protected from the burning heat of the sun.

He tried a second time and fashioned another man and woman from the best clay there was. This time, God made sure that he baked them slowly and long. After putting them in the kiln he wandered far and wide in the garden. When he came back and took these creations out of the oven, he found that he had left them baking too long and their skin was black. God put these in the hot continent of Africa, where they were happy and free.

On his third attempt, God fashioned a man and a woman from the best clay in the garden. After he lovingly placed them in the kiln, he waited patiently and did not wander away. This time the creatures were baked just right, not too short and not too long. They were brown. They were the first Pilipinos and God put them in this beautiful land to be happy and free under the tropical sun.

Alicia and I liked Teacher's story a lot. We were happy because we had brown skin. After school, we wandered together towards our house and saw Liling sitting by the window. We went up their house to sit with her. She did not go to school because she had to stay home to look after her little siblings. Her mother, *Indang* Juana, was often away, earning a living as the only midwife in the village. When Liling's chores were done, she sat by the window and rubbed coconut oil on her worn callous hands, clasping and unclasping them until they were supple and smooth again. She combed her heavy hair until it glistened like her skin.

Liling was fourteen or fifteen. She was wiry and slender with a charming round face. She had a mole on her right cheek which her mother hoped to be a talisman that

would bring her luck when she married. Others said it meant bitterness because the mole was on the path of her tears when she cried.

But Alicia and I believed that Liling was a creature perfectly baked brown in God's oven. When she called down to us from her window, we looked up to a star. After all, she was named after a famous movie star, "Lolita Rodriguez."

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The hot, dry weather seemed to run endlessly while the heavy moisture in the air clung like a heavy cloak on us. In Mother's garden, the earth was hard and dry, and the leaves were weighed down with dust. In the fields and by the riverside, the cogon reeds turned into great brown tussocks, hardened by the constant gust of hot winds. The thick clouds of dust produced spectacular sunsets when the skies became as red as blood, and the landscape at the foot of the mountains was burnt brown or black. When the wind blew hard, a plume of dust would fill the air like fog.

"The earth needs a good wash," Mother and Aunt would say as they cleaned the dust from the window sills and swept off the fine grit from the bamboo floor.

In the meantime, Father was vigilantly making sure rats didn't spoil the rice seeds in our little granary. He had been waiting patiently for the monsoon rains to flood the paddies ready for sowing. Like many other farmers he was fearful of the damage that rats could do. The farmers would talk very kindly to the vermin at night.

"Please kind creatures," they would plead. "I have children to feed, as well as my aging parents and poor relatives. Be kind to us. Go gently and find food elsewhere away from our rice. May God bless you and make you happy. Let us be always your grateful friends."

Some farmers pacified the rodents with offerings of food. This ritual was a well-known secret in the farming community. Then there were men who would hunt and trap the grain fed rodents, and ate their meat as a delicacy.

While waiting for the rains to come, Father had a lot of things to do in his little workshop under the porch; like fixing and cleaning his tools, sharpening Mother's kitchen knives and carving wood. He also liked painting and decorating new umbrellas. Mother bought my first umbrella during that time. It was black with a curved rattan

handle that neatly fitted my hands. Little Sister and I watched him painting it one morning. He was sitting on the floor holding the opened umbrella upright with the left hand and painting with the other. Using small brushes, he painted freehand, swags of tiny flowers and leaves in green, yellow and red around the rim. For most of the afternoon, my umbrella stood under the window waiting for the paint to dry while I kept guard.

But the rains came in a cluster of typhoons and my umbrella was not strong enough to hold the rain away. Aurora had to walk me to and from school with Mother's strong umbrella. Pupils from far barrios who had to cross the river didn't attend school when the banks were flooded and the water rolled heavily with soil and debris from upstream. Most of the children who came brought their umbrellas, which were very plain. Some children had only large banana leaves to keep dry. Some had raincoats on, but there were the few who braved the rain and ran through the downpour hugging their books inside their shirts. Their figures hunched forward, cutting through the ever-extending wall of water.

Alicia had never had an umbrella; she never had to use one. She never walked in the rain. She died three days after she grazed her arm crawling under an old wire fence. The two of us crawled under that wire fence many time before. When I saw Alicia for the last time, she was lying inside a white box, lined and trimmed with satin. She looked peaceful, as if quite happy to be sleeping. Her mother and sisters were wailing when they took her away. Her box was decked with wild flowers and frangipane blossoms picked from neighbours' yards. The procession passed along the road in front of our school, and Teacher and all the school children stood in attention. I was very quiet and felt confused. Teacher's eyes were red.

After a week, Mother bundled all of us into a *kalesa* and were taken to a clinic for our tetanus injections.

The relentless monsoon rains continued. As lightning cut across the night skies, and as the great rivers in the skies emptied their waters upon our village, I snuggled close to Aunt and Little Sister. In the mat next to ours, Father was lying beside Mother, who was hugging the baby. Every bolt of lightning illuminated the room and thunder shook the whole house. The world outside was one roaring pouring leviathan of light and sound conducted it seemed by the ululation of a wrathful wind. It was reassuring

when Mother started singing a hymn to Saint Barbara and we all joined in, “*Oh Saint Barbara, come down and save us...*”

The place where Alicia sat next to me was empty for a while as it often was when she stayed at home sick. I half waited for her to come back and when I wandered around the neighbourhood in the afternoons, I waited for her to appear around the corner. But I knew that no one who had been taken away in a box was ever coming back. I felt lonely and climbed up the tamarind tree a lot. The following week, Teacher sat Ludivinia next to me. Luding was older and very kind. She was the only pupil in school who received pocket money. With her daily five centavos, she'd take me along to *Apung Paku's* store after school and buy five large squares of prawn crisps, each as wide as the span of my hand.

“Here, two for you and two for me and we'll halve the fifth one.”

It was like that for many afternoons; two and half pieces for her and two and a half for me. Then, one day, we took the bag of crisps to her house to eat and she took three pieces and gave me two.

“Oh, I'd like my half, please,” I said pleadingly.

“But it's my money,” she said, a tad cross, and handed me my rightful half of crisp which I took and ate quickly before she changed her mind. Soon, we were playing quietly again.

“Where's your mother, Luding?” I asked while we were looking at her grandmother's photo album.

“She's working in America. She's going to send for me when she has saved enough money.”

“Do you want to go to America?” I asked.

“Yes, I want to be with my mother. I'll go to school there, too.”

“You're not scared to go in an aeroplane?”

“No.”

“Will you be coming back?”

“One day, if Grandmother cannot join us. You’re coming to join us in America aren’t you, Grandmother?”

“Maybe, little one, if my health will allow it. We’ll see.”

“When I go away,” Luding said, “I’ll leave you some of my dresses and shoes. Mother is buying lots and lots of shoes and clothes for me in America.”

Sometimes Luding received presents from her mother. One time the present came in the form of a beautiful dress. It was a simple lilac dress, made from organdie, with puffed sleeves and little rosebuds embroidered on the bodice. The dress had a full skirt which swung out gracefully with its ruffled petticoat sewn underneath.

I thought of Alicia’s favourite floral dress. I also thought organdie was a truly fine material, especially when embroidered with pink rosebuds. Organdie. Organdie. You could sing and dance with that word. O R G A N D I E.

Luding’s mother did eventually come and after a few weeks, they left for America. All of Luding’s old clothes and shoes were sent to her cousins in Manila. Her grandmother stayed in the village for a few more months. But the grandmother was getting older and frail and soon her children from the city took her to live with them. I never saw or heard of Luding or her grandmother again. For many days after Luding left for America, I’d sing that song Teacher taught us. “*When I grow to be a lady, I’ll be a queen, a lovely queen...*” Sometimes, I wished that Alicia would return so we could sing together and talk about dresses made of organdie.

It was soon rice-planting season. The soil in the water-logged paddies was ploughed. It was soft and black; glossy with its fertile promise. Teams of men and women walked to and from the field every day to plant rice seedlings in the sodden earth. They started at dawn, and rested for a well-earned siesta after lunch to escape the intense midday sun. After their siesta, they continued working until late in the afternoon. Aunt have told me many times what a gruelling job planting rice was and how the planters would often suffer from skin sores on their feet, sometimes up to their knees from being soaked in the mud all day. But I thought they had a lot of fun too because there was always a guitarist who played rhythmic tunes all day so that instead of working, they seemed to be dancing.

At school, Teacher taught us a new song, called “Planting Rice:”

Planting rice is never fun

Bent from morn till the set of sun

Cannot sit and cannot stand

Cannot stop for a little bit

I sang this over and over again to Baby Brother and Little Sister. We danced around the house singing and planting imaginary rice seedlings on an imaginary field.

At harvest time, a new baby was born. Baby Brother became Little Brother. Hay was stacked high in the small ravine at the bottom of our garden. This was once a part of the river bed, the river having meandered away into a deeper niche below leaving deep trenches like this one in the landscape the way a snake would shed its skin discarding it in odd places. There was a hefty baliti tree whose branches hung over the trench. Soon there were older boys from my school jumping from a sturdy lower branch to the haystack below, screaming and laughing. When other girls followed suit I joined in and we jumped and tumbled and danced and rolled and buried ourselves into the mountain of golden straw.

At the top of the embankment, Little Sister and Little Brother were looking down at the frolic below.

“Stand back, stand back,” I called out. Now I had to watch out for them.

“Oh, do it again, Elder Sister,” they shouted back. “Come up and do it again!”



Figure 2 Class Photo, Grades I and II at the School at the Old Mill.

CHAPTER THREE: THE SANTOL TREE: BAMBAN

Bamban was the town where our grandparents and two unmarried aunts lived, and where I lived as a child for three years. Bamban was the place in my youth which now, in my mature years, keeps appearing in my dreams: the primary and elementary schools I went to and the youthful friendships I made; the church and its grotto in the garden; the robust oleander trees that were always with blossoms; the solitary walks along meandering leafy lanes and dusty unpaved streets; the market place; the wide open spaces where the rice paddies lay; the clumps of little huts at the end of town and the rush to find my way back home to Grandmother and Elder Sister and then Little Sister, to my aunts Delia and Blandina; and to Grandfather, who was sitting or lying in his hammock in a cosy area under the house by the large storage room—his chest heaving, his diseased lungs wheezing sorely with every expiration of breath, stoic, patient, waiting. Waiting for me, my coming home an indication that a closing of another day was near.

That dynamic and intelligent township of my childhood is transformed now—ravaged after the explosion of Mount Pinatubo in June 1991. A large section of the town was buried deep, beyond recognition, beyond salvaging. All that was there—the teeming senses of humanity and its multilayered stories—gone. It has been replaced by an indistinct landscape, where here and there perennial tall grasses tussle to take stronghold in a sea of sand and dust. But it will not take another generation for the grass to take over and in the monsoon season, after the flooding, the wild flowers will bloom in profusion and dance in the breeze like the trembling memories that lie beneath.

Now, a new town of Bamban has developed on the periphery of where the old one used to be, where expansive sugar and rice fields thrived for generations —where it is elevated and the volcanic dust is not too deep and the earth is arable. The new town has a different layout and form, deprived of the veneer and character of the old one. The Parua River has resurfaced and follows its old course; shallower and wider in girth, it meanders on, the way it has always done. New settlements have formed around its boundaries. The old bridge, wrecked and partly swept away by devastating mud flows,

has been replaced with a modern bridge that was built with the help of many sympathetic nations.

This act of remembering and writing aims to paint in words the Bamban I knew and which now exists only in my memory.

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My grandparents and my three older siblings lived with Uncle Felipe in his parish for a few years, until his subsequent posting took him to a distant town in the diocese. But with his chronic illness and growing nostalgia, Grandfather decided to take the family back to the old family house in Bamban, where Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister undertook their last two years of elementary education.

Soon after their graduation, Grandmother brought Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister back home to Mother and Father, with Second Eldest Sister in tow. I remember how happy I was to see all of them getting off the bus with their luggage. I was jumping up and down and singing. Mother and Father were very happy to have them back, though they never showed much emotion. Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister were quiet and subdued as they tried finding their feet on old grounds. But life went on as normal. There were a lot of chores to do for Mother and Aunt, who had come back with her little daughter to live with us. Mother was heavily pregnant again. Aurora had gone back home to help look after her sick mother. It was expected that Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister would help around the house before and after school.

Second Eldest Sister, who was staying on with Grandmother and Grandfather, was happy to be seeing everyone. She had been living with them since she was a toddler and home for her was wherever Grandmother lived. The two of them stayed on for a few days and she and I got to know more of each other. Thus, I was happy when told I was taking Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister's places in our grandparents' house. When it was time for us to go, my clothes and my new school notebooks and pencils were collected into one brown paper shopping bag. I was very excited, as I always was when going on a trip.

We flagged a bus very early one morning, hopped in carefully and I sat next to my sister with a brown paper bag of my belongings standing by my feet. It was the dry season and it felt good to feel the cool humid air whipping sharply at my face and my

bobbed hair winging behind me. I tried counting the electric posts and trees along the road but they sped away too fast from us.

Before long we were passing a small monolith honouring the thousands of soldiers who passed that way during the war. It was an event deeply etched in the minds of the elders in our town. This was the “death march,” they’d say, when Japanese soldiers martialled American and Pilipino soldiers several hundred miles from the barracks of Bataan to Camp O’Donnell outside our town. Thousands of soldiers died along the way and many more died during captivity. Civilians who were caught helping marching sick soldiers were shot dead or bashed. Father never talked about what he witnessed during the war, although I once heard Mother mention to friends how her elder sister was hit across the back with a rifle as she tried passing food to some soldiers. Her sister coughed blood and was seriously ill afterwards and then died, leaving two little sons behind.

These were fleeting bits of information I heard as a child, which I did not understand until maturity. What was significant then was the existential unfolding of a life from moment to moment like on that poignant bus trip to Bamban. On that trip, a child was unaware of what lay ahead of her; an intimate journey of discovery as a young life headed in a different direction—shedding fragments of childhood behind her as new realities took place. Like a moth slowly and innocently freeing itself from its cocoon, without awareness and without control.

As the bumpy ride progressed, a feeling of uncertainty developed inside me. It did not feel good that everything—trees and people, were rushing away behind us. But the bus drove on, its horn blasting out loudly at every opportunity. As we drove past the extensive sugar plantation at “*Malutung Gabun*,” (red earth), I knew we were halfway there. People said that this was a haunted place and travellers at night quickly sped past because of many reports of ghostly apparitions. Beyond *Malutung Gabun*, lay *Susung Dalaga* or a “virgin’s breast.” *Susung Dalaga* sat closest on the horizon, separated from the mountain ranges that included a chain of dormant volcanoes. Legends of love and betrayal surrounded *Susung Dalaga*, but that morning it looked just like a fresh and perfect mountain adding depth and height to the lushness of the landscape—and its stillness while light clouds hugged its firmly rounded top strangely made me gloomy and isolated. As the bus exited left into the old tarmac road towards Bamban, the

mountain that seemed to be watching me with sympathetic interest slowly disappeared from view.

Many times, the bus driver stopped to pick up more passengers. Soon, it was too crowded on the bus and someone picked me out of my seat and took my spot and then sat me and my bag on his knees. Grandmother had my sister on her lap holding her with one hand and clutching the handles of a large bag of rice by her feet with the other.

Grandfather was sitting in his hammock under the front room of the house when we arrived. There was a trace of a smile on his face when I placed his hand on my forehead. “*Siclaud ku pu*,” (I kneel before you) I said smiling. “God bless you,” he said. Second Eldest Sister did the same. “Ah, you’ve come to stay then,” he said.

Then my sister and I ran upstairs. I was eager to see the whole house again as it had been a long while since I was last there.

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Our grandparents’ house was made of timber with corrugated aluminium roof and timber ceilings. It had a spacious front room with a large table used by our two aunts for dressmaking. At that time, though, they were away in college and only came home some weekends and during semester breaks. There were wide windows on three sides which made it a pleasant place to sit, or take siestas on very warm days. When it was just Grandmother, Elder Sister and I in the house and with Grandfather downstairs all day, the windows in the front room were left shut to stop dust settling in. And then this room would exude a ghostly energy that barred me from entering it on my own. However, when aunts were home and especially when our two married aunts came to visit with their children, the front room would become alive again. The windows were opened wide, the place dusted and everyone congregated there.

Down the front room was a small reception, or *sala*, which was mainly used for prayers at night. A small altar took pride of place. There was the glass encased statue of “Christ the King,” sitting on his throne. His figure was one of calm, while his bright red heart was aflame with love. His right hand stretched out giving benediction, the other holding an orb. On either side of the statue were pictures and icons of saints and of the Blessed Mother, Mary. Every night without fail we prayed the angelus, then the rosary

before that altar. Two small light bulbs on either side of the statue were turned on, and then carefully switched off after prayers.

An enclosed veranda branched off the *sala*, which had two folding doors that led to the front stairs with wide steps going downstairs onto a small yard.

Beyond the *sala* was the dining room, which had a long table with two refectory benches. These were pushed against the far wall and were only set in the middle of the room during fiesta, when the extended family and guests gathered and shared meals together through the day. In the corner from the door was a tall shelf where we kept our clothes in neat cardboard boxes. Our beddings were also stored there. Our rolled-up mats stood against the wall next to the shelf. At night, after washing up and tidying the kitchen following supper, we unrolled the mats on the floor, prepared our beddings and slept in this room.

The kitchen was the most used room in the house. It had a floor-to-ceiling cupboard and pantry. There were two hanging alcoves in the kitchen, called *bangera* which were like little balconies that jutted out of two wide windows. The *bangera* had simple wooden railings around three sides and were open to the elements, although the corrugated roofing in this area of the house extended generously over them, keeping them dry except in very strong and windy downpour. It was nice to sit in these alcoves on hot summer days, and catch a cool breeze and feel you were being held safely while suspended on air, the way you do when you're sitting high in a tree.

The artesian pump sat in its own small concreted area and next to it was the little hallway leading to the backstairs. Part of the backstairs was against the dining room wall to the right and it had a simple timber railing to the left. There was a thatched awning over it. You could sit at the top of the backstairs, leaning against the dining room wall, during a storm and not get wet.

The stairs were also sheltered by the santol fruit tree, with its lush bold green leaves. Grandmother said it was getting too many nutrients as it grew next to the septic tank. Hence the tree's energy went into producing thick fat branches and leaves instead of bearing fruit like a fruit tree should. The plan to cut it down never materialised because the tree served not only to keep that area of the house cool but also to screen the house from the septic tank and the property at the back.

There was a room under the house that had the entire width and length of the sala and the veranda. This room had a window on two opposite walls, as well as tightly woven split bamboo walls and door. It was about four feet high from floor to ceiling. Grownups had to stoop down when they went inside. Perhaps the room had been built to add extra sleeping space during fiestas in the past, but it had ended up mainly as a storeroom. Blue tin chests and cardboard boxes sat prominently in one large section of the room. These belonged to Uncle Felipe from his high school days and his time at the seminary. There were also some old odd furniture, mats and crockery that were used during fiesta. However, there was plenty of space in there to hide and potter or play cubby house when our cousins were around.

Grandfather's hammock was slung about a metre from the door of the storeroom and in the area under the front room, protecting him from strong winds or rain. The shrubs and small trees close to the house gave him adequate privacy. The yard was not large but it was very pretty. A lush vine called samat, (also called betel leaves), with its glossy heart-shaped large leaves, covered a bamboo pergola in the front yard. The samat leaves were a magnet for snails and during the rainy seasons when there was a plague of them, either my sister or I would accompany Grandmother at night with an oil lamp and a bucket to collect them. We'd do this for a few nights until Grandmother was satisfied that her precious leaves were safe.

Grandmother chewed betel nut a number of times a day, wrapped in samat leaves laced with lime paste. This made her calm and relaxed. It also made the inside of her mouth red. Other women who chewed this concoction had black and brown teeth, but Grandmother only wore her teeth when she ate her meals and when she went out so she always had gleaming white teeth on her pretty face. She had a special stone pestle and mortar to grind the mixture before she placed it in her mouth and she carried a little spittoon along with her. Grandmother always washed her mouth well after chewing betel nut, so one hardly knew she indulged in the habit.

There was also a small garden bed along the path leading to the gate, planted with vincas, different kinds of dracaenas and other perennials. The garden was surrounded by little smooth rocks that had been collected from the river generations before. The gate was made out of timber, with two swing doors which went only halfway down. The lower half had a wide slab of timber on top so you could sit

comfortably on it and watch people going past or children playing on the dirt road. The gate could be locked and it had its own small gable thatched roof.

I liked our grandparents' house and although it was a lot smaller and humbler than the houses of our relatives on the properties to the back and left of their house, it was cosy and well-proportioned and you felt safe and secure inside it.

But that feeling of security took some time to develop. On that first day of my three year stay at my Grandparents' house, the enthusiasm I had while exploring my new home soon waned into a feeling of desolation. Grandmother was tired and withdrawn, perhaps because she was missing my Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister. After lunch, she lay down for a siesta, and coaxed Second Elder Sister and I to do the same. When they were asleep, it felt very quiet and I lay there with a mounting soreness in my heart. I missed Mother and Little Sister. I missed my friends and *Indang Juana* and all the sounds and familiarity of home. I wanted to know what Father would bring home for Mother to cook that evening.

Finally, I got up and sat at the top of the back stairs. At the back of the property was a timber yard which was owned by one of Grandfather's cousins. To the right of the yard was their large two-storey house which faced the paved main road. A timber fence with a small gate separated our property from theirs. You could take this gate and make a short cut to the main road by walking through Great Uncle's yard but the watchful eyes of the guard dogs tethered nearby prevented us from taking that route.

For a while, I was preoccupied with watching men unload a truck of timber and then loading several pieces of large timber onto another truck. When it was quiet again, I heard Grandfather caught up in a coughing fit and I went around to the front of the house to see him. He was lying in his hammock with his eyes shut, his chest heaving. I sat quietly by the front stairs and watched him.

"Don't cry, little girl," he said after a while. "You will soon get used to the place and feel at home." I leaned against the banisters and wept quietly.

"Are your writing paper and pencils ready for school on Monday?" he asked.

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Are you enrolled?"

“Yes, Auntie Delia enrolled me before going to college.”

“Give me your pencils and I’ll sharpen them.” From then on he would sharpen my pencils nearly every day with the sharp Swiss knife Uncle Felipe gave him. “Now, you know which school you’re going to? Would it be the same school as your sister?”

“No, Grandfather, Second Elder Sister will go the elementary school. I’m still at primary school. She and Grandmother will show me how to get there tomorrow.”

“Are you scared? Your father said you’re very clever. Bah, you were even in an English spelling contest last year.”

“I’m a little scared, Grandfather... Elder sister said Grade Four is the most difficult year.”

“Ah, don’t be scared. You’ll be fine. As long as you find your way back here every afternoon. You’ll soon be busy with school and be happy. Now, if you like you can clean and polish my wooden clogs and I’ll give you five centavos to take to school on Monday.”

I took his clogs and scrubbed them with soap and water until the natural grain of the wood was showing.

“*Abah*, they look as good as new,” he said when I gave them back to him. “Mmm, that was a long while ago... Now, remember always, the best thing to do when you’re feeling sorry for yourself is to be busy. Then, for that time, at least, you’ll not be thinking about yourself.”

And then he was quiet again. Either our conversation made him very tired or avoiding another coughing fit. I sat on the stairs and kept him company. It was hot and the world was so still you could hear a sob travelling up your throat from deep inside you. Suddenly loud music erupted.

Great Uncle Emilio was married to Grandfather’s other cousin and they lived next door, to the left of us, with one of their daughters who was a teacher. Great Uncle Emilio had an important job at the town hall. During the week, he left the house before eight in the morning and returned home just after three in the afternoon. He would always switch on his radio as soon as he entered his living room.

Upon hearing his radio that afternoon, I ran upstairs and stood by the veranda window.

When Great Uncle Emilio's living room windows had been opened to let the cool air in, you could see nearly the entire room, and also his dining room, from our veranda. I watched him sit on his rocking chair, light his pipe and open up his evening newspaper. Aunt Leti, his daughter, was sorting out papers on the dining table. And then there was the radio. The radio stood in its hallowed place the way it had always done. I had observed it with great fascination during every visit. It was set in its own large cabinet of polished mahogany with shelves on the top and on either side. The loudspeakers sat in their niches on either side of the cabinet behind dark mahogany grills. Soon afterwards a phonograph was added on one of the shelves and records took the place of some ornaments, which were moved elsewhere in the living room. Great Uncle Emilio was houseproud. I'd see him polish his radio cabinet often, even polishing the leaves of the ivy. The ivy, with its plump glossy leaves clambered up the side of one window, and young tendrils reached up the wall and over the curtain railings.

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And so, on that first day I started living with my grandparents and Second Eldest Sister in Bamnan, watching the activities of our relatives next door and listening to the radio helped ease the ache I felt inside. Some lively songs were playing that afternoon. Hank Williams was singing "Jambalaya," and I sang along quietly:

Jambalaya, crawfish pie, fille gambo

For tonight, I'm gonna see my chaz a mio,

Pick guitar, fill fruit jar and be gayo;

Son of a gun we'll have big fun on the bayou!

Then Patti Page was singing, "Mockingbird Hill" which I liked a lot too and knew the lyrics well:

Tra la la, tweedle dee dee it gives me a thrill

To wake up in the morning to the mockingbird's trill.

Tra la la, tweedle dee dee

There's peace and goodwill

You're welcome as the flowers on Mockingbird hill.

When the news bulletins and the political commentaries took over from the music, I left the window and joined Grandmother and Second Elder Sister in the dining room. My sister and I sat quietly close by, organising our new school materials. Grandmother meditated and read her novenas. She would do this every afternoon with the muted sound of the radio in the background. Afterwards, she took out the little basket which contained a stone pestle and mortar and all the ingredients for her betel nut chew.

“Can I grind the nut for you, Grandmother?” I asked.

“That’s fine. First pound this quarter of the betel nut.”

“Why only the quarter, Grandmother?”

“Ah, more than that would be too astringent to the mouth. Besides, it makes the nut last longer. If I have four chews in a day, I’d only use one whole nut.”

“Does Uncle Emilio’s wife use a whole nut with each chew? They are very rich.”

“Mmm, maybe not. Too much betel nut would still be unpleasant to taste whether you’re rich or not.” She rubbed a bit of lime paste in the centre of a young *samat* leaf, rolled it into a ball and added it to the nut in the mortar. When she was done she took the paste with her fingers and put it in her mouth, then wiped her fingers on her *saya*. Grandmother wiped her hands on her *saya* so much so that you knew what she had been doing earlier when you sat or stood close to her. She would smell of garlic and onion when she had been cooking. She would smell of Tiger Balm when her arthritis was playing up. She would smell of manure and dirt when she had been working in the garden. Or she could smell of pee. If she was busy in the garden and couldn’t be bothered going upstairs to use the toilet, she’d find a secluded spot and pee standing up while holding her *saya* and slips a bit away from her body. Then she’d wipe herself with her cotton slip. With the *saya* over their long chemise and slip, old women didn’t wear

panties. That's why it was difficult for us little ones to pee standing up because the few times I tried, I had to take my panties off first and then my pee ran down my legs and my sandals got wet.

“When I grow up, maybe I'll chew betel nut, too.”

“I won't,” said Second Elder Sister. “It's hot on the tongue and will give you bad breath and red teeth.”

“Ah, you can chew it when you have all your teeth out,” said Grandmother.

“When does one have all their teeth taken out, Grandmother?” I asked.

“Mmm, you can have them out before you get married, that way your husband won't have the trouble of finding money to pay the dentist and have a new set of teeth made for you.”

“But all our married aunts have their real teeth; they don't wear dentures at all. I don't think I'd like to wear dentures when I'm old, but I would like some gold teeth one day. They're very pretty, gold teeth.”

“Bah, it's best not to dream too highly, just wait and see what happens. Even your dreams should be sensible. Then there's less disappointment for you.”

We helped Grandmother tidy up and cook supper. After our meal Second Elder Sister washed the dishes while I pumped the water for washing and to fill up the large clay pot for our drinking water. This became our job after every meal. At six o'clock, the church bells tolled and the three of us prayed the angelus and the rosary before the altar. Grandfather sat in his chair and joined in praying the rosary in silence. The night came very quickly, and as soon as it was dark we got ready for bed. Grandmother, my sister and I slept together under a mosquito net by the window while Grandfather slept on the mat next to us under his own mosquito net. He slept propped up with several pillows and his spittoon by his left side. Many times in the night, he either coughed or cleared his throat and heaved up mucus into his spittoon. I slept through all of it as a child during that first year I lived in Bamban, reassured he was close by and I felt safe and not alone in the night.

From about seven thirty in the morning on the Monday of the first day of school in Bamban, children my age, singly or in groups, were walking down the street in the direction where Grandmother said the school building was. I set off holding my two notebooks and my little box of pencils and eraser close to my chest. I started talking to another girl who, it turned out, lived not far from us. She was on her own and seemed happy to have someone walking to school with her. For a long time, Anita and I walked to and from school together. If I was early, I'd wait until she came out of her gate.

