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## Three Translations

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## THREE TRANSLATIONS BY SOLEDAD S. REYES

As the bibliography of her publications show, Soledad S. Reyes has devoted the last decade or so translating fiction by Tagalog writers into English. In this section, we offer a small sample of her work in that regard.

“An Eight-Year-Old” and “The Story of ‘Mabuti’” are translations of the stories “Walong Taong Gulang” (1939) and “Ang Kuwento ni Mabuti” (1948), both authored by Genoveva Edroza-Matute. Both stories demonstrate Edroza-Matute’s style of verbal portraiture where revelation comes through subdued details given piecemeal and pathos is all the more deeply felt thereby. In the first, a sympathetic teacher remembers the case of a reclusive student, whose ill-health, she (and the reader) discover, is due to more than just poor nutrition; in the second, a student arrives at the hurt that has lain hidden behind her teacher’s smiles and lessons on the “beauty of life.” Both translations are part of *I Am a Voice*, a collection of Genoveva Edroza-Matute’s stories in English translation by Reyes, forthcoming from the Ateneo de Manila University Press.

“Where Did You Lose Your Way?,” Reyes’s translation of Rosario de Guzman-Lingat’s “Saan Ka Naligaw?,” depicts the double betrayal of a war veteran. Waiting for years for a backpay that will never come,

Moheng is duped again, this time by a fellow Filipino, into digging for the famed Yamashita treasure. But in de Guzman-Lingat's vision Moheng is not wholly blameless; he is derelict in his domestic duties. The story is included in the aptly titled collection of Rosario de Guzman-Lingat's stories in English translation *The Ravaged World* (2023).

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### AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD

By Genoveva Edroza-Matute

Translated by Soledad S. Reyes

More than anyone else, that young boy had made a dent on my mind, not on the first day I laid eyes on him, but in the length of time I knew him. For two weeks, he was one of the sixty students I talked with, threw question at, gave answers to, reprimanded, comforted. He was one of the sixty students I recognized only by their faces.

Classes had gone on for about three weeks when I noticed that face, with a darker than usual complexion, with a flat nose, small mouth with thick lips, and gentle eyes, that belonged to an eight-year-old boy named Leoncio Santos.

Leoncio Santos. That was him—when I called out his name, it meant he had to stand up, to recite, to follow my order. He was only one of the sixty students who, for five days in a week, I got to face in that classroom. One of the group composed of different individuals but who I viewed as similar in many ways. Like, for example, the common tendency to tease each other and to engage in scuffles, only to reconcile later.

What differentiated Leoncio from his classmates was his love for solitude. I noticed this quality in the third week of class, at the same

time that an image became seared in my memory of a dark-skinned face with a flat nose, small mouth with thick lips, gentle eyes, that went by the name of Leoncio Santos.

While the children were playing in the school yard, I realized how Leoncio stood out from his classmates. I noticed how he merely followed his classmates at play with his eyes, did not join them having fun. That struck me as strange and from that day, I made it a point to observe him closely.

It occurred to me at first that he was probably sick which prevented him from playing with his classmates. But once inside the classroom, he showed no evidence that he was feeling unwell. Nor did he absent himself from class, which would have made me think he was sick.

I would observe Leoncio every day, at recess time, looking at his classmates; sometimes he would lean against the mango tree in the yard; on several occasions, he would sit on the cool, green grass.

“Perhaps he has no friends,” I muttered to myself as I watched the forlorn figure leaning on the mango tree. Although I believe in the common view that children instinctively understood each other, whatever language they spoke, the desire to help him without being obviously blatant about it, came to me. I spoke to some of his classmates. I urged them to play with Leoncio because he was a nice boy, generous and well-behaved. The classmates promised to do what I had asked.

But when I looked out the window, and glanced at the mango tree, I saw the familiar figure of Leoncio in the usual pose. I scanned the yard and discovered Leoncio’s classmates having fun.

When the students came back into the classroom, I made it clear, in a gentle but firm voice, that I was disappointed that they did not do what I had asked. I was surprised when one of the students said: “But we asked him to play with us—we even pleaded but he refused.”

