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Balane: Departure from Nazareth: The Story the Evangelists Did Not Tell

The Story the Evangelists Did Not Tell

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Mother and son faced each other at table. The sun had just set behind the hills—early, for it was mid-autumn. It was a simple supper, austere. Broiled fish, some figs and dates. The only concession to culinary luxury was the crisp, warm bread which would have graced even a rich man's table, for Mary baked the most delicious bread in the neighborhood.

"What is it, son, you have something to say?", and the man parted his lips in surprise. He was a big man, muscular—he had been a carpenter almost since he learned to walk—pushing thirty, but with a gentle, open face that made him look a decade younger: the resemblance between mother and son was uncanny and the subject of amused comments from other people. He was surprised—as he always was—at his mother's unerring ability to guess his mind even if he gave not the slightest indication of it. In fact, at that moment, he had intended to speak but had thought better of it.

"What is it, son?," the woman repeated.

"Yes, mother," he replied with hesitation, "as a matter of fact, there was something I wanted to tell you."

"Yes?"

"Well, you see, I've been thinking; I think it's time ... for me to go away," he said the last part quickly, hoping to cushion its impact.

There was no discernible change in the woman's face.

"For good?"

"Something like that," he answered. His mother also had the ability to get straight to the point.

"For some time now," she said, "I feared you would tell me this, since the news of what John has been doing."

John was a cousin twice-removed, begotten of Mary's cousin in her old age, and born only six months before Jesus. Word had gotten around the past few months that John had been preaching with great eloquence in the wilderness around the River Jordan and was baptizing people in the river itself as a sign of recommitment to God. This kinsman of theirs had earned quite a reputation as an ascetic, clothed in camel's hair and feeding on locusts and wild honey, and had attracted considerable crowds who called him a prophet. He had won to himself a small band of men of intense loyalty.

"You intend to join him, son?," she asked.

"As a first step perhaps," he replied, "and then see what the Lord God has for me to do. I feel I have to go, mother, and . . ."

"I know," she interrupted him softly, "yes, I know. You were called for something important, Jesus; many times you have told me this, and I know you are right," she said almost in a whisper, remembering so many things she had always pondered on.

"Yes, it's going to be difficult here without you," she continued after a pause, "but go, for it is what you have to do."

At first he said nothing, pinching off tiny morsels of the warm brown bread and chewing listlessly on them.

"Mother," he said abruptly, "I want to tell you one thing, which I hope you'll understand. When I go, I shall belong to all the people—it will have to be that way—and if we should meet, I may have to avoid addressing you with familiarity. You will understand?"

The woman gave no answer, only looked at him and nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"That will not mean that I will be less your son."

"Of course—I understand, son," she answered, "you will always be my little boy, whatever you do," and she continued with a lift in her voice, "and what a naughty little boy you were. I remember that day when those wise men from the East came, how you misbehaved as they were kneeling in front of you, doing all sorts of things, pulling the beard of one of them, snorting your saliva, oh, terrible things."

And the man smiled sheepishly, "But I was not even two then!"

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The mother was deaf to the explanation, and continued, "And how frantically I was trying to make you behave! And those distinguished gentlemen—casting secret glances at one another. Just imagine, travelling so far, and only for your antics. Oh, you were impossible."

"Mother," he chided her in mock seriousness, "How you exaggerate."

"That's the plain truth."

"Incidentally," he asked, "what ever happened to those things you said the wise men gave me?"

"The gold and the frankincense and the myrrh?" she answered, "let's see now—the frankincense I gave to your Uncle Zachary (he was John's father, a priest in the temple), the myrrh we used last year when your father died, and the gold—it's still there."

After a moment's silence she added ' her voice now softer and more serious, "And when will you be leaving?"

"Perhaps, in a fortnight, as soon as I finish this order of Simon for chairs and tables."

They continued their supper in silence, until she spoke again, "Son . . . we've never been rich; your . . . my husband and I; only made do with the little that we had. I wish we could have given you more . . ."

"Don't say that, mother, you gave me more . . . much more than I could ever have asked for—love, your example and devotion—your's and father's—the things both of you taught me, the precious things, that are better than money . . ." and when he said this he looked deep into his mother's eyes, and in that instant of communion their hearts were one.

The fortnight was a busy time, Jesus working in the carpentry shop, finishing the pieces of furniture he had promised to deliver to the rich merchant Simon, and Mary knitting a light blue robe for her son.

Each afternoon Mary would look into the shop and watch her son work, and as the work came nearer to completion with each day that passed, she felt a pang that daily too grew sharper. Until one afternoon he said to her, "Mother, it's finished; don't you think they're beautiful?"

And they were, the exquisitely wrought tables and chairs. As beautiful as anyone could make them, for Jesus was perhaps the best carpenter in the village—a skill he had learned from his father Joseph, a masterly craftsman, and a tireless teacher of his craft.

"Tomorrow I can deliver them to Simon."

Before noon of the following day, Jesus was back from the merchant's house, and with an eager voice greeted his mother, "Mother, Simon was extremely pleased with the work, and he paid me a good sum for it. Here . . . That's going to last a few months," and he handed her a thick brown bag of coins.

"Tomorrow, very early in the morning... I'll have to go."

The woman looked up at him, put her hand on his shoulder, and smiled.

Mary was up hours before light the following day, to bake bread for her son's last meal before he ceased to be wholly hers. Breakfast was had in silence. There was nothing mother or son could say that could express what they felt, nothing that could assuage the ache in the heart.

And then it was time to go . . . Before the sun . . . before the neighbors awoke . . . Before the mother's heart could say "Stay".

The son held his mother's shoulders, then gathered her in a tight embrace, expressing in that last hug all the love the world would never even begin to understand. And she tugged lightly at his robe, this robe she had labored so lovingly to knit. And with just the merest hesitation, he turned to go, to the waiting donkey by the door—it was one of the very few things Joseph had left behind.

Finally, she was alone, after all these years—when tragedy hung low like a summer cloud. There were no tears at this parting, no tears. If these years had given her anything, it was this - sorrow that was beyond all the tears all the world could shed. All these years—the bitter search for a lodging place on the night the infant was born, the flight into an alien land in the dead of night because they were going to slaughter her baby, the frightful worry over the boy's loss in Jerusalem, the million things she never understood, which she could now remember because of the hurt they gave her—and each time, each time she had learned to bear the pain without tears, though each time she had had to pick up the pieces of her heart. And now, it was parting time, and it seemed all the blows she had ever suffered were accumulated in this one piercing moment. Would she be strong enough to gather the potsherds of her heart this time?

The day was just breaking, the grey in the sky had turned pink. The sound of the donkey's hooves echoed crisply in the cold air that chirped with the song of a thousand birds. And still she kept and pondered and treasured all these things in her heart, as her baby—now

grown into a Man—rode slowly down the road, on the receding echoes of an old animal's feet, slowly, not looking back—truly his mother's son—purposefully, to the waiting ascetic, to the shining river, and to the world.

Novaliches, Quezon City, 1976



Farewell Present

He was one of the lawyers who interviewed me. He was a name partner, and couldn't fail to impress.

At the end of the interview, he walked me to the main door because I had gotten lost in the maze of corridors in the office.

"It always happens," he told me, "applicants always lose their way here. It isn't a big office, but the layout isn't very good. It's like a labyrinth."