It was a long walk to school along little lanes and rows and rows of little huts and some quite large two-storey houses. There were little corner stores along the way that sold school materials and toys like marbles and papier mache dolls and biscuits, crisps, and candies. There were gardenias and other shrubs in front of houses and bougainvillea, cadena de amor clambering over fences. We walked under the canopies of great trees. There was a bamboo grove which creaked and groaned sullenly and during wet and windy days large drops of rain whipped over your head.

The school building sat proudly in its large grounds away from houses and shops. On that first day of school in Bamban, my heart at first sank when I first beheld the school yard teeming with children I did not know. There was excitement and jostling around. Everyone was happy to be back in their old school and to be with their usual group of friends. I stood back, not knowing what came next. After a while, a man, who announced himself as the principal came out onto the large front porch and demanded silence and order. After his message of welcome, he handed the public address system to the teachers who one by one announced the grade and section he or she was teaching and then called out the names of their respective pupils. Each pupil called answered "Present!" and fell into their respective lines. And so it went on until all the children were led by their teachers to their permanent classrooms for the whole school year. When my name was called out, I followed the others in my class. We were assigned our seats; two in a desk for the year, and my seatmate became my first friend in my class. Grandfather was right. There was nothing to be scared of once you knew which class and which room to go to everyday. And that you knew your way back home when school was over.

After several tearful afternoons spent sitting on the back steps missing home, I was quite happy again. Every other weekend Grandmother took Elder Sister and me

back home. With Grandfather chronically unwell and with no income coming in, it was left to Uncle Felipe and Father to support the family in Bamban and also to send our two aunts to college. The weekend trips home were essential to get a bit of money for food and school needs.

I always looked forward to visiting home and waited patiently for when it happened. It was always a happy time to see Eldest Brother and Eldest Sister, Little Sister and the two little ones. I sought out my old friends and we played in familiar yards and lanes and in our beautiful river. Often I'd take back special little things to Bamban with me like a plastic bracelet, marbles, my old collection of feathers, and my pretty black and red cansasaga seeds. But there was one object I treasured most for a long time, a slingshot Eldest Brother made for me which was made from a small sturdy forked branch of a guava tree and a wide neatly trimmed length of rubber for the catapult.

One particular Saturday when it was my turn to go home with Grandmother, I got dressed early and waited patiently for her to be ready when she decided at the last minute that she was taking Elder Sister along instead.

“Oh no, Grandmother, I want to go. Elder Sister went home with you last time.”

“No matter, she had a temperature last night. It's just right your parents should see her. She might need to go to a doctor and its best they know she's not well.”

“Then, we can all go together Grandmother. I don't have to stay back here.”

“You have to stay with your grandfather! I made the decision and that's final.”

“But I want to go!” And I walked behind them to the bus stop crying. Twice she stopped, then picked up a stick and threatened to hit me but I ran away every time she swung at me. When they started again, I followed.

“But it's my turn to go home. It's my turn. Oh please, let me go with you!” I cried. But I came too close and she turned around and gave me a few whacks on the back of my legs.

“Go back you impudent girl!” she yelled. “Or you'll get some more of that!”

When I got back into our yard, Grandfather was sitting on his hammock as though waiting for me. “You were in trouble with your Grandmother... stop crying now,” he said. His asthma seemed to get worse when he was agitated. He got up after a fit of coughing and lit some medicinal powder in a tall tin, bent over it and inhaled the steam from smouldering eucalyptus powder and other pungent herbs.

Somehow, seeing Grandfather’s distress made me forget my own misery. I sat with him for a while and waited for him to settle down. He leaned back and closed his eyes. After a while, I left him and went to sit on the backstairs. Aunt Leti, who was on her way to the market, stopped on the other side of the fence said, “Oh, you were in trouble with your Grandmother, were you little girl?”

Our relatives next door hardly ever spoke to Grandfather and Grandmother and rarely acknowledged you when they noticed you were watching them. Although you’d be aware at times they were watching with interest, especially when you sat on the backstairs. They never inquired if you were happy or hungry or well. That morning, though, Aunt Leti’s words and voice were kind and it felt good that she stopped to talk. There were times when you were left on your own and there was nothing to eat in the kitchen and Grandfather who only ate some dry biscuits through the day and he kept those with him, didn’t really know if you’d eaten or not. One time, the Great Aunt who owned the timber yard next door came upstairs looking for Grandmother and found me eating cold rice from the pot, drizzled with vinegar and salt.

“Oh, you’re eating spoilt rice, child!” she said.

“It’s nice...not spoilt,” I answered smiling. I told her Grandfather was in his hammock. That was the first and last time I saw her come to the house.

Secretly, I was grateful that the santol tree was never cut down. I thought it was a beautiful little tree even if it was not suitable for climbing, unlike the guava trees back home which always provided fruit for me to eat between meals. The santol tree was a kindly tree to be close to when sitting at the top of the back stairs and you were feeling sad and alone. It felt nearly as comforting as sitting up the tamarind tree back home.

Some very interesting events happened while I sat at the top of the stairs by the santol tree. Like that early afternoon when I watched Uncle Emilio’s wife leaving their house. They had just acquired a young pig and it was tied up to a post under the house

with a thick rope around its neck. For hours the animal squealed and cried going round and round the post until there was no more length in the rope for it to move. And it cried pitifully for a long time, pulling and tugging as the rope cut deeper into the back of its neck. Gradually, the rope became soaked in blood. After a while the pig fell asleep, waking up every so often to pull and cry. I can't remember why I was alone in the house then. I just sat there and watched, powerless to do anything. When Great Uncle Emilio came, he started easing the rope around the pig's neck and untangling it from the post. He was muttering under his breath: "The child of a whore, that child of a whore!" Late that afternoon he and his wife had a heated argument and he was yelling, "I forbid you from playing cards with your bitch friends again, do you hear?" She still left the house soon after lunch the next day, though from then on she always returned before Great Uncle Emilio finished work.

There was also that time I was sitting by the santol tree when there was a sudden commotion next door. The young woman who came to clean Great Uncle Emilio's house that morning was running in terror from the front room through the house screaming, and then flew down the back stairs with a large cat chasing after her. The cat was as large as a dog. Its russet and black hair was standing on end, its long fluffy tail was raised high in fury and it was screeching behind the terrified woman. "Graorrrrr!" it roared. She continued running to the timber yard, panting heavily.

"Ohhh, dios mio, dios mio! Heeeelp!" she cried.

But the cat had already left the scene by that time. That cat was known in the neighbourhood. It simply helped itself into people's empty houses as he pleased. Normally, he left when the owners returned home. But that day, the cleaning woman apparently threatened it with her broom while it was lazing on the front window sill. Cornered and not choosing to jump off the ledge, the vexed feline got up and hissed at the woman, who then fled in horror. I distinctly heard the cat's fearsome growl behind the thunder of her fleeing feet. The cleaning woman never came back to clean Great Uncle Emilio's house.

It was just as well the cat never came to our house because Grandfather's asthma got worse when there were animals close by and I was mortally scared of it after witnessing the awful chase next door. On another occasion when it was just Grandfather and me in the house, I had just finished reading my school book on the top of the stairs

when I went inside to pee. To my shock, I saw a snake hanging down from the bamboo ceiling in the toilet. I watched it for a while with curiosity and disbelief and then I calmly went downstairs to tell Grandfather. He had just returned from a short trip to town to get some dry biscuits and asthma powder from the pharmacy and was sitting down in his hammock.

“I saw a snake in the toilet, Grandfather,” I said.

“A snake? You’re not lying to me child?”

“No Grandfather. He looked like the devil himself.”

“Well, a snake was never seen around here before,” he said, sounding worried and a bit doubtful.

“What shall we do Grandfather? We don’t have a toilet now that there’s a snake there.”

“It will go away, you’ll see,” he said as he collected his thoughts.

“I’m scared...”

Grandfather rarely went upstairs during the day, but he did that afternoon, his chest groaning with the exertion. But there was no snake in sight. He sat in the kitchen for a while with the toilet door opened waiting for the snake to reappear. It didn’t. I was disappointed for a long time, thinking he didn’t trust me anymore. But for many months afterwards we inspected the toilet first before we used it. They said snakes didn’t like humans close by and so I always sang or tapped on the wall while I was inside and often looked up to make sure a wicked reptile was not swinging over my head.

~

For a long while, I was an outsider in Bamban. Every afternoon, at the end of lessons, I volunteered to be a cleaner. Under the supervision of our teacher a small group of us cleaned the class room ready for the next day. We swept the wooden floor, and polished it afterward with coconut husks to make it shine; we dusted the desks and cleaned the blackboards. When it was done, I slowly walked back home, stopping now and then to watch any interesting happening on the way. We didn’t have toys or books to read at home apart from our school books and while Second Elder Sister was happy

doing quiet things close to Grandmother I looked for entertainment outside the house. After I did my chores I sat by the front gate and watched other children play on the unpaved road. I loved watching the older girls play clapping games with rhyming chants. Sometimes some girls would tease and make fun of me because I was new in the place and for some reason or another didn't fit in.

When things were dull at school or things became complicated as it did in Arithmetic classes in the afternoons, I often played truant. We had a ninety minute lunch break at midday and those who lived close by went home for lunch, while the others ate their packed lunches. Elder Sister and I would walk home and Grandmother had lunch ready for us. After washing up after ourselves, we walked back to school. Halfway down the road I would head in the direction away from school. It was much more interesting looking into people's yards and observing people doing ordinary things. At times, the things you saw were quite extraordinary.

There were those two women fighting at one time. They were yelling and cussing at each other at first and then they fell on the ground rolling in the dirt and pulling each other's hair. It took a while for some men and women to separate them.

"Abah, you brainless children of whores," an elderly woman scolded, "You're worse than little kids. Have you lost your senses? Shame on you!"

The fighting women were led to their homes, still screaming obscenities at each other. The group of people stayed there and continued talking excitedly about what had just happened. Some were laughing, while others took sides or argued about who had scored the best punch.

Sometimes you'd see a group of men testing their favourite fighting cocks. At first they sat around nursing their animals with affection and pride. They were all such handsome creatures with their brightly-coloured plumes, tall straight necks, cropped combs and tall proud tails. Every now and then the men would have trial cock fights during which the owners held on to their birds' tails as the energetic roosters tried their hardest to get at each other. Things sometimes got so rowdy that it frightened you when they at times let go of their hold and let the cocks fight— flying and tearing at each other until their owners picked them up and then stroked them lovingly to calm them down. You'd wonder how such beautiful birds could possibly bear such hatred at each

other, and why, oh, why did their owners let them fight and get hurt if they loved them so?

One time, a group of men with their little children were sitting in a ring chatting happily when, for fun, they picked two of their pre-school boys placed them inside a circle, and coaxed them to box. They were soon fighting and one of the boys started crying and his father picked him up. Then one of the grandmothers walked over to them in anger.

“Do you men have nothing decent to do with your time except this?” she asked. “You’ve lost all your money on your cockfighting and now you turn your sinful ways onto your own children!” The men stopped what they were doing, laughed off their shame and continued with their banter.

There was that frightful scene one afternoon on my way back home where a man was whipping a girl, perhaps my age, who had apparently stolen some money from his house where she was working. I heard the stick hitting her buttocks and the back of her legs. She was crying and begging for mercy but the beating went on and then he gave her to her mother who was watching. I was sure that after he died, that man would go to Hell, and so I prayed that he would die soon. But it was his wife who died of cancer some months later. She was one of our teachers... she was so beautiful and gentle.

Scenes like these sometimes made me wish I liked and understood arithmetic so that I didn’t have to play truant. No one at home could help and Teacher didn’t have time to stop and teach slow learners. Thus, the further one fell behind in the lessons, the less likely they were to catch up.

After some time, I decided to go to more peaceful places. The little village beyond the railroad tracks was the better place to go to when you played truant. There was a cluster of families there who were mostly farmers who worked the rice fields. One of my classmates lived there. She was a lot older than me and I liked her a lot because she always included me in her team when there were playground competitions like jump the spines, running and hopscotch. Since I wasn’t very tall and had skinny weak legs, I didn’t do nearly as well as the others. Nevertheless, we would still win most of the time because she took my spot and won most of the points with her long legs and sprite figure. One day, she broke one of her sandals while playing.

“Oh, Father will surely whip me when I get home,” she cried. “Please help me fix my sandal, please help me fix my sandal.”

“Maybe, you can tell him they just fell apart while you were walking in the paddies,” one said.

“Yes, they’re old and worn out anyway,” said another.

“Oh, no matter, he’ll still beat me. We don’t have money to buy a new pair. This pair is supposed to last the whole year, at least. Oh, help.”

She came to school barefoot for a long time. Later, she came to school wearing a pair of rubber thongs which she removed when playing.

It was always nice seeing her in the fields when she had to miss school to help with the planting and harvesting. When the weather was fine during the wet season, I would often skip my afternoon classes to see her. However, harvest time was much more interesting because it was hot and dry then and the fields became gold and brown in colour and the paddies were hard and dry. Men and women would cut the harvest with their scythes, one artful and deliberate swing of the scythe at a time, each sweep yielding an armful of rice stalks heavy with yellow grain. Another group collected these stalks for threshing by feet or by carabaos, which were led around trampling on the grain all day. The women would then start their winnowing under large trees not far from the tracks. Damp grain was spread on large canvases and mats on the clean, flat area close to the train tracks. Sometimes I helped my friend run a rake through the rice to air it and accelerate the drying process. Most of the time, though, I would just sit in the shade and watch because the dust and pollen made me snotty and itchy.

When her parents didn’t need her we’d play for a while. She knew the times trains passed from either direction. Sometimes we would lie down with our ears against the tracks and listened to trains approaching from a distance, and then ran away when we saw the serpentine locomotive appearing from behind the hills. I watched with endless fascination at the people standing by the doorways or sitting at the steps looking out to nowhere, unaware that someone was standing there watching as their train sped past. I’d wonder where all the people came from and to what kind of places were they travelling. Supposing they missed their stops, would they go on travelling forever?

How could I find my way home to Mother and Father if I got on a train? What lay beyond the end of the train tracks?

Those times of truancy were happy and carefree days and far more exciting than sitting in a classroom trying to learn subjects like arithmetic which were irrelevant and beyond my understanding. Plus, I always felt drowsy in the classroom during the afternoon. It was much better to be outside feeling free. But you had to be conscious of time when you were playing truant. You always had to take note of the sun as it travelled westward. You had to start walking home at the right time just so you didn't get home too early or too late, otherwise Grandmother and Grandfather and our aunts could become suspicious. Although when you came home late, you could always say that you went to church for catechism lessons or that the teacher asked you to stay longer with the cleaning. If you came home too early, you could say that the teacher was sick. That really happened once when during class, our teacher who was heavily pregnant went to her chair clutching her belly. She sent one of the pupils to fetch the principal. The principal immediately called for her husband, who was the physical education teacher. Our teacher looked pale and stunned when water and blood started running down her legs and onto the floor. We watched with amazement as her husband carried her like he would a child, onto a waiting jeep and took her to the hospital.

But my truancy had to stop when, after the first year of schooling in Bambang, Father looked disappointed upon seeing my school grades. "What's this?" he asked. I was so sad. I wasn't as bright as he thought I was, after all.

I've always felt that Father was not really happy we were taken away from home by our grandparents and he'd probably have taken me back home if I had asked. But we were taught to obey elders to never complain or argue with them, whether we liked their rules or not. One time when he came to visit Grandfather, he saw that I could hardly walk. I had scratched an insect bite on my big toe early in the week and it had become infected. Towards the end of the week, nearly the whole foot up to my lower leg was purple with the swelling. Father took me home with him that afternoon and brought me to the doctor in the evening. The doctor's clinic was in a large veranda of his house and patients and their relatives were waiting sitting on benches and on the floor. Some were waiting outside the house. We had to wait our turn.

"Ah, this child should have been brought to me days ago," he said.

“She lives with her grandmother in Bamban. My mother probably thought it was not bad and the wound would heal in due course,” said Father apologetically.

“Mmm, I wonder what kind of poultice did she apply on that wound...in this case, home remedy did not help,” the doctor said as he prepared to give me an injection.

“That’s a brave girl,” he said. “That was nothing compared with the pain on your foot, was it? Make sure your hands are clean before you eat and before you scratch an insect bite or a sore. You don’t want another infection like this do you?”

“No, sir,” I said meekly. The doctor washed my wound and sprinkled some white powder on it before putting a firm bandage around my foot. After receiving some further instructions from the doctor, Father carried me to a waiting *kalesa* and we went home.

For several days, Father washed my wound with hydrogen peroxide and applied powdered sulphanilamide twice a day. I stayed quiet and slept a lot for a few days after that. Soon my foot felt lighter and the pain and fever eased away. When my foot returned to normal, Grandmother and Elder Sister took me back to Bamban with them. I wanted to remain at home, but I knew I had to go back to school. This was also the last time I enjoyed a special connection with Father. In Bamban, home with Father and Mother gradually became more distant and going home became more like visiting a different place. I became more self-reliant and practiced living in two worlds; one with my family, the other, a clandestine world of imagination and adventure where I alone was responsible for my own happiness.

NEIGHBOURS AND RELATIONS

Across the road from us was a large house made of timber and concrete sitting grandly in an extensive compound. The girl who I met on my first day of school lived there and I’d visit her occasionally. Her father was often away, while her mother stayed home with her children and ran the household. The mother was kind and she liked me coming around as she did not like her daughter leaving the house or their yard.

It was a busy household and she and her servants were always cleaning and washing. Her many clothes lines were always full of drying laundry, each item pegged

out according to kind, size and colour; the shirts next to each other, as were the trousers, dresses and skirts—small size to larger size. Warm days were sure to be washing or starching days. Starching days involved some interesting rituals. One by one, dry clean clothes and sheets were soaked in starchy water, and then the liquid squeezed out as much as a strong pair of hands could muster. The clothes and sheets were then pegged out in the usual orderly way. On most days, the yard was festooned with washed or starched clothes flapping in the breeze like streamers in the plaza during fiesta.

Twice a week, dry starched clothes and sheets were made damp with a sprinkling of clean water, each piece rolled and stacked neatly into large baskets ready for the ironing woman the next morning.

And then the laundry ritual started all over again.

When my friend's mother and her servants were not doing the laundry, they were cleaning inside the house. Out in the yard, dry leaves did not stay more than one day on the ground before they were swept away. By the time her husband was due to come back home, my friend's mother was so tired she stayed in bed feeling unwell and he'd be sorry for her. She also would not eat, though she kept some food close by so she could have a bite when he was not looking. I heard her telling her friends that she did this.

Compared to our grandparents' house, my friend's house was too busy and too clean. You also had to wait outside the gate before anyone noticed and let you in. My friend spoke very little and would only watch me play. She was the same at school and had difficulty learning. I soon stopped playing with her.

Next door, to the right of us, was a neat old Spanish colonial type house with a small garden full of canna lilies, gardenias and hibiscus. An elderly couple had been renting the house for a while. They looked kind and reserved, and they had that air of mystery which fascinated me. My family didn't associate much with them because they were Protestants. The man, who always wore a light clean shirt tucked neatly into his well-ironed trousers and who wore a formal blazer when he went out in his old car was a pastor. Sometimes I watched from our living room or kitchen window as they worked in their yard, and they would smile when they saw me. The wife had a light brown complexion and was very slim. Her smile was always gentle and sweet, and she had an

air of melancholy about her. There were times when I'd go in their yard and watch them potter. They spoke to me very kindly and would give me something to drink.

“Do you like school, *Neneng*—little girl?” The husband asked once.

“I like my school back home better. I don't like arithmetic at all,” I replied.

“What do you think you'd like to be when you grow up?” His wife asked.

“I don't know...perhaps a teacher, but that's hard. Oh, I like to sing on stage.”

“Mmm, you should think of being something even better than that. You could be a teacher, a doctor, or a lawyer,” he said, looking at me straight in the eyes.

“But I'm not good at arithmetic. Perhaps I shall be a nun instead.”

“Why a nun, *Neneng*?” she asked.

“Well, if I become a nun, I shall not go to Hell. I'm scared of hell. I'd really like to be a saint if I could then I'm sure I'll go to heaven when I die and I shall be special then. Everyone would love me, and I'll help people if they prayed to me.”

“Ah, *Neneng*, there's no Hell. No such thing at all,” he said, waving his hand emphatically. “You must not be afraid. God loves you very much. He would not like you to be hurt. Don't think about those things.”

“Grandmother doesn't really like Protestants. She would not like me becoming a Protestant. “You will not go to Hell, will you, because you're Protestants?”

“Ha, ha, ha! *Neneng*, so long as we're good people, loving God and our neighbours, God will be happy. No, we'll not go to Hell and neither will you. There's no such place. Now, you must study hard and be somebody special one day. If you are learned, you will be a rich person because you'll understand and see things better. You will travel and see many places,” he said.

“Now, you go and play and keep on singing. We will pray for you and your grandmother and grandfather. He's not very well,” she said.

“No ma'am, Grandfather has asthma. He can't breathe sometimes but he is not going to die.”

“Oh, of course not, child.”

“You must study hard and read a lot. You’ll go really far if you study very hard,” he said as he sat behind his desk to write his next sermon. His wife gave me a biscuit and walked me to the door.

“Don’t forget to say your prayers,” she said.

“No ma’am, we pray the rosary and the litany every night.”

“I mean your very own prayers... your own words when you talk to God, before you go to sleep.”

“Last night I prayed for Elder Sister to die because she was mean to me and pinched me and she hits me sometimes. Grandmother loves her more. So you see, I’m going to Hell for sure because it’s a sin to hate somebody.”

There were times when I really hated Second Elder Sister, when she was mean to me, and when I was jealous because Grandmother loved her a lot and just ignored me. I once heard a woman say a curse about someone. “May he crawl like a snake,” she said, and I would pray that about my sister and grandmother sometimes when I felt hurt inside. Then, I’d be sorry afterwards. I hated snakes. And I really liked my sister because she was pretty and very kind when she wanted to be.

“Mmm, *Neneng*,” she said softly, “you should pray for them. Maybe your sister thought you did something really wrong and she got angry. You must not touch her things and stay away from her when she’s cross. Do you remember the times she’s good to you?”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t really want her to turn into a snake and I don’t want to go to hell.”

“No, no. You didn’t really mean what you prayed for, you were just upset and hurt, and that’s all. I know that you love your sister.”

The neighbours were often out of town visiting other small Protestant communities in the area and I was always happy to see them when they were home. I liked visiting them. The house had a veranda where shoes, clogs and slippers were neatly put away in a corner, while a felt and two straw hats were casually hung on a

bentwood hatstand by the doorway. Two umbrellas leaned against the wall close to a small rustic table with a book and some magazines on top. There was also an old rocking chair.

As you entered the living room area, a tall music stand greeted you to the right. A leather-bound bible with fine pages that felt like silk sat on top. The bible had been opened on a different page every time I visited, with a purple strip of velvet to mark the page. The printing was stylised with illuminated large letters in every first word of every chapter. One time I was allowed to stand on a chair to look closely into the book but it was too extraordinary and too fine for me to read.

In their living room, there was a mahogany writing desk and a comfortable chair walled in on two sides with shelves lined with books and journals. There were pencils and fountain pens inside a squat glass jar sitting on the desk next to notebooks and piles of papers. Beyond the living room was a small sitting area with a plain sofa, two armchairs and a coffee table with a vase of plastic flowers and foliage. The timber floors, walls and furniture were always polished and shiny. The whole house spoke of them: their kindness and refinement, the qualities of resignation and seemingly peaceful sadness. You would read this through their eyes and it made you wonder what secret life stories they must have experienced in the past before they came to live next door to you; what amazing sights they would have seen from where they came from. However, you would not dare ask questions because you were simply pleased they were there and that life was more interesting because of that.

They had a son who was away at college studying to be a pastor too and he'd come home some weekends. I saw him fetching water from their artesian pump. He would carry the water up the back stairs to his mother or he would water the window baskets trailing with foliage around the veranda. He would often potter in the little shed at the back of their house and would give me a shy smile when he saw me watching by the fence.

One time the couple went away to America for a long visit and their son was left to mind the house. I saw him occasionally, ambling in the yard or reading on the veranda. After a while, I hardly saw him outside and all was quiet in the house. My grandparents who also kept to themselves and who were never friendly with people of different faiths did not inquire about him. When his parents came back home they found

him hanging from a tall beam in their study, a noose around his neck and a chair lying on its back under him.

It was the long school vacation then and I was taken by Grandmother to Aunt Inocenta's place to spend the time with her, perhaps to help her around the house because she had another baby. When I was brought back to Bamban to start Fifth Grade, the couple was gone. Not a word was spoken about them or the tragedy. From a mysterious past, the Protestant couple passed through a little corridor of my youth only to vanish again into another mystery. And only I would miss them.

That house next door remained empty for a long time, a barren structure in our neighbourhood. Every time I passed by or looked over the fence, I'd hear its silent song of despair. The house was rented out eventually but the new tenants were not gardeners and didn't stay very long. The place continued to look sad. By the time I left Bamban, the house had become a dilapidated and colourless remnant of something once so fine, too unrecognisable even to feel sad for.

It was just as well that most of the things and people in my life remained constant. Grandfather was always there, peaceful and content in spite of his disease. Grandmother and Elder Sister, even if somewhat isolated from me, were always around, as well as my school friends and of course Great Uncle Emilio and his radio and phonograph.

During weekends or school holidays, or when Grandmother and Elder Sister were staying for a few days with our married aunts and when I didn't have any desire to go anywhere in the neighbourhood, I was happy to stay home with Grandfather and Aunts Delia and Blandina, who would always come home for the holidays. I would read my school books, or watch my aunties do their sewing or primping themselves while I waited for three o'clock in the afternoon for Great Uncle Emilio to come home. I liked that he always played his radio loud.

Great Uncle had a favourite station he tuned into which played mostly English ballads and American country music. I wondered if he ever knew during the three years I lived next door to him, that I was listening to the songs played on his radio, and memorising all the ones I liked, collecting songs in a treasury in my mind. I wondered if he even knew a little girl was there always waiting for him to come home, glad he was

home, and so glad to share the songs he liked to hear, and while he was never heard to sing along or hum a tune, a little girl next door was singing and learning, was happy and less lonely. That little girl learnt so many songs that on special occasions like a fiesta, her aunts often asked her to sing and entertain their guests. Someone would pull up a chair, lift her on top and she'd sing her favourite songs. After some applause, she'd suddenly feel shy, jump off the chair and run and hide.

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By the middle of the school year, Bamban felt like home. I liked how I was left on my own as long as I had done my chores and learnt my prayers, which was easy enough. I liked how I could wander around the neighbourhood or go to the fields and watch people and observe what was happening with nature, with the change of seasons.

Bird migration was one of the most exciting phenomena during some parts of the year. The wide skies in the open fields were awesome theatres to watch flocks of migrating birds performing acrobatic feats. They came forth in waves, thousands of little birds twisting and turning as one, dancing along an aerial symphony and then melting into the horizon only to swing back again. Standing in the open fields, you would hear the unearthly murmuration of wings. Usually these migrations came closer to home when a portion of this migration would descend into the thick foliage of the huge acacia tree between our property and Great Uncle Emilio's house and on the many large trees in the neighbourhood. In the late afternoons and into the evening the twittering of thousands of birds would descend like a living blanket from the sky, deafening and lively; a frenetic stream of life and activity. This was followed by silence as the darkness rolled in heavily into night.

One afternoon, a group of men with rifles came and asked permission from Great Uncle Emilio to enter their compound to shoot. I watched from the veranda as birds fell on the ground and little boys like dogs scrambled on top of each other to snatch them up where they fell. Every time shots were fired, befuddled birds flew off and then eventually came back to the tree and when all was quiet, the shooting started again.

The next time the hunters came, I was ready. It was late afternoon and the light was still good. The birds were quiet, ready to settle down for the night. I was standing

by the window on the veranda, out of their view, and had my sling shot and a small bag of stones ready. Every time the men aimed to shoot, I fired several stones into the heart of the tree, disturbing the birds. This went on till nearly dark and the men were very cross.

“Ah, *sinverguenza!* You, you little brats won’t be still!” said one.

“O, but we were very still, sir, very still.”

“What was disturbing the birds then? Now go away, go away!”

“Maybe, it’s Pedro here, with his sniffing, sir, but I was very quiet, sir.”

“Damn it! Now it’s too dark and we can’t do any shooting anymore.”

“Let’s go, let’s go. This is all useless. Now, you don’t have any birds to take home to eat, you nasty little sons of whores!”

“But we were very quiet and still, sir,” a boy protested.

Perhaps Great Uncle didn’t allow the men to enter his property again or they found better spots to shoot, but no one came to shoot the birds in our acacia tree again. Secretly, I believed that I wielded power over cruel men that afternoon. And for a long time I would have fantasies of doing many more heroic deeds, until at last I’d die and become a proper saint, loved by one and all forever.

Alas, the next time I was influential in making a change, it was not something I felt comfortable with. We had a teacher who always arrived at school late. One morning I happened to arrive early at school and there were raucous goings-on in the classroom when I walked in. Some boys were standing on their desks and throwing paper planes in the air while others scampered about to catch them and the girls were screaming and laughing as they watched. I decided to leave the room with one of my classmates I was friendly with and fetch the teacher. We were a few blocks away when we saw him coming down the street

“Oh, Mr. Mejia,” I said. “You’re so late. School started a long time ago and we’ve decided to go home.” I expected him to laugh at the joke and then to proceed to walk to school with us.