“Did he say why? What was his reason?” I asked.

“No, ma’am. He just didn’t want to play with us.”

On the following day, I gathered the students at recess time, and

asked them if they would include me in their game. They were beside themselves with delight, and in a moment, sixty excited students had surrounded me. A mere glance at the group, and I was absolutely certain that the small boy was not there. And I was right—Leoncio was nowhere in sight.

I looked out the window and caught a glimpse of him seated on the cool, green grass near the school fence. I waved at him. He looked over his shoulder, assuming that I was calling someone else's attention, but stood up when he saw that there was nobody else. Even the way he stood up showed how little energy he had. The children suggested a game of cat and mouse where the cat would run after the mouse. The children formed a huge circle by holding each other's hands.

I designated a boy named Anselmo to be the "dog," and Leoncio, who I wanted to have fun with his classmates and who I no longer wished to see act like an old man burdened by problems, was assigned to be the "cat."

I began to sing the song that accompanied the game and fifty-eight other voices joined me.

I saw Leoncio, eyes alert, running in and out of the circle, and sprinted away from the group. He was catching his breath.

Anselmo was a fast runner. When he was about to catch the "cat," the children roared in unison, "Run! Run!". Leoncio looked over his shoulder and increased his pace—and I saw him fall down.

The boy's footing was awkward and unsure. He was not used to playing. This was the truth that jolted me.

I began to speak to him after class.

"Leoncio," I frequently said, "it's good for a child to play. You will get stronger and you'll have lots of friends. Don't you want to be like Anselmo who's tall? Don't you wish to have friends?"

"Yes, Miss de la Rosa," he said, "I'd like that."

And I made him promise to join his classmates at play.

But each time I would look out the window, Leoncio's slight frame

leaning on the mango tree or seated on the cold, green grass, watching, always observing as was his wont, would greet my eyes. I could not help but feel sadness for the little boy. My pain intensified when I would see Leoncio hurriedly joining his classmates the moment he caught a glimpse of me at the window.

Leoncio Santos was one of the brightest students. He could have been the best if not for several factors.

He seemed not inclined to listen, showed little interest in others, and appeared indifferent to learning. He often failed to answer the question I asked only once. That was why I made him sit in front, but I observed no change.

Leoncio was neat and clean—even in his attires, though his clothes looked a size bigger. A few were too long, and a couple were too short, obviously hand-me-downs.

Once before class began, I chanced upon Leoncio, with his face on the desk. I asked him if he was sleepy, but he shook his head slightly, and sluggishly he rose to his feet. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw him leaving the room. I later found him walking toward the grassy part of the yard. He lay on the cool, green grass, face down.

At dismissal time, the loner joined a classmate named Cesar. I gazed at them from the gate as they left. Leoncio was holding on to Cesar's arm, walking slowly.

Then Leoncio did not show up one day. No one knew the reason for his absence.

When he showed up the next day, I asked him why he was absent.

"I got dizzy, Miss de la Rosa."

"Do you feel better now?" I asked him.

He said he was all right.

"Please tell your mother," I went on, "to feed you vegetables, eggs, fruits, and make you drink fresh milk."

"Yes, ma'am."

I noticed how loosely the flesh in his thin arms hung.

When I asked him if he had relayed my message to his mother, he gave me a slight nod.

“What did your mother say, Leoncio?” I asked.

He threw me a brief glance, stared at the floor and in a barely audible voice, said, “Nothing.”

Several months passed but I did not see any change in the boy, except for his clothes that were clean but obviously worn out.

He still stayed under the mango tree and sat on the grass during playtime.

He was still one of the brightest students but never received first honors due to inattentiveness and lack of interest in his studies.

His frame was tiny and extremely thin, and he had dizzy spells in the classroom.

“Are you not fond of vegetables and eggs? How about fruits?” I asked him once. “And fresh milk?”

I was not sure if he heard me, but he did not bother to reply. I had to repeat my questions before he shook his head slowly.

“Why, did not you inform your mother that they’re good for you?”

“I did, ma’am.”

“Did she not buy them for you?”

He did not say a word. He was busy eyeing something on the floor.