At the entrance, I stole a quick glance at the wooden shingle embossed with gold letters: Dimalanta Guerrero Valencia Law Office. His name came third. As he shook my hand, I asked him—a little brashly, I later realized—my eyes darting back to the varnished wooden board, "Is that arrangement alphabetical or chronological?"

"All of the above," he replied with a grin adding, "Okay, Mr. Del Valle, welcome aboard." I wasn't sure if he was grinning at my question or my impudence.

In my first week in the office, I learned that he had just lately come back from Europe after graduate studies in law in Heidelberg and a year in Spain for courses in history. I found affinity with him because I had majored in German for my undergraduate degree.

I had been accepted the same day I was interviewed. Later, I learned that that was unprecedented because applicants usually waited at least a week before being informed of the fate of their application. I also learned that my immediate acceptance was at his instance.

He was very urbane, and very solicitous toward me. He went over my drafts carefully, with very thorough marginal comments. And

he frequently wrote nice compliments at the end of the draft if he considered it well done. Sometimes the comments were in German.

I must have had a little too much to drink at my first office Christmas party because I was rash enough to ask him, as we were leaving, to invite me for a nightcap. At the lobby of the Pen I had a couple of vodka tonics and then he took me back to the basement parking in our office. Before getting off, I told him—I don't know why, it must have been the vodka—that I wanted to be a close friend of his. He didn't answer, he just smiled and ran a hand down the back of my head. I found that awkward, and a little gauche.

As the months wore on, his kindness and solicitude were beginning to discomfit me, even if I couldn't tell how much of it was fact and how much, my private perception. I had not heard any comments from the office staff, so I wasn't sure they noticed.

One evening, he invited me for beer, just the two of us. We didn't talk law at all. The exchange was mainly about literature. Actually, it was hardly an exchange. My familiarity with literature is superficial; his was far deeper than I would have expected from a lawyer. He liked Chaucer and Joyce, Yeats and Eliot, and of course, Shakespeare. He was high enough, after four bottles, to recite the first lines of the Prologue of *Canterbury Tales*.

“Whan that April with this shoures soote.

The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.

And bathered every veyne in swich licour

Of which vertu engendred is the flour...”

He went on for more than a dozen lines, raising his mug as he ended with the reference to Thomas à Becket:

“The holy, blisful martir for to seke

That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke...”

He rendered the golden verses in the quaint melodious accents of medieval English. I didn't realize the Norman conquest could give birth to such a musical language.

He took me back to the office, but my car wouldn't start, so he suggested I leave my car in the basement and spend the night in his condo unit which was close by. It was a two-bedroom affair but since his mother was visiting from the province at that time and was using the guest room, I had to sleep in his room, in a trundle bed beside his. I went to bed fully clothed because I was not sure if he was up

to something. I could hardly sleep despite the alcohol. But nothing happened. I was relieved, but also disappointed, because, if he had tried to do something, at least that would have identified for me his feelings towards me. And then I'd know what to do.

He later told a partner that I was the son he never had. The partner relayed that to me.

My father died the year before I finished law. He was stern, hardly smiled. He was a good provider but he showed no emotion except anger. I disliked academics and yet I studied very hard because I was afraid of him. His outbursts of temper were often violent. Once, when I was in Grade 1, I was annoyed at my younger sister and banged the door. My father got up from bed, pulled out his belt, and whacked me again and again on the legs. I was wearing short pants and the welts were very prominent. I didn't want to go to school, but he made me go so that everybody in school would know what a bad boy I was. That happened many more times, well into my high school years. Sometimes I'd crawl under the dining table, sometimes hide behind the door. But he'd always get me.

After what the partner told me, I turned cold a distant towards him. I talked to him only if I had to, and only on work-related matters. I'm sure he noticed, and yet he gave no sign of it. One Friday evening, after the regular "Friday beer club" at the office, my brother—who had borrowed my car—called to say he couldn't come back for me because he wasn't feeling well. It was a rainy night and I lived in Antipolo. The guys in the office heard me talking on the phone but only he volunteered to take me home. But for the bad weather, I would have refused the offer. Still, having to accept a favor from him was annoying. And he was *not* father ... nor could he ever be.

In my mind I made up stories, seeking to give some reality to my suspicions. The more bizarre they were, the more real they seemed. And yet nothing seemed beyond possibility. Once, he delivered a lecture to the legal staff on how to help clients draft wills. I sat without listening. What was he hiding behind that show of warmth? A son lost in infancy? A misplaced protectiveness? An ambiguous affection? I made discreet inquiries. They yielded nothing.

After two years in the office, my discomfort had built up to such a point that I felt I had to leave. I submitted a letter of resignation and furnished each of the partners a copy—all except him. As soon as he

learned of it, he had me called to his room. I thought he would give me a dressing-down. I was ready for that. Instead, all he told me was that he wished me the best, that he hoped it was a career choice, that he would not stand in the way of my professional growth. He said finally that the office would not be the same without me.

The day before I left, he gave me a box wrapped in brown paper. I took it without opening it and murmured a polite *thank you*. The next day I opened the box—it contained an expensive Omega and a note which said simply: “For the 770 days, thanks.” I computed the length of my stay in the office. The count was correct.

I dropped by the office a couple of times after that—to pick up my things. Both times I said hello to each of the partners, except him. The last time I went, we crossed paths in the reception area. He smiled warmly and greeted me: Hi Thad. I simply nodded in reply. I saw that despite the bright smile, his eyes were sad.

Then for years, I didn’t see him again. When I got married, I invited some of the partners—but not him. I heard later that he had left the country and settled in Spain.

I now have three sons and two daughters. I have never laid hands on any of them—I’ve never used the belt on them. It’s not easy to raise kids, especially if you have five in a space of seven years. Still and all, fatherhood has its joys.

My wife asked me one day, “Which of the kids is your favorite?”

“None,” I lied, “I love them all equally.”

“Well,” she declared, “your actions show otherwise. Little Carlo is your favorite.” Carlo is the middle child.

“But it’s funny,” my wife continued, “I notice he’s the one who’s most distant.”

“You’re imagining things,” I shot back testily because she was too perceptive for comfort.

Some years later, I got a call. It was from him. He said he was here on vacation. He asked me to dinner. My first impulse was to turn it down, but thought better of it and said yes.

“So what have you been up to?” I asked, over dinner.

“Nothing great,” he answered lightly, “I teach English in Madrid. Learning English is such a craze in Spain.”

“Teach English? Why? You’re a lawyer. You were not doing badly here,” was my surprised reaction.

"I like Spain. It's picturesque, and far away," he replied, looking at the flickering candle on the table.

"Far away from what? You make it sound like Never-Never Land," I said.

He said nothing, smiling mirthlessly.

"You come home often?" I asked him.

"No, this is my first trip here since I left."

"You're here on holiday?"

"No, not really. Got to tie up a few loose ends. My parents left me a piece of property. I'm disposing of it."

He asked me about my work, my family, a few trivial things.

"It's not easy to leave home and relocate in a foreign land," I prodded him, "I know some people who do that because they want to leave some things behind. Like unpleasant things?" I probed, fumbling for words.

"No, I didn't leave because of negative things," his even tone betrayed neither contrivance nor hesitation, "There were dark parts, yes, but also good things. One shouldn't forget the good things, even those in the midst of the darkness ... like the fireflies of the old German proverb? Those good things are like fireflies in the night. They're always there, little glowing dots in the dark, if you but look."