“Oh, no,” he cried, “but it’s still ten minutes before school starts.” He was staring at his watch in disbelief. “The Principal’s watch must be early. “He stopped and thought for a while. My classmate and I were too shocked and terrified by his reaction, we were speechless.

“Oh dear, oh dear, I can’t go to school now, it’d be too embarrassing. Please tell the Principal and your classmates that I’m sick and can’t teach today.”

“Now, walk back to school, children. I’m sure a relief teacher will take over. Now, don’t tell anyone, will you?” he begged.

“Oh no sir, never, sir.” We watched as he hurriedly walked back home. Befuddled, we returned to the classroom, making a vow with each other never to tell. We sought out the Principal and told him that our teacher was sick. Our class was left alone for most of the day, with one of the teachers and the Principal visiting us at regular intervals to give us some reading or composition to do. For days afterwards, I was expecting to be called to the Principal’s office for detention, but this never happened. Mr. Mejia was hardly ever late for school again.

After this time, my confidence soared. I was happily living a life that was outwardly blameless. My luck was soon to change, though. On an errand to the market one Saturday afternoon, I witnessed one of my favourite teachers being abused by the storekeeper.

“Thick-faced woman,” the storekeeper hissed. “Liar! You and your family are a pack of liars. Scums!” I was glad that no one else was around to see our science teacher so humiliated. She saw me and then continued to explain to the storeowner why their debt hadn’t been paid on time and that they were not defaulting. I thought I should leave to save her from further shame, but my feet stayed rooted to the ground.

After that incident, I noticed her looking at me furtively in the classroom. We shared a secret. How could I forget the way she was rudely pushed out of the shop on that evening of her shame? I felt connected with her in a special way that it boosted my confidence. I could not do anything wrong, or so I thought. After a few instances of disorderliness in the classroom, though, she sat me down in front of the class called me a disrespectful and insolent piece of shit. I bore the humiliation bravely; after all, I still kept a shameful secret about her. However, not long after that, a rumour did spread in

school about the teacher and her husband's fracas with another storekeeper—and my secret was told in whispers to all who cared to listen.

It was good that life in my grandparents' house sailed on still waters. No one cared to find out how I got on at school. My older siblings had never been in trouble and they didn't have any reason to think that I could be different. I would go home, kiss my elders' hands (except Second Elder Sister's), do my chores and wait for Great Uncle Emilio to play his phonograph. Or I would sit by the window in our veranda and watch birds come and go in the adjoining properties. Apart from the acacia tree, there were several leafy caimito fruit trees in their yard and when he played his "South Pacific" record I imagined the birds listening to the music with me. I would sing along with my favourite tracks: *"I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair, I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair and send him on his way."*

One evening we were praying the rosary while Great Uncle Emilio was playing his favourite Mario Lanza record in the background when I suddenly heard my voice as if from a dream, singing...:*"Younger than spring time are you, softer than starlight are you..."* Grandmother stopped in the middle of the long litany, momentarily confused.

"Damned that man playing his music so loud till late in the night," Grandfather complained. But it was only six o'clock.

GRANDMOTHER AND *INKUNG* JUAN

There were times when Grandmother was troubled with eczema on her feet. Sometimes she also suffered from general malaise, which she blamed on "ill wind or humour" in the air.

During those times, messages were sent to *Inkung* Juan—Grandfather John—to come to Bamban for a visit. *Inkung* Juan was a close friend of our grandparents. I remember him as a burly and tall man, a shaman and a cook who was there from the start managing the cooking during fiestas. He loved pretending to pinch our bottoms and would chase us with a big growl and then laugh as we scuffled away screaming. He must have been strong and virile in his youth because even in his senior years, his stature and voice gave him a distinct presence.

It was also said that Grandmother lost five children either at birth or early in their infancy before Uncle Felipe was born. When she was finally pregnant with Uncle, *Inkung* Juan looked after her and assisted in the birth. The baby was christened with *Inkung* Juan as the sole godparent and Uncle was named after Grandmother's eldest and favourite brother, Felipe. *Inkung* Juan apparently stayed with the family for a while until he was confident that mother and baby would flourish. However, he would return if summoned, especially when Grandmother was ailing, because Grandmother flatly refused to see a doctor. One time he came with a jar of leeches, which he put on the infected eczema on her feet. She sat on a low stool, with my two aunts on either side of her, to comfort her during those long sessions. Grandmother was terrified of leeches.

“Do you think Grandmother will die?” I asked Elder Sister.

“Of course not, silly, *Inkung* Juan will make her better for sure.”

“I would die if I had leeches on me!”

“You're just a little coward thing, you are!” she said, teasing.

There were times when *Inkung* Juan treated Grandmother's aches in her lower back or if she had bronchial congestion, with cupping. He used six glass beakers with rounded bottoms, which he kept spotlessly clean. Grandmother would be lying face down on the mat with her back exposed. *Inkung* Juan first massaged her back with coconut oil. Following this, he lit a stiff wick with his lighter and held the flame inside an upside down beaker close to her. When the inside of the glass was warm and smoky, he quickly removed the flame then clamped the beaker on to her back and you could see the skin being sucked up inside the glass. He did the same with the other beakers. When this procedure was finished, Grandmother was left with round red marks which stood out on her olive skin. *Inkung* Juan cleaned his beakers very carefully afterwards before packing them back in his bag.

“I'm washing off all the 'ill humours' that was poisoning your grandmother's body,” he said as I watched closely. “Now, she will be well again!”

“Did it hurt her, *Inkung* Juan?” I asked.

“*Bah*, your Grandmother is a brave woman, she can put up with a lot of pain,” he said. “And now, it’s your turn, little girl! Here I come!” he said with a growl and laughed when I ran away terrified.

In time, visits from *Inkung* Juan became scarce and after Grandfather died and Grandmother went to live with Uncle Felipe, he stopped coming altogether until I quite forgot about him. Then, when I was a young woman in high school, *Inkung* Juan came to our house one mid-afternoon. He was stooped and grey. He asked if there was any food for him. I offered to re-heat some left over food but he preferred to eat it cold.

“I’m used to eating cold food,” he said, his voice hoarse, as if he had difficulty breathing. He was still eating when Mother came and she sat and talked to him.

“Where have you been all this time, Grandfather?”

“Oh, I’ve been living with my son, Calisto, in Pag-asa,” he said. Calisto was a waif he adopted probably about the time he stopped coming to see the family. *Inkung* Juan sent the boy through high school and spoke possessively and affectionately of him. Unfortunately, Calisto ended up quite sickly and disabled. In his old age, *Inkung* Juan still helped support Calisto and his family from his veteran’s pension.

As a young man, *Inkung* Juan had taken part in the war for independence from Spain in 1896 with late Great Uncle Feliciano, who retired a captain. Every four weeks *Inkung* Juan came to town to collect his small pension, a lifelong compensation for his military service. He’d turn up every morning at the municipal hall and wait for the daily mail to come. He was regularly penniless days before his cheque arrived and then cashed by the town clerk. And after paying the clerk a little fee for allowing him to sleep in his barn, he took the bus back home to Pag-asa.

He came to our house again one early morning and asked if he could have some coffee. I told him we only had cold coffee from the day before and that no fresh ground coffee beans had been boiled yet.

“The cold one will do child,” he said. When we opened the container there was a cockroach floating in it.

“Oh no, you can’t have that now, *Inkung* Juan, you have to wait while we boil some fresh coffee.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” he said, looking at me in the eye. Reluctantly, I filled his chipped enamel mug. His hands were trembling and unsteady, their gift of healing long gone. After putting a heaped tablespoon of brown sugar in it, he slurped the beverage deliberately, as if it was the best beverage in the world. After a breakfast of hot rice and fried salted pilchard, he left, walking with a little shuffle on his left foot; his stooped figure shabbily attired, once tall and broad, now gingerly negotiating the uneven and unpaved foot path towards the town hall.

That was the last I saw of *Inkung* Juan. After some months, of not showing up again, Mother decided he must have died. I thought about him for a long time; his lonely figure, his silver hair, his unshaven face depicting of hardship—and of a spirit never to break. He was a riddle of a man and I often constructed his birth and childhood in my mind. I liked to think he had been loved and cared for as a child, and then as a young man he set off on his own with his free spirit and ambiguous sexuality. Like many figures from my childhood, *Inkung* Juan materialised from a mysterious past only to vanish mysteriously into the unknown. I prayed that he did not die alone by the roadside or in somebody’s flea-infested old barn. I hoped he received his last pension payment, took it home to Calisto and died with his family around him. And I wished I had the means and the maturity to have taken care of him; had the power to help him reinvent his life.

But then, my mind would always go back to that time in Bamban when *Inkung* Juan gifted my world with excitement and wonder. He was for me a shaman, a magician and a comic. After his visits, Grandmother would be fine again and soon she’d be pottering in the garden, going to church every morning and often joining prayer meetings afterwards. These were mostly group prayers of thanksgiving when a particular bounty came to a family; perhaps a university graduation or a family member surviving a serious illness, or it could be the anniversary of the death of a loved one. My sister and I enjoyed accompanying Grandmother to these meetings because breakfast was always served afterwards. I particularly loved it when warm *pandesals* or sweet bread rolls were served with tinned sardines. Grandmother was shy and didn’t talk much, but her presence was valued, maybe because she was pious and upright, or because she was a *mestiza* or has Caucasian blood; or perhaps because she was the mother of a well-respected priest. It could have been all of those reasons.

Grandmother tried very hard to manage the household with limited money in her purse. Our main dish week after week was a casserole with pumpkin, fresh water snails and *malungay* leaves. I liked going to the market to buy ingredients and supplies for her— perhaps ten centavos worth of pork fat to flavour the pumpkin dish, a packet of salted fish, some vegetables and occasionally a small bag of betel nuts.

Grandmother bought the pumpkin and snails on her way home from church because these had to be just right. The snails had to be fat and mature, harvested from mossy rocks in a fresh water stream or river; and the pumpkin had to be young and green so that you could eat the skin as well. Grandmother's pumpkin and snail dish was delicious, especially when eaten the day it was cooked or even on the second day. The casserole tasted just a little sour by the third or fourth day.

Somehow, Grandmother was never born to be a good housekeeper. She would rather potter in the yard or work in her married children's gardens. Her cleaning was not as meticulous as Mother's. At that time Mother would often comment about me with a sigh, "Ayaii, you're very much like your grandmother!" I often thought that Mother was unnecessarily fastidious. Grandmother was fine the way she was. As a grown up, I too would rather be outside in the garden than potter with tiresome chores in the house. And a bit of dirt on the hands was fine as long as you washed your hands before eating and didn't touch a sore or a wound with your dirty fingers.

We wore our play school clothes for a week to save on soap. Grandmother's spine was starting to get crooked at that time and the less time spent doing the laundry the better for her. I had a denim play dress which I wore for days and it was just like a sack dress. Grandmother would starch this dress like she would all her laundry, and my nipples would be red and sore for the first two days I wore it. Our bed sheets were stiff and coarse for about a week. Two or three weeks later, though, these sheets were softer and warm and you could gather them against your cheeks without being chaffed.

The lack of money was probably what led Grandmother to gamble a few centavos every day. She collected the discarded egg sacs of a large spider she found while tidying in the house or yard and kept the best-looking ones. The egg sacs were perfect spheres, like the sacramental wafers one receives at Holy Communion. Once, I discovered a spider with a full egg sack under the eaves and watched with wonderment as hundreds of hatchlings—silvery whispers of life and movement gently cascading out

of their sack, spreading under the eaves, in sheltered corners of the ceiling and in the depth of a thick shrub. Many more took flight on the back of a strong breeze, alone and independent as soon as they saw the light of their first day. Grandmother did not seem to mind. “It is their destiny,” she’d say.

Every afternoon after her meditation and novenas, she knelt or crouched by the kitchen window, picked out a wafer soaking in a glass of water, held it up against the light and deciphered numbers which she wrote out on a piece of paper. There was a kind of earnestness about Grandmother when she was involved in that activity, perhaps because she was praying that every number she deciphered would bring her a win. When Grandfather happened to see her doing this, he’d either ignore her or snigger. Every morning, she put five or ten, sometimes even twenty centavos when she was feeling lucky, on the daily lottery in the neighbourhood. She sometimes got her money back but mostly lost it. Once she won three hundred pesos, which was a lot of money in those days, and she bought herself a new embroidered *pañuelo* and *saya*. Our two aunties had extra pocket money to take to college for weeks. Grandfather was mildly amused, especially after Grandmother gave him some cash from her winnings. “Ah, that would not last,” he said disparagingly. “Fat chance you’ll be that lucky again,” he said. Grandmother simply ignored him and indulged in her bit of gambling as she pleased.

Grandmother was born during the latter chapter of the Spanish colonisation of the Philippines. The date of her birth was unknown. Uncle Felipe calculated that Grandmother was around a hundred and four when she died. She grew up during a time when girls were not sent to school and they were raised solely to become good wives, mothers and housekeepers. Hence, she never learnt to read and write. Aunts Blandina and Delia taught Grandmother to write her name when they needed her signature in some documents to go to a Catholic college. Grandmother was the youngest and the only girl of four children. She was especially devoted to her eldest brother, Great Uncle Felipe. I suspect that their parents died when she was little and her eldest brother became her guardian.

Our family knew nothing about our background until January 2009, during one of my visits to the Philippines. It happened that a cousin had died at the time of my visit and I went to the wake. The deceased was lying in state in the front room of his house, his widow sitting forlornly in an armchair close by, while her grandchildren and their

cousins were playing and milling around the room, sometimes chasing a ball under the coffin. We adults sat around the dining table eating, drinking sugary pineapple juice and catching up. Some of us had been away for many years and had lost touch and it had always been the case that a death in the family became a time for a reunion and reconnection; an occasion that was at once cheerful and poignant.

Not forgetting that one of the reasons of my visit was to research my past, I started asking my cousins what they knew about our grandparents. At that time, only four of their children were still alive. One had dementia, while another was an energetic and charming ninety three-year-old lady living with her family in San Diego, who could not remember being told anything about her parents' background. Aunt Blandina, now in a nursing home in California, and the youngest, Aunt Delia, in her late seventies and living in Alaska with her family, did not have any information to give about their parents either. Whatever information they were given as children was sadly beyond their power of recollection in their old age.

"Isn't it sad, how we never thought of asking our grandparents when they were alive?" I said to my cousins and this opened up a very long discussion.

"Life was hard for them, you know. Working to feed their families and to get by was the main thing. What happened in the past was never an issue for them. They wouldn't have thought it would be an issue for us," said one cousin.

"They didn't dwell on sentimentalities."

"They probably thought, 'what good would it do now?'"

"But it is so important we know, it could tell us so much about ourselves," I said. "Would they have anything shameful to hide? What do you think?"

"When I was little, I remember asking my grandfather why his nose was tall and long and why his skin was white while mine was brown and my nose flat. And you know what he said?" Cousin Olivia ventured excitedly. "He said, 'child, my mother was a Jew. Her family name was 'Yahya'.'"

"I remember Mother mentioning a long time ago," one of Aunt Delia's daughters said excitedly, "that Grandmother's maiden name was 'Yahya' and that she came from an honourable line of people from either 'Syria' or 'Iran'."

A clue given to the little girl, Olivia, about sixty years ago was a sensational revelation and suddenly our grandparents had a past that framed them, gave depth to their identities. And something extraordinary came to mind. While visiting the Holy Land on a pilgrimage the year before, I had experienced an unexpectedly strong sense of connection to that land and her people. While meditating along the Western Wall at the Temple Mount, a wave of sadness and love came over me, causing me to weep. Cousin Olivia's snippet of memory brought to light that spiritual encounter; an experience that may have indubitably linked me with my Jewish heritage.

That was all the history we have of Grandmother. I have created the rest in my mind. The Diaspora. It was a story which began hundreds of centuries ago in the Holy Land; a story of persecution and deprivation and, finally, of survival. My ancestors would have fled to Spain and in time, would have converted to Catholicism during the chaotic period of the Inquisition. They then would have become part of the great repatriation into Mexico when Spain set forth to colonise the world with the cross and the sword. A large contingent of Hispanic military and civilian personnel from Mexico was then shipped to the Philippines to begin a new colony there.

To be a Jew, to belong to the race that persecuted Christ and nailed Him on the cross, would have been a fearsome truth to bear if you were a Christian and living in a fervently Catholic society. Our Jewish heritage would have remained unknown if not for that fateful wake in 2009 when my cousins and I met again after decades of separation.

GRANDFATHER

When I was living in Bamnan, Grandfather's health deteriorated further and he spent most of his days in his hammock downstairs. It was cool there and with his hammock slung close to the store room, he had adequate shelter from the wind and rain. The little garden and the shrubbery close to the house gave him privacy, while the world continued on outside the wire mesh fence and quaint wooden gate.

My aunts said that I was Grandfather's favourite grandchild, though I didn't know that was so. He was undemonstrative and mostly kept to himself. But when I was a bit older and living with them in Bamnan with Elder Sister, I would often sit close by

and stay with him for a while after school to keep him company. Sometimes he looked at me and said my name in a funny sing-song way, “Doliet, Doliet,” then asked me to do something for him like fetch a glass of water, clean his clogs or when he was really unwell, to empty his spittoon. I would bring my blunt pencils to him to be sharpened with his Swiss knife. His difficulty breathing and his wheezing chest didn’t stop him from doing a fine job and my pencils were just as sharp and pointy as those done with a proper sharpener.

Often, I would watch in terror as Grandfather fought for every breath. He would set alight a portion of his asthma powder and herbs in a small tin, then bend over and inhale the thin smoke, painfully drawing it deep into his lungs. Then, exhausted, he’d lean back into his hammock, close his eyes, tears running down the side of his face, his chest heaving relentlessly. Grandfather’s chronic and severe asthma was an everyday reality in the household. He was left alone because that was what he preferred. His face was always resigned; no evocation of a soul buffeted with guilt or regret. If Grandfather had committed grave sins in his past, his lifelong illness would have been more than fair retribution.

Secretly, I liked to think that he was really fond of me. The adults in my family were fonder of the older children and the little ones. Children in the middle, like me and Little Sister were rarely fussed over. He was the only one who said my name in a special way and I was the only one who went to him to have their pencil sharpened. No matter what, though, I liked Grandfather a lot and I always felt sorry that he was not well. Because he was terrified that a chill would cause severe congestion, he rarely bathed. He had a special odour that I alone seemed not to mind. I liked how he and Father had the same voice, the same hands, and the same mannerisms. In their eyes I saw pain and joy, silent longing and fullness. Although, Grandfather smelt of sweet decaying earth while Father, who bathed daily, smelt of softly scented soap.

Towards the end of my first year’s stay in Bamnan, all was not well with Grandfather and one of his relatives. It was obvious that Grandfather’s lot was smaller by far than each of the two properties next door. One day, there was a big stir in the house when the cousin who owned the timber yard came around and told Grandfather that his property was gifted to him in a will by one of their deceased ancestors. Grandfather was asked to vacate the place. Shocked, he refused, claiming the property

was his mother's birthright, as well as the few hectares of a rice plantation called "*Tala*" or Star, which Father was working on.

Grandfather's mother came from a prominent family in Bambang and originally had much influence in the economy of the town as they owned a considerable amount of land. I suspect that being a woman with little education and who had been widowed early with two sons, Grandfather's mother was not knowledgeable with the processes of securing proper documentations of her inheritance. Did Grandfather produce a "deed of ownership" of his small lot to show his relatives, or had he simply relied on the words of his late mother? I suspect that to be so.

Being poor didn't deprive Grandfather and his brother of any dignity though. Though short in stature, he always carried himself with poise and confidence. He walked down the street like an elegant gentleman. The family's deep piety helped a lot in maintaining their morale and with Uncle Felipe's ordination to the priesthood, the sense of family pride soared. In those days, having a priest in the family counted for a lot. All members of the clan, young and old, rich and poor, would kiss his hands reverently.

However, the family conflict of the elders did not abate, although Uncle Felipe and Father kept their distance from it. In due course, Grandfather's spirits started to deteriorate with his health. He saw the conflict not only as a personal affront but more so as a violation of the memory of his beloved mother. In retrospect, I wonder when he was fighting for breath during his asthma attacks, with tears running down his face, if he was silently calling for his mother for relief and succor. When he looked at me with a kindly smile, did something in my features remind him of his mother?

As Grandfather's health continued to decline, he was moved upstairs in the *sala*, right under the statue of Christ the King. Uncle Felipe bought a hospital bed for him, together with plush pillows and fresh white linens. Our aunts nursed him around the clock, feeding him, propping him up with pillows so he could breathe easier. His relatives came to visit bringing gifts and nothing was mentioned about the family conflict.

Uncle travelled from his parish as often as he could to visit Grandfather, always bringing sweet delicacies from his parish; *turrone de casoy* and *yemas* (fudge). I'd stand

close by Grandfather's bed when he ate some of these, hoping he'd give me one but Aunt Delia kept telling me to go away. When she coaxed him to eat a *turrone* or a *yema*, he would sometimes say, "Give it to Little Julia."

"Ah, his favourite grandchild!" Aunt Innocenta would tease when he shared a sweet with me.

The time came when Uncle Felipe and the whole family were gathered together nearly every day. One late afternoon, Uncle came with some other priests and anointed Grandfather with oil, blessed him and said prayers with him and our aunts. Grandfather looked peaceful and content. Perhaps because he was a quiet and introspective man, he had been mostly left on his own in the past. At that time of his final illness, though, I noticed how much happier he looked when so much attention and love was being showered upon him by his family.

When the church bells rang at six o'clock one evening, Grandfather in his weak voice told us to gather around for the angelus and the rosary as he was getting tired and wanted to go to sleep. Aunt Delia led the prayers and was kneeling by his bed while my other aunts and Mother, Father and Grandmother and the rest of us were kneeling, sitting or standing on the floor around his bed. I remember how Grandmother and my aunts were praying fervently with their eyes focused on the luminous icon of Christ the King above Grandfather, as though they were about to weep. I felt tired watching after a while and sat at the foot of the bed half-asleep, but I heard Grandfather audibly saying all the responses in the prayers. He'd be quiet for a while and then I'd hear him again. And then once or twice, following the "Hail Marys", I heard him respond quite clearly, "*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*" He stopped responding altogether before the litany had finished.

After prayers, we were coaxed to be very quiet so as not to wake him. When my aunts realised he had died they fell on the floor weeping. Grandmother fainted. Father kissed Grandfather's hands and walked out into the yard. It was dark by then and the world was cool and still. All afternoon the sky had looked heavy, with sharp columns of sunlight occasionally breaking through the leaden clouds. At dusk, strong winds blew the rainclouds away, leaving behind a striking red sun.

Grandfather was laid to rest on a fine morning. Uncle Felipe was assisted by twenty other priests in a solemn funeral rite which was presided over by the bishop. As Grandfather's coffin was being taken out of the church, the bells tolled a mournful sequence. This was the picture I carry in my memory of when Grandfather passed away. None of his rich and influential relatives would have a funeral service as solemn and as distinct as Grandfather's when they died.

Several years after Grandfather's death, and in spite of his wishes that the family never leave his mother's house and lot, the family yielded to the pressure and vacated the small property. Besides, the house was getting old and rundown and Aunt Delia and her husband could not afford the repairs. By that time Grandmother, Aunt Blandina and Little Cousin were living with Uncle Felipe in a beautiful parish elsewhere.

Years later, while making a family tree of the clan to present at a planned reunion, Uncle Felipe and his cousins were unable to find information about Grandfather's paternal line. I remember in the past, on All Saints Day, Grandfather in spite of his illness, came without fail with the family to the cemetery to light candles on the graves of his brother and mother. There was never a grave there for his father. I was fifteen or sixteen when the extensive family tree was being made and I distinctly recall hearing them speculating that Grandfather and his brother Feliciano had been fathered by a priest, hence the secrecy and the reason for the small inheritance given to his mother. Cases like this were common during the colonial period and even long afterwards. Priests wielded a lot of influence in the community and people were quite tolerant with priestly indiscretions. Yet the convention of crime and punishment persisted, with the woman and her children getting the short end of the stick.

In his declining years, I ventured to ask Uncle Felipe what he thought about this former speculation, but he strongly denied any knowledge of it ever being spoken.

UNCLE FELIPE

Grandmother adored Uncle. He was her miracle child, surviving after five children before him died in infancy. He was his parents' beautiful eldest child, their obedient and

bright virgin boy; the shining star of their lives, whose survival in childhood they believed paved the way for five more children to be born.

Uncle Felipe was a good student and being the eldest, was encouraged to complete high school. His inclination to enter the priesthood afterwards was strongly endorsed by his very pious family. When he finally took his vows of celibacy and solemn spiritual marriage to the church, his responsibilities as carer and supporter of the family were passed on to Father.

Uncle appreciated the responsibility father inherited because of his choice of vocation and they remained very close throughout their lives. Uncle went on to become a very popular priest and was known for his work in promoting education and self-help programs for the poor in his parishes. As a young priest ministering to far-flung parishes, he worked hard to bring the church to the poor who were without means of transport; and he invented or developed a mobile altar from an old small bus. Later, Father showed his fellow farmers and tenants a newspaper clip of Uncle celebrating mass with a small congregation atop a converted bus, by the edge of a rice field under the shelter of a great mango tree. Uncle's interests in mechanics and electronics had been apparent since he was very young and this contributed to his achievements in his pastoral life. Grandmother would fondly tell the story of when Uncle was a young seminarian and was lent a movie camera and a projector. He filmed the extended family in Bamnan doing their chores in one day: collecting water from the well, tending the chicken coop, laundering by the well, cooking, having siesta...and who could forget the image of Great Aunt Matea who was a spinster—grey and bent, sweeping the yard? That night, everyone sat and watched mesmerised when a short movie about them was shown on Great Aunt's whitest bed sheet.

One of Uncle's major projects was building a vocational school for the benefit of the disadvantaged. Dressmaking, carpentry, cabinet making, animal husbandry and preserving and canning were taught by volunteers. In his early forties, the Vatican awarded Uncle with the title of 'Monsignor', in acknowledgement of his civic works.

I remember the occasion when the family attended that ceremony in a special rite at the cathedral. We were so proud. By that time, though, I really didn't know Uncle very well anymore; his status and works –in-progress had made him very busy, and he lived in a world separate from the rest of the family. To compensate for this, he

organised a family reunion every year which was held in his parish hall. Later on, as words about the reunion spread, members of the clan who attended increased. The rich members made contributions towards the celebration and organisation of the events. Once in one grand reunion, a distant cousin who was a top movie star and her family attended. This resulted in a raucous hour of excitement among the younger and older *provincianas* or poor relations from the province that milled around the celebrity, screaming and wanting photos taken with her. Finally, she had to leave the hall so lunch could be served. The beautiful Vilma Santos was respectfully asked not to come again.

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Within a year of Grandfather's death, Grandmother and Little Cousin went to live with Uncle Felipe. Aunt Blandina followed and became the dressmaking instructress in Uncle's vocational school until she got married. After many years caring for Grandfather and managing with very little money, Grandmother started blossoming and enjoying the second spring of her life. Managing the housekeeping in the presbytery of a prosperous parish suited her. Uncle indulged her passion for gardening and had a walled garden constructed for her. This garden had mini valleys and hills and water courses flowing down quaint canals. There were concrete statues of saints here and there, perhaps inspired by gardens he had seen in Italy and Spain—Uncle spoke fluent Spanish. Visiting this garden in my early teens was like visiting a slice of paradise. The lush tropical foliage of vegetables and the ornamental vines and shrubs as they rambled down and around hillets, rockeries and statues, offered many corners and nooks for quiet contemplations, and were frequented by many visitors.

The garden and a small menagerie of livestock outside supplied all the needs of the large household in the presbytery, even when it held large religious and civic festivities such as fiestas, retreats and conferences. During these events, cooks performed their magic in huge cooking pots from a makeshift kitchen outside. I remember a chief cook who would wave a hand over each steaming cauldron, smell it then adjust his seasoning to perfection. He had in the other hand a bottle of locally brewed liquor which he regularly took a swig from. By the time lunch or dinner was to be served, he was quite senseless. By that point, though, his job was done, the food was served and his helpers had only to tidy up.

This parish which was in Uncle Felipe's watch at the height of his career was located in a prosperous Hispanic-Pilipino town in Central Luzon. The two or three times in the year we visited there were the highlights of the year for the family. The church for me was closest to what is heavenly and you could hardly wait to explore it in solitary bliss. The choir loft was a favourite place to visit and from there you could climb the narrow winding stairs to the belfry. From the belfry, you saw the entire town; starting from the rotunda in the plaza below, to the large houses of the rich and the clustered housing and yards of the middle classes, and the workshops of the wood carvers and artisans who made religious statues in concrete, alabaster or Plaster of Paris. Beyond, in the distance, were the farmlands and modest huts of the poor.