I held his chin up.

He lifted his face but his eyes avoided mine.

“Did she not buy the food, Leoncio?” I asked again.

As he shook his head, something trickled down his dark cheeks from his gentle eyes.

That day, at lunch break . . . I looked at my sixty students leaving the room. Walking down the stairs, the students had their eyes already fixed on the food stall.

The group broke into clusters like a flock of doves. Most of them rushed to buy their food; the others opened their bags of home-cooked food.

I was on my way to the room when I overheard an exchange between two students.

“Never brings any food, yes?”

“You bet, and oh dear! The way he devours our food with his eyes! Did you see him?”

And I suddenly recalled the image of a small eight-year-old boy, his face upturned but adamantly refusing to look into my eyes, and from those eyes . . .

I swiftly climbed down the stairs. I searched for him. He was standing in one corner. One foot against the fence he was leaning on, the other foot on the ground. A child with a piece of bread stood next to him. That grabbed his attention.

When he caught me staring at him, Leoncio hurriedly walked towards a group of boys playing. But I called him and told him to come to my room.

Leoncio Santos was extremely shy. I pretended to be angry before he reluctantly accepted what I offered.

The scene that unfolded was sad, grim, and gut-wrenching. I even refused to remember how he looked when he left the room, so distraught was the boy.

He had been away from school for several days. Each time I looked at his empty seat, I could imagine a dark-skinned boy with a dark face, a flat nose, a small mouth with thick lips, and gentle eyes. Whenever I found myself at the window, or happened to see the mango tree, I would see an eight-year-old boy, staring at the students at play, and eating.

Like before, nobody knew why Leoncio was absent.

After seeing an empty desk for five days, I walked with two students who lived near Leoncio’s house.

We walked on rough roads, full of potholes. We passed through many yards. Upon arriving at the house where my two companions lived, I left them and proceeded to Leoncio’s house.

The house was farther down. I finally reached the address on the list.

A middle-aged woman showed me the way into the house.

The sight that greeted me when I stepped into the room was something I had feared. Lying on the mat was the tiny body of Leoncio Santos.

“My teacher,” he muttered when he saw me.

“Please come in, ma’am,” the woman said. “I’m thankful that you found time to visit my son,” and she began looking for a chair.

She left the room and when she came back, she was carrying a chair, but I was already seated on the floor stroking the boy’s forehead.

“Oh, no, ma’am, not there. Here, please sit here,” the woman urged me. “You’re not used to this. . . this is not right.”

“Oh no, please don’t say that . . . I’m used to this!”

My voice changed. I felt a lump in my throat.

“Has he seen a doctor?”

The woman massaged the boy’s head before she replied:

“No, ma’am. Well, it’s because . . . I have a neighbor who suggested the crushed young guava leaves would be good, and also betel leaf as poultice.”

I hardly paid attention to the woman’s nervous answer. I was inwardly berating myself for the question I had asked.

The sun had set when I looked out the window.

“Leoncio, try to get well. Eat the food I brought, okay? When you return to school I will show you something.”

His mother walked me to the stairs. Her eyes, that had become gentler, were pleading.

Leoncio’s mother was painfully shy. I pretended to be angry before she accepted what I offered her.

But in her reluctant gesture, I had a glimpse of a wounded heart.

“Government . . . rebellion . . . blind loyalty . . . Leoncio’s father . . . cheated . . . pretended to be a leader . . . prisoner . . . these past four years . . . Leoncio . . . Leoncio. . . .”

Those were the fiery words of the truth that scorched my soul.

I realized the truth of the adage that a person became speechless when her mind was struggling with ideas. My heart was overpowered with an emotion that prevented me from opening my mouth

“Goodbye. Please be careful . . . those steps are rickety and about to fall. Thank you, ma’am. Please stay. You have not had lunch.”

I stepped over the gate . . .

“Inay, is my teacher gone? These are so tasty. Please come in. You have not had lunch.”

As I traversed a dark path, I could see an eight-year-old boy, with a darker than usual complexion, a flat nose, a small mouth with thick lips, and gentle eyes, to whom I asked: “Why, are you not fond of vegetables and eggs? Don’t you like to eat the fruits I mentioned to you? And fresh milk?”