My mind wandered back to an evening long ago when I listened with awe to a man reciting with such flair, the *Canterbury Tales*.

I wanted him to ask me why I treated him the way I did. I wanted him to demand an explanation. I wanted to hear words of reproach. But he didn't ask. And I didn't explain.

Over his protests, I paid for the dinner. "You're in my turf," I insisted.

I drove him back to his hotel in Quezon City..

"Get in touch again next time you're here," I told him brightly but not particularly warmly, by way of goodbye.

"I'm not coming back, Thad. Not easy to leave work. But thanks, Thad, for the dinner," and he took my hand and shook it.

"And for the 770 days?" I replied without thinking, "I haven't forgotten. Do you recognize this watch?"

He glanced at it and nodded with a smile.

It was at that point that I felt like telling him: *Forgive me my coarseness. Think of me as a son, if you like.* It might have been because I knew I wouldn't see him again and for just this once I wanted him to feel good. But that would have been a show of emotion and I didn't

want that. Or perhaps I had been ungracious to him so long being nice would have been embarrassing. I said nothing.

“Goodbye, Thad. Be well,” he said in parting as he got off. My eyes followed him as he walked across the lobby, not looking back.

I never saw him again. Two years later, I learned that he had died of cancer. A cousin of his came to my office to tell me the news. He had died in a Madrid hospital. Only his landlady was there at his last moments. They buried him in a poor man’s cemetery, the kind where you dig up the bones after a certain number of years to give way to a new corpse.

His landlady had sent some of his personal effects home.

“I found this among Kuya Armand’s things,” his cousin handed me a baseball cap, “it’s for you.”

It had my name written on a slip of paper pinned to the visor. On the cap were embroidered the words: “*Die Feuerfliegen sind immer dort.*” It meant “The fireflies are always there.”

I felt an impulse to go to Madrid and visit his grave. I dismissed the thought; that would have been an empty belated gesture—a wreath of withered leaves on his rented grave . . . But one cloudy afternoon, I went to the hotel in Quezon City where I took him home that night. I stood and lingered on the sidewalk and gazed for a long time at the lobby where he had gotten off. I felt a deep sense of regret, futilely searching for reasons for what I had done, and not done. It would have been far easier if he had shown anger, or hurt, or at least annoyance. At least that would have made a closure.

My chest was heavy with an unguarded sorrow.

I did not weep when my father died. Now I fought back tears. But this was not the time for them. There’d be time enough for grief . . . and then perhaps, also for joy, and grace, when I learned to accept the gift of those 770 days.

A roll of thunder presaged rain just as I headed back to the car. I had just gained the parking lot and was unlocking the car door when the first droplets began to fall.

Makati City, Philippines, 2005



Dirt Road

“Very well, Attorney, Monday, 10 a.m.”

Ato Manalang pressed the cell phone button to end the call. It had been a week since the first call, and he still felt excited. He was already looking beyond, after the Commission had done its work and submitted its Report. The first promised appointment, and then the second—the one he had longed for all these years. After decades of practice and teaching in two of the leading law schools in the country, he had made a name for himself. Atty. Renato Manalang was a master of procedural law, a wizard to be admired or feared (depending on which side you happened to be on) in the courtroom, a tireless teacher of his craft whom students looked up to as THE *maestro* in litigation, at the same time a prodigious legal scholar and author of numerous tracts.

He had made his pile, proof of which was that he had sold his old house in San Andres Bukid and had moved to Ayala Alabang. Of course he had cut corners once in a while, maybe a little too often, and there was some blood on his shoes. But that was part of the game. In the rat race he just happened to run faster than his fellow rats. Yes, he had filled his barn; now he wanted prestige.

Then came last week's call. The party at the other end of the landline, who identified herself as Lizzie, the Chief of Staff of the Special Presidential Assistant for Appointments, asked if he could meet with her boss in a private room of a membership club for a confidential matter. The meeting was very private indeed, with only the Boss himself and Lizzie, a shapely woman in her early thirties who exuded a subtle air of seduction, dining with him. The Boss had been a student of Ato's in law school—a fact which helped make the meeting relaxed and informal.

He had left the meeting in a state of high elation. What he had so long been hoping for was now being offered on a silver platter. He was to be appointed Chair of the fact-finding commission to investigate a recent caper pulled by some junior military officers. They had seized the Japanese Embassy and held the embassy staff—including the ambassador—hostage. The young officers, later referred to by the press as the “embassy mutineers” had planted explosives around the chancery premises and announced on media (the whole incident had

been covered live) that the purpose of the operation was to bring to public attention, “in the strongest possible terms,” the corruption in the military including the selling of weapons to rebel groups. Inexplicably, at the height of the siege, the mutineers released the ambassador and the other hostages, thus forgoing a tactical advantage. The incident fizzled out after twenty-four hours, the mutineers giving themselves up when it became clear that no substantial crowds were going to form.

If he made the *proper* decision, there was a commitment from the Boss that he would be named Secretary of Justice and then, after a year, just enough time for him to warm his seat at the DOJ, he would be appointed to the Supreme Court. The commitment was sealed with a handshake.

For Ato, it was an easy job. The case against the officers was open-and-shut. And he had no sympathy for these renegades to begin with. They were power-hungry scallawags to whom he would read the riot act. Nice and pat.

On his way home from the dinner, through the eternal traffic jam of the South Expressway, he fell into reminiscing. He thought of Iñaki, his youngest son, killed in action in Mindanao three years ago. He had not stopped mourning him. He was only twenty-three. It was a needless death, Ato recalled. He could easily have pulled strings to have Iñaki assigned to a desk job in Manila (the chief of the Philippine Army was a protégé of his parents). Not only did Iñaki refuse any intercession on his father’s part, he volunteered for the Basilan front where the fighting was fiercest. The folly of youth, Ato thought, folly so tragic it wounded his heart beyond healing.

Iñaki was the only blessing that came out of his marriage. Kevin, his other son, was a hopeless wastrel, a habitué of bars and beer gardens. As for the two girls, they cared nothing for a career, married early, and were quite content minding the house and attending silly socials.

And Remy, where had all those feelings gone? Funny what metamorphoses time could bring about. When he first saw Remy, he was reviewing for the bar and she had just graduated from St. Scholastica’s and was working in the personnel department of the biggest beverage firm in the country. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. Despite the merciless time demands of bar review, he managed to see her almost every day, right up to the pre-week review. That was almost forty years ago. Now he could hardly stand the sight

of her: fat, dull, shrill, a compulsive nagger. Appearances and social convention were the only reasons they still lived under the same roof. The contemporary term for it was *house divorce*. It was bad for his career if he called it quits. Besides he could have his cake and eat it too. Remy knew about his philandering, but didn't make an issue of it. She had her own *amigas*, her ballroom dancing sessions and the young good-looking dance instructors, from whom Ato suspected Remy found her fun, and not just on the dance floor.

The cellphone call this morning was from Lizzie, setting the initial meeting of the Commission, which, with him as Chair, had four members: a retired officer, a former congressman, a lay preacher, and a university professor.

The *proper* decision, the Boss had told him. He knew perfectly well what that meant—find these young officers culpable, recommend both civil and military sanctions against them, and paint the government in the most favorable colors possible. No sweat for him. The only possible problem was persuading the four members to come around to the conclusion he had already arrived at in his own mind. But that should not be too difficult. What were his lawyer's skills for?