To listen to the organist practising in the choir loft was always wonderful. From up there, you were able to touch the figures of the murals where they ended. You could also watch worshippers deeply immersed in their prayers in the pews below. They seemed encased in invisible cloisters, totally detached from the world around them—that world of vibrant beauty which you thought only you saw and loved. The rows upon rows of gilded arches and niches on the entire wall behind the marble altar, each niche holding a statue of a saint; the lofty dome where light flooded in, the dazzling colours of the lead windows, the movement of biblical tales in the murals overhead—all of these brought awe and wonderment your heart could scarcely hold.

During our visits to see Uncle Felipe and Grandmother, I would always find the chance to hang around near Uncle's bedroom door so I could hear the soft music from his phonograph: *Salve Regina, Veni Creator Spiritus, Agnus Dei...Miserere Mei*. I followed Aunt Blandina when she had things to do for him in his room, like organising his papers or just tidying up his desk. I wandered around looking and touching everything I could: his tall hospital bed, a gift from a doctor friend, filled with plump pillows and cushions because like Father and Grandfather, he was an asthmatic and had to sleep propped up in bed. Sitting on his bed, you could see the horizon and the gardens through the wide windows. There was a clutter of electric chords and mechanical stuff on one side of the room. There were shelves packed with reels of recorded music.

Among the people who served in Uncle Felipe's parish household was Francesca who later became his personal assistant and housekeeper. She started working in the presbytery as one of three young maids under Grandmother's wings. Francesca

was very cheerful and solicitous, with sparkling eyes. It was hard to believe how strong and hardworking she was; you'd feel so frail beside her. It was even more inspiring when you remembered that she was only a few years older than you. I liked Francesca from the start and when we came to visit, I'd always look for her. "Oh, Elder Sister Francina, there you are!" I'd exclaim when I saw her.

The times I was allowed to stay for short summer vacations with Grandmother were special occurrences. This was also the time when childhood was metamorphosed into adolescence. It was always good to be with Francesca because I could tell her things I could not tell anyone else. I followed her around and tried helping her in what she was doing. At night we slept in the same cool bamboo bed across the room from Grandmother's. Francesca would tell stories about her family, but then was mostly too tired to chat too long and soon fell asleep. I'd watch her for a while and study her childlike features—her long black hair lying in a heap on her pillow, as though it had a life of its own.

Summer school vacations were also the times in a dynamic parish when retreats and other spiritual formation programs took place. I liked being a part of the action, to feel grown-up. I'd perhaps help with the serving at mealtimes, help tidy up, or better still give a hand in the gift shop downstairs where rosaries, prayer books, religious medallions and statuettes, veils, and ornaments and fancy things were sold to visitors. Or you could simply withdraw from it all and just watch and listen.

The presbytery was an extensive old building that smelt of hardwood, candle wax and incense. There were large windows with crafted iron grates so that each was like a small balcony, and you could sit there and watch the world going by outside; the activities in the plaza, the peddlers; or watch a group of finely dressed people congregating for a wedding or christening. Or you could sit there and dream of bygone days when the church and these adjoining buildings had just been built: the huge thick white washed concrete walls and arches that carried the heavy tiled roof; the Spanish friars with the patronage of many prosperous Hispanic-Pilipino families going about their business in their horse-drawn carriages; the festivities and grand balls; the teeming spirituality from worshippers throughout generations—the activities of the past and present moving together, dancing together, and singing as one—and you in the midst of it all.

One evening, after a busy day helping with chores for a group of seminarians, I left Francesca's side and escaped to the deserted main hall overlooking the plaza. It was the eve of the town's fiesta and fireworks had just started. While absorbed in the spectacle of fire, light and explosions, I suddenly became aware of a young seminarian standing beside me. We had caught each other's eyes several times during the last two days while I was helping serve the buffet table at meal times. On a few occasions, Francesca and I would watch the group from the little window upstairs as they went into a cloister for quiet reflection.

"They look like angels in their white soutanes," commented Francesca.

"Oh, look at that one, he's so handsome!"

And then, suddenly, there he was standing tall next to me.

"Oh, it's my first proper fireworks," I said shyly. He looked at me very closely for a few moments. His face shone, his eyes welled with tenderness and confusion. Then, without uttering a word, he bowed slightly and quietly walked away. I was left alone standing in the softened light. A profound sensation rolled under my skin and flooded through my face and down my torso. At fifteen I became truly aware of my sensuality. I stayed by the window and watched the display to the end. Francesca was asleep when I joined her. The night was warm and a light breeze carrying smoky scents from the fireworks wafted in through the window. I pulled my bed sheet gently over me and cuddled my soft pillow close to my face. A sweet melancholy filled my heart. And I fell asleep bathed in the afterglow of the gaze of two exquisite brown eyes.

The next morning, I met his gaze with a smile when I brought a large bowl of fruits to the table. This was the last day of the retreat. I saw him again at lunch, obscured in the din of voices and movement. The reserve and silence required during their three days of retreat had been lifted. Then he was swept away with the group, not to be seen again. I never knew his name. I never heard his voice. When he left, the place became bereft of angels and joy. I hung around Francesca. I could not bear the weight of my gloom on my own. "I shall love you forever," I thought to myself, over and over again. "Oh, how I love you!"

Francesca never married and continued to work in Uncle's household until his retirement. Her hair had turned grey by then but her eyes were still bright and cheerful.

Uncle spoke to her with a friendly yet polite familiarity. They were friends and equals. I remember hearing Uncle Felipe telling Father one day of his wish that priests should be allowed to marry. He was close to retirement and anxious with the thought of getting old and infirm and cared for by strangers who would talk and coo over him as if he was a baby. At that point, he had just returned from visiting the old and ailing Bishop. Father didn't know what to say.

After retirement, Uncle Felipe went to America to be a chaplain for a wayside chapel in the Bronx for several years, became a US citizen and only came home after Francesca died. In spite of many illnesses, he lingered long in a home for retired priests, outliving his brother by a decade and his mother by a few years. Uncle Felipe's hair was hardly grey and his features remained youthful. He chuckled the way I remembered it when I was a child. Like Father's chuckles. I remember when he visited our house by the river or the family house in Bamban, and how everyone fussed over him. I remember how I thought he looked like an image sent directly from God, in his long white cassock, his tonsure, like a crown of saintliness on top of his head, his long plump fingers, so soft to hold and to kiss. Uncle Felipe was enchanting.

When I saw him for the last time, he was lying in a little room with his old and odd electronic gadgets and books stocked up in every corner, attended by a male servant and devoted nieces. Though he could not get out of bed on his own, he was still planning the next meal and his next grand project to help the poor. In the end, it was a melancholy sight to see that worn out figure surrounded with his worldly clutter, like cast aside remnants from his shining days of beauty and fruitful labours—of longings he kept close to his heart but did not hold value anymore.

"I might be able to get on the fishing trawler one of these days," he said as I was leaving. Then he said, "Don't forget to pray for Francine, did you know she died?" He was holding a plain wooden cross against his heart. His bed sheets betrayed the odour of illness and decay. Outside his window the garden ran wild and the bougainvillea blossomed endlessly. The frangipanis cast their fragrance, weeping and rejoicing all at once. Outside his door I heard the CD player playing a familiar hymn: *Salve Regina*.

LITTLE SISTER

A year after Grandfather died, Second Elder Sister was ready to go to high school and Grandmother took her back home to Mother and Father. Younger Sister was sent with her to take Elder Sister's place. Younger Sister and I were, however, not enough to take Elder Sister's spot in the scheme of things. Elder Sister had been in Grandmother's care from infancy and she adored her. After she left Bamban, Grandmother became withdrawn and distant, perhaps because she did not like to invest strong love and affection again, considering the weight of her emotional emptiness at that time.

I was ten and Little Sister was eight. On her first day at my old school, Little Sister went on her own like I had done the year before. Being timid, it must have been a distressing day for her. It was easier for me to start elementary school in another part of town as I was going with my old classmates. Often when I sat on the back steps late in the day, Little Sister would sit next to me and cry. We became very close and started looking out for each other.

In Grandmother's house, we learnt to live in our own little world. I knew what not to do or say to avoid angering the adults outside that world. We did our chores and strove hard to behave well from fear of being scolded. There was neither tenderness nor much concern for our well-being. When other children laughed at our dirty and frayed hems, it aroused the pride in us. When class mates commented on my mucky nose and grubby outfits, I learnt to improve my hygiene and made sure Little Sister did the same.

It was not that Grandmother or our Aunts didn't care about us, but perhaps they thought that we were old enough to look after ourselves. Our aunts were in their late teens and were young themselves and believed the world should revolve around them as young people do. They saw how their richer relatives lived and they had very little compared to them. While Uncle Felipe paid for their university fees, they perhaps expected to receive more spending money from Father, as they might have thought was their justifiable right, because he was working the small family rice plantation in *Tala*. He was married, with many children, though, and there was not much left for them after harvest, which came twice a year. To make ends meet, Father had to work other plantations for other landowners and contracted other farmers to help with the work.

For one reason or another, I sensed at that time that we were considered Mother's daughters and that she and her children were getting all the profit from their land. There were occasions when Aunt Blandina would hiss at us, especially when visiting for the weekend from college. Little Sister would be so hurt, especially as she would run to Aunt Blandina when she came through the gate, crying, "Auntie, Auntie!" Before long we just watched and stood aside quietly when Aunt Blandina came. There was an instance when she swung a soup ladle at my head and the coconut shell scoop broke away and hit the wall. We remained quiet and defenceless during such times.

"Oh, poor girl, you broke the ladle on her head," said Aunt Delia.

"Well, she should have ducked!" Aunt Blandina said, a bit surprised by her violent turn, though not in the least apologetic.

They talked unkindly about Mother in the presence of Little Sister and me, as if we didn't matter. Grandmother, who adored her daughters and spoilt them as she did Second Elder Sister, would not say anything. I thought, perhaps, she agreed with them.

One day Grandmother came home from visiting Aunt Innocenta and came back to Bamban with Aunt's little daughter in tow. Little Cousin was five years of age, very cuddly and with pretty curls on her head. She quickly took over Grandmother's heart and Grandmother was happy again. Little Cousin would take our things and cried if we took them back, then Grandmother would scold us. She would do the naughtiest things, like pinching us or kicking us away, but Grandmother and Aunt Blandina would only laugh and ignore her. Day after day, resentment mounted inside us with the meanness of Little Cousin's actions and Grandmother's indifference. There were times when you would be close to praying that Little Cousin, in fact, all of them, die or crawl like snakes but you couldn't because you didn't want to go to Hell.

One day while Little Cousin was lying on the floor playing, I tripped over her and my knee landed deliberately on her belly. My hand held tightly on to her curly hair, pulling it down. She screamed with pain and Grandmother came running to her. I said it was an accident and Grandmother believed me. That night I prayed the *Confiteor* very sincerely, so that I could be forgiven should I die in my sleep. Again, I experienced that power which worked for my benefit because I lied. I could be taken in front of everyone on Judgement day and God would rag me in front of all His creations as a lying piece of

shit or even worse, I could go to hell should I die before making a confession — *Oh my God, I'm heartily sorry for having offended thee. I detest all of my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. But most of all because I offended thee who art all good and deserving of all my love...*

Little Sister's presence connected me to a home that was lost. Mother and Father had sold our beautiful little house by the river and built a two-storey bungalow closer to town. Every time we went home with Grandmother to our new house, I would be full of sadness when the bus passed our former dwelling place, as though someone I loved had died. At night I huddled close to Little Sister and felt stronger. In my mind I was my Little Sister's protector, but as time went on, she was the one who watched over me. She had a fiery character and she would jump at anyone who made the mistake of teasing or bullying me. One time on our way home from school, two girls made fun of me and my dress.

"O, look at you, wearing a sack dress!" said one of the girls.

"Yes, you look like a walking sack of rice," said the other.

"Leave her alone!" Little Sister cried.

"Hah, snotty face!" said the first girl.

"Nah, who is the brave girl, then?" taunted another. Little Sister pulled the top of the girl's dress and tore it to the waist.

"There, you wear nothing but rags!" she said and then we ran home as fast as we could. Aunt Delia gave Little Sister's bottom a few whacks with her slipper after the girl's mother came to the house and complained.

One time we were fighting over something in the kitchen and we were pushing and shoving each other. Being the stronger one, Little Sister gave me a big shove and I fell backward and my head hit the corner of the cupboard. Blood trickled down the back of my head and onto my neck. Her face went pale. I would never have told on Little Sister and risk her being punished.

Life in Bamban gradually improved. Little Cousin and Little Sister, who were closer in age, became friends. Our aunts had graduated from college and came back

home, each with a framed photograph of their pretty selves wearing togas and caps. Instead of looking for jobs in the city, they stayed in the security of home and did dressmaking, which fitted the womanly ideals of our family. In a society where there were not many opportunities for women, the university diploma was foremost a status symbol and made a good credential in finding an appropriate match for marriage.

With our aunts back home, the front room was bright and airy again and the two of them were always busy cutting dress patterns and sewing. Many young ladies came to them with pretty materials, chose styles from catalogues and had their measurements taken. With the aunts' friends coming around, the house was lively at last and Grandmother was content.

Our aunts were a bit older by then and more cheerful. Little Sister and I quite forgot their earlier behaviour. We happily ran errands for them at whatever time of the day or evening. Aunt Blandina became more lady-like and didn't brandish a stick or ladle at us again when she got angry. Occasionally, she even took us with her when she went to see friends or relatives out of town. On one occasion, she took me along to Manila. We caught buses, walked the busy streets and then we went to the university to pick up her diploma. This was my first visit to the city and I was enchanted. Later in the day, after collecting luggage from her boarding house, we took a taxi to the bus terminal and then had the long trip back to Bamban.

It was very late in the night when we got off the bus. It was one and a half block walk to the house and Aunt Blandina needed Aunt Delia to help carry the luggage. Aunt Blandina decided to leave me by the roadside with the bags to fetch her sister. I sat on the suitcase and waited. It was a night cloaked in the darkest shadows I'd ever seen. I had to pee but was too scared to walk away, so I peed next to the bags. That was when I saw the heavens. There was a cloud of stars blanketing the night sky, and in the blue-black darkness above, stars were raining down and streaming across the horizon, leaving white trails of light behind them. I sat there, a solitary witness to an extended celestial display I would not see again all my life.

Aunt Blandina had changed into comfortable clothes and shoes when she returned back with Aunt Delia and Grandmother, who was carrying a torch. Not once did they look up at the skies.

There was another memorable day when my aunts took me along with their friends on an excursion to a dredging boat at Masantol River. A motorised dingy took us to the large vessel in the middle of the wide river and our party was warmly received by the captain, who gave us a tour of his craft and its robust digging machine. We were provided with a buffet lunch and everyone was happy and friendly. After lunch, there was an unexpected heavy downpour that lasted for some time and we could not leave the boat until the rain had eased, which was mid-afternoon. Unfortunately, for one reason or another, the dingy that brought us to the vessel earlier couldn't come and get us. We had to walk to shore over the huge pipelines that conveyed the silt from the riverbed to the levee at the banks. I was walking behind Aunt Blandina and holding on to her skirt.

“Stop bawling and pulling me down or we'll fall off,” she said angrily. Aunt Blandina was also frightened.

“Oh, Auntie, I'm scared. We're going to die for sure. O, we're going to fall off and drown,” I cried.

I could hardly see through my tears and kept wiping my nose on my sleeves. When we were halfway to the shore, the two of us fell into the river and every move to get out would sink us deeper into the sludge. Everyone started screaming and calling for help. My bawling made Aunt even more nervous. Some men appeared, running skilfully on the pipelines to our rescue. I was pulled up first, followed by Aunt Blandina. She was holding on to the shoulders of one of the men who led her to the shore, while another carried me in his arms. When I was set down onto dry land, I could hardly walk with the weight of the mud on my clothes and skin. Soon another spell of wind and rain came and I was half-running, half-walking behind my aunts. The rain pelted the back of my legs and I started howling again.

I cannot remember how that day ended except for the part when we were inside a hut and we washed the mud off ourselves. My teeth were knocking against each other because I had a chill. I stopped crying when a warm bedsheet was wrapped around me.

Aunts Blandina and Delia were very religious and devoted to the Virgin Mary. They were conscientious with their novenas and prayed the angelus twice a day. Aunt Delia was the saintlier of the two. When we said the Nicene Creed just before the rosary

in the evening, she would kneel with her arms stretch out to the sides like the crucified figure on the cross and pray so fervently that her head hung to one side. She made sure we did the same and I stayed on my knees as long as possible so I too could have black thick skin on my knees like her.

Every Wednesday afternoon we all went to church for the novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help. We brought flowers from Grandmother's little garden and sometimes Little Sister and I took oleander flowers overhanging over the fences of people's yards and placed them on the altar in front of the icon of the Madonna and child. I liked those afternoons at church because I knew all the hymns and sang them loudly. Then we played by the grotto of Our Lady in the middle of the nice garden in front of the church, while our aunts talked with other young men and women in the parish.

It's very peculiar how that church in Bamban appears in my dreams to this day. The varnished pews, the black and white floor tiles, the altar and statues of saints and the Holy Child or Santo Niño, the stations of the cross—the christenings, and the weddings which were always so splendid. The priest at that time was a tall and stern man with a voice to go with it. On one occasion, there was an evening service and we were with Grandmother. My friends from my religion class were there too with their parents. After the service, the elders went to the presbytery for a meeting while we children started playing with the organ.

“Pedal harder, harder!” shouted Ruby as she banged away at the keyboard. I watched fascinated as two other children worked the foot pedals faster and harder until there was a big bang and the pedals fell off their hinges. We all dispersed quietly and I went to Grandmother. The next morning, Grandmother and some elders were talking about the broken organ and of how the Padre was complaining about “those” unruly children. Since that time, we children stayed away from the organ or the priest would start glaring at us. I would also pull my friend Betsy away every time she lifted the beaded tunic of the small statue of the *Santo Nino* or Holy Infant, to look at the little round protrusion between his legs.

It was soon the time when Aunt Delia said I was ready for my first communion. I knew all my prayers by heart and had mastered my catechism book. It was decided that Grandmother would take me to the dawn mass for my first communion one Sunday. She always preferred to hear the first mass as it was cooler and less crowded then. My

aunts preferred to go to the mid- morning masses so they could meet up with their friends. Besides, Little Sister and Little Cousin were too young to get up that early. I was wearing the long white frock Aunt Delia had sewn and one of her pretty white lace veils, which was pinned on top of my head with some flowers she had picked from the garden the previous evening. It was a special day for me as I believed I was receiving Jesus for the first time, but I felt disappointed because I was the only child to received first communion that day. I wished it was a more joyful occasion, I wished for some fanfare—a crowd to witness my special day, and to be kneeling on my own decorated little pew.

When it was time for communion, Grandmother took me with her and we knelt along the communion rails by the side. I was close to tears with self-pity until I suddenly got worried that the *padre* would surely yell at me if he suspected I was one of the children present when the organ was broken. I wished a gush of wind would snuff out my candle so he wouldn't recognise my face, even if the candle looked so pretty with the white satin ribbon Aunt Delia had tied around it. My fears and disappointment were swept away though when the *padre* walked down the altar and purposely came straight to me accompanied by two altar boys in long white tunics. He gave me my first holy communion and paused for a moment before turning to the rest of the congregation. I saw his eyes lit with kindness.

Grandmother would always say if you put yourself last, you often will be placed in front if you deserved it. On my first communion day, I was certainly placed first before everyone else. I was also convinced that the priest hadn't recognised me or if he did, he had forgiven me. When we returned to our pew, I closed my eyes and prayed so ardently that I felt a beam of grace flooding down on me. I didn't spit all morning for fear that some bits of Jesus would be cast to the ground.

After a week, my aunts took Little Sister and I to a photography studio for my formal first communion picture. I was kneeling on a little white pew with large white ribbons pinned on either side. I held my communion candle in one hand and a prayer book in the other. A cross was hanging on the wall in the background over my head. My first communion picture is long lost now but I will remember that image all my life. It is not the choreographed composition of a perfect First Holy Communion photograph that the idiosyncratic memory remembers, but that of a little girl in a simple long white

frock, wearing a white veil pinned with fresh flowers on her hair, looking ahead and smiling.

Not long after that, Aunt Delia got married and Grandmother, Little Cousin and Aunt Blandina went to live with Uncle Felipe in his new parish. Little Sister and I stayed on in Bamban with Aunt Delia and her husband to finish our elementary schooling. Suddenly, the house felt quiet and empty. Little Sister and I became even closer to one another. Our new uncle, who was a teacher didn't find a teaching job for quite a while, and was often moody, so we all depended a lot on Father and Uncle Felipe for support. Aunt Delia became close to Little Sister, especially when she felt unhappy with her new husband. Little Sister was always eager to please and was very good at helping around the house, especially pumping the water when Aunt was doing the laundry. Auntie helped her with her lessons and taught her all her prayers. She was soon ready for First Communion.

There were Sundays, after church when Aunt Delia and her husband spent the day with his family a few blocks away from the church. There were also times when it was just the two of us and we were hungry and we'd scrape burnt rice from the night before from the bottom of the pan, and ate it with water and salt. One time, we were sent home from church with six little bread rolls or *pan de sal*, which we ate. Uncle was cross afterwards because we ate all of them.

We got used to being on our own throughout the day on Sundays, did our chores then played happily together inventing games. We continued to listen and learn more songs from Great Uncle Emilio's radio and phonograph, and we pretended to be actresses and singers. The kitchen table was the stage and most of the time, Little Sister was happy to be the audience. I'd stand on the table with the old broom for the microphone or guitar then sang and play-acted to our hearts' desire. She would applaud, yell or call out criticisms. We would laugh out loud, so happy to be on our own.

~

Little Sister and I share a special bond. Even now, her strong will has not mellowed, in spite of being a nun and a missionary for over forty years. When we spend holidays together back home, we still argue a bit. Nevertheless, I love her taking over the household and am inspired by her loyalty to Mother. She cooks, and with our loyal

old servant, cleans the house endlessly. I call her a fanatic when I lose an argument and she calls me a harebrained infidel. Then we laugh at ourselves.

When Little Sister wakes up early to say her matins, she sits in the far corner of the room with only a little light so that I'm not woken up. When she finishes, she wakes me up and we get ready to go to mass. I hold on to her as we walk the unpaved lanes to church like we did when we walked to church as little girls in Bamban.



Figure 3 In front of Uncle Felipe's Audio System. Eldest Brother, Eldest Sister, Second Eldest Sister and Me.

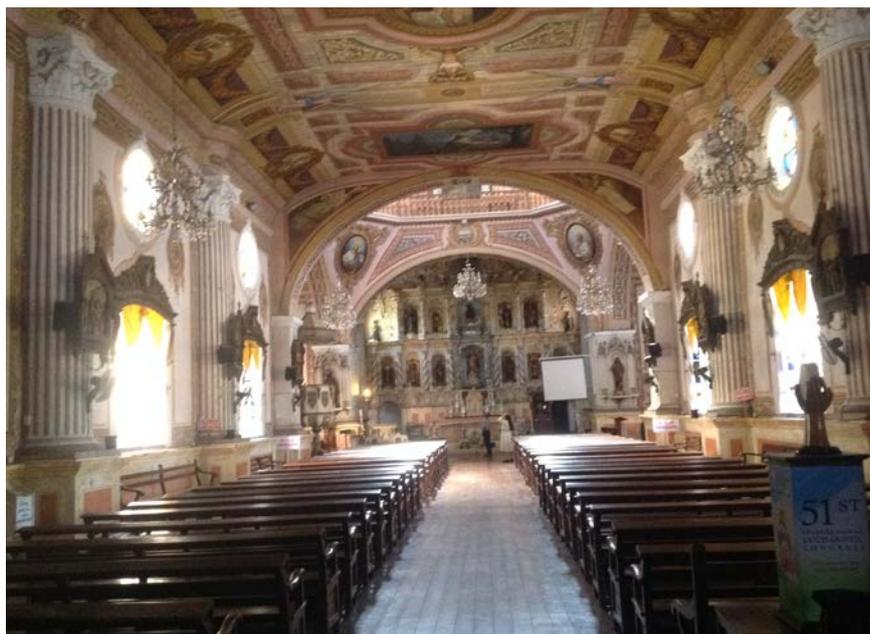


Figure 4. The beautiful church in Uncle Felipe's parish

CHAPTER FOUR:

A LUNCH WITH YOLLY

Live in simple faith...

Just as this trusting cherry

Flowers, fades and falls.

(A haiku by Issa)

“I’ll cook salmon head *sinigang* tomorrow. Come for lunch, yes? I know it’s your favourite. Colin and I are going to the Fisherman’s Co-op very early in the morning. I’ll buy two salmon heads—very fresh. Just for you and me,” she says.

“Oh, my favourite! Yolly, of course, I’ll come.”

“How yous feelin? Homesick still?”

“Mmm, a bit. One doesn’t feel complete somehow coming back from visiting home, you know what I mean? You don’t feel whole when you’re over there and you don’t feel whole when you’re over here.”

“Ah, you can do nothin’ about it. *Yan ang palad natin*. - It’s our destiny-. Must try to be happy whatever. We have good life ‘ere and home is ‘ere now.”

~

It’s been just a week since I returned from visiting my aged mother and the family back home. As planned, I was there for All Saints’ Day, the festival held on November 1st each year when families gather in the cemetery to celebrate their dead. This yearly festival is a day of prayer and merriment; a day spent reconnecting with the past while treasuring the present. It’s a joyful yet poignant event that I was absent from for so many years and which I had been looking forward to enjoying once more with the extended family. How wonderful it was to see Mother at age ninety, still enjoying making wreaths—one for each of our departed loved ones. I was very young when I last watched her creating works of art with flowers on All Saints’ Day. To watch her timeworn fingers

still able to work deftly with wires and blooms this time around was inspiring...it felt like visiting childhood again.

~

Yolly seems to know when to call and when to offer comfort with her food and company. She wants to hear all my news, but most of all, she knows I'm having that after-travel-from-home kind of empty feeling. She is always there for me, Yolly. She is as usual, my emotional bridge between home from far away and home back here. I have so much to tell her.

Why is it that one's links to one's roots and one's past seem to get stronger as one gets older? Why is it that every journey back to one's place of birth becomes a sentimental journey where you are at once a native and a stranger? Why is it that as one gets older, one has recurring dreams of images and landscapes from the past? Back here in our small town in suburban Newcastle, Yolly and I had been trying to answer these questions. Certainly, we shall be talking about it again at lunch today. It will be just the two of us and the thought of her salmon head *sinigang* already fills me with anticipation. Only Yolly could cook *sinigang* here in Australia that is as good as the one cooked back home.

There was a time when fish heads were thrown out or given away free at the Fish Co-op. Now, one can even buy them at Woolies for what Yolly complains is an exorbitant price. Fresh fatty heads of trout or salmon make the best *sinigang*. Cleaned and then cooked in tamarind broth and seasoned with whole green chilies and fish sauce; a soup to die for, especially when Yolly cooks it with vegetables from her garden: small round green aubergines, snake beans, okra and tender baby taros. It is a sour-salty soup which, when eaten with steaming rice, makes a heartening full meal.

Yolly prefers to clean houses for a living. The other year she finished a course in caring for the aged. She reported for work in a nursing home one day and resigned the next. The paperwork involved at the end of the day intimidated her.

"I prefer to do my work then get my pay. *Simple lang, walang problema!* No worries submitting papers for tax returns, no GST bullshet. Don't matter if the pay is little," she said.

I suspect she's a bit dyslexic and deciphering written words, especially in English, is difficult for her. Earlier on, and needing a car to get a job, she sat for a multiple choice test for her L plate. She went to several RTA offices and finally passed on her fourth try. A new car was already waiting in the garage by then and she had to get her license. With a little help from friends to get through the learner's manual, she was ready for her driving lessons. After just one driving test, Yolly got her license. "Ahh, I only rode on the back of a carabao when I was a kid, now, I drive a car!" she said triumphantly.

Yolly's veggie garden is her pride and joy, her enduring connection to home, which is a remote village in the northern Philippines. Her house and garden evokes so much of the cultural spirit that resonates with hospitality, grace and the respect for tradition. Going to her house is like a trip back home. When a group of us Pilipinas get together at her place for lunch or dinner, we drop our guard and start speaking loudly, as if we're talking with someone from across the rice paddy. We put aside the knives and forks and eat with our fingers, we tell jokes, and we talk about our folks back home. We talk about them with fondness and love. And longing.

After dessert is served and if there's time, the younger ones start dancing. Their figures petite and lithe, so suited to dance. Or the karaoke set is attached to the TV and everyone has a go at singing. But most of all we speak Tagalog, our common language. There is that reassuring spirit of freedom—stolen hours that transcend separation and distance. Here in this place, we balance our lives on fledgling roots at first, seeking nurture and connection. Roots which before long become steady and strong—all of us are patriotic and loyal Australians. Here too, is home. When a group of us gather and eat together, or worship together, we find a golden thread that is familiar and sacred. And when we part, we do so with the spirit of solace and wholeness. And strength.