## THE STORY OF “MABUTI”

By Genoveva Edroza-Matute

Translated by Soledad S. Reyes

I no longer see her. But they insist that she is still there at the school where she used to teach, in the old and unpainted school, where I first met her. In one of the old rooms on the second floor, on top of the stairs that creaked with each step, the room which has a view of the murky water of the estero, she’s still there teaching book knowledge—and nurturing a kind of knowledge I learned only from her.

I have always associated her with the beauty of Life. Wherever it may dwell: in a scene, in a thought, or even in a sound, I would see her and I am filled with happiness. But there was nothing beautiful in her appearance . . . and in her life. . . .

She was one of the most ordinary teachers at that time. No one paid any attention to her. There was nothing extraordinary about her—

not in the way she dressed, not in the way she carried out her duties as a teacher.

We all called her *Mabuti* [Good] behind her back. That was her favorite word. That was the convenient substitute for words she occasionally forgot, and the subject of sentences that suggested her uncertainty and tentativeness. In a strange manner, that name became the reflection of her views of the world.

“Good,” she would say. “. . . and now we begin our lesson. It’s good we have reached this far. . . Good. . . good. . . “

I had never intended to reveal anything to her except that once she caught me shedding tears: on that occasion my tender heart was grieving over a child’s pain.

The sun was about to set and apart from the occasional spirited yelling of the students watching the school’s athletes practicing, the school noise had dissipated. I was bravely trying to find a solution to my woes in a hidden corner of the school library. This was where she found me.

“It’s good there are still some people here,” she muttered, trying to hide her tentativeness. “It seems something is bothering you. . . it would be good if I could be of help.”

My initial urge was to flee from her and never to come back ever. In my child’s mind, it would be a great shame and humiliation for me to see her again, as meeting her again would only remind me of that unfortunate incident. My feet turned to lead after I heard her say something. In my shock I sat down on a nearby chair.

“I didn’t know there was anybody here. . . I had come here to cry.” I was taken aback by the honesty of those words. Her gaze was on my lap. A little later, I saw a tentative smile on her lips.

She held my hand, and the next thing was I heard myself telling her a problem I thought then was the heaviest in the world. She listened intently, and now, as I recollect the incident, I wonder how she kept

herself from laughing at such a petty problem. But she listened to me with understanding, and even then I realized how genuine her concern was.

We left the school together. The intersection where we went our separate ways loomed when suddenly a thought streaked through my mind.

“Before I forget ma’am, what about you? What was it? What made you seek that corner where. . . you had wished to cry?”

She laughed gently and repeated the words: “that corner where. . . we cried. . . both of us.” Then the sound of laughter vanished: “I wish I could tell you . . . but my problem is not for the ears of children like you. It would be good if you would be spared this kind of problem. . . forever. What I mean is. . . may Life be good. . . to you.”

Mabuti was transformed into a new person after the incident. As she spoke behind her desk, asking questions, providing answers, as she flashed those gentle and shy smiles, as she frowned when exasperated, I could hear once again the footsteps walking toward the corner of the school library. That corner where “we both cried,” she told me that afternoon. And as her voice reverberated in the classroom, I strove to discover the reason or reasons for her seeking that corner of the school library. I was trying to figure out if she was still going there, that corner that . . . belonged to us.

And because I discovered the truth about her, I began to observe her, to wait for any trace of bitterness in what she said. Instead, she taught her students happiness, trust, and hope. She filled our minds with lofty thoughts, our emotions with sonorous sounds, and we gradually learned about the beauty of life. Each lesson in our Literature class became a means to quench our thirst for beauty. And I marveled.

It had not been earlier, I reminded myself after she had drummed into us the ineffable beauty of life in our lessons. The ability to discover this facet of life became mine only after that fateful encounter in the library.

Her supreme confidence in God, in humankind, in everything, was one of the strongest lessons I learned. Perhaps this deep trust enabled her to see beauty in what appeared to us as commonplace. That was perhaps the reason why she spoke with such conviction in showing meaning in otherwise apparently meaningless things.