The hearings were held in the main Armed Forces camp. The Commission met daily, in gruelling eight-hour sessions. Witnesses, both military and civilian, were summoned; documents presented. The mutineers gave testimonies, which, though articulate, sounded strangely muffled, suppressed; gone was the stridency of their television announcements during the siege. The proceedings were covered live by media; except for instances when very sensitive information was given, at which times the Commission met in executive session, and evidence received *sub rosa*.

As the hearings drew to a close, and the pattern of the voluminous evidence emerged, an outright condemnation of the mutineers was no longer as obvious, even to Ato Manalang. He had always been aware of corruption in the military his own friends in the officer corps frequently told him about it, albeit by indirection. ñaki himself had, on several occasions, expressed his dismay to his father over venality among people who trumpeted a motto of honor and integrity. He knew all this, but during the hearings revelations of corruption in the armed services stunned even him. Nor was that all: the reality behind the failed putsch of these young officers involved more than malfeasance.

Despite his misgivings, he still hoped for a unanimous vote among the Commission members, a vote for an unqualified finding of culpability of the officers. But after considering all the evidence presented, the Commission's sentiment was not quite unanimous. Although all of them felt that the mutineers were indeed accountable and should be made subject to the appropriate military and civil proceedings, the members were split on the extent of the recommendations the Commission should make. Two—the former congressman and the retired officer—preferred to limit the Commission's findings to the mutineers' guilt. The two others—the university professor and the lay preacher—wanted to go further. Ato Manalang asked each one to submit a draft finding, still hoping that the two “mavericks” would somehow pull their punches. And they would, he hoped, if somehow they could come to a full realization of the repercussions of what they intended to say, the consequences ... for them, and for the commission. And he was painfully aware that the mavericks' sentiments, if incorporated in the report, would take it far beyond what the Boss had called the *proper* decision, and doom his Supreme Court appointment. When the individual drafts were submitted a fortnight later, the statements of the two were fully as damning as he had feared.

He had a week to prepare the final report. Somehow he had to include the position of the two mavericks even if he voted with the other side. But he could soften the impact of their statements. They had authorized him to make a single report; no one would make a separate recommendation. Thank God he was able to obtain at least that concession. But he knew he was in a fine pickle, and he detested the situation in which he now found himself, having to cast the deciding vote: either to submit a finding in consonance with the whole mass of evidence presented, thus throwing his lot with the two mavericks and in the process shock and perhaps destabilize the entire nation ... and bid his judicial hopes a fond farewell, or to suppress the unfavorable evidence, and be a magistrate of the high court.

He had a week ... and he needed to drop in on his old friend.

* * * Fr. Miguel de Jesús and Ato were like brothers. They grew up together, were classmates at the Ateneo from grade school to college. Their paths diverged after that—Miguel went to Wharton for his MBA, then joined the Jesuits. Ato went to UP for law, then to Michigan for his graduate studies. Miguel de Jesús, now with an SJ after his name, was

Mig to everyone except Ato and a few friends, to whom he was Teban, the name of the calesa owner in the weekly radio program *Kuwentong Kutsero*, so popular in their elementary and high-school days. The pet-name came about because, when the sit-com was made into a movie, the group noticed that Mig resembled the *cochero* Teban Biglang-Awa. He never outgrew the appellation and *Teban* he remained to Ato and the rest of the old *barkada* to this day, despite his Jesuit cachet and his position as Vice-President for Finance of their Alma Mater.

Ato and Mig were the closest in the group, because they were both only sons. In the car, on the way to Loyola Heights, Ato smiled to himself as he recalled one of their summer trips to Mig's family's farm in Isabela. Mig had taught him to ride a *nuwang*—a carabao—and walking back home along a path lined with guava trees laden with fruit, their thighs grimy with the dried mud from the carabao's back, they chanced upon an artesian well in front of a tenant's house. There was a large wash basin by the well. The two boys, both ten years old, looked at each other, smiled impishly and, without a word, stripped themselves naked and, in turn, while one pumped the well, the other sat in the basin and had a bath in the cold crystal-clear water. There were some *aba*—*gabi* plants—by the well and the two, shrieking with glee as the water splashed on their bodies, nipped some *aba* leaves and crushed them in the basin. Neither of them could sleep that night: the itchiness was intolerable, on their legs, thighs, buttocks, groins, privates. Of course, the rest of the *barkada* learned about their caper and from then on the two of them were referred to as the *gabi* chums.

It was to Mig, a.k.a. Teban, that Ato went that late afternoon in September.

"Teban," Ato greeted the priest as he barged into the Finance Vice-President's room, which smelled of stale tobacco, "you should quit your cigar-smoking. Your room stinks."

"Ato, come in, sit down. In my room you'll suffer the tobacco smell but you'll enjoy Beethoven's Seventh," the priest declared as he stuck into the player a CD of Karajan's famous version of the master's Seventh Symphony.

For a while the two reminisced, of course about the *gabi* incident and other things, among them Ato's vanity.

"What was that horrible green pomade you liked very much?" asked the priest, "the one with the smell that made me dizzy?"

"Santan Lupel," replied Ato, "and it wasn't horrible. Strong, seductive scent, which helped me with the girls at our jam sessions. And it wasn't cheap either . . . I used it only for special occasions, when I wanted to look my best."

"Horrible smell as I recall," insisted Mig, "and your horn-rimmed glasses . . . made you look . . . they would now say, so nerdy."

"Yeah, funny the things we used to like so much when we were boys."

"What's up, Ato?" asked Mig as Karajan conducted the Berlin Philharmonic through the symphony's ethereal *Rondo Allegretto*.

"Well, I came primarily because, as you know, I'm Chairman of our Golden Jubilee committee and I want to ask you to write a piece about the Loyola Heights campus of our time, you know, what did the Ateneo look like in the fifties?"

"Yes, Ateneo in the fifties," mused Mig, "when we came to Loyola for high school. Katipunan didn't exist, and there was only one road onto the campus from Aurora Boulevard, remember? That winding dirt road which ended beside the gym, that road that looked more like a cowpath, with the house along it which flew the Philippine flag?"

"Yes, I remember," Ato chuckled, "and we'd drink a Coke and solve the problems of the world in the corner store while waiting for the bus to Cubao."

"You just gave me an idea," the priest said, his eyes lighting up, "I'll write about that dirt road, it's a kind of symbol of how things have changed."

"Terrific," agreed Ato, "yes, that road symbolizes everything we have lost."

Ato stopped abruptly, remembering the real reason for his visit.

"You've been in the papers quite often lately," observed Mig, his voice suddenly serious seeming to pick up the cue from Ato's last remark.

"Yes, the hearings have just wound up. And truth to tell, that's the main reason I came," admitted Ato.

"What's the score," Mig asked.

"Well, most of the hearings were televised. Have you been following the coverage?"

"Not regularly," Mig answered, "but from what I've seen, it looks like those young soldiers have dug their graves."

"Well, not all the sessions were televised, and there's more than what's been shown on TV," muttered Ato, his voice dropping as he got up to close the door.

"In the course of the hearings we've become privy to information," continued Ato, now in a whisper, "disclosed during the executive sessions, very sensitive information, and very confidential. I'm going to share it with you provided you treat it as confessional matter."

"I can put on a stole if you wish," said Mig, "and if you don't feel like telling me, you don't have to."