Sometimes, like today, when I arrive a bit early at Yolly's for lunch, the smell of her cooking transports me back in time—my hurried steps as I walked home from school at lunchtime, while the scents of sautéing onion and garlic or frying salted fish drifted from kitchens along the narrow lanes and hung in the humid air. It also reminds me of my grandmother's kitchen in a remote presbytery around that time of the day, and on late afternoons before the Angelus hour. Scents which in certain vulnerable moods and state of mind, invite poignant recollections. A longing to reconnect with my past.

It's nearly midday now and Yolly doesn't know I've arrived. Coming around the side gate, I steal into her vegie patch, admiring the young snake beans hanging through the lattices. Next to the clumps of taro is a row of okra flushed with tiny yellow flowers, here and there a fruit is sprouting out. Now, here are two rows of aubergines with their large leaves and tiny purple flowers—so pretty but very prickly. Ampalaya vines cover the back fence.

Now, I remember Grandmother's garden by a river. I am walking beside her with my own little bamboo basket slung over my arm, half-full of the leafy treasures we have just collected. I'm not yet five years old. The garden is as expansive as a dream, stretching out to the river and to the sky. Grandmother and Grandfather are living in the presbytery in Telabanca, a remote village in Central Luzon. Uncle Felipe has just taken his priestly vows and this is his first assignment. You have to take a long bumpy bus ride, and then cross a wide shallow river in a *gareta*—a large carabao-drawn cart, to get there. Telabanca means “like a boat,” because that is how that village looks like when viewed from across the water. Part of the village juts out into the river like a long fishing boat half nestling on the black volcanic soil. Grandmother, Grandfather, Second Elder Sister and two servants live with Uncle to look after him and his household.

Grandmother took Second Elder Sister in her care when she was just three, soon after Baby Brother was born. By that time there were five of us and Eldest Brother was just ten. Mother's hands were full and Grandmother wanted to help.

Please, I want to see Second Elder Sister, I plead again and again. It is just before the monsoon season when Father takes me along for a visit. Crossing the river in a *gareta* during the rainy season can be difficult even if the cart's wheels are wide as they are tall. The heartiest water buffalo will at times refuse to wade into the muddy torrents. There are stories of drowning and Mother is worried.

After two nights Father has to get back home and agrees to leave me behind so that I can spend more time with Second Elder Sister. While she's at school in the mornings I spend long hours with Grandmother in her garden, finding which plant is fruiting today and how much these have grown from the day before. Now she's planting new seedlings, poking little holes in the soft soil with her forefinger. She squats lower as she gently pushes a seedling down so that it will root firmly into the earth, and then she gives it a name. Each plant and tree in the garden has the name of one of the many women she

knows with many children, invoking each plant—fruit or vegetable—to be fruitful and abundant as well. You are Clara...you are Lucia... you are Petra... you are Tecla...your name is Serapina! When Grandmother is done, she gets up with a groan, putting her hands on her lower back. She brushes off the dirt on the seat of her *saya*. She places a hand on my shoulder as she struggles to straighten her back. I hold my shoulder steady as we slowly head back to the house. How wonderful to have Grandmother all to myself! She and I in this garden, walking together under the generous arc of the sky where clouds hung high like wind-swept lace.

I remember one particular morning: we are in the garden harvesting vegetables for the table that day. But Grandmother always finds something to do here and there and I have to wait. Now she's bent down raking the dark volcanic soil around her seedlings with her fingers, her hands look strong and white against the darkly earth. "Grandmother, I'm as hungry as a piglet!" I say. She chuckles and continues with her task. I sit on a rock watching the ducks dabbling in the water. The ducks' pen extends far into the shallow waters of the river. Mother ducks glide along serenely. Around them, ducklings float about like little yellow and brown boats on a gently rippling surface. A moist breeze brushes around me, bringing with it the scents of the river and of foliage and fruits, yielding their sweetness and fullness to the sun, of the distant rain and of *bacalao* or dried salted cod cooking in the kitchen.

When the monsoon rains fall for several days, the river reaches close to the back door of the presbytery, and ducks and ducklings sometimes waddle onto the earthen floor of the kitchen. Quite often, we have duck adobo, a dish Grandfather particularly liked. A mature duck is slayed and dressed by the cook. The meat is stewed slowly on a very low heat in vinegar, garlic, pepper, bay leaf and soy sauce. During the last half hour of cooking, young potatoes, the gizzards and the liver are added.

Grandmother would mix some soft newly cooked rice with bits of meat, mashed potato from the adobo, and a bit of the sauce which glistens with duck fat. She deftly picked mouthfuls of food with her fingers and then popped these one after another into the eager mouths of Elder Sister and me, making sure we ate enough. Second Elder Sister ate very little, to Grandmother's consternation, and Grandmother would always tell her, "You must eat like your little sister, look how chubby her cheeks are!" While Second

Elder Sister would always eat less than Grandmother wanted her to, I could always, always eat more.

~

“Aii, *halina, halina.*” Come inside, come inside. “Aah, staring into space, yous dreamin’?” Yolly calls out.

She meets me at the back door. The smell of *sinigang* and of the jasmine rice cooking fills the kitchen. I watch her during our meal. Yolly loves her food as she loves life. She is strong and stout. I feel small and insignificant next to her.

I like seeing strong women like Yolly. She helps clean my house from top to bottom for five hours, with only a short break for a strong cup of coffee and some biscuits. Then, after our lunch together, she drives home and potters in her garden, perhaps mow her small lawn, then cook tea before finally having a shower. “A wash well-earned,” she’d say.

She was a new bride when I first met her; a shy young woman who had just arrived with her husband from Manila. She spoke little English and when she laughed a hand always covered her mouth. She would stick to this habit long after her dentures filled the gap in her mouth.

Yolly has matured into a confident middle-aged woman, looking assured and stylish in the clothes she buys at end-of-season sales or from St Vinnie’s, where she works as a volunteer. She remains careful with her money and treasures her material possessions like crystals, which could break easily and suddenly amount to nothing. Her larder is stocked as if famine is imminent.

Today, as always, I marvel at the tidiness of her house. Everything looks clean yet cosy. Being childless, her nurturing instincts are focused on housekeeping, cooking and gardening. She cleans clients’ houses like she would her own: dusting shelves, ornaments and crystals, then putting these back with pride, as if they are her own treasures. She rubs oil or polish on wooden bench tops and tables with deliberate yet graceful strokes like an accomplished conductor leading his orchestra. At times I secretly watch her when she helps me clean my house and every time, I’m inspired by the serenity with which she does her work. There is an aura of innocence and acceptance in her movements that

exudes grace and strength. It's as if those tables, floors, shelves and ornaments are friends in need of nursing — and deserving to be cared for. Yet, she would always tell me that her industry is a result of her need to perspire.

“One needs to expel all the ill humours from one's system. It's the only way to be healthy,” she says.

What remembrances, what memories these objects in the house and in her tasks must conjure in her mind? Does she daydream a lot, like I do? Catching fragments of memories here and there— sorrowful and joyful fragments that make up the DNA of a life— a soul. “We're both Cancerians. Peas in the same pod,” she says, “*Hindi tayo kumpleto kung wala tayong pamilya at pamamahay.*” - Home and family make us complete.

I agree. How often does the mind wander back to one's childhood when a particular object in the home— a scent, a flavour, a word, a play of colour, or a melody triggers this or that closet in your mind to open quite spontaneously— distilled nuggets from the past... non-existent, yet vivid in your memory? Sometimes, when I wake up, for example, on a sunny morning and see the colours of the rainbow reflected on the wall as a shaft of light strikes a crystal vase on the shelf — a key turns in my mind and I am in Telabanca once more. It is mid-morning and the sacristan's wife is cleaning the silver and crystal cruets in the sacristy. Her long black hair is tied up in a knot on top of her head; her jolly and kind chatter fills the room. She puts the sacramental vessels back on the shelf by a tall window, and a shaft of light plows through the glass, spraying rainbows on the opposite wall, the rainbows lengthening as the sun sails past.

And there on that afternoon while Grandmother is having her siesta and Uncle and the sacristan are away, I enter the sacristy alone and inspect the vestments and ceremonial cassocks hanging in a teak wardrobe. Black, green, white and purple satin materials, all intricately embroidered with red and gold—with green, purple and silver coloured threads. How resplendent they are and how gaily satin return the light!

The large leather-bound missal lies on the dresser. The sun pours in through the tall window. I'm standing inside a stream of light and fine dust. The hot air is damp. I walk out onto the altar area where it is cooler. It is a cavernous space which smells of incense, candle wax and old timber.

Without the worshippers and the sacristan, it is an alien space, as awesome as it is menacing. The faces of the statues of Saint Joseph and Saint Anthony are cold, their inertness forbidding. Even the statue of the Virgin, the people's "Mama Mary," who's always listening in silence to endless litanies of petitions from her legion of worshippers—their rosary beads clicking, their faces carrying the anguish and ecstasy of deep need and hopeful longings, suppliants walking on their knees from the large entry door and ending under her gaze, the Mother of all mercies—who now looks cold, hopelessly locked in stone. Sightless. Grief-stricken herself.

Gradually, the silence and the scent of a burning candle roll into a thunder of mystifying energy. Fear enters through my ears and my skin, gripping me to the bones. Slowly, I retread my steps backwards, and then swing around as I enter the arched door of the sacristy. With my heart pulsing in my head, I ran away from the horror that is snapping at my heels and out into the dazzling light. No one is about; every creature is hiding away from the raging sun. I run to the artesian well under the shade of a mature palm tree where the Sacristan's wife is washing Uncle's cassocks.

"You should be having your siesta with your grandmother, little girl," she says. I sit close to her... and now she's singing a song. I remember her well, even if today her voice is conjured only as a sweet visitation of a fading dream, her face and name beyond recalling.

When Second Elder Sister comes back from school, we play hopscotch on the soft black sand by the river. I tell her about my solitary visit in the church earlier and she says the statues come alive at night when everyone is asleep. She says she can hear voices and rumblings at night, especially when a storm is about. I tell her I'm not afraid.

This night some men with nets are allowed to come upstairs to the main bathroom to catch bats that have roosted in the damp ceiling. They bring a little lantern to the darkened room and then there is a muted scuffle, whereupon a small black creature escapes from the net, flings itself against the wall, and drops flailing on the floor. A man grabs it with his bare hands and puts it in a flour bag with the rest of their catch. The creature has the face of Satan—just like the pictures in my catechism book, except that it did not have horns at the top of its head.

“You had too much sun yesterday,” Grandmother says the next morning, as she places a cool wet cloth on my brow. “Now, you have a fever.” The Sacristan’s wife is looking down at me with her kind face.

“*Aiii*, you must stop wandering around on your own in the heat. One never knows what bad humours and mischievous spirits are about at that time of day,” she says. “Ah, no matter, with a lot of rice porridge and plenty of sweet calamansi juice, you will be well again soon.” She’s smiling. A smile as eternal as her song, the words of which I can’t remember anymore. The way I can’t remember her face.

“*Kawawa naman ang apu ko,*” - My poor grandchild, - Grandmother says. I fall asleep with her tender words. Words I will not hear again from her.

~

“Dat was good. Tank you lord,” Yolly says. Then she slurps the last bit of *sinigang* broth from her bowl and I do the same.

“*Aii*, you must have some more,” she says as she ladles more soup and vegetables in my bowl and then to hers.

“You’re such a good cook, Yolly, *abah*, this is the best *sinigang* I’ve ever tasted.”

“Ah, I knew you’d like it.”

I am her guest, her friend. She gave me the larger salmon head and most of the okra because I love them best. The fatty belly of the salmon and vegetables cooked in varying texture of crunch and softness make Yolly’s *sinigang* extraordinarily delicious. As we pick and suck the brains and the jelly out of the eyes, we discuss how Australians would think it horrible if they saw us feasting on the salmon’s head this way.

“But they eat lamb brains and pork intestines and tripe, what’s wrong about us eating the best part of fish which is the head, mmm?” she asks. We both agree it’s not right to throw good stuff away— quite disrespectful. Criminal, in fact.

“Tining needs a kitchen hand at the restaurant on Saturday nights. I’ll start working next weekend,” she says as she gets up to check on the rice pudding glazing in the oven. The smell of steam from the caramelising coconut cream and grated palm sugar glaze fills the kitchen.

“You can’t work at the restaurant Yol, your hands...,” I tell her, looking at her swollen arthritic fingers.

“It will pass. I stop when I save enough money anyhow.”

“I’m sure Colin will give you some money if you ask him.”

“Ah, dats okey, I do it my way.”

She has a large extended family back home and over the years a good portion of her house-cleaning money is sent to them. She has put nieces through secretarial schools and paid large sums for her siblings’ medical expenses. One had polio, another, a heart condition. She paid the costs of the funerals for her mother and father, who died within a year of each other.

When I proudly mention this to one of my white Australian friends, she retorted rather sourly, “All of our dollars being sent abroad!” I can’t think of anything to say. Instead, I imagined the frail remains of the beloved dead, lying in state in the main room of a hut, inside a varnished coffin lined with white lace and thick wadding. This tells all who’d come how well he or she is remembered and honoured by a privileged member of the family abroad; a final luxury to comfort and give pride to those who are left behind. There’d be enough money left for the grieving family, friends and neighbours to feast on meat and sweets. For a funeral is not solely a time for grieving but also of celebrating the family and the community. A time to remember that life and death are closely linked with each other.

Over lunch, Yolly agonises over how she could manage to send thirteen hundred dollars back home to pay for a niece’s ticket to go abroad, maybe to work as a maid in Hong Kong or Singapore. Thousands of young Pilipino; university graduates, the country’s “best and brightest,” leave the country every year to work as domestic aides or to hold professional positions around the world, thereby boosting a tenuous national economy. We were always told at school that the country is rich in natural resources, but it was rarely said that the nation’s best resources are her people who are proud, resilient, adventurous and hard-working, ready to launch headlong into the unknown, armed mainly with the determination to make a better life for themselves and their families back home through the dignity of hard, honest labour.

“Hallo ladies!” Colin says, as he bounds into the room. His smile seems to fill his face. He puts down a bag of potatoes by the back door and hands Yolly a bunch of flowers.

“Oh my god, you spendin’ too much again,” she exclaims.

“Say ‘thank you’ Yolly,” I prompt.

“Tanks,” she says looking up to him. Her eyes saying: ‘Thank you for being here...thank you for loving me.’ “Don’t spend your money too much, dahlin’. One must save— one never knows what happens tomorrow.”

“You’re an incorrigible nag, Yolanda,” Colin quips dismissively.

She takes his parka jacket off him and hands him a warm and clean sloppy joe. “You must keep warm. It’s too cold. Tanks God you haven’t caught the flu yet.”

“Wait till I take you to England. Then you will know what ‘cold’ means,” he says, taking the mug of coffee she hands him. “I will leave you two gals to your lunch...have some paperwork to do.” He kisses the top of her head.

“Ah, go and leave us alone then,” she says, tartly and tenderly.

Yolly met Colin, a building contractor, one year after she lost her first husband, Karol, who was twenty-five years her senior. She told me once how Karol promised her a better life in Australia. She was thirty three, with not many prospects, and accepted his offer of marriage. It was a way out, she said. She was a loving and devoted wife and then his patient nurse during his long battle with cancer. He died on the fifteenth year of their happy though at times volatile marriage.

Karol, after two marriages and years of alcoholism and loneliness, went one winter to the Philippines looking for a wife. He found Yolly. Once, after several tins of beer and perhaps brewing inside with a streak of insecurity over his much younger and strong-willed wife, he claimed “I found her in the gutter and made a decent woman out of her.” In fact, it was the other way around. She brought many Pilipino women and their Australian husbands around and shared her unpretentious but delicious and hearty meals. Karol had never heard laughter flow around him or experienced the treasure of many friendships until Yolly found him, senseless, in a pool of vomit in a gutter in Manila.

~

“Have you told Colin you’re going to work in Tining’s restaurant?” I ask.

“Yes, but I must do it my own way,” she says as she puts the vase of flowers on the table and sits down again. I muse at how well the daisies look next to her face. Round. Generous. Strong.

“You’re getting older, Yolanda,” I tell her firmly. “It’s not really your problem anymore.”

“Ay, you don’t believe that *mahal* (dear), I know so.” She starts rummaging through her sewing box.

“What I mean is you’ve given them enough. Your responsibility now is to yourself. You don’t have anything to prove.”

“Ah, dahlin’,” she says as she threads a needle. “You don’t know what you sayin’...you was never poor...not like I was.”

“And you will never be poor again, Yoll. This is Australia. It’s different times. And why don’t you just throw out those stupid panties. You have money to buy new ones,” I tell her impatiently. She stops her darning and reflects. Then she gets up and walks to the cutlery drawer.

“Oolong tea?” she asks, nearly in a whisper. I sense she feels confronted.

“You’re so bloody stubborn.”

“I will not ‘ave dem begging. If I help the older ones, then they can look after the younger ones in return. You see...yes?”

“I see, Yolly. It’s our tradition and you are too kind. I hope they appreciate everything you do for them.”

“No, no payback. I have good life... they need me. I know you understand. You too go without sometimes so you can send money to some poor folks back home.”

“I guess you’re right. I sometimes wonder if our desire to help is genuine kindness or it is because we enjoy being heroes. You know, to fatten our egos,” I say, more as a private reflection than as a response.

“Ah, I dunno.”

“It probably gives us some sort of power...”

“Maybe.”

“Perhaps we’re scared that if we fail to do penance for our *suerte*—it could be taken away from us. Penance—that’s interesting. Perhaps that’s why one feels guilty sometimes with one’s good fortune (*suerte*) when one didn’t have much before, you know. It could be because one needs to do some penance to feel deserving, somehow.”

“Ah, you’re talkin’ bullshet. I know you are school-learnt. I learnt from here,” Yolly exclaims dramatically, slapping her right hand on her chest. “I learnt sleeping alone in a cupboard with mosquitoes and cockroaches. I fell asleep missing my mother so much. I was sent away because I was her bastard child. You don’t know nothin’.”

“Poor girl. I’m sorry,” I get up and embrace her. “But I didn’t know, Yoll. Please tell me about it.”

“There were Elder Brother and Sisters. One day mother left home. She came back a year later with child—me. ‘Ah, there is Anita’s little *bastarda*,’ they’d say. I could not learn at school and so I was sent away to work in the landlord’s kitchen. I was ten.”

“My father, he could not bear to look at me...’appy when I was gone,” she continued.

“O, Yolly, *kawawa ka naman, mahal*.” Poor darling.

“My mistress’ children...I was nothin’ to dem.”

~

I was lying on the sleeping mat next to Grandmother. She had her back against me and Second Elder Sister on her other side. The warm night air was heavy with moisture and the winged calls of bats can be heard from the garden close by and the fruit trees beyond. The windows had been opened just enough to let some cool air in and to stop the rain entering should it pour during the night. The shutters rattled every time a gust of wind brushes past. A bare light bulb swung gently on top of the stairwell to light Grandmother’s way should she get up and use the enamelled potty in the far corner the

room. Every now and then, Grandfather, who slept in a separate bed under his own mosquito net, would clear his lungs.

A baby in one of the nearby houses had just stopped crying when two cats started screeching in ever-changing pitch through their mating ritual. Only they and I and the gathering storm were awake. Then Grandmother sat up and made sure my bedsheet was in place and I was warm. She then settled down, her arm around Elder Sister who had a nasty bump on her head, and was soon asleep again. That afternoon, while playing, I had pushed Elder Sister off a stool and she fell onto the hard floor. Grandmother picked her up and washed her face with cold water. Settling Sister's bruised forehead against her breast, Grandmother looked at me with such disapproval that I had to look away.

"*Siverguenza*," she said. – Shameless -. An expression she often used during moments of vexation and sometimes mirth. That afternoon, though, this word sounded cold and stung with rejection. Was the loneliness and isolation I felt then close to what Yolly felt on those her nights of banishment?

A few days later Father came for me. That night I slept close to him, his arm for my pillow.

"Please do not leave while I'm asleep," I begged. At dawn, as the sun was stretching its arms across the river, we caught a *gareta* and left for home.

But no one came for Yolly. From early childhood she had learnt to accept the fate of her caste. She missed formal schooling and when she was growing up, her favourite job was going to the bush and gathering firewood, chopping large branches with her machete till they fell to the ground, then cutting these into length to take back to the kitchen. "Chopping, chopping—ah, I liked that best," she'd say. She was alone then and she was free. She grew up to be a reliable domestic servant working for wealthy families in Manila. She had her own circle of friends whom she met on her days-off and during vacations; servants and labourers like herself. She also regularly sent money to help her family back home in the province.

Conversely, I had a more privileged life, going to university and earning a degree. I then had a well-paying job in Manila before meeting and marrying a businessman and settling into a fairly comfortable married life in Australia.

~

“It’s okay.” She wipes her eyes and beams a chunky smile. “All a long time ago. Nothin’ more to be done. I’m ‘ere now and it’s okay.”

“You deserve to be happy, Yolly, you deserve everything: the house, the car, the money, Karol, and now Colin. But most of all you are a winner because of your good heart. You may not know it, but you are your family’s hero and savior. ”

“Mmm,” she mumbles reflectively. “But I must help my family, dey all I have.”

I set the dessert plates while she gets ready to take the pudding from the oven. “Doesn’t that smell take you back home?”

“Ah, I knows you like it.”

“You’re just the best cook, Yol. Mmm! Oh, the smell! It’s too much!”

“Yous a drama queen! *Masyado kang OA!*” Overacting. She jeers fondly.

“*Hindi naman, oii.*” Not really, I protest.

“If you are so hard up, you could get some money from the Trust,” I tell her as she hands me a generous slice of the pudding. I know about a substantial sum of money Karol invested for her old-age.

“Don’t work too hard, Yolly. Just because Karol said not to touch the money until you’re old does not mean you can’t. He’s dead, bless his soul. It’s yours now. And you’re not really that young anymore, just look at your hands.”

Besides the investment, Yolly has ten thousand dollars in cash bricked into one of the walls of her house. Karol was worried that banking the money would reduce his pension. As a young Polish war refugee, he arrived in Australia with his belongings wrapped in his late mother’s old shawl. “I worked fuckin’ hard...worked my fuckin’ balls off, no Scaramouche, Scaramouche wastin’ time ‘ere and ‘der,” he would say in his “immigrant” jargon, a lot of it picked up by Yolly. “Paid my tax an’ got nothin’ free.”

I’m the only other person besides Yolly who knows about the money. I sometimes have this fantasy of breaking into her house, should she die suddenly, and helping myself to her entombed ten grand.

“You know, Karol was real shet at times, but a good, honest man.” She starts cutting another slice. “I not going to just sit ‘ere and do nothin’.”

“It’s really your decision, Yoll, I’m just worried for you.”

“I’ll be fine dahlin’, don’t worry youself.”

“Okey, I have swollen fingers,” she continues. “But I’m strong yet. Must work. Still a long way to go. A little pain is nothin’. Karol worked very hard for his money, must not waste it.” She holds out her strong right arm and showed off her muscles.

“Excuse me, that’s not muscle, that is fat. Pure fat, Yolanda!”

“Ah, *gardemet, salumbibet*, you!” - Goddamn it, son of a bitch!- She protests laughing.

“Look, it’s hard...see...see?” She flexes both arms, then puts a leg out and flexes her muscles. We laugh loudly. Already the drama of a few minutes ago is behind us. We are living the moment. Without regret or bitterness.

“No use livin’ with tormented heart, we live the only life we know; must be all right in the end,” she says.

“You’re having too much fun, it sounds to me,” Colin joins in. He places an arm around her. “I think I might have a slice of that strange lookin’ pudding,” he says in his heavy Yorkshire accent. I watch them tidying and pottering around the kitchen sink together and think how happy they are with each other. Like her, he works hard and enjoys the simple life—good food, a moderate indulgence with his bitter lager at the bowling club, the two of them spending a bit of money twice a week at the clubs on raffle nights, often winning several legs of ham around Christmas time and then giving them away as presents to their many friends—and clean living.

“You’re such a great lady.” I open my arms for a hug.

“Ahh, not really, tank you anyhow,” she says, tapping my back gently. She looks up to Colin.

“Always naggin’—but she’s a good girl, my Yolanda,” he says proudly.

“O, the two of yous...full of bullshet!” she says giggling, a hand over her mouth.

~

Tomorrow, I'll cook Grandmother's favorite ampalaya dish. I'll sauté the chopped garlic and onion in a little oil then add thin slices of chicken breast or maybe prawns, chopped tomatoes, pepper, a little salt and a good dash of fish sauce—instead of the *bago-ong* or fermented fish fry, the scent of which lingers in the house hours after cooking—and a tablespoon of sugar to temper the bitterness. I'll stir fry this on high heat for three to four minutes, and then add the thinly sliced ampalaya. Before serving, I'll douse it with a bit of good olive oil.

I believe Grandmother would enjoy my dish, though I would not mind if she didn't. The psychological isolation we had from each other had long disappeared with the distance of time and space.

I was never a favourite granddaughter. When I seemed to be having fun with my siblings she'd call for me and make me help her in the garden. Perhaps, she thought I was too boisterous. When Grandmother came to visit, it was only Second Elder Sister that seemed to delight her. I was a precocious child and I must have said words she thought were irreverent; she was, after all, the matriarch. She probably thought I was hard and proud when as a child I pretended I did not care when she punished me with deliberate indifference and disdain. Humiliation was the old way to instill in children the value of reverence to their elders. It was the only way she knew, and the only way Father and Mother knew.

The close to fanatical piety and determination to make us worthy children of God drove her and my parents to unwittingly weave pockets of confusion into the landscape of our childhood. Theirs was a confused kind of religiosity. They were overwhelmed with the fear of straying from God or rather their children straying from Him, and preferred a child whose spirit was humbled because such spirit would not rebel against them and against God—would not contemplate doing evil acts. Would not bring shame to the family. Would not go to hell. It was the kind of nurture they received themselves—borne from the hardship, ignorance, from fire and brimstones church homilies of a Hispanic colonial past and then the terrors and depravations of wars. But then, childhood must have been worse for them and in the end, to conform and to have no voice would have been simpler. Consequently, as adults, to change direction and vision was beyond their strength.

When I was growing up, Grandmother hardly spoke to me, except when I displeased her and then her tongue would lash out. Just one or two words that cut deep. By the time I was in my late teens, I stopped trying to know her. I had been settled abroad for many years when I was told she had died. I felt a wave of sadness and regret. Of all her grandchildren, I'm the one most like her. I have her olive skin, her cheekbones and her long willowy fingers. I love the food and vegetables she loved. I have the weakness in the lower back that she suffered from. And I'm a passionate gardener like her. Through all the seasons in the garden, I feel Grandmother's genes running in my veins—when I'm turning the soil, planting, pruning and harvesting or just quietly enjoying my little bit of paradise, my spiritual sanctuary—in much the same way her garden in distant Telabanca, was her retreat.

Lately, every time I see Grandmother in my dreams, she is smiling at me. She is wearing her embroidered *pañuelo* and traditional *saya*. She is scented with ylang-ylang and her hair which is smoothed with coconut oil, shimmers in the light. I like the pert hook at the tip of her nose, her dark eyes and her delicate ears, the lobes pulled down by her gold looped earrings. She raises her right hand in benediction the way she had always done—blessing those she is leaving behind or those loved ones setting forth on a journey. Her blessings are what I remember most about her now. Her right hand is raised close to her heart and blessing us with the sign of the cross, again and again. Her eyes are full of hope and resignation—entrusting our safety and fate in the hands of God—as we set off on our journey back home. She is standing there with Uncle Felipe and Francesca by her side. She is free now, free from cares and responsibility, and from the demons of many generations before her.

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The stalks of daisies Yolly sent along with me look homely on my kitchen bench. They remind me of home. Generous and sacred. They remind me of Yolly, who has taught me to forgive the errors of the past and like her, to resolve these instead as the golden thread that gives us the strength of spirit to overcome the struggles we meet in life—to endeavor to mature pleasingly, in wisdom and grace. They remind me of the passing of time, of the bittersweet qualities of life in its exquisite unending cycle.

PART TWO:

A Synthesized Childhood: A Literary Journey towards a Narrative of the Self

*All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory— what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our ‘flooding.’ (Toni Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory’, *Inventing the Truth*) 119*

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

(L. P. Hartley) 9

PROLOGUE

Going Home

We were driving out of town on our way to the airport for our trip back to Australia when my daughter and I were stuck in a traffic snarl which you could hardly imagine ever being set right again.

“Grandmother Lusing, at ninety-one, was the last of the living legends in our town,” our driver, the son of an old friend, said consolingly.

He was a perceptive young man who could read how we felt inside: anxious that we could miss our aeroplane, yet heavy in our hearts for leaving “home.” God knows when we would be returning. It was just a few days after my mother’s funeral.

We were in the middle of the bridge where only one lane was open as the other lane was still being constructed. The old bridge had been weakened by the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991. It took over twenty years before the construction of a new bridge was finally started. In the past, this bridge at the southern end of town indicated that the

town proper had ended and from here, the rice paddies began to stretch out as far as the eyes could see. It's a different town now— new and dynamic, a place which has become progressively unfamiliar in aspect and form, with every few years interval I've visited. Now, dense housing of the poor and the middle classes stands in the area where our pretty little house was, not too far from the river. The little lanes where I wandered and played, the ancient trees which stood tall and mysterious, are gone.