Not once did she refer to her personal life the whole time she was our teacher. But she did mention something about her daughter, her only daughter . . . repeatedly. Never did the name of her daughter's father escape from her lips. Two of my classmates, however, knew that she was not a widow.

There was no doubt in my mind that all her glorious dreams were centered on the child. She spoke endlessly of her daughter's funny antics, the little girl's dreams that were increasingly getting varied, her goals in life being slowly formed. Once, without meaning to, she expressed her fear: that she might not be able to measure up to her daughter's dreams. With the exception of a few of our classmates, we listened to these stories about her child and "endured" them because there was no way to avoid them. But for me, each reference to the child helped me gain a new understanding, for a suspicion had gradually been forming in my mind.

Through her stories, we learned about the child's birthday party, her new dress with a large red ribbon around the waist, her daughter's friends, and their gifts. Her daughter had turned six. She would begin school next year. And her wish for the child was to become a doctor—and a good one.

At that precise moment, a boy behind me whispered: "Just like her father!"

Our teacher heard what the boy said. And she spoke.

"Yes, just like her father," she said. Her face turned pale and a forced smile formed on her lips.

That was the first and the last time that reference to the celebrant's father was made.

I was sure at that moment that something had gone wrong in her life. And while I sat on my chair, two yards away from her, I felt a prick of pain in my heart urging me to approach her, hold her hands, just like her gesture in the corner of the library, and to beg her to open her heart to me. I thought having someone to confide in could ease her pain. But I was deterred from doing what I had in mind at the sight of my classmates who could not care less when our teacher muttered, “Yes, just like her father,” as blood slowly disappeared from her face.

And then, she uttered something which remained engraved in my mind to this day. She gazed at me steadfastly, striving mightily to control the trembling of her lips, and said: “Good . . . good! Just as this Fe would say—those who have undergone sufferings away from the eyes of other people, can recognize happiness hidden from view. Good, and now we shall begin our lesson. . . .”

I was certain then, just as I am certain today, that the statement did not come from me, not in my words or through my writing. But as she gazed at me that morning, and as she uttered those words, I felt that she and I were one. And we are one with those individuals who, having lived with pain away from the eyes of other people, can recognize happiness hidden from view.

Once again, on that occasion one morning, as her face regained its color, our teacher showed the hidden beauty of life in our literature lessons: the beauty in courage, the beauty in forging ahead whatever colors Life unfolded.

And now, it has been a few days since I found out that the doctor had died. The father of that child, who could become a good doctor in the future, had passed away. He died and was waked for two days and two nights at the house which was not the home of Mabuti and her daughter. And things fell into place. In that stark truth, and its immense cruelty, I finally made sense of it all . . .



## WHERE DID YOU LOSE YOUR WAY?

By Rosario de Guzman-Lingat

Translated by Soledad S. Reyes

*It was a concrete bridge, its yellow paint peeling off, the cemented portion peeking on either side. But everything was quiet in the dark night, arrogance written all over the structure, waiting. For whatever would take place. And anything could happen. Like, for example, the destruction of this haughty bridge.*

*They were a group that came from the mountain. Seven volunteers. Guerilla soldiers, all battle-tested, and prepared for anything. Even for death itself. No one would return to the camp alive should the mission fail. Time did not matter in life. It offered the unusual opportunity to be great.*

*The bridge could be seen, its yellow paint obliterated by the veil of darkness, from where the men crouched, hidden. Armed, uniformed sentries were on the bridge. Three of them. One on either end of the bridge, and a third marching up and down the bridge. There were only three of them. But with sudden, unexpected noise, it would be difficult to guess how many soldiers from the Japanese Imperial Army would swarm the bridge. Even the presence of the three soldiers was a calculated move. Not to call attention to a most important mission designed to lead the conquerors to victory.*

*A secret. That was what they thought.*

*Before the sun was up, three trucks full of ammunition and weapons would cross the bridge. The mission of the seven guerrilla soldiers: to snatch the military supplies or to blow the bridge up and destroy the trucks.*

*One of the seven men must cross the river, swim to the other side and kill the sentry guarding that end. The river was wide. The moon's pale reflection shimmered on its calm surface. Occasionally, the third sentry would peek into the river on either side of the bridge, watchful of any movement. The group was aware of the other sentry.*

*Who would cross the river?*

*Only one name issued from the lips of six men. It was Moheng!*

*Without any protest, without any trepidation, his lively mind on high*

*alert, he descended into the blackish-green water, urged on by that awesome recklessness, that enviable strength of daring youthfulness.*

“Ah, that might be all hot air, Mang Moheng!”