"I do. I need to tell you, if only to be able to process it. You see, apparently, the whole thing was orchestrated ... by someone very high, and very close to the commander-in-chief. The top bananas played on the very serious and very legitimate grievances of those junior officers and manipulated them into staging this caper, practically instigated it, making them believe that they would have the support of the higher-ups all the way. The plan all along was to leave them in the lurch."

"And didn't these young officers say as much in their testimonies?" inquired Mig.

"They did . . . well, not quite as much. They were, and still are, under threat. But the main evidence of this came from other sources, independent witnesses."

"But what was the purpose of it all?" was the priest's puzzled query.

"To give the *comandante-en-jefe* the justification for declaring a state of emergency and taking control of the utility companies. A splendid power gambit, I must admit."

"But if that was the gambit, why create a fact-finding commission, and why wait until the report is released?"

"Simple," explained Ato, "the whole thing has to be dressed in the garb of legality, of legitimacy, to ensure public support, or at least public tolerance. That's why this damn report is so crucial. It has to do two things: make a categorical statement about the young officers' sole responsibility, and second, make the administration smell like a rose."

"And you're playing along?" asked the priest.

"Well, the panel is split. Teban, look, the Senate is intransigent, obstructionist, the businessmen are chafing, the civil society groups are defiant. What the hell, Teban, I think it's good for the country."

"Which," asked the priest with a touch of sarcasm, "framing those young officers?"

"Oh, c'mon," Ato snapped back, "don't be cute."

The priest did not reply. After some seconds of silence, Ato said in a calm, friendly voice, "After this personal apocalypse, are you still my friend, Father?"

"Yes, Ato," answered the priest, "without hesitation, and without reserve. And for God's sake, don't call me *Father*. It grates on my *cochero's* ears." And after a brief pause he continued, in a more measured tone, "but you burden my heart, dear pal."

"Yeah," replied Ato, looking down, "nor do I blame you for feeling that way. I'm miles away, light-years away from the Sodality prefect you knew when we were in high-school. In a way, I'm like the Bourbons, Teban, I learned nothing, and yet forgot nothing."

"You say the panel is split," Mig observed. "Yes, two completely pro-administration, and two wanting the report to include what I just told you."

"So how are you going to deal with your two dissenters?" ,

"I'm confident I can find a way," replied Ato, "to make the report paper it over, make the language hem and haw."

"In other words," said Mig, "suppress the evidence that is not to your liking, or should I say, not to the administration's liking."

"You put it bluntly, I would rather say sift the evidence selectively," explained Ato.

The priest said nothing, and then looked out the window, his eyes squinting as he gazed down the line of trees by the road.

"Remember our first year here, Ato? Those trees out there, they were saplings."

"Yes," replied Ato, looking out himself, "now they're gnarled old trees. Maybe we'll outlive them."

"So what's the *real* score?" inquired Mig abruptly.

"What do you mean? That's the real score. I think emergency measures, if supported by the people, will be good for the country. And with a well-crafted report and recommendation from my Commission, there's going to be popular support for the extraordinary remedies. *Grandes males, grandes remedios*."

"Ato," said Mig, his tone flat, "it may be good for the country for all I know. But that's not the reason you're doing it."

Ato was silent for a while, then murmured an answer, "Well, on top of that, I've been made an offer."

"The Supreme Court?," the priest asked evenly.

"How did you know?," Ato's voice rose a few decibels.

"We're not the *gabi* chums for nothing," smiled Mig.

"Yes, the Supreme Court," Ato admitted.

"You're qualified enough to get there without striking this deal," observed Mig.

"Thanks for the kind thought. As a matter of fact, I agree with you, modesty aside, as the silly cliché goes. But the Big Boss isn't going to appoint me unless I deliver the goods."

"And you're sure of what you're about to do?," asked Mig.

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"Because I don't think you are. Because if you were, you wouldn't have come to see me. Because, like you said, like the Bourbons, you haven't altogether succeeded in forgetting."

"Shit, Teban, you read me like a lousy pornographic novel."

"Which is how?"

"Very intensely and very thoroughly, down to the last gross detail."

Their eyes met and they both broke into a chuckle.

"Tell you what," declared Mig, "why don't we walk down to that old dirt road? If I'm going to write about it, then it should be revisited," then continued, "Ah, but that's a good half-kilometer's hike. Are you up to it?"

"Why not? If you can hoof it, so can I," replied Ato.

They went down to the lobby and crossed over to the street, turning right at the corner in front of the University Church. As they walked past the covered courts, Ato looked toward the valley, beyond the ridge. He recalled the times they spent the night on that ledge, looking down the valley, on class campings or after the annual ROTC sham battles. The cadets would bivouac there and they would sit by their tent, he and Mig joined by Fr. Bernabe, their literature teacher, who told them that they should wait for the light from behind the hills of Montalban, till "jocund day stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops." The bivouacs were in February and the night sky was always a blazing canopy of stars.

"This is a night when it is a shame to sleep," Fr. Bernabe would declare. And he'd tell Ato and Mig that if they kept perfectly still, they would be able to hear the bamboo trees grow.

They walked past the statue of St. Ignatius, turned right following the curve in the road, with the Irwin Theater to their left, and the Grade School complex beside it. None of these structures existed when they were in high school. Finally they were in front of the gymnasium, the oldest building on campus. At an oblique angle across the gym now stood the power station. In their high-school days that was a vacant lot from which the old dirt road snaked its way to the boulevard. They walked across the station and traced what was left of the winding path, now just a brown sliver hemmed in by encroaching weeds. How many times had they walked this path before, their arms aching with the load of books they carried. How many times had they stopped at the corner store, to drink a bottle of Coke and smoke a clandestine cigarette while waiting for the next bus to Cubao.

"Any ideas on what you're going to write about this road?" asked Ato glancing at his companion walking abreast of him to his right.

"A few," answered Mig, "yes... those afternoons when we walked this path after a sudden rain, our shoes all muddy, the earth smelling like wet clay and the leaves trembling and dripping with the raindrops," the priest's voice was pensive as if he were talking to himself, "it was a young campus, a young street, and we were young boys discussing how, when we became men, we would change the world into something kindlier and purer."

After a brief pause, the priest continued, "It's a tired old world now, Ato. Many things don't exist anymore. Hardly anything is left of this old path which served us so well ... " and turning his gaze to his right, pointed toward Katipunan Avenue, "That's what we have now, that broad bustling avenue out there, noisy, polluted, paved with hard ugly cement, smelling of burnt gasoline."

Ato was silent. He had looked to the west, in the direction where Mig was pointing, toward Katipunan, but he quickly turned his gaze away and looked the other way, to his left, to the eastern horizon, toward the mountain range beyond the valley—the hills of Montalban that were the foothills of the Sierra Madre. The eastern sky was dull with a leaden haze. But on the opposite horizon, beyond the unsightly Katipunan, the orange glare of the dying sun seemed to set everything on fire.

"Teban, I think I'm going to do something bright," suddenly declared Ato.

"Oh, and prithee, friend and boon companion," replied the priest, "what might that be?"

"Do you think the University would allow me to sponsor, as one of our golden jubilee projects, the restoration of this road? Of course it's going to be on behalf of our class. We could have the road marked off and the edges landscaped, but the path itself should remain unchanged. You know, as a reminder of the campus of the fifties. Perhaps, it can even serve as a promenade. Or who knows, people might start using it again as an access road."