Even the river has changed its geography. Old Pinatubo, having been dormant throughout the nation's living memory exploded with incredible power that the majority of the population believed Judgment Day had come. Although it lay a hundred kilometers or so away from the mountain, our river was buried several meters deep, entombing the boulders which I had looked up to as towering crags as a child. Eventually, the river reemerged with channels flowing sluggishly in and around patches of cogon reeds.

Due to increased traffic passing through the town, the new bridge was widened to about a meter away from the top windows of plain, unplastered two-story houses whose front windows are now permanently shut tightly to ward off the dust and noise. Behind these dust-bound houses, laundry hung drying in the dirty breeze and little children played in the narrow lanes.

The human spirit will never fail to triumph, I thought, no matter what difficulty destiny places in its path. A day is propelled into another day, a year into another, a disintegration begetting the impulse to put pieces back together. That is the story of the people in my town. And I was leaving it behind, for an indefinite period of time. That afternoon, though, I truly felt that I was leaving a "home" of the heart I could not recognise anymore; a place that had shed its skin, its colour, sounds and scents; a home from the past that my daughter would never know unless I told its story. Now she identifies our "ancestral home" as that place where many loving relations live and as the root of her Asian heritage of which she is proud.

We sat in the car patiently waiting, each of us nursing losses on different levels. I appreciated her silence which allowed my mind to meander through disjointed memories. It is fascinating what triggers the mind to open the floodgates of random memories from the realms of our interior landscape. In that traffic jam, it was the river running under the bridge that was the key— though muted as it was by the drone of

idling motor engines above it and its banks eroded beyond recognition and here and there becoming depository of human refuse.

“One hundred percent humidity,” the radio broadcaster announced.

Looking at the hazy horizon over the rooftops beyond, I longed for the drenching rains and the cool waters of the past— that emerald pastoral world that used to lie beyond, and which had frequented sweet recurring dreams. It has all gone now, I acknowledged with forced resignation. Where shall I go and lodge my rebellion otherwise? It was best to stay calm and seek refuge from my memories.

And then a liquefaction of some kind took place, as it always does when memory and imagination fuse with the present state of being— of peace in the depth of chaos, that yin and yang quality of our culture rooted in piety and superstition that is born out of the eternal cycle of adversity and struggle, of fortitude and resilience. A liquefaction akin to that sweet quality of daydreaming when you are transfigured into places and sacred abodes of the mind and spirit— wherein images of lived experiences well up and swell and flow around your being— burgeoning, alive, distilled, unrevised and validated by the fecundity of sensations they carry— memory and imagination, your vehicles in this emotional journey across time.

In the dreaming, the river under that bridge is untainted and cool, hurling itself playfully against mossy crags and boulders— black and smooth from the timeless rushing of water over them— and breaking into sprays of iridescent splinters. The sensuous bamboo grove sways languidly and the air hums with the gossip of many washerwomen. Amongst the composition of characters, a little girl, with a thin neck and skinny arms and legs is poised to jump into the water, in a shallow area of the river where children like her could swim and play safely. She wades under the water allowing the river to rush over her body. She is alive and conscious of her existence, the way she is conscious of the wind and voices and water. Her aunt would often speak of tales from long ago. “Before you were born,” she would say, “when you were still water in the river...” Now this little girl is water in the river no longer— she is material and sentient. Over there, amongst the other women, is her mother, looking at her, her face shining.

The little girl that was me is not conscious of all that, though. She is in fact singing to herself the catchy jingle about vitamin drops for infants which she heard playing on the radio all through the dry season:

Sa payat na sangol

Ay nakabubuti

Ang United American Tiki Tiki!

Siyang tunay...!

To a skinny infant/child

It brings goodness,

It's United American *Tiki Tiki!*

Aiii, that's the truth...!

At last our vehicle was moving again, the traffic waking up with a lively cacophony of horns and engines and smoke. We left behind that animated town, as it carried itself onward with renewed purpose and rhythm, weaving destinies with the raw and exquisite pulse of ordinary existence, the way it had always done, as sure as the sun and rain come in their cyclic patters— sometimes in tempest, sometimes in long stretches of calm, the way the river has followed its course continually— sluggishly in the dry season and then rolling in earnest in the wet season with the heft of the monsoon rains. All that remains of that treasured world are memories of their ethereal and disjointed qualities— often appearing spontaneously, triggered by a song, a child's smile or mannerisms, a scent, an event, a peculiar tilt of sunlight as it plays on the gloss of green vegetation after the rain, or of particular emotions that resonate back into the past.

It came to me like an epiphany in that taxi, when I decided that that river and the world it had sustained must live again. I had to tell its story. I must undertake a literary journey into the past, to engage my imagination with memory and paint and re-frame with words the people and landscape of my childhood because that was where the river belonged, the place of my birth and being, where I was water in the river. I must connect again with my past, before the ability to remember diminish and fade away. I

must write my memoir of early childhood and weave it into the continuity of this exquisite loop that is the narrative of my life.

I also decided that I must write my memoir in English, the language of my second home and the language spoken by my Pilipino-Australian children. It is the language I've spoken— sometimes falteringly, even diluted on occasion with smatterings of words from my mother tongue— through more than half of my life.

Learning English

Some decades ago, I enrolled in English at the Faculty of Arts and Letters at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. After the Spanish-American war and until her independence in 1946, the Philippines was a protectorate of the United States of America and our education system was heavily Americanised. English was the medium of instruction in schools. Students who wanted to go further in their studies had to adopt English as their second language.

One day, at the University Humanities Library, I happened to find a copy of an English translation of *The Iliad*. For days, I kept coming back until I had read the entire narrative, dumbstruck with the gripping images of a heroic past that filled my senses and imagination: its fears, its colours, the odour of blood, sweat and decay, the sounds of thundering horses and chariots, the explosion of dirt and rubble, the passion of heroes against heroes, the anguish of the suppliant and the roar of the victor. And to counterbalance all of the above, woven in unparalleled lyricism and imagery, you could hear in the background, by the hearth, the gentle murmur of a loom— a quiet pastoral scene— the rigours and pulses of ordinary daily life.

This encounter which captivated my senses with the magic of story-telling, led me to re-evaluate my interest in learning English. From then on my studies meant more than acquiring a respectable university degree in order to find a place in a very competitive and limited employment environment. They were the key to accessing great novels and other narratives written or translated into English. I was keen to look into the wider world and at its peoples, to break down barriers of time, space and ethos. To be free. Ultimately, with that serendipitous encounter with Homer's story-telling prowess, my love affair with the English language began with the deep appreciation of the art of literary expression.

I realised that a good writer, like the authors I shall invoke in this study, is nothing short of a magician, an artificer of words, with the power to hold you and twist your heart inside out, stretch and roll and pummel it like a piece of dough, and then to release you with your soul forever enlightened and enriched, or disturbed and questioning. In an interview with Shelley F. Fishkin, author and academic Maxine Hong Kingston's words are so resonant of the above sentiments; "I want to give people questions— and then when people wrestle with them and struggle with them in their own minds and in their own lives, all kinds of exciting things happen to them" (785).

Finally, a good narrative never fails to inspire you to be a storyteller yourself.

The interior self is a bountiful place to begin looking for stories we could tell. It is a safe place where we can plunder from memories wedged in our lived experiences and to marry these with our fertile imagination, weave or construct narratives of our lives. In this regard, I believed that the English language, whether written in prose or verse, is rich, malleable and possesses a limitless palette of colours and texture to paint literary portraits of life experiences and of the figures peopling them. I trust its limitless capacity to articulate the human condition on the page.

In the process of learning to write and speak English over many years, I came to appreciate the lyrical expression through the sinuous composition with words, whether a narrative was originally written in English or had been translated into English. The vibrancy and cadences in the works of Marguerite Yourcenar (*Memoirs of Trajan* 1990), of Homer (*Iliad* (1961) and the *Odyssey*, and Gao Xingjian (*Soul Mountain* 2001), are especially appealing to me not only because of their rich content, lyricism but also because of the way they translate so well in English.

Nearly four decades later and having all those years lived in Australia, it seems that the determination to master my second language in the past was a preface to my present search for a form, style and a voice sufficient for documenting a time that I am temporally, spatially and culturally cut off from. Learning English in my youth has become somehow a prelude in my attempt to write in a foreign land where English is the mother tongue, the literary documentation of a childhood now "foreign" and distant from me on many levels. But the word "foreign," when applied to my past seems to me at times to be misleading. Perhaps I am actually the outsider looking into the smoke and mirrors of a long-gone place and reality that never shifted from the place where it has

stood still in my memory. After all, I was the one who voluntarily orchestrated my own cultural displacement. Now, every time I return to the Philippines, there is a deeper unfamiliarity between my native country and myself; I am at once a native and a stranger. In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie writes about this dilemma of cultural transplantation while looking at a photograph from his childhood home in old Bombay: “it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home in a lost city in the mists of lost time (9).” He further writes of himself and fellow Indian immigrant writers in England:

The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles. ... We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. As a result ... we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. (15)

This sentiment has to be true for every immigrant writer. The umbilical cord which ties us to our roots can never be severed. To sever it is to erase one’s primal identity. While established and aspiring immigrant writers aim to assimilate and prosper in their new “homelands,” they will continually draw inspiration in their artistic and spiritual endeavors from the cultures and ethos that nurtured their beginnings. They are law-abiding, patriotic citizens of their adopted “motherlands,” at the same time as being citizens of their respective countries of birth. This sense of duality or plurality in identity may naturally help shape in them a multilayered perception of the world around them. It’s a richness intertwined with the spirit of absence— a yearning for the countries that were left behind. Subconsciously, they carry the guilt of the act of desertion, and with it the nagging sense of loss.

CHAPTER ONE

On Memoirs: Why Do We Write Them?

Writing the Past

The memoir is often confused with the autobiography, though they have significant differences that place them into two distinct genres. The autobiography is a dutiful chronicling of dates and events, significant or otherwise, of one's life from birth to the time of writing— either at the height of success or at the end of it, or at the time of retirement when one has the time and maturity for careful and organised research and recollections. The memoir, on the other hand, is less concerned with chronology and details or events from one date to another. It is an emotional and intellectual assembling of a slice of a life rather than an attempt to record its totality. William Zinsser explains that the memoir is often defined as a “portion of a life,” and that the “writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense— childhood, for instance— or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a window into a life.” Zinsser adds: “By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn't possible in autobiography; memoir is window into a life” (all quotes: 21).

There are subclasses of personal or autobiographical writings. These include the *confessional*, *credo*, *diurnal* but more notably, the *journal* and the *diary*. These are recordings of activities, reflections, thoughts and emotions that we encounter on a daily basis. These are all written for private need or perusal, though they may also be used in the future as part of a text being written. In her book *You Can Write a Memoir* (2001), S. C. Hauser describes the above personal writings as written with the self as audience. Although others may read them, the writer is generally speaking internally, recording or working out experience for his/her own understanding and remembering. The *journal*

and the *diary* are regarded as writings that go beyond the day-to-day recording of events and are thoughtful reflections which can be written in lengthy passages and on multiple pages. However, the journal is less concerned than the diary with the exact days and dates when certain experiences occurred (3).

A Glossary of Literary Terms (1999) describes autobiographical writings as the day-to-day records of the events in one's life written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication. Some examples of these are the seventeenth-century diaries of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, and the eighteenth-century journals of James Boswell and Fanny Burney and Dorothy Wordsworth, whose remarkable journals were published long after her death (22). Journals and diaries from the past, like those mentioned above, have provided valuable historical accounts of the customs and ethos of the periods in history in which they were written.

The common denominator in all the above-mentioned personal writings is memory. *The Webster International Dictionary* (1968) describes *memory* as derived from the French word *memoire* and from the Latin, *memoria* (*memory*), French *memor* (*mindful*), Old English *mimor* (*known*), Greek *merimnan* (*to be thoughtful*), Sanskrit *emarati* (*to remember*) and Goth *murnan* (*to be anxious for*). The same dictionary also defines memory as “a faculty of retaining mental and physical impressions, and of recalling them to the mind.” There are many words that are derived from the word ‘memory’: *memoir*, *remember*, *commemorate*, *memorable*, *memento*, *memorandum* and *mourn* which means, *to remember sorrowfully* (Hauser 2).

I agree with Hauser when she says that the distinction between the autobiography and the memoir is sometimes hard to achieve. Other times it might be clear and achieved spontaneously (4). St. Augustine's *Confessions* (357-430 AD), for instance, has been considered to be the earliest fully established autobiography (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 22). While reading Books XIII and IX, though, I find the accompanying deep examinations of conscience— an intense analysis of memory in search for perfection— and the portrayal of Augustine's mental anguish over the death of his beloved mother, give the books the reflective intensity and the contemplative qualities of a spiritual memoir.

Whatever “slices” of a life a *memoir* covers, memory and imagination are its main resource. In memoir-writing, the author aims to craft an honest narrative from disparate

fragments of memories, to form a synthesized recreation of a portion of a life with the anticipation of it being read and shared— and for it to be hopefully analysed and to be appreciated as valid representation of some enduring truths in the human situation— its spiritual, intellectual and emotional issues; its universality. Hauser writes that “[the] mere recording of events, mere recollection, and even contemplation and meditation are usually not enough in themselves to warrant an audience”; she adds: “Writers who would speak to others, who would be heard by others, will want to make the transition from ‘this is my story’ to ‘this is the story of a human life, and it’s therefore also your story” (4).

One of the greatest joys in life is to every now and then chance upon a piece of literature where language is a vehicle that touches and engages the mind, heart and spirit. My love of the literary expression in English draws back to their works—and to Homer and Shakespeare— to be refreshed, in the same way one can be spiritually and emotionally refreshed when listening to beautiful music—to be enthused time and again to the literary form of communication. I find autobiographical writings, especially the memoir, as particularly appealing foci of interest. Annie Dillard, Maxine Hong Kingston, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway and Mark Doty are among memoirists who have inspired my interest in the genre.

We are a species of storytellers and every story we tell is derived from memory— from events and occurrences we have experienced ourselves, or observed, read, heard and shared with others. And when we start the process of recalling and writing, we are continually astonished at how much “stories” and details are stored in the treasury of our minds. Every trigger becomes a flooding of sensations and emotions; of joys, sorrows, disappointments, even discoveries. R. F. Thompson and S.A. Madigan who had co-written *Memory; The Key to Consciousness* (2005), illustrate this wonder when they define memory as follows:

Memory is the most extraordinary phenomenon in the natural world. Our brains are modified and reorganised by our experiences. Our interactions with the physical world— our sensory experiences, our perceptions, our actions— change us continuously and determine what we are later able to perceive, remember, understand and become (1).

Consequently, we look at our memories through many faceted lenses which necessarily entails that painting literary sketches of the past is a complex and challenging enterprise and where words become the main tool in the recreation of memories on a page. Aptly, Mary Carruthers writes in the 'Preface' to *The Book of Memory* (2nd Ed, 2008), "...recollection is a kind of composition and by its very nature is selective and formal." The memoirist continually navigates between memory and imagination in the writing and creative process and how she/he composes, handles and interprets memories with language is truly a painstaking course. Dillard's comments are accurate when she writes, "What impels the writer is a deep love for and respect for language, for literary forms, [...]. It's a privilege to muck about with sentences all morning. It's a challenge to bring off a powerful effect, or to tell the truth about something." ("To Fashion a Text," *Inventing the Truth*, 75).

It seems that the natural starting point of our "telling" is childhood. The further memory goes back, the sweeter and stronger are the random flashes of experiences and events that manifest themselves in our minds' eyes become. Perhaps this is because they spring from that time when life was so new, in close proximity to the eternity which preceded our birth. Because that is where we sprung from after all, before we were born, not too far away from the point where childhood began. This is a sentiment described rightly by author Vladimir Nabokov when he claims in his Memoir, *Speak, Memory* (2012) that "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness (5). He further writes of his earliest memories: "Nothing is sweeter or stranger than to ponder those first thrills. They belong to the harmonious world of a perfect childhood and as much, possess a naturally plastic form in one's memory, which can be set down with hardly any effort" (12). Nabokov's statement clearly alludes to the mystical quality of childhood memories for the fact of its temporal, spiritual and emotional distance from the adult state of remembering and writing. This quality underlies Bachelard's words quoted in the epigraph of my memoir, "...to recall flashes of daydreams that illuminate the **synthesis of immemorial and recollected**. [...], we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost." (Bachelard 5-6)

Childhood memories are fragments, each one clear and uncluttered, never losing their shine even if it is often difficult, even nigh impossible at times, to pin down the

location in time and place within the topography of our early lives they belong to. Due to the unreliability and fragmentary nature of memory we may be confronted with doubts about the perspicacity of some events that we have stored in our memories as children. Edmund Gosse has written an apt and lyrical description on the subject in his memoir: “[...] the life of a child is so brief, and its impressions are so illusory and fugitive, that it is difficult to record its history as it would be difficult to design a morning cloud sailing before the wind” (85). However, it is useful to know that writing a memoir is not writing a historical document, where thorough, accurate and factual research is involved; rather, it is a reflective interpretation of our memories where the focus is on the emotional content of the experience rather than the historical incidents surrounding them. The memoir is internally wrought out as memoirist Mary Karr points out: “Memoir is not an act of history but an act of memory, which is innately corrupt” (Cohen 16). In an interview with Amanda Fortini, Karr also says: “People mistakenly believe the best memoir is the one in which the grossest stuff happens. [...]. How it’s written counts for something” (15). This points out to the creative construction involved in memoir writing where memories and language are the building blocks and the imagination the interpreter of experiences. In her essay ‘Memory and Imagination’ (1996), Patricia Hampl writes:

Memoir is a peculiarly open form, inviting broken and incomplete images, half-recollected fragments, all the mass and mess of detail. It offers to shape this confusion— and in shaping, of course, it necessarily creates a work of art, not a legal document. [...] A memoirist must acquiesce to selectivity, like any artist. The version we dare to write is the only truth, the only relationship we can have with the past. (33-4)

When plagued with doubts, the only recourse is to rely on the point of view of that inner child who is re-living and rediscovering the past. Childhood memories have their own individual imprints of sensations and emotions. From these we create touchstones or symbols that can guide us in our creative composition. What we remember of that distant past are our own personal truths, which would most likely be seen differently by other members of the family or by other figures that interpenetrated our lives in the past.

In the “Acknowledgements” page of his memoir, Tobias Wolff reminds his readers that his memoir is a “book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But

I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story (iii).” Wolff’s mother might have had different views or perspectives on some particular events or turns of his narrative, but that is not important. What is important is how that child he was in the past personally saw or experienced the same event. It is the history of that child then and not of the adult writing about it now. The events from the past, and all the ripples of sensations and feelings and thoughts that characterised these, are that child’s own story and the only truths that must propel and energize a childhood memoir. The following remark made by Karr in her interview is right: “If I’d lived with a video camera strapped to my head, it might represent events in clearer external detail, but it wouldn’t reveal my inner life. [...] You might remember something I did that I don’t remember, but I know how I felt” (14).

Memories of childhood contain their own truths, and these truths are the building blocks with which we weave the linearity to the narratives of our lives. That is why it is not a mystery that in the event when the endless roll of the years has taken their toll upon our cogent universe and when senility has impaired the mind, our childhood becomes a homely beacon, lighting the last foothold of our cognition. I believe that the last word we would ever remember to utter is “Ma.” A baby’s first cry. Mother.

The writing of a memoir of my early childhood, which is my elected project for my Master’s degree, unfortunately experienced delays as other life commitments took precedence. The event of my mother’s passing became a perfect “memento mori” which gave me the renewed determination to complete my manuscript. It is often the case that deep emotions, especially those involving the loss of a loved one and the longing for lost times, can carry us to the base of existence. These take us deep into that state of existential nothingness— from which our experience of beauty and pure awareness of being stems out; the blank canvas from which our spiritual blossoming begins.

Robert Pogue Harrison’s insight when he reflects on Stendhal’s definition of beauty, as “a promise of happiness” and which he revises as a “promise of future” is very appropriate:

[...], knowing as beauty fades, we know that even the future will eventually fade into the past ... In other words, we have that in us that desire to become part of the world, to enter the flow of time, to achieve form and come into appearance. What is not finite cannot give birth, nor be filled with a promise of the future. (16-7)

It is within the depths of that existential nothingness—that essence of “deathness” or darkness—that early childhood lays in close proximity to eternity that Nabokov reflects upon on page 154 of this exegesis. Here, we are able to gather, if we are so inclined, memories of a past with its qualities of lights and shadows and transport them out into the light, onto the public space of life’s continued flourishing. It is in that state of nothingness that the self is revealed in its full concentration; from stasis into movement, from emptiness to newly revealed meanings, from confusion to clarity.

A key reason for writing a memoir is the need to recover and preserve those memories of the past— especially those from our childhood— that are precious to us. The very essence of our mortality drives us to seek for the possibility— even if just a shard— of immortality. The initial despondency that followed my mother’s death and the realisation of the total erasure of the landscape of my early childhood propelled my need to try to bring it all back. That “home of the past” cannot simply remain buried in unspoken remembrances. Writing down its story is the only recourse to transform it from mere memory into a tangible material encapsulating that beloved home of my birth, its people and its landscape. Through the act of writing, with the energy of an inspired imagination, I discovered the power to bring back ghosts and past realities that were gradually floating away into oblivion.

In short, memoir writing, I believe, is a proactive act of entering our internal core to find the fire, the song, the essence of who we are and what we are made of that defines our brief appearance on this mortal platform. The memoir provides longevity, if not immortality, to events, experiences and the characters that peopled our lives and the ironic interplay we shared with the tempi of the human story.

The Memoir as History Revealing Emotional Truths

Every memoir, whether written as a series of short essays or in substantial book form, has its own reason for being written and the themes and reasons are as individual as the author. One could always sense in every memoir text some underlying emotional overtones: of mysteries needing to be unraveled, or wounds needing to be healed, or anger needing to be appeased, intellectual crises needing to be resolved, and/or love

needing to be renewed, and ultimately, of joys needing to be told. These overtones are the spices of the memoir narrative that define the genre.

As mentioned, St. Augustine's *Confessions* is considered to be the earliest autobiographical writing in western civilisation. This text offers an appealing example of writing the interior self, and of portraying deep personal crises. The text describes detailed exposition of his spiritual journey from what he considered a debauched or sinful life to his conversion to Christianity and subsequent priesthood at age thirty-three. He is known in the Catholic Church to have conceived of the notion of "original sin," and the concept that the priest could only be married to the church, hence the prerequisite of celibacy in the priestly vocation.

Having a pagan father and a Christian mother, engendered conflicting influences in his ethos. This motivated St. Augustine to pursue spiritual enlightenment from early manhood until his Christian conversion. In his Introduction to his translation of *Confessions* (1991), Henry Chadwick writes:

The *Confessions* is a polemical work, at least as much a self-vindication as an admission of mistakes. The very title carries a conscious double meaning, of confession as praise as well as of confession as acknowledgement of faults. And its form is extraordinary— a prose-poem addressed to God, intended to be overheard by anxious and critical; fellow-Christians. (ix)

The fact that *Confessions* is meant with an audience in mind suggests it to be an emotionally charged text with the writer's own agenda to promote or discuss which would necessarily carry the moral and social context defining his time and the character of his audience. While this discussion of *Confessions* in this exegesis focusses only briefly on Books VIII and IX of the text, we still get a glimpse of the social character of that time. In Book VIII, we see a man before his conversion, searching for wisdom and spiritual epiphany in a competitive masculine world of political and sexual prowess (140). He speaks of his long anguish in making the decision to leave behind the carnal and material worlds he was enjoying (which included the low caste woman whom he loved and had a child with) for a life of chastity and total devotion to a priestly and saintly life;

But I was an unhappy young man, wretched as at the beginning of my adolescence when I prayed you for chastity and said; ‘Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.’ I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too readily heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress. (145)

In Book IX, we find out about Augustine’s mother, Monica, and her life of self-denial and submission to the husband’s will typical of the belief of that time. During the shaping-up of early western Christianity, she had the glorified role of the woman as a vessel of Christian virtues of purity, subservience and piety— as the silent voice in the background, a non-citizen. Augustine writes in praise of his mother:

Indeed many wives married to gentler husbands bore the marks of blows and suffered disfigurement to their faces. [...]. Monica, speaking as if in jest but offering serious advice used to blame their tongues. She would say that since the day when they heard the so-called matrimonial contract read out to them, they should reckon them to be legally binding documents by which they had become servants. (168-9)

Our modern sensibility makes us cringe at the above exposé, but this unappealing look at womanhood by the male sex is still true in many Middle Eastern cultures, the Far East and to some extent in our society today. Though, as revealed in Book IX, a mother’s love and influence on her child/son is constant and powerful, a universal truth throughout the ages. In Book IX, Augustine writes about his saintly mother and the devotion they had for each other and how, just before she dies, he shares with her an extraordinary experience of falling into a state of “religious ecstasy”— a spiritual phenomenon of being in a trance-like communion with the divine (170-1). When Monica finally passes away, the “man” in him who does not allow himself to give in to grief— a timeless expectation or belief that men do not cry and are incapable of tenderness— is portrayed in a different light.

After his mother’s burial, Augustine went to the baths to “rid the mind of anxiety:”

Then I went to sleep and woke up to find that the rest had brought me some relief from my sorrow. As I lay alone in bed, I remembered the verses of your

servant Ambrose and [...] little by little, my old feelings about your handmaid came back to me. I thought of her devoted love for you and the tenderness and patience she had shown to me, [...]. The tears which I had been holding back streamed down, and I let them flow as freely as they would, making of them a pillow for my heart. On them it rested, for my weeping sounded in your ears alone, not in the ears of men who might have misconstrued it and despised it. (453-4)¹

Of this segment in Book IX of *Confessions* James McConkey comments:

A reader might assume that following his conversion Augustine (as a bishop destined...) would demonstrate, at least in his public pronouncements, the steadfastness to be found in faith, the unbending strength of his convictions; but in Book XI— and later— he shows us the human difficulty, if not the impossibility of such resolute behavior. The grief is poignant and real. (492)

Confessions teaches us the universal and timeless qualities of human aspirations and expectations. Cultural values and ethos of peoples may change across time, but this is not so for certain emotional and spiritual tensions. These include the need for love, acceptance and hope; and the universal need to succeed and to be accepted in the eyes of men (though not necessarily in the eyes of God, as in the case of St. Augustine).

However, the reserve observed by men in the past, to keep their emotions to themselves as a sign of manly strength, is not adhered to so much these days, especially in western cultures. Many of the more popular memoirs are written by male writers. The contemporary male memoirist is freer in showing his emotional or internal conflicts. At the same time contemporary reader allow, if not require, the male memoirist those “feminine” qualities of tenderness and reflective astuteness— of controlled

¹The above quote is translated by R.S.Coffin, used by J. McConkey. *The Anatomy of Memory*.

Maker of all things! God most high!
Great Ruler of the starry sky!
Who, robing day with beauteous light,
Hast clothed in soft repose the night,
That sleep may wearied limbs restore,
And fit for toil and use once more;
May gently soothe the careworn breast,
And lull our anxious griefs to rest. (From St. Ambrose’s “Evening Hymn”, Trans. J. D. Chambers, 1854. *The Anatomy of Memory*,500).

sentimentality. In his essay/memoir “Waves,” Edwin J. Kenney’s (1942-1992)², a former professor of English, illustrates this point. Kenney writes about his mother’s painful battle with cancer and her subsequent death. At this time, Kenney was himself suffering from a rare form of cancer that he knew was incurable. In his restrained yet emotionally-driven narrative, he writes of his visit to his mother just before she died, and saw her “drawn, waxen, olive-skin, skull-like face” (470). Because their features are so alike, he sees his own face on hers and wondered if he was grieving for the mother he loved and was about to lose— or for himself.

In this text, the act of writing becomes a meditation of Kenney’s feelings surrounding his illness. As he writes about his day-to-day struggles, we are drawn into his experiences as he articulates his inner voice. We follow in his path of spiritual self-discovery. While sailing on his own one day, he escapes from the middle of the bay where there is a “disorienting merger of the elements of water, fog, sunlight, and sky (471).” He chooses to stir his boat along the coastline, close enough to see vividly a family group and friends on the porch and lawns of a house. A woman follows his progress through a pair of binoculars and starts waving vigorously at him, as do all the people there; adults and children. The warmth and spontaneity of this scene touches Kenney deeply. He weeps and writes of this experience afterwards:

I derive from this visionary moment a deeply abiding sense of peace and assurance and joy. [...] I know intuitively that this is not a wave good-bye, signifying death, or estrangement of loss, but a welcome, welcoming me back into the life of the world. And whatever my disease and its treatment may bring, whatever I may decide to do, in this recurring and abiding moment— I am riding the wave of mystery that is my life, and I fully know it. (472)

Unlike St. Augustine’s, Kenney’s memoir is not written for his private reflection but to be shared with others. His is the story of a modern man who seeks to find solace and reassurance from the sense of commonality with his fellow men and who, in doing so, discovers companionship and emotional release. In return, we the readers could find comfort and inspiration in sharing with powerful writings like Kenney’s as these could help us to face our own emotional upheavals. Vicarious experiences of others’ anxieties and their ensuing forms of “enlightenment” can offset rippling effects of the positive

² “Waves” is featured in J. McConkey’s *The Anatomy of Memory*. P463-72.

kind. They help us to deal with our own angst, knowing we are not alone. The second-hand experiences we have of other people's pain and problems can help us find solutions to our own crises. This is an intimate partnership of sorts where the memoirist and his/her readers may embark together on a journey into the darkness of existence and ultimately coming out onto the light of common spiritual and emotional awakening. The commonality of the experience between the writer and the reader validates the construction of a memoir.