“Oy, Mang Atong is still alive, why don’t you ask him. The truth is, that old man has made life difficult for me, but when it comes to my guerilla days during the Japanese situation, he’ll vouch for me.”

The two of them were the sole occupants of the bench in front of Tikang’s store. It was a store doubling as an eatery. There were three small tables inside and a couple could comfortably eat at each table. They were seated, in front of the store, on a long bench which accommodated the usual group of idle men and regular customers warming their stomachs with Tikang’s strong coffee, early in the morning or late in the afternoon when it was cooler. Between the store’s open door and another bench was the rocking chair of Tandang Anong who, with his spindly, old cane, full of nodes, had become a permanent fixture in the corner.

The grinning Lino, baring his teeth, playfully threw a glance at the old man, to further vex Tandang Anong whose face, under the white hair, already showed much irritation, and whose eyes, now reduced to slits, were fiercely concentrating on nothing in particular in front of him, to convey that he wanted nothing to do with the mindless chatter.

“It’s difficult for you, Lino, even to imagine the dangers I faced and survived!” Rays of glory glimmered in Moheng’s eyes. The shoulders that habitually sagged suddenly straightened up with pride. Lino was swept up into the compelling story and felt as if those events were within reach if he would only stretch his hands. For reasons unknown to him, he laughed uproariously. “You were not yet born then. How old are you? Twenty-one?”

“But you don’t have any medals to your name, Mang Moheng!”

“Medals? I was not aspiring for medals when I climbed the mountain to join the guerrillas.”

“Back pay!” The word was violently spat out by the old man on the rocking chair.

“It’s Tandang Anong . . .” But Lino was already convulsed with laughter.

Blood suddenly surged and flooded Moheng’s face, as he looked balefully at Tikang’s father: “If it was only back pay, Mang Anong, I could have claimed it years ago!”

“And what is it you’ve been waiting for these twenty years? As far as I can remember, you have refused to look for work—except for some odd jobs—since the war ended. Why? Waiting to become instantly rich from your back pay? You joined the group of Lucio, at first. Then these past few years the group of Carmelo. The same dead end. Whether it’s Lucio or Carmelo, the constant refrain—it’s coming, it’s coming. Every year. Each month, waiting with bated breath. There you are, old and infirm. Time wasted. You could have done a lot, Moheng!”

“I’ve done a lot, Mang Anong!”

“During the war!” And one more spool of spit. “Then you wasted your life regaling each other with tall tales here at Tikang’s store, waiting for non-existent money. Lucio died penniless. And you and Maciong, what are you wishing for? Your hair has also turned white!”

“Was Mang Lucio with you in the mountain?” Lino was curious to know.

“Lucio, Maciong. We were under Straughn. But Straughn was killed, there were misunderstandings, and we were separated from the group. Lucio formed his own group and I joined them. I had the rank of a captain. Maciong was a lieutenant. Turing and Baste were guerillas in name only. The Americans were here when the two of them attached themselves to us. Lucio, Maciong, and myself, we’re genuine. We hid in the forest at the foot of the mountain, and during fierce encounters, we would run deeper into the forest, clamber up the mountain, always together, as one group.”

Tandang Anong’s throat was billowing, “Until now, salivating for your back pay.”

*Moheng stared at his fingernails, picking the dirt off the nails with his thumb. Back pay. Lucio was not the only one who died waiting. He was not the only one left hoping.*

Mang Atong threw another one of his acidic remarks, “It’s hard to swipe away the hope for money.”

This old man was making his blood boil. He might just lose his temper and trade insult for insult . . .

Moheng was about to stand up when Lino asked, “How much do you think you will get, just in case?”