"I think that can be arranged," replied Mig, smiling.

"And ...," the priest continued, "shall we name it the Justice Renato Manalang Lane?"

"Justice ... " Ato practically spat out the word, "bovine crap," then his voice dropped so low Mig could barely catch the words. "Name it after the man whose like I may yet be."

"And who is that admirable human being?" queried Mig.

"Iñaki Manalang. You can call it Iñaki Lane if you like."

"And, Teban" added Ato, "thanks for bringing me here."

"Thanks for giving me the chance," answered the priest.

As the pair neared the end of the path, Ato looked ahead to his right, where the store used to be. The store was gone, the space now just a corner lot overgrown with weeds. Straight ahead traffic was still light on Aurora Boulevard; the other side of the street was empty save for two men looking to their left, apparently waiting for a bus to the valley. They were both quite young: one was in a fatigue uniform (strange, Ato thought, that a soldier should be waiting for public transport), and the other, in dark pants and a white shirt, wearing horn-rimmed glasses. Ato smiled, horn rims were now out of style. The two young men turned their heads toward Ato as he was regarding them. They were perhaps ten or fifteen yards straight ahead. Ato squinted, and creased his brow ... they looked exactly like ... and he quickened his pace toward the corner. Having been overtaken, and now some distance behind Ato, Mig called out to him: "Ato, why are you walking so fast?"

"Teban," asked Ato excitedly, turning briefly toward Mig and then gazing back at the two young men, "those two boys, do you see them?"

"Yes," replied the priest, "I do. What about them?"

"Look at them, the soldier, and the other one, with the glasses. Don't you think they look like ..."

But Mig interrupted him, “I can’t make out their faces, Ato. You know how bad my eyes are. But yes, one is in fatigues and the other is wearing glasses with black rims ... hey, look, they’re waving at you, Ato.”

Ato did catch a glimpse of the two waving at him, but in a split-second a bus stopped along the road, blocking his view. A few moments later, the bus lurched forward and sped down toward the valley. The two young men were gone.

“You did see them, Teban?” Ato’s voice was raised and he spoke rapidly.

“Yeah, I did, but what are you so agitated about?” asked the puzzled priest.

“Well, for a while I thought they were ... I could have sworn ... “ and then his voice trailed off, “ oh, never mind, the sunset can play tricks on one’s eyes.”

And calming down, Ato continued, “About time we got back, Teban.”

“Yeah, I have a mass at six,” said Mig, looking at his watch, and then stealing a curious glance at Ato.

But before turning back, Ato took a few more steps in the direction of Aurora Boulevard. The breeze was blowing his way from the other side of the street. It blew a blast in his face, carrying a whiff, still familiar, so painfully familiar after all these years—there was no mistaking it—strong and pungent, the sharp, sweet scent of Santan Lupel.

Makati City, Philippines, 2005



Rondo Allegretto

She learned about it this morning from Tino. After the daily staff meeting at Casa Isabel, Tino told her, in a manner that was studiously casual, that Nonong was in town. In an effort to conceal her surprise, she reacted with annoyance, “So what is it to me?”

“Just in case you wanted to know,” Tino answered with a hint of mischief in his voice.

Dina glared at him but said nothing. She did not mind being addressed “Dina” by this man whom she had put in charge of procuring the provisions for her restaurant’s kitchen—everybody in Casa Isabel, from the manager down to the maintenance man called her “Ma’am” or “Ma’am Dina,” but Tino was her classmate in the grades, and Nonong’s too. Besides, he was extremely efficient at his job and had the resourcefulness to get the freshest fish and greens, and at very low prices too. So she readily overlooked his familiar manner and his being a gossip, even the rumors that he was carrying on with one of the waiters. But sometimes, like this morning, he could try her patience.

“When did he arrive?” Dina asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

Tino’s answer went beyond the information sought by the question, “Yesterday morning, and I think you can guess why he’s here, Dina. He’s attending our grade-school golden jubilee. You know, Dina, he hasn’t changed, still handsome ... still oozing with sex appeal.”

Dina regretted asking the question and shot back, “If you find him so attractive, why don’t you proposition him?”

“I wish I could, but he’s not for me,” the man answered plaintively, clearing his throat, a sly smile playing on his lips.

With a grunt, Dina changed the subject, “Don’t forget, the guests are *balikbayan* from Chicago, and they made a special request for crabs. Get the biggest and fattest you can find.”

Tino nodded and went down the kitchen stairs.

She had contemplated this possibility ever since she came back to Teruel almost a year ago. After all, his aged mother was here; she was in very frail health and could go anytime. And yet, she didn’t imagine it would affect her like this. It had been more than thirty years—she had completely lost track of him. The only bit of news she had heard during all this time was that he had married a pharmacist from Parañaque. That was even before she gave up her thriving dental practice in this town, packed up her things, and went to the U.S., settling finally in Philadelphia and there meeting and marrying Otto. It was not a loveless marriage. Otto was a good and caring husband, gentle and kind to her. But Otto was past fifty, and she was thirty-five, and still nursing an unhealed wound.

Casa Isabel gave her something to do in Teruel, in fact she had her hands full running it. She never regretted her decision to come home for good after Otto’s death two years ago. And when the opportunity

presented itself to buy the old house across the street, that was really a lucky break for her, even if initially she was hesitant to buy it from Mrs. Alvarado, who was selling it primarily to spite her half-sister Consuelo. Well, she thought, one man's meat is another man's poison. And the idea of converting the old mansion into a fine-dining restaurant which she named after her grandmother turned out to be a brilliant one: Casa Isabel was flourishing, attracting not only the well-to-do townsfolk but also customers from the other towns, and even the neighboring province.

But the history of the house was never far from the forefront of her awareness—this house that Nonong's grandfather had built for his younger brother Jorge, her grandmother's betrothed. The significance of her purchase of the property was not lost on her—it was as if many ghosts were reaching out from the past, of the lovers Isabel and Jorge, doomed to an unfulfilled love, of the people who inhabited this house: Jorge's wife Marta, the beautiful termagant, Jorge and Marta's three children—Jorgeling, the alcoholic whose bed was often the gutters of Teruel, Consuelo, and Jazmin who died in adolescence, and Jorge's love-children, Lucila and Jovita, who suffered greatly from their stepmother's cruelty (Lucila had become mentally incompetent because of blows inflicted by the woman who was the very incarnation of the wicked stepmother). Fate's revenge was that Jovita acquired the house from Consuelo by purchase and Jovita, deaf to Consuelo's entreaties to buy it back, sold it to Dina.

But the ghost whose presence Dina found most disquieting belonged to one who never even lived in it. Nonong's presence was like a spirit that refused to be exorcised, and because he was the grandson of the man who built it, the memory of Nonong permeated every nook and cranny of the house.

As long as Nonong remained a ghost haunting her memory, Dina was in control, at times in fact she deliberately conjured his image, and the scenes of so long ago, especially that afternoon when she refused Nonong's offer of elopement, after being rejected by her parents by reason of economic instability. She was scared of her parents, even if every fiber in her longed to run away with him, whom she had loved since childhood; and he strode away, his eyes glistening with tears. That was the last time she saw him. More than thirty years ago.

Dina knew the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of Nonong coming to Casa Isabel, so she made it a point to drop in only once a day, at six

o' clock in the morning, to check on the kitchen and leave instructions for the day's operations. True enough, Tino told her one morning that Nonong had come for dinner the night before, accompanied by a couple of cousins.