Writing a memoir may also be a result of our need to express our rebellion, as well as the yearning for approval for the choices we make. Edmund Gosse and James Joyce wrote their memoirs during the Victorian Period, when it was difficult to write truthful personal stories. Their narratives reflect the ethos of that time, which demanded that family honor had to be protected and consequently, writing of delicate personal issues were veiled with restraint and niceties. Hence, it is not until the end of his long narrative, *Father and Son* (1989), that Gosse reveals his motive for writing: to vindicate his choice of a vocation that did not conform to his father's plans. His father expected his son to follow in his footsteps and become a cleric. "After all," Gosse writes, "the son is an individual and has a human being's privilege to fashion his inner life for himself" (251). The memoir is reflective of the later Victorian period, the time when traditional values were being eroded by new scientific studies and the findings of notable figures like Darwin, Wallace and Hooker. Of his father, a respected cleric under stress during the Victorian crisis of faith, Gosse says: "My father although half suffocated by the emotion of being lifted, as it were, on the great biological wave, never dreamed of letting go his clutch of the ancient tradition, but hung there, strained and buffeted" (113).

Gosse's memoir focuses on himself as a child— little Edmund, who at seven is a companion and carer of his dying mother, and then of his fractured yet close relationship with his father. In the narrative, his father is defined in relation to the child. For example, the father's aim to shape his son according to his own beliefs and inclinations generates in the child a sense of inner isolation. Gosse describes vivid images of himself looking out of the window onto a world outside, of a caged bird and of night terrors. In this way, whether knowingly or otherwise through symbolic images, he divulges emotional issues in childhood he must have kept close to his heart through his youth— until the writing of his memoir. There is always a tone of guarded formality

in the writing, even if by this time, his father had been dead for many years, and the only thing Gosse could hurt is his memory.

In *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Joyce adopts a style using the artifice of fiction. This is an autobiographical novel that draws closely on Joyce's formative years. The intellect, the sensitivity, the eccentricity of Stephen Daedalus resembles Joyce's own personality. Like Gosse, Joyce's motive for writing is rebellion; a condemnation of the suffocating traditions and attitudes that have outlived their time. "When the soul of a man is born in this country," he asserts, "there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight" (11).

Joyce dares to be political. He dares to point an accusing finger, and he dares to write about subjects that had been taboo before. These taboo subjects include Daedalus' sexual awakening with a prostitute (86), a family quarrel (with his mother) and his decision not to partake of or serve in a church rite at Easter and his unbelief in the Catholic faith (201). He dares to write about the banality and ordinariness of daily existence: "When you wet the bed first it is warm then it gets cold" (5). He was ahead of his time and scorned by many of his contemporaries. In his introduction to *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, Jeri Johnson quotes H. G. Wells when he claims:

There are things that polite, and decorous people do not mention in public. Nice people don't talk about religion or politics, nor do they ever on any account admit into discussion the emissions, excitation, vulnerabilities of the body. In the eyes of such decorous people, James Joyce was not a nice writer. (xi)

Similarly, when Virginia Woolf was writing her memoirs, secrecy and evasion over particular matters, largely problematic family and sexual issues, had not yet been lifted. In her memoir "A Sketch of the Past" (1939), she writes with guarded freedom, for instance, when recounting improper conduct of her much older half-brother with her as a child. She is also candid about her resentment of her father's selfishness and tyrannical attitudes to his eldest daughter. Her memoirs were not written for publication and were intended to be read only within her close social and literary circle. Even then, Woolf's creative excursions into more problematic and revealing details about her family were handled delicately as Jeanne Schulkind writes in her introduction to Woolf's memoirs, *Moments of Being* (1985):

These memoirs reveal, by their variously shaded tones, ‘other groups impinging’ on Virginia Woolf’s consciousness, how ‘what to her people say and think’ subtly alters the shape of the self that is presented to the world. [...] particularly at those moments when the forded flights of the poetic imagination leave feeling far behind on the ground or the tentative starts into areas of originality are cut short by hasty retreats into the safety of conventional formulas. The self-consciousness, with its hint of vulnerability, no doubt reflects a slight unease regarding her audience. (15)

With the above memoirs, we are able to glean not only the personal histories of the writers, but the history of the time they lived in, in much the same way that we access the pulses and dynamics of racial issues in the USA through the memoir writings of authors like Henry Louis Gates Jr. (*Colored People* 1995) and Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 2009). The experiences of these last two writers are contained in their reflective and insightful memoirs that portray the failings of a section of society that inflict pain and humiliation upon another— whose works, James MacConkey claims, gave “awareness of the spiritual equality of all individuals— a moral awareness that makes the struggle to overcome racial animosities a struggle to liberate both oppressor and victim” (*The Anatomy of Memory*, 255). Both Gates Jr. and Angelou wrote their individual memoirs with candour and honesty so much so that their narratives bear the scent, the voice, the skin and the heart of Black America; and White America, for that matter.

Memoir writing and reading, however, is not all about reflection on the miseries of life. Apart from teaching and learning, another important reason for reading memoirs is to be entertained. An enjoyable memoir— whether the narrative is steeped with intense emotional overtones or otherwise— is one that is composed with sincerity, compelling expression and crafty evocations of imageries that are centered on the day-to-day progression of ordinary life and narrated with the balanced interplay of humour and pathos. These memoirs draw you into the story, to live vicariously the story being told— to look in closely into lives, the universality and humanity of which, make them your own. Frank McCourt’s memoir, *Angela’s Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood* (1996) is one great example of the above. Another example is Annie Dillard’s portrayal of her childhood that is bristling with joy and enthusiasm. Dillard had an affluent childhood, the child of highly educated and influential parents. Perhaps that is where the pathos in

her memoir lies for readers who have had a less than perfect childhood. *An American Childhood* (1987) is a portrait of the absolute godliness of childhood in its existential moments of being alive. In an essay, she writes:

So I put in that moment of waking up and noticing that you've been put down in a world that's already under way. The rushing of time wakes you: you play along mindless and eternal on the kitchen floor, and time streams in full flood beside you on the floor. It rages beside you, down its swollen banks, and when it wakes you you're so startled you fall in. When you wake up, you notice that you're here. ("To Fashion a Text," *Inventing the Truth*, 1987.) 59

Dillard is one of those writers who have mastered the evocation with words of internal truths or realities you are conscious of but do not know how to express yourself. I have found her lyricism and depths of instinct to be inspiring. The joy of reading Dillard's memoir, like the others mentioned in this study, led me to the realisation that writing a memoir is worthwhile even if all that is appreciated is the writer's spirit of generosity. To re-live our past lives is one of the main motives for participating in the process of remembering and writing— to retrieve and recreate precious histories of our lives and then to align these with the business of living humanity: your joys and sorrows, your moral and spiritual issues. There is humility in the act of sharing, a quality in the creative process which makes the memoir an extraordinary form of communication. The memoir connects you to the universality of human thoughts and aspirations, as well as to the natural world that nurtures these. Dillard opens her memoir with this spirit of connection:

When everything else has gone from my brain— [...], the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length dissolved, what will be left, I believe is topology, the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.

I shall see the city poured rolling down the mountain valleys like slag, and see the city lights sprinkle and curved around the hills' curves, rows of bonfires winding.
(3)

Dillard sees her life story as an exploration of her primal connection to the land and as a celebration of the humanity that gives life to the land. This affinity with the

landscape, its topology, and its people, is the launching pad for her life-writing process. She writes from the perspective of personal history, with the faith her story is humanity's own:

A child wakes up over and over again," she claims, "and notices that she's living. She dreams along, loving the exuberant life of the senses, [...] oblivious of herself— and then suddenly, she [...] feels herself alive. She notices her own awareness. And she notices that she is set down here, mysteriously, in a going world. The world is full of fascinating information that she can collect and enjoy. And the world is public; its issues are moral and historical ones. (56)

The content of a memoir does not need to be groundbreaking in the topics or experiences it conveys to make an exciting read. M. F. Kennedy Fisher, who is one of the most prolific gastronomic writers of the twentieth century, was writing her memoir *To Begin Again: Stories and Memoirs* (1992)³— a series of essays— late in her life (she died aged 83 in 1992). In one excerpt from her work, "Tally," she writes about an imaginary friend of her brother in childhood, Tally— whom everyone in the family played along with, without asking questions— until years passed and the imaginary friend was not mentioned anymore. In old age, she wonders whether such peculiarities of childhood might have a scientific or spiritual significance. "For I feel muddled," she writes, "as I try to think about the reason why I slept for about twenty-five years with my hand hanging over the edge of my bed (*The Anatomy of Memory*, 425)." She remembers that she too had an imaginary friend as a child; one she hadn't named or mentioned to anyone until this time of writing—an old man under her bed who cared for and looked after her:

The old man must have been tiny, because it did not matter if I slept on a real bed or on a pallet or on bare boards: I simply let my left hand stay trustingly over the edge of whatever I lay on, even as I lay close to a dear lover or a sweet child. And it did not matter if my hand hung sweaty in the tropics, or carefully escaping from heavy warmth in a snowland, [...] I knew that when I most needed it, the old man there, [...] would reach out and clasp it confidently in his own strong clean hand." (428)

³ M.F.K. Fisher's short biography and description of her works are written by James McConkey in *The Anatomy of Memory* (425). Her essays/memoirs "Tally (428-431)" and "The Jackstraws" (426)" are included in the same Anthology in the "Perspectives of Memory" Chapter 447-502."

This tiny snippet of memory seems trivial— a snippet suddenly remembered and reflected upon with the wisdom and tenderness that come with age. This memory is warm and engaging, while the actual telling of the memory evokes poignancy— of particular feelings of loneliness in old age and of how memories from childhood could remind you of the passing of time. In old age, Fisher ponders why the imaginary friend from her childhood gradually dissolved as she grew up. I am grateful she had written this memory down, because her act of remembering has also been my own. Fisher’s short memoir has reawakened similar memories of imaginary friends from my childhood that would have otherwise remained forgotten. Her reflections become my own reflections and I’m comforted by the emotions these remembrances carry.

The Memoir as a Means of Revealing Horrible Truths

At times, while writing our personal histories, we encounter personal truths that are confronting and sensitive. Thus, the process of presenting them on a page can cause anxiety or tension. Questions could arise as to whether your “truth” is your property and if so, do you have the power to write compromising and murky secrets involving your family without their consent? If the memoirist has the need to proceed with the writing, how shall he/she go about it? Should the story be told “less” truthfully, or should the writer make the necessary changes so that the people involved will not recognise themselves? Is it an act of betrayal if the memoirist portrays his/her family in an unfavourable light to satisfy his search for answers about his/her life? And in telling the truth, how reliable is the memoirist’s memory? How emotionally invested is his/her imagination and reflection? Virginia Woolf suggests these problems when she writes in “A Sketch of the Past,”

This influence, by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analyzed ... if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. (*Moments of Being*) 80.

It is interesting to note here the way the memoirist can see and reflect on the same experience in different levels all at once. In a childhood memoir, it is important to write about the experience from the point of view of the child. But as the writer of your own

story, you interpret memories through your adult perspective and in many cases the tension between memory and imagination—the shifting perspectives— becomes a real issue. No matter how hard you configure fragments, there will be gaps, which the memoirist has to negotiate with strength in her artistic representation.

For this reason, authors such as James Joyce wrote memoirs in the form of autobiographical fiction. In *Running in the Family* (1983), Michael Ondaatje tells the story of his family using elements of fantasy and realism. J.M. Coetzee, on the other hand, has distanced himself so much from his story by writing his trilogy of memoirs, *Youth* (2003), *Boyhood* (1998) and *Summertime* (2009), entirely from the third-person point of view. In this way he is able to view his life with a sense of objectivity. In the process, Coetzee could be seen to undermine his talents and achievements by portraying himself as the voyeur of a life he seems not to be particularly enamored with. For me, Coetzee has stripped his memoir of warmth by erasing himself totally from his self-narrative.

In the process of writing my memoir, I discovered how a foothold of memory could reveal long-forgotten events which I found very confronting. Perhaps we have an instinct to safeguard our sanity by either forgetting or storing these events in the deepest recesses of our minds. Most of the time, though, these horrible truths stay with us throughout our lives, and they stay just around the corner of our daily perceptions—muted in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives— until in some cases, the need to “let go” drives one to write a memoir.

In the course of my reading, I had come across some memoirs that contained such heartbreaking stories of violence and suffering, I had to skip some pages or in some cases, I had to put down the book to collect my thoughts and courage before picking it up again to continue reading. Examples of such texts are Gao Xingian’s *One Man’s Bible* (2002), which is a fictionalised version of the authors life in the gulag of the Cultural Revolution in China; and *Infidel* (2007) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, which is the author’s account of her escape from primitive and violent traditions and from religious fanaticism, and ultimately immigrating to the west. There were also Holocaust memoirs, such as Elie Wiesel’s *Night* (1960), which I had to give up reading altogether as I did not have the strength to bear the despondency that stories of “man’s inhumanity to man” brings. One can read only so much before very confronting memoirs become

unbearable. However, these confronting memoirs are vital in giving place to personal memories over history and collective forgetting: that those hate crimes must never be forgotten and therefore, never repeated; that mankind should learn from history. There are, however, those memoirs in which horrible truths are easier to read because they have been written sensitively and in innovative styles, and are removed from the brutalities of war.

Reflective memoirs like Virginia Woolf's *Moments of Being* (1985) are examples of deeply contemplative writings wherein painful events are written with reflective and analytic honesty. The above collection covers Woolf's impressions of the different stages of her life, from infancy through to adolescence and into adulthood. According to Jeanne Schulkind, Woolf's memoirs reveal the remarkable unity of her art, thought and sensibility. The beliefs and values that underlie Woolf's work marked her responses to the world with a distinctive quality. These memoirs reveal the degree to which she wove the facts of her life—the people, the incidents, the emotions— into the fabric of her fiction (*Moments of Being* 11). Reading these memoirs makes it easier to look at Virginia Woolf, the author, in her novels— her style and remarkable articulation and rumination of the most abstract of feelings. For instance, when she writes about her shame when caught looking into a mirror, she makes a long analysis on the possibilities on why it might be so (68). It is interesting to read the exposition of her mind— the narration of random observations of related events and sensations— and then a horrible truth from the past emerges:

I thus detect another element in the shame which I had in being caught looking at myself in the glass in the hall. I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body. Another memory, also of the hall, may help to explain this. There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. [...] I remember resenting, disliking it— what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling? It must have been strong, since I still recall it. (69)

There are other confronting events in her life that Woolf writes about in her memoir, like the death of her beloved sister Stella (42), the night her mother died (91-2), or of the talk at the dinner table about the suicide of a family friend by hanging from a tree and which Woolf imagined being committed from the apple tree in their garden

(71). Woolf also writes poignantly about a memory from her childhood, when she just stood there while her brother, Thoby, was hitting her because she could not understand why somebody would like to hurt someone (71). These childhood events gave her the lasting sense of utter despair and fear which haunted her throughout her life and which may have been partly a symptom of her mental illness.

However, Woolf does not dwell on the darker experiences in her childhood. Rather, so many of the memorable and more positive scenes from her past are described with all of the accompanying sensations which serve to intensify them, making them shine: the colour, the scent, the forms, the brush of the wind, the shape of the flowers. Woolf describes, for example, her memories of the nursery she shared with her siblings (66), as well as her memories of her mother (81). She writes:

I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex' and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete. (67)

I find Virginia Woolf's memoirs provide useful studies of a sensitive and creative mind whose reflective internal gaze on her experiences articulates so well the interior make-up of a true literary artist. The triumph of Woolf's work lies in her ability to draw us into her experience so that her words merge with our own reflective intuition as we ruminate with her, on life's mysteries and wonderments in both its ordinary and extraordinary aspects, as well as its "horrible" truths.

Mark Doty has many "horrible" truths to tell in his compelling memoir, *Firebird* (2000). Through sheer strength of spirit, Doty successfully survived his childhood and ended up with literary accolades in adulthood. Growing up with his family constantly on the move across America, wherever his father's job took them, was bad enough, but the growing disenchantment of his mother with many aspects of her life, particularly with her two children, Doty and his older sister Sally, drove her into alcoholism and mental health problems. There are two scenes that stand out strongly in Doty's memory that evidently affected him deeply and which at the same time he feels may have contributed to his mother's mental and emotional fracture. His mother's words convey her intense disappointment and on his part, despair and guilt: "Son you're a boy" and in another

scene, when she exclaims: “Son’s a homosexual and Sally’s a whore” (101, 123). Sadly, the lack of joy and loving stimulation in the family drive Doty’s sister into addiction and prostitution. The memoir shows, however, that the mother’s internal conflict has resulted significantly from the lack of permanence, a dysfunctional marital relationship and the confusion of a sensitive mind when reality does not meet perceived and idealised expectations. Unlike her children, Doty’s mother lacked the strength to adjust to change and reinvent herself; rather, when things in her life did not work out the way she expected them to, she succumbed to bitterness and alcoholism.

Many of the truths Doty conveys about his upbringing— particularly regarding his latent homosexuality and his mother’s growing depression— would have required considerable courage to disclose. In the process of writing, Doty seems anguished by the possibility that his memoir might impact negatively on his family’s name. There were ‘painful’ events in Doty’s life that haunted him, and which possibly drove him to write his memoir. One, as mentioned above, happened in childhood when his mother caught him dancing with abandon while mimicking Judy Garland’s performance of “Get Happy”. His mother told him, “Son you’re a boy“. Doty reflects on the sense of rejection he felt, the denial of approval from the mother he loved. Her voice, her expression showed “her fear for what her son will become. His dissolute future spread out in front to her like an oil slick; shameful, worthless, sick” (101). In *Firebird*, we read about a child nursing his own spirit and enjoying the act of surviving, of a child’s need to be beautiful in the gaze of his mother...the mother as his source of strength. During puberty, his mother’s intense disapproval drove him to experiment with drugs and attempted suicide. At seventeen, Doty marries a woman whom he hoped to save from alcoholism and drug addiction...and/or perhaps to mask his latent homosexuality. The marriage didn’t last.

Another significant event occurred when he was sixteen; his drunken and crazed mother pointed a gun at him and the only reason she failed to shoot was because she forgot to pull the safety latch (176). I mentioned earlier how the writing of intensely “horrible” events in our lives could eventually set us free. This stems from the need to unburden one’s self of those demons that haunt us; the nagging sorrows and disappointments that drag us down emotionally and spiritually and which disallow us to experience true joyfulness. The act of writing may come from a need to distance these from our emotional cognition, to be able to objectively reflect and analyse these

experiences in detail, and hopefully find some understanding and acceptance of those difficult aspects in our lives that inevitably make us who we are. McConkey reflects on this:

Human identity, as reflected in personality and selfhood ... have their source in memories contained in the unconscious as well as the conscious mind. If this is true ... memory is the source not only of our emotions and quirks but of our spiritual desires. Memory itself expresses, I believe, a wanting: a desire to make sense of one's life and of the phenomenal world. (447)

As a story-teller, Doty writes with brutal honesty. This takes us to the other disturbing event etched acutely in his memory: his mother who is demented and in severe state of physical and mental deterioration with cirrhosis of the liver, is confined in hospital. Her hands are tied to a wooden board to stop her tampering with the tubes that are connected to her. "'Your father,' my mother says, trying to sit up in the hospital bed, raising her head to look me directly in the eye, urgent, confiding, 'has nailed my hands to these boards.' Why tell a story like this, who wants to hear it?" (182-3). The question is directed both to himself and his reader. Despairing, he writes: "The older I get, the more I distrust redemption; it isn't in the power of language to repair damages." For a while, it seems, his despair would deny all resolutions...the total forfeiture of escape. But the process of writing however, offers hope:

We live the stories we tell; the stories we don't tell live us. What you don't allow yourself to know controls and determines; whatever's held to the light 'can be changed'— not the facts, of course, but how we understand them, how we live with them. ... What matters is what we learn to make of what happens to us. And we learn to make, think, by telling. Held to the light of common scrutiny, nothing's ever quite as unique as our shame and sorrow would have us think. (183)

After the publication of *Firebird*, Doty briefly reconciled with his father and his father's second wife, but their relationship soon deteriorated. In his essay "Return to Sender" (2000), Doty writes:

The experience I report here is, I suppose, every memoirist's nightmare: that we will lose people in our lives by writing about them. I have replaced an inauthentic

relationship ... with an authentic silence ... I've shown light into dark places and thus brought shame upon my family; I have told the truth, which may indeed set you free, but not without the price of betrayal. You cannot sing your ancestor's songs as they intended them to be sung, as they would have phrased them themselves. If you choose to sing them at all, you will betray your forebears, because you will never understand them as they'd wish to be understood. (162-3)

The sense of betrayal described here would be similar to the uncertainty Maxine Hong Kingston harboured for a long time before finally deciding to publish her memoirs, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts* (1997). The demand for "silence" over the family secrets was strong. To break the silence was irreverent, a betrayal. It was during that time of indecision that Kingston was able to experiment with a style of writing through which she could present not only her story but the story of a cultural code that spanned generations and culminated in her family's relocation to America. The experimental and innovative style with which she wrote her memoir reflects many influences. It is helpful to know that even acclaimed writers like Kingston need to look to other authors for ideas and inspirations. In an interview, she claims that she has been influenced by Walt Whitman and Virginia Woolf:

I like the freedom that Walt Whitman was using to play with and shape the American language. I just lifted lines from *Leaves of Grass*. You would think they were modern sixties' slang— "Trippers and Askers" ... whenever I come to a low point in my life or in my work, when I read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* ... that always seems to get my life force moving again ... she can make one character live for four hundred years and that Orlando can be a man, Orlando can be a woman. Virginia Woolf broke through constraints of time, of gender, of culture. (Fishkin 784)

Kingston has created a wonderful artifice in writing about the horrible truth. *The Woman Warrior* is a refreshing text in its complex manner of composition, in which genders, myths, legends, history, and traditional Chinese and modern American realities collide and stereotypes are subverted. Kingston opens her memoir with cautionary words from her mother:

You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We

say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.”
(3)

The mother continues to tell the sad tale of Kingston’s aunt, ‘No Name Woman’, who fell pregnant at an “unsuitable” time because her husband had been living in America for some years (3). The villagers kept a forbidding silent watch on her. The story continues with the horror of the villagers descending upon No Name Woman and the family. At that point, she was close to giving birth. No Name Woman is tortured and the entire family abused, their house vandalised:

The old woman from the next field swept through the air and loosed the spirits-of-the-broom over our heads. ‘Pigs, ‘ghosts’, pigs,’ they sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house ... Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well. (5)

Typically, in Asian cultures, “tell stories” like these are meant to be cautionary tales. “Don’t let your father know that I told you. Do not humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5). The family’s honour is paramount and it is stained by a family member’s transgression. Familial and societal persecutions are severe not only from the living but from the ghosts of ancestors. Like Aeneas, who transplants his family and household *Lares* or guardian deities into Latium, the Chinese immigrants transplant their superstition and beliefs into America. A generation later, Kingston begins to write her memoir with all the “talk-stories” her mother has told her and her siblings. Secrecy is required of her but she goes on writing, with no intention of publishing at first. Some truths, especially from the past, can be regarded as unacceptable on many levels. These truths are often left unspoken for generations, primarily because of the fear that the shame of the past could become the shame of the present.

Secret unutterable truths can, however, maintain their energies through generations in unending cycle. At the heart of all these truths are songs waiting to be sung, love that needs to be given, guilt to be shared, forgiveness waiting to be asked or bestowed. The tensions these engender are like contained springs that are waiting to be released or made known. For however horrible these truths may be, they are part of the histories of who we are. Ultimately, to break the silence, to bring to light what was

taboo and mysterious seems inevitable. Finally, Kingston is personally pleased with her artful narrative and decides to publish it. In the interview, Kingston justifies this rebellion when she says:

I realised that by writing about her I gave her back life and a place in history and maybe immortality. There's redemption that takes place in art. And I had resolved questions that would not resolve in life. So of course I had to publish. I feel that I constantly deal with the "don't tell" taboo—we all do. (786)

Kingston's decision to publish her memoir eliminates the censure and demand for female silence and subservience in the Chinese traditions. She has chosen to break boundaries and in the process creating a style employing interplay of truth, fantasy and historical embellishment. Her mother, Brave Orchid's, gripping talk-stories, have ironically motivated, if not driven, Kingston into re-telling her own version of the life stories which fed her creative imagination from babyhood to maturity.

My mother told others [talk-stories] that followed swordswomen through woods and palaces for years. Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. And on Sundays, from noon to midnight, we went to the movies at the Confucius Church. We saw swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill; they didn't even need a running start. (19)

Thus, through the art of literary expression, Kingston finds the tool to set the horrible secrets of her family free, stories that are tied up with the struggle of the Chinese people. These stories, along with the myths, legends and customs from their native land are part of the baggage that are carried along by immigrants/refugees fleeing war, persecution and famine into their new homes in countries such as America. Many of these "horrible" stories feature in many biographies of Chinese immigrants, for example, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (2008). Kingston's memoir has these stories in abundance: deformed babies and the killing of baby girls, a crazed woman being stoned to death, slavery, witchcraft.

In the act of telling her life stories, Kingston incorporates all the plumes of China's historical past—the characters and ethos of a culture steeped in the immemorial traditions of "old" China—hearsay and oral traditions and superstitions,

unwritten laws and taboos—weaving all these with the realities and tensions she experienced growing up as a child of Chinese immigrants in America. Kingston writes: “Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities” (5). This is a common practice in educating children in Asian countries. Traditional legends are used as models, and myths are embellished to intensify whatever virtues are being taught to the child; the grander, the more terrifyingly heroic, the better. This makes an Asian childhood at times a confused one, at times traumatic, yet rich on many levels. Telling a tale in Asian culture is a sublime art form and the images and “lessons” they convey stick in the subconscious of the child and someone like Kingston could grow up feeling partly real and partly a tale or a myth.⁴

Although she knew nothing about No Name Woman, except for the terrible tale her mother had told her, Kingston took the liberty to interpret her image and make an authentic and humanised figure out of her. Kingston gives her aunt a voice and womanly attributes derived from Kingston’s own sensibilities and deeply ingrained Chinese tenet and superstitions. In the process, she gives No Name Woman warm and strong feminine qualities, as well as free will and a soul. Could this aunt have known the man who had raped or seduced her? He could be someone she knew, someone closer to home— a lover whom she chose to deny knowledge of; he could have been the one who betrayed her to the villagers and hid his identity further by participating in the collective punishment.

Kingston describes her aunt’s quiet surrender to the pains of achieving physical beauty: the pulling of facial hair, the binding of feet. Most of all, though, Kingston makes No Name Woman a heroic figure.

[She falls in love and to] sustain her being in love, she often worked at herself in the mirror, [...] She wanted him to look back.” (9) [At the time of birthing, she went to the pigsty] as a last act of responsibility: she would protect this child as she had protected its father. [...] Carrying the baby to the well shows loving.

⁴ After the story of No Name Woman, Kingston digresses. In the second chapter, she becomes Fa Mu Lan, a mythical hero (traditionally a man), who wreaks revenge for the suffering of her people and fights against armies, giants, and evil barons. Kingston then returns home to be an ordinary wife and mother. She also brings in at the end of her memoir another legendary heroine, Ts’ai Yen, (“A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”) who was abducted as a young girl and grew up to be the wife of a chieftain. Ts’ai Yen sings of her lost home and lost traditions, yet lives where she is with the shining qualities of an idealized woman.

Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys. (15)

Through the power of her memoir, Kingston connects herself to a tragic figure whose identity and existence were aborted by the people who should have protected and honoured her: her own family. Through her memoir, Kingston is able to reach out to a young woman from the past and symbolically set this woman free. No Name Woman and her child are no longer silent figures plugging the well of a forbidding past. Mother and child can now be free, and be without guilt or shame. The shackles of old traditions which tethered No Name Woman to despair and oblivion by a judgmental and ignorant society have been broken by one inspired act of writing. The unforgiving spirits of her ancestors have ceased to hound her, because she and her baby are now in America and in the heart of readers who read her niece's memoir.