"He inquired about you," Tino told her.

"He was interested in checking out the place and the food, not me," she retorted.

"You think so?" teased Tino. It was a remark that elicited another glare from Dina.

Dina decided to skip the reunion. She didn't want to waken sleeping dogs. So on the scheduled day, a Sunday, Dina drove out of town. She went early to the capital city for Mass, because the homecoming invitation stated that the reunion activities would start with a Mass in the parish church, sponsored by the golden jubilarians. It was past ten at night, well after the festivities wound up, when she came back.

Early the next morning, she was woken by a loud knock on her bedroom door. It was the maid telling her that Tino's nephew, the one who lived with him, was in the *sala*; he had come running and was short of breath. Something was wrong.

"What happened?," Dina anxiously asked the boy.

"Tata Tino woke me up complaining of chest pains and difficulty in breathing. He asked me to inform you, Nana Dina."

Dina hurriedly dressed and rushed to Tino's house behind the old school building called the *gabaldon* by the townsfolk. They flung open the creaking bamboo gate and went straight to Tino's bedroom. They found him sitting on the edge of the bed, not looking particularly ill; he was breathing normally.

"How do you feel? I think we should take you to the hospital", Dina said worriedly.

"No, I think I'm alright now. The chest pains are gone. I think I may just have had too much to drink yesterday. Sorry, Dina, for the inconvenience."

Before Dina could reply, she felt a light tap on her shoulder and heard a voice from many years ago.

"Hello, Dina, it's been so long," and Dina turned and saw him.

His hair was salt-and-pepper, but he hadn't changed much, still slim, still straight as a ramrod.

All she could manage was “Hello, how’ve you been?”

“Old, as you can see. The years seem to have been good to you,” he replied.

She said nothing.

“We missed you yesterday,” he added, “Too bad, it was lots of fun. Everybody was looking for you.”

“I had an important appointment in the city. Something I couldn’t cancel,” she lied.

“Are you ok now?” Nonong asked, turning to Tino.

“Yes, but for a while I thought I was having a heart attack,” replied Tino.

“Next time,” Nonong chided him, “don’t mix your beer and your gin. You can’t drink the way you did when you were twenty.”

They left the house together, to her discomfiture. They talked pleasantries; he asked about her years in the States. She told him about Otto and Philadelphia, and her coming back for good last year, and Casa Isabel.

“Yes, Casa Isabel I had heard of,” Nonong said, I was there the other evening, for dinner, I asked about you, but they told me you hadn’t been coming by at night.”

Dina was aware that he was probing, so she veered, “You’re here for yesterday’s homecoming?”

“Yes, but also to visit Mama. She’s 90 you know, and in precarious health. Her memory is going; I had to introduce myself. But after a few moments, she recognized me.”

Dina noticed that his speech, contained hardly a trace of what the locals referred to as the “wursh-wursh” accent.

“I hear you married a pharmacist?,” now was Dina’s turn to probe.

“Yes, from Parañaque. Her name was Amparito. She died last year. But she had been wheelchair-bound for a couple of years after she slipped in a supermarket, and fractured her hip. Never really recovered.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said.

“Thanks,” he replied, . . . we lived in California, in Vallejo, where, as you know, half the population is from Parañaque,” he said with a laugh, “I still live there, but now it’s a *solo* existence for me.”

“Any kids?” she asked.

“Three, two boys and a girl—the eldest is thirty; the youngest, twenty-three. Only the youngest is unmarried, but all of them are on their own now.”

They were now in front of Casa Isabel.

"Well," Dina said by way of goodbye. "I'll have to check on the restaurant's operations. Tino will be in no condition to work today. See you around."

"Ciao. Oh, by the way, I hear you also have lodgings for guests?"

"Yes" Dina replied, "I had the four old bedrooms refurbished. They're air-conditioned and are available for double or triple occupancy."

"Well, nice seeing you again, Dina," he said as he walked away.

The following morning, Tino was back at work. Dina was in the kitchen, waiting.

"There was no need to pull that cheap stunt," Dina berated him as soon as he walked in, "you think I wouldn't wise up to your little conspiracy?"

"Dina, it wasn't a set-up," protested Tino, "those chest pains were real."

"Real," Dina shot back, "my foot. Tell it to the marines."

"Dina," Tino's voice was low but not diffident, "you're my boss, and I realize I could lose my job for this, but we're also friends. You can fire me after I'm through, but let me say my little piece. I've noticed your unease since you learned that Nonong was in town. When I told you the news, you told me: 'What is it to me?' Well, if it isn't anything to you, don't let it affect your behaviour. Why should you let Nonong—or anyone else—ruffle your life? Why do you give him the power to undo you? You're much smarter than that."

Dina was silent. After an awkward pause, Tino spoke again, head bowed, "Am I fired?"

"No," Dina answered evenly, "take care of the supplies. We have some guests for lunch."

Tino nodded and turned to go. But as he was going down the stairs, Dina called out to him, and said softly, "Thanks, friend."

A few days later, Dina heard that Nonong's mother had died. She went peacefully, in her sleep. Thanks to Tino's little pep-talk in the kitchen, Dina had no hesitation about going to the wake. Nor did she regret going. Despite almost a year in Teruel, there were still a good number of relatives and old friends and acquaintances whom she met at the wake for the first time since she left for abroad. Because of the encounter of a few days previous, Nonong and she were relaxed with each other.

When it was time to go, Nonong offered to take her home. She demurred, saying, "They say it's bad luck to see a guest out."

"That may be," he explained, "but I'm not seeing you out, I'm walking you home."

"Ok," she consented, "I hope the spirits accept that splitting of hairs."

It was a good hike to Dina's house, and they walked slowly. A few meters down, she saw the illuminated sign of the Teruel Rural Bank.

"Did you know," she said, "that this town is named after a small city in eastern Spain? I had the chance to visit it with Otto. Bought a lot of stuff with the name *Teruel* on them, and sent them to my folks here."

"I heard something like that from my mother," Nonong remarked, "She told me that there was a story, something like a Spanish version of Romeo and Juliet, about two young lovers from Teruel who died of grief because fate prevented them from marrying each other. But maybe the Spanish are more blasé because, according to my mother, there is a verse about these two sweethearts: 'The lovers of Teruel, foolish was she, and he as well.'"

"Yes," replied Dina, "I heard that couplet from my grandmother."

"Los amantes de Teruel,

Tonta ella, y tonto el."

Dina looked to her right, to the park in front of the town hall, with Rizal's monument rising in the middle, a white sepulchral majesty. There were stone benches around the monument and a pair of lovers sitting on one of them, holding hands. Many years ago, thought Dina, what elderly couple in turn saw her and Nonong on one of those benches, perhaps recalling a memory akin to hers tonight?

"Actually," she continued, "when I went to Teruel, I visited the chapel where the tombs of the lovers were. They lie side by side, but in separate tombs, with sculptured figures of the two recumbent on each one's tomb. Both are young—the girl is strikingly beautiful, the boy, as handsome as Adonis. His hand reaches out toward hers, almost but not quite touching. So near, but not quite there. The tour guide told us their story: they were sweethearts from childhood but the girl's parents were opposed to the match because the boy was poor. The boy left town, but not before extracting a promise from the girl's parents that he be given five years to return, financially stable, and have their daughter's hand in marriage. He came back, rich and worthy of his beloved's social status, but a day late, just in time to see his loved one march out of church as

someone else's bride. He asked her for a kiss, and being refused, died of grief at her feet. The following day, the girl, still in her wedding finery, went to the boy's funeral to give him the kiss she had withheld from him, and planting a kiss on his lips, fell dead on his body."