Kingston has painted a loving and believable picture of her aunt. In this picture, she pours her own insights and sensitivities into re-creating a character she never knew but whose plight she takes for her own. In the act of writing, Kingston has had the chance to reflect on the womanly needs and feelings of a tragic young woman who found herself the subject of collective anger. By rendering her own vision and intuition into the personality of her aunt, Kingston has given her aunt warmth, legitimacy and strength. In the empathetic configuration of her aunt, Kingston presents a creative interpretation evoking her interior self, one that is nurtured with myths and the full weight of the human condition. Hence, while distorting in a way the definition of the genre, she creates a memoir with a distinct poetic license that is gripping and honest.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE WRITING PROCESS

Splicing together fact and fiction, memory and imagination into one frame—now telling a myth, now history and social mannerisms, now the present reality and so forth — could be daunting for an amateur writer. Kingston’s memoir contains the visions of two extremely opposing cultures which she cannot extricate from one another. She was born and educated in America to Chinese immigrant parents who constantly reminded her of who she really was; a Chinese— imbued with all that country’s superstitions, values and taboos. She would have been bilingual by the time she started school and from the start learnt to navigate within the tensions of two opposing cultures. I believe this contributed strongly to a multi-layered sensibility in Kingston that is evident in her memoir. Admittedly, I found reading *The Woman Warrior* difficult to begin with because I could not tell whether I was reading fiction or not. Jeanne R. Smith writes:

Though much of the criticism of *The Woman Warrior* focuses on the difficulties created by competing and often contradictory allegiances, such contradiction is not necessarily debilitating. Kingston’s multivocal *Woman Warrior* redefines autobiography as a process of acknowledging and giving voice to contradictions and paradoxes within the self (32-3).

As I persevered in reading *Woman Warrior*, I came to appreciate its eccentric appeal and I even nursed the idea for some time that I should copy her style for my memoir. However, I couldn’t do this even if I tried. My childhood holds different qualities: different landscapes, different values molded by different histories. Unlike Kingston, I spent a good half of my life in my place of birth. The songs I sang as a child were American ballads; we had American nicknames and Asian features, and we spoke our regional dialects at home, while learning and speaking English and Spanish at school. Our forebears looked to Spain as their motherland and our parents were born during the American occupation of the Philippines. The myths and fables I learnt were from the Christian Bible. There were remnant legends from pre-Christian era in the state but these were mostly pushed into the background. Even the remote tribes in the mountain provinces in the North, who practiced Animism, were slowly integrating into the mainstream Christian beliefs and worship after the war. However, there are many

superstitions and myths from pre-Christian era in the country that stay firmly rooted in the daily life of the community. I have integrated some of these into my stories to enhance the ethnic qualities of my memoir. Examples include the shaman, goblins and other spirits of the natural world.

As children, we were so immersed in the Biblical stories and prayers that were taught to us that we neglected to see the violence and destruction these stories and these biblical myths held. Deaths on the cross, the martyrdoms, even the butchery of the Crusades were held in awe. In religion, violence can somehow be framed as holy. That being said, religion holds communities together. The law of love, though often broken and misinterpreted, keeps the faithful in check. “I would rather break your legs, make you lame,” my father would threaten my brothers when they fought or spoke to the elders belligerently, “rather than you growing up into disreputable adults,” as though he was God himself and owned our lives. In this way, the rural society that dealt with the fate of No Name Woman echoes the fanaticism and ignorance that prevailed in the strictly Catholic community of my childhood with its misinterpreted visions of sin and punishment.

No Name Woman dishonored her family and wounded the moral fiber of the community with the belief that her “depravity” would surely bring bad luck to the harvest and worse still, that her action could bring retribution from the ghosts of their ancestors. The erasure of her memory is justified not only in traditional Chinese ethos but also in the post-war ethos of the rural Philippines, where life was hard and the mortality rate, especially among children, was high. Any break from the norm was looked upon with fear and censure.

In “A Simple Faith: A Lunch with Yolly,” I illustrate the above predicament, the ironic interplay between idealised Christian values and the havoc that blind faith can play on the lives of unfortunate individuals who find themselves on the wrong side of the social and moral divide. I try to convey glimpses of the emotional and physical violence and the confusion caused by the ignorance and fanatical religiosity that pervaded the landscape of my childhood. In this short memoir, I tried to portray the emotional violence that children like Yolly suffered as a consequence of the sins of their parents which is the denial of love and compassion by the members of the family and the larger community whose job it was to protect and nurture them.

In our culture, as in traditional Chinese cultures, to speak of the “sins” of our elders is taboo. Thus, it was with great care that I mentioned something negative about my grandmother and my parents in my ‘Yolly’ narrative. Though aware that they had all passed away now, I persevered with the writing with a strong sense of guilt and disloyalty. I also took comfort with the thought that probably none of the remaining elders in the family would read my memoirs. But the need for clarity—to discover the reasons why certain things happened and to learn of our ancestors’ background—seemed to be of more value to me. Consequently, I found that the writing enabled me to see the family members I wrote about in more positive lights. The writing was a symbolic process of going into the dark to find light, which is the primary quality of this genre of “self-recollection,” as Toni Morrison had defined the memoir (“The Site of Memory,” *Inventing the Truth*, 103).

Courage is required to tell the world that our elders held beliefs and practices based on myths and ignorance, and that these beliefs and practices were wrong and irrational. By encountering my deceased family members again through the act of writing, I realised how they and generations before them were products of the circumstances they were brought up in: the wars, the deprivations of liberty and education which colonialism had enforced upon them. These drove them to take refuge in their religion. They believed they were doing the right thing by us, by the community and by God. Ironically, in a serendipitous way, in spite of their upbringing and fear of change, they had the initiative to send us to school and for us to receive the education they never had. Through the examples of their hard work and spirit of self-preservation, we gained the strength of spirit needed to carve our own destiny in a rapidly changing world. The kind of strength of spirit that Yolly has gained from her misfortune has enabled her to succeed as a human being. Like Kingston’s *No Name Woman*, who with motherly love carries her baby to the well and does not abandon it to suffer in life for her sins, the character of Yolly does not abandon her family but carries them through to better living conditions. Initially an object of shame through the sins of her mother, she traverses the pilgrim’s road with the simple faith of love and acceptance and becoming a true Female Salvatore in the process.

However, the story of Yolly is not meant to be a cautionary tale; instead, it has been written to reveal a model character with a universal appeal and humanity. I have placed “A Simple Faith: A lunch with Yolly,” as the last chapter of my creative

component in this project, to serve as a coda to the first three chapters, which are written from the child's point of view. This final chapter which portrays that child of the past in the present is written entirely in the first-person and omniscient point of view. It is told in the perspective of the adult, who is narrating her life in relation with the life of a friend (Yolly). The story within- the-story style is also used in weaving the stories of two kinds of childhood together and the relationships of two adult characters in the present, who are both immigrants in Australia. The story of Yolly's childhood is spliced with the childhood of the narrator through the use of flashbacks.

I employed dialogue freely in this chapter and these are written in the present tense, as are all of the dialogues in my memoirs, Part One of this project, to convey immediacy and a sense of movement and suspense. The interlacing of long passages with the faster pace of the dialogue balances the passive rhythm of lengthy reflective narrations. This also parallels the intertwining together of events from the past and present of two childhoods and the lives of two adult characters in the present; that of the narrator and Yolly's.

In representing the character of Yolly to the English-speaking reader, I kept her speaking broken English, with the aim of keeping true to her ethnicity. The integration of Pilipino/Spanish interjections and slangs in the dialogue was meant to add validity and coherence to the spirits of place and cultural experience:

“It's okay.” She wipes her eyes and beams a chunky smile. “All a long time ago. Nothin' more to be done. I'm 'ere and it's okay.”

“You deserve to be happy, Yolly, you deserve everything: the house—the car—the money—Karol....”

“Mmm,” she mumbles reflectively. “But I must 'elp my family, dey all I 'ave.”
(139)

The dialogue in this memoir illustrates our migrant character and voice, and helps map out complex linguistic and cultural tension within the “foreign” culture of our “second home.” The reflective voice and the dialogue in this chapter also depict the duality of our perspectives; that of the migrant forever connected and drawing strength from the memory of the “home” that is left behind while thriving quite happily in the “foreign” home that nurtures and shapes the present.

The Child's Perspective/Voice

In *The Truth of Memoir* (2014), Kerry Cohen lectures: “The words you write must matter beyond the page. By necessity of the genre, other people have to care about your story” (16). With this in mind, I initially doubted my ability to sustain a long narrative in English about my past, writing in a culture that is so different from the culture of my birth where I spent my formative years. My motivation in writing my memoir has been to reclaim that child and her world; its colour, scents, sounds and unique “voice.” I had hoped to write it well enough for the reader to empathise and participate in my journey of “self-recollection.” In her essay “To Fashion a Text,” Annie Dillard observes: “There’s nothing you can’t do [in a memoir]. No subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed, you get to make up your own form every time” (*Inventing the Truth* 1987, 74). This is certainly true of Kingston's work. It is a definition which gives amateur memoirists like me some relief and encouragement. Initially, having felt confident with my “mastery” of English; I thought the writing process was going to be straightforward. “Look into thy heart and write,” Sir Philip Sidney said, and I wrote. After several attempts, I found that the drafts I wrote were flat and dull. They were simply exercises in narrating sequences of events— from the omniscient or first-person point of view, which denied the character I was portraying dynamics in her voice. And then, I tried writing drafts entirely in the third person point of view after two readers in a writing workshop commented on the proliferation of the pronoun “I” in the text. Again, I had to revise these drafts as my narrative seemed too alienated from myself, the writer. I thought that “I” should be markedly present in my “self” narrative. To quote David Shields, it is “I” “Who know what was around the next bend, know what the future holds, know how the story is going to turn out. We expect personal essayists to speak to us from behind a stylised version of themselves rather than give us the whole man” (84).

Shields claims the ‘I’ he used in his memoir is deceptive and tricky. He writes, “There are two of us. I’m the chronicler in this character at the center who is, but in the necessary sense, not me. He doesn’t have my retrospect or leisure . . . He moves in the book in a state of innocence about the future . . .” (84). In writing a childhood memoir, there are necessarily two voices: that of the child being portrayed and that of the adult narrator who is looking back reflectively on the child that he/she was. As Mary Karr points out: “The interplay of these two planes— present and past, the ‘me’ now and the ‘me’ then create the narrative and the voice. One can’t exist without the other” (*The*

Truth of Memoir; 18). However, I believe that the dominant voice should be that of the child who navigates innocently and joyfully in the world of the past, long before its voice takes on moral and adult overtones. That child's voice is what I want to depict most strongly in my memoir.

In her essay, Dillard writes that her memoir is about "the passion of childhood. It's about a child's vigor, and originality, and eagerness, and mastery, and joy" ("Fashioning a Text," 56). For this reason, her memoir has been my main inspiration in my own writing. Like Dillard, I want to write about the many things I liked as a child and which made my childhood a blissful one: the joys of food and song and freedom; the joys of learning and discovery, and of the security and nurture that love gives. I also want to pay tribute to the figures who featured within the circumference of that world. I needed to depict them and to hear and see them again through the voice of that child. After several more drafts, I found the child's perspective and voice to be the more engaging point of view to use. The following observation by Virginia Woolf's is very apt:

... these moments of being of mine were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child. But in the foreground there were of course people; and these people were very like characters in Dickens. They were caricatures; they were very simple; they were immensely alive. ... Dickens owes his astonishing power to make characters alive to the fact that he saw them as a child sees them ... (*Moments of Being*, 73)

In the end, I relied on the integrity of the child's visions that responded strongly to those moments in life that were resonant with love, light, joy and fun. This was early childhood, after all, that exquisite time of innocence in a human life. The early childhood period that I had written contains the confusion, isolation, and some pain a child must deal with in the process of growing up in that particular environment and its peoples and the circumstances she was born into.

In my narrative, the child comes alive strongly when she speaks in a dialogue wherein through short, simple sentences, the reader can hear her internal and external voices. The internal voice ruminates subconsciously while immersed in the sensations of abstract realities:

Sometimes, I played with children in the yard of a house where women wept and moaned so loudly, some fainting on the floor from grief and exhaustion. And inside the house, in the middle of the main room, on a long dining table or in a bamboo bed someone in his or her best Sunday clothes would be lying peacefully. Sometimes it's a baby or another child lying still on top of a small table...

During those times, especially in the evenings, our parents would meet together and chat for hours We could play hide and seek in the moon light. Men came with their guitars and played and sung lively ballads and other people played cards. There was a lot of laughter and carousing and at times some men would get intoxicated from home brewed rice and coconut wines ... (39)

In this sketch, the prevailing voice is that of the child who is telling her own story in the first person point of view. At the same time, the voice of the adult narrator is covertly present. She is seeing and remembering her childhood and supplying gaps in remembered fragments of memories. There were times when I thought that the adult's point of view did not sit well in a child's internal life, and this made me contemplate on the style for a while. But after reading Phillip Lopate's essay "Reflection and Retrospection" (2005), I felt encouraged to go ahead. Lopate writes:

In writing memoir, the trick ... is to establish a double perspective that will allow the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived ... while conveying the sophisticated wisdom of one's current self. This second perspective, the author's retrospective employment of a more mature intelligence to interpret the past, is not merely an obligation but a privilege, and opportunity. ... The heart of the matter often shines through those passages where the writer analyses the meaning of his or her experience. (143)

Lopate's opinion is that allowing the "mature reflections to percolate through accounts of past experiences (143)," contributes to the reliability of the narration, helping to promote intimacy between the narrator and her reader. The narrator, who speaks in the first person, fills in the gaps between memory fragments so that the figures or events being portrayed are not left unfinished or unresolved. In Chapter Three of my memoir, the narrator achieves closure with some characters. These characters include Inkung Juan and Little Sister, as well as the Protestant couple who lived next door and who left town after the suicide of their only son. Since I never knew what happened to this

couple after they moved away, I made it a point to describe the dwelling they had left behind, which is symbolic of the bleakness their vanishing caused in my life and in that landscape:

When I was brought back to Bamban to start fifth grade, the couple was gone. Not a word was spoken about them or of the tragedy. That house next door remained empty for a long time, a barren structure in our neighbourhood. Every time I passed by or looked over the fence, I'd heard its silent song of despair. It was rented out eventually, but the new tenants were not gardeners and they didn't stay very long. The place continued to look sad and poorly and by the time I left Bamban, it was a dilapidated and colourless remnant of something once so fine, too unrecognisable even to feel sad for. (94)

The participation of the narrator in the above lines is invaluable. They are the sentiments of an adult viewpoint which is from the moral arena that the child's perspective cannot yet penetrate as were the confusion here and there in the narrative. Examples of this discordance are the treatment of the woman with Tourette by other women at the artesian well, the death of a childhood friend and the story of the baby in a candy jar and in "The Santol Tree," stories of separation and alienation. These were realities which that the child didn't understand. They were part of the *mise-en-scene* on the stage of that place in a time past where the child was mainly a voyeur. All that child needed to do was to get out of trouble. To be seen and not heard. Sometimes there was punishment given and other pains like illness or separations that came in cycles; like falling off a chair, fingers getting caught in shutting drawers or being stung by a wasp. I tried to capture this world in the point of view of the child "filtered" through the mind of the adult reflection:

From very early on I had the intuition to get out of the way and find my own space and sought amusements outside the house. I was a child with a curious mind and vivid imagination and found novel ways with which to occupy myself and explore—to stay out of Mother and Aunt's ways. And I learnt to negotiate between pleasure and pain, between love and anger, between care and abandonment. (20)

Here the child's experiences filtering through adult lens, rendering an intelligent description and insight in the scene for the sake of the reader. That child is sitting in

self-isolation, to get away from trouble, and then is ultimately entertained and amused, even confused at times with what she sees, hears and smells. It was while writing reflective sequences like these that I felt how tenderly intimate is my relationship to that child of the past that was me. I also realised how generous memory is for endowing that child with innocence and an endless sense of joyfulness. I could see her there, sitting in the tree, motionless until she speaks:

“How lucky birds can fly, isn’t it Mother?”

“Mmm, yes they are.”

“If I were a bird, I would fly so high...but where do they sleep?”

“On trees deep in the forest”

“But if I were a bird, I should fly back home here every night.”

“Maybe it’s better you’re not a bird then.”

“Yes, I’d like to be home here with you and Father every night.”

“If you’re a bird, you may be shot for food.”

“They don’t hurt?”

“No, they’re animals. We need to eat them to survive and for you to grow up one day. God made it so.” (35)

This dialogue reveals the internal world of a curious child, asking questions which the mother tries to answer. This is also one of the cases when the reader hears the voices of other characters in the narrative. Here the mother speaks of what she believed in all her life. She led a life filled with hardships before things got better. She was in the child-bearing stage and was destined to have many. There was no time for her to reflect on things differently. Following this dialogue, the narrator takes over again in an indirect way and describes the tensions and confusions which the child experiences but cannot understand fully. Throughout my memoir, especially in confronting situations, the author takes over to convey the limited understanding of a child. From the first person point of view, the reflection often switches to the second person’s perspective. My aim here is to draw the reader into the experience, to reflect with the child over a universal experience the reader would be familiar with:

I understood then. If your pet dog got killed on the road, and Father's tenants took the carcass home to cook for lunch, it was alright. It was not your dog anymore when you looked at it before they took him away. It was dead and didn't feel pain. When you see a man hitting a skinny dog over the head with a club, you would be glad when it's all over and the howling stops and the dog feels pain no more. There was a sick man in that house and his family needed meat to get him better and working again to feed his children. But somehow, he still died. If you could find a good reason why something cruel is done, it's easy to start playing again. (36)

In the above passage there is a dramatic irony involved in which the child suspects that her mother is not wholly telling the truth. This is something the child could not verbalise yet, but which can be conveyed through hindsight and reflection. This irony enhances the pathos in the scene, while at the same time conveying the theme of innocence in the foreground of confronting realities. This style of discourse came to me quite naturally and I did not understand why. Only well into the process of writing did I realise that one of the reasons I have used this style has been to appease myself as the child that I was, who sees these experiences again from my present perspective. It is also a tender gesture to that child, assuring her that she is not alone this time around. I am with her. The reader, too, is with her:

After Father had blown out the little flame in the kerosene lamp and the clothes hanging from the pegs on the wall seemed to fall asleep too, you closed your eyes and fell into deep restful sleep. Father and Mother were close by and you were sleeping between Little Sister and Aurora whose back felt warm next to you, fencing you from all the movement and mysteries that lurked in the dark. It felt as snug as being inside a warm cosy box. And our house was a fine big box that held us all close together. (36)

I have focused on the child's point of view to capture a perspective on the daily rituals of life in a post-war rural Pilipino village: the seamless integration of both local animist belief system and Catholicism, the way more confronting experiences are processed by a child in terms of the everyday or common occurrences of death, illness, still births, poverty. I injected humorous situations to counterbalance the pathos in many situations. I made sure the element of gentle humanity which lay in the heart of an

observant child, was scattered here and there to provide cadence and refreshment to some bleak passages in the rhythm of a child's voyage of discovery.

Consequently, while many sad and troubling events were mentioned in my memoir, I made it a point not to dwell heavily on them. Instead, I moved quickly on to another event or scene. In this way life was constructed consistently to appease the sensitivities of a child who saw and lived life in an unending cycle of play and learning. Blessedly, a child would not naturally dwell on things or events it did not understand.

This is very much evoked in my memoir with the enactment of childhood activity, wonderment and play. At the same time, in the background, the song of the river is playing— continually, rolling on endlessly in its watery course, nurturing and cleansing the body, the spirit and the land. In this way, the flow of the river is paralleled with the change of seasons—the recurring entry and exit of the monsoon rains in their cleansing and sometimes destructive roles and the certainty of the hot and dry season. These cyclic changes are accompanied with the groupings of chores or labour and the festivals of petitions and thanksgiving that arise in their wake. These were all representative of the continuity of life in its eternal sequence of death and rebirth, of sowing and harvesting, of loss and triumph.

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Throughout my life, I have carried a memory chip in my mind of a gentle friend I met on my first day of school, and her name was Alicia. Sometimes, I visualise that she was tall and thin with long black hair, plaited neatly every day. But that could not be her, because that beautifully plaited hair belonged to a classmate in Bamban about three years afterwards, whose name too, I could not recall. I remember looking at that plait and watching as lice crawled all over it, up over the bumps, then into the crevices. Alicia never had lice. She features in my memory as fragile and clean—pallid and wraithlike.

We sat next to each other from my first day at school until she was simply not there anymore, before that school year ended. The vignettes of memories I have of Alicia are very few. I remember admiring her impeccably written alphabet, her light yellow pencil and her dress. I don't know why my memory has rendered her as wearing a dress with full bias skirt with floral prints. There's another vignette of us together

under the canopy of a large tree and she was sitting on her haunches, her skirt gathered on her knees while I sat on the dirt covering my legs with the cool sand. That was all. And yet, these vignettes of memories contain the whole story of Alicia, whose distant figure remains a towering landmark in my memory. To return to my childhood, I decided that I had to begin with that landmark— a girl named Alicia.

How strange it was that, when I began to return to that landmark which is Alicia, a staggering kaleidoscope of colours, movements, figures and emotions came around them. It was daunting to pin down a particular moment or essence and give it a sense of place or a sense of time in the everyday world of the past.

But when the issue of time and/or chronology (which is the quality of the memoir) is taken out of the equation, it encourages the imagination to work more freely and the process of composition becomes more negotiable. In this way, the composition and the “filling in” of the gaps in memory fragments, become an emotional and easier creative undertaking.

I utilised this freedom by choosing to subdivide the groupings of memories into chapters according to the time and place of events. I placed those strings of memories in my first three chapters entitled “The Tamarind Tree”; all the events and characters I remembered occurring during my first year of school were woven together in the second chapter, “The School at the Old Mill.” The next three years of elementary schooling spent with my grandparents in another town were documented in the “The Santol Tree.” As a concluding chapter or coda, I added “A Simple Faith: A Lunch With Yolly.” In this coda, that child is grown up and living in Australia as an immigrant. This coda is meant to introduce continuity in the child’s story, and link the child of the past with the migrant she has become.

It had been my intentions while writing this memoir, that the pulse of life, the moods and ethos of the time and the sensibilities of the characters in my narrative be conveyed to the reader; and that one of the tools used to achieve this is dialogue. The dialogue throughout the memoir served very well for the mingling of points of view. I also found that dialogue is a useful recourse to take when complicated situations or events that needed to be articulated got entangled in “knots” in the (English) language. The dialogue also breaks up the monotony of a long narrative; and injects humour; and heightens and/or tempers strong emotions.

Great Uncle Felipe soon died and it was one of the merriest few days of that time. ...there was a lot of praying and more feasting done. There was a full moon during all those evenings when we played till late in Great Uncle's yard.

"Oh, how lucky you are someone died in your family!" one of my playmates said.

"Yes."

"All your family and friends are here. So happy," she said.

"Yes, and there's so much food!" I boasted.

"You must be so rich," she said.

"Great Uncle and Great Aunt are. They have pigs, carabaos and a kalesa."

"Ah, but you are so rich and so lucky someone died," she said when I gave her a piece of my sweet, sticky block of popped rice. (41)

When memories come in a rush, it is then time for the construction of expository dialogue. Dialogue generally uses simple language, and this makes it a good respite from the serious chasing of words. Mimicking the diction of a child is fun and easy, especially if you are looking through the eyes of one. In the dialogue, the situation or experience is dramatised in front of you on the page. The use of the present tense also gives the dialogue immediacy and intensity.

Reading Ernest Hemingway's works, especially his memoir *A Moveable Feast* (1992), was helpful. Hemingway's work made me notice the slack pace of my narrative, at first, because I was too preoccupied with words. Hemingway's use of concise and austere yet "complete" language, especially the fast rolling pace of his dialogue is a good model for a child's speech ... speaking as it thinks. However, I don't have the natural intuition nor the temperament as Hemingway has to master the "telling the least to tell the most" style of writing. My native culture has verbose and poetic languages. When writing or reciting a piece of literature formally, the more stylised the language, the better. It is interesting to note here an internet conversation between Adam David

and Miguel Syjuco, a Pilipino journalist and author of the award winning novel *Illustrado* (2010), in which Syjuco claims that “editors [in the West] always complained about it [Pilipino writings] either being too didactic, or over-written and despite my protestations, such works were never, ever published” (263).

Storytelling in my culture is close to a performing art. People gesticulate, make faces and move about. One family member of mine waves her hands and prances about when telling a story as if she is dancing with her tale. It is this quality in our culture which I wanted to include in my narrative through the dialogue and make it more immediate and performative:

Sometimes, I'd enter a house where a woman was having a baby and *Indang* Juana would be there orchestrating the activities and there were always a lot of other excited people either helping or just enjoying everyone's company.

“Oh, the grief we women have to go through. *Dios mio*, it took nearly two days labour for my first born,” one woman said.

“Oh, the pain of being married!” said another woman [...].

“Ah, that's life for us,” another wife said.

“Dear wife, do not complain,” retorted her husband. “You can't live without me, for sure...*Abah*, you haven't said 'no' yet when I entered your chamber at night!” and everyone laughed their hearts out.

“*Aiii, hijo de puta*, don't listen to him!” the wife said covering her face with her *pañuelo*. (38)

In my portrayal of that child of the past, I wanted to depict in her voice all the sensations within that world where she moved; the scent, sounds and feelings. I wanted to depict through her that sense of place which was dynamic and sensual, evoking sensory details of taste and smell, so that the reader would almost taste the food the child loved to eat; I also wanted the reader to hear and experience the sounds of the natural world in the neighbourhood, in the fields and open spaces, or by the river.

Bird migration was one of the most exciting phenomena during some parts of the year. The wide skies in the open fields were awesome theatres to watch flocks of

migrating birds performing acrobatic feats. They came forth in waves, thousands of little birds twisting and turning as one, dancing along an aerial symphony and then melting into the horizon only to swing back again. Should you be standing in the open fields beneath, you would hear the unearthly murmuration of wings. [...] In the late afternoons and into the evening the twittering mass would descend in the neighbourhood like a living blanket from the sky, deafening and lively; a frenetic stream of life... (96)

I wanted to convey the liveliness in our culture which is evident in the day-to-day routine of living; the love of music and dance, the ability of people to find humour even in very grave situations. When people are together there will always be laughter. And people talked loudly. They would jest endlessly and laughed with all their might as they wept with all their hearts when death or other misfortunes struck.

EPILOGUE

I feel that the writing of a memoir and/or the reading of others' memoirs involves a hunger that is at once intellectual, emotional and spiritual; a social and moral interaction between writer and reader; and an assertion of commonality and fraternity, as well as of individuality.

Through the process of writing our memoirs, we get involved in an experience that is close to an existential meditation as we recreate worlds that would otherwise be lost in the mist of life's rapid changes. Writing my memoir allowed me to appreciate the unique qualities the past assumes as it is relived and re-experienced. At this age and state of mind, when mortality stares at you in the face, time becomes a precious commodity. Memories become ethereal; at once real and imaginary, vivid yet abstract. I've wondered if it was this absence of physical reality that makes the past shine on the page, like it never shone during the actual experience. I believe that it is Love that causes this to be so. It is Love and the innate desire for connection that make the past events and realities shine and animated on the page and with them, all the figures that moved within those spheres of awareness. Consequently, we hear the voices of our elders and loved ones from long ago in a different loving timbre, as they reveal realities we never heard or aware of as children. In his memoir *Life Beyond Measure* (2008), actor Sidney Poitier accurately defines the values derived in the writing process:

[Although] the elders from my time ...are not with us anymore, we keep them alive in part by honouring the questions they searched their whole lives to answer. From the bits we can know of them and the other individuals from our collective family tree, we can better understand where we come from and where we are headed. (6-7)

In the process of writing a portrait of my early childhood, many memories and clues buried in the mist of the distant past emerged. By re-living my childhood on the page, I had the privilege of experiencing childhood yet again, together with all the figures whom I had long lost touch with. This literary journey has been a voyage of discovery marked with the realisation that those who have gone before us have never really left us and have continually pervaded our lives, through the upheavals of a rapidly changing world. They are there providing calm and stability and love and hope in the bedlam of our struggles. They guide us by their lived principles, even allowing us to

improve on their mistakes. Most of all, through writing the narrative of my childhood, I found the linearity of who I am; where I came from, and how my awareness enhances the perspective through which I see my old life in the Philippines and the new life I have made in Australia.

I realise that writing my memoir is not merely a vehicle for finding my roots, but also for renewing and forging love, and for making peace as described in my “Lunch with Yolly” narrative. Like Iris Origo, who wrote her insightful memoir, *Images and Shadows* (1970) in her late sixties, if I were a beggar in a street corner, what I’d beg for would be “time from the past, time in which to comfort, to complete and to repair—time wasted before I knew how quickly it would slip by” (258).

Now, I have stopped wondering why deep in my consciousness, I have always regarded my early childhood as my one and only jaunt into paradise. Through the writing of my memoir, I have re-lived the qualities of pure innocence— that true state of godliness— and hereafter, every fragment of memory evoking that state I shall always see in my mind and imagination with tenderness, clarity and gratitude.

I wanted to write my childhood memoir after migrating to Australia, long before my mother’s death. The cliché, “distance makes the heart grow fonder” cannot be more true to an immigrant. Consequently, I consider the act of writing as a devotional gesture of ownership of what to me has always been a sacred place. At the same time this ownership is to be an act of releasing my hold so that I can pass on my literary narrative to my children as a symbolic gifting of my cultural heritage, a significant portion of their genesis.

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