"Yes, indeed," concluded Dina, "*tonta ella, y tonto el.*"

Then she added, "But you're right, maybe the Spanish attitude toward love is more down-to-earth than Shakespeare's, that is, if that couplet represents how the Spanish regard the two young lovers. If one can't have the one he loves, there's no sense destroying oneself for it."

"I suppose you're right," mused Nonong, "Do you suppose the lovers of Teruel would have learned to cope had they decided to live?"

Dina did not answer.

After a while, she asked, "Was Amparito a good wife?"

"Yes, a very good one. Raised our children quite well. I have no complaints."

Then she asked him, "Were you happy with her?"

"I guess I should say I was ... What about you, no regrets?"

"About what?", asked Dina.

"About Otto, about Philadelphia, about relocating in the U. S.?"

"That's a question I never ask myself," she replied, "It's pointless to look back. The road, however short the stretch left, leads only forward, not backward. Remember the story of Lot's wife, or Orpheus?"

"Yes, you're right. But I suppose neither Orpheus nor Lot's wife—if that pillar of salt had any life left in it—was forbidden to remember."

"I suppose not," Dina mused, "In one's private world of memory, each one reigns supreme."

And seeing the gate of her house to their right, she said, "Well, here we are. Thanks for walking with me, Nonong."

"Good night, Dina, thanks for coming to the wake," he said in parting, lightly brushing his hand against hers, and quickly added, "Oh, by the way, my brother and his family are arriving tomorrow. There won't be enough space in the house. I was wondering if Casa Isabel has an available room for me. That is, if it will accept me."

Dina's answer was instant, "Yes, I think there is an available room, if you'll check with reception tomorrow. And I don't see why it shouldn't accept you; it's a restaurant-*pensión*, not a membership club."

"Thanks," answered Nonong, "I'll inquire from reception tomorrow. You see, I need a place to stay, the house is full. Well, good night again."

"Good night," Dina replied, "and, oh," she added as Nonong turned to go, "you don't have to have a reason. Casa Isabel doesn't demand an explanation from its guests."

Nonong glanced at her, just in time to catch a hint of a smile on her lips.

* * * It was the ninth day after the funeral. The *decenario*, the novena for the dead, ended tonight. Nonong had been staying at Casa Isabel for almost two weeks now. Tomorrow would be check-out day; he was taking the afternoon flight from Legaspi to Manila and back to Vallejo after two days. When he got back to Casa Isabel, he met Dina at the main parlor leaving final instructions to the staff. He had not expected to see her there because it was quite late. All the time he was staying there, he didn't see her, although he knew that she would go very early for the daily meeting with Tino for provisions. He had seen her at the funeral but they had not had the opportunity to talk.

"Oh, hi, Nonong," Dina cheerfully greeted him as he walked into the parlor. "You came from the night prayers?"

"Yes, today was the last day. I'm checking out tomorrow, Dina."

"Oh? Back to the US?"

"Yes, in three days," Nonong answered ... Is it too late to order some port or sherry?

"No," answered Dina, asking the last-shift waiter to bring out a bottle and a wine glass for Nonong. The waiter promptly produced a half-full bottle of tawny port and a port glass.

"I know it's late," Nonong said, a little hesitantly, "but may I invite you to join me for a nightcap?"

"Why not?" was Dina's ready reply, and the waiter produced a second glass.

"This is on the house, to wish you a pleasant journey home," Dina declared.

"Thanks, free port makes the voyage more enjoyable, no pun intended," he replied with a chuckle.

The two seated themselves at the corner table, while the waiter stood awkwardly a few feet away to attend to them.

"You can dismiss the waiter," offered Nonong, "It's late. I promise to clear the table."

"Ok, thanks." Dina replied, "he's had a long day," and signalled the waiter leave to go.

The conversation was a little starchy at first, then eased up as the pair started reminiscing about Teruel in the old days, about the town's unforgettable characters: Pidio who went about town in his stained *calzoncillo*; Idro, who was caught cheating at cards (he had hidden the *kabayong bastos* under his butt); Fr. Canton, who at Christmas sent the venerable matrons of Teruel one piece each of dried fish tucked inside the greeting card.

Then it took a turn.

"So it's back to Vallejo for you?" inquired Dina.

"Yes ... not that I want to. If I had my way, I'd rather pitch tent here, in the old country," he answered, "Truth is, Vallejo doesn't have Teruel's charm."

"So what's keeping you?" she asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I need a real reason to stay."

Dina averted her eyes and looked around the parlor, fixing her gaze on the window balusters.

"You know the story of this house, don't you?" she asked him.

"Yes, my grandfather built it for his kid brother Lolo Oré whom he wanted to marry off to your grandmother. *Matoa*, I still remember what you called her. Who backed out—he or she?"

Dina realized that it was the wrong thing to bring up by way of changing the subject.

"It was not meant to be," was all she could answer.

"I don't believe in Fate," he demurred, "if they loved each other, they should have fought for it, not crumbled under pressure."

"My grandmother was too demure, too submissive; somebody else beat her to him," she explained, "but do you know that after your grand-uncle's wife died, he called on her and proposed marriage?"

"Oh? Then, they should have given love a second chance. Why didn't they get married then?"

"She spurned him."

"Would *you* gamble on a second chance?" he abruptly asked.

Dina was on her feet instantly, turning her back to him.

"You've had too much port," she snapped.

Nonong too sprang to his feet and stood in front of her, taking her hands in his. She did not withdraw them.

"I'm sorry, Dina ... but no, I'm not sorry. I meant to ask you this the first time I saw you, at Tino's house. I have to be honest with you. You

can reject me, as Matoa spurned Lolo Orè. But, like him, I have to take that risk. If you want to get rid of me, you'll have to tell me you don't want me."

Dina gave no reply.

"Is there anything left of the old feeling?" Nonong pursued, "... and in case I'm not making myself clear, that's a proposal."

Dina was silent longer that Nonong could hold his breath. But he saw that tears were welling from her eyes.

She finally spoke, "Lolo Orè asked *Matoa* that question that night he proposed. She answered that she had lost it somewhere along the way." Dina paused, tears now flowing down her cheeks, then continued, "Maybe she wasn't quite truthful, or maybe she was wrong. Because if she felt the way I did when you left for Manila that afternoon you told me I was not brave enough to defy my parents, she should have said that nothing is ever lost, and somewhere along the way you tell yourself it's useless to fight it."

Dina's words couldn't be clearer, but Nonong hungered for absolute assurance, as if the privation of all those years had to be filled with the words he had always yearned to hear.

"It's not too late then?" he asked.

"We're too late for yesterday ... but not too late for tomorrow," replied Dina softly.

"Nor for tonight," Nonong whispered.

"Do you realize that after a hundred years, we'd finally be completing the circle for this house?", Dina asked.

"Good for this blessed house," he replied in agreement, "Don't you think then that we shouldn't waste any more of its time?"

He looked at her, tenderness commingling with desire. With one hand he switched off the lights in the main parlor, and taking her by the arm with the other, led her, slowly, wordlessly, toward the welcoming half-light of the century-old bedroom.

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