Moheng nibbled at his lips and said, “At that time, Lucio thought it would have amounted to forty thousand pesos. . . .”

Tandang Anong groaned. “You could have earned more than forty thousand pesos in twenty years . . . if!”

“Father . . .” Tikang’s small but energetic frame made its presence felt in the small store. She was more than forty years old, still unmarried, but she moved like a thirty-year-old woman. “You’re venting your ire on Moheng again. He might just lose his cool and swear never to drop by my store.”

Moheng forced himself to smile. “It’s no big deal.” He turned to Lino to show that indeed, it’s no big deal. “With this group, headed by Colonel Carmelo, we’ll get an advance of ten thousand pesos.”

“There’s an advance?” The old man hissed, Tikang’s warning coming too late.

“Colonel Carmelo?” Lino paused for a while. “Carmelo. Is he the one with the house near Esso? Is he a colonel?”

“He lives near the gasoline station. I’ve known him only for three years, but he has recognition papers, with complete documentation of the members. There’s more certainty here than in Lucio’s group.”

“It might just be another scam, Mang Moheng. The war ended years ago and . . .”

“What do you think of me, a fool? We’ll see on the 23rd of this month.”

“Again?” Tikang’s attempt to control her father was drowned by the old man’s booming voice. “How many 15th, 20th, of the month, and on and on, have I heard from you?”

“This time, I am sure, Mang Anong. Carmelo already showed me the check!”

Tikang’s shrill voice mercifully put an end to the heated discussion. “It might be good, Moheng, not that I am driving you away, to look to your wife and child. I met Paula in the market, and she told me that Cita’s fever is getting worse. I think Paula is worried about your daughter.”

Paula was just being overly concerned. But it would be better to beat a hasty retreat. Moheng was immediately on his feet.

“That’s the martyr,” Moheng heard Tandang Anong mumble. “Paula and her two children.”

Moheng walked away.

That darned busybody!

Moheng fixed his attention on his destination. The street was burning with the noonday heat. Paula was in the house, cooking for lunch. A little rice bought with what she earned selling fish this morning, and some fish from her merchandise. Paula would return to the market to sell what was left of her fish. Cita, had she not gotten drenched when she was with her mother two days ago, would have helped her mother sell the fish . . . Would Mando be home? He had been gallivanting around with his friends. He was nineteen years old, a casual construction worker, prone to trouble. A son was a source of headaches. Even his own debates with Tandang Anong became messier and convoluted.

That old meddler. He, and all of them, would see, when he got hold of his money on the 23rd! And a bitter “hopefully” squeezed his heart. Suddenly, the old man’s growling face and Lino’s mocking expression streaked across his mind. Let them laugh on the 23rd, and say it was nothing but a scam!

But wait. And his pace slowed down. What, what if . . . there's nothing, like before?

Carmelo was taking down the frames on the wall when Moheng visited him.

“Are you moving houses?” he asked curiously.

“Why would I? Only five days and it will be the 23rd.” He flashed a meaningful smile as he added, “I’ll send these frames over to my child in Manila. The couple have a new house and I promised these to them. They also hauled away my TV and stereo. See, they’re not here. They promise to return them once they have their own appliances.”

“Are you sure of what’s ours?” Moheng helped Carmelo take down the frames. This was what he liked about Carmelo. Even though he was a man with some means, he treated everyone equally, and did not consider himself different. He was a genuine guerrilla.

“If not for this, I would have stayed in Manila. And this is great news . . .” Carmelo pulled Moheng to a cushioned sofa, lit a tobacco, and although sure that Moheng would decline it, nonetheless offered one to the visitor. “Once we receive the money, all of us, officers, will automatically become American citizens. You’re included, Moheng. We’ll be sent to the States. Your children will study there!”

Moheng could hardly breathe. He could not help but stare at Carmelo, blowing smoke away. It dawned on him several times that a tobacco invested dignity upon Carmelo’s silver hair, his portly body. Perhaps, he should consider smoking tobacco a future habit.

“I hope it’s today!”

“Five more days, Moheng.”

“People are laughing at us. They say you’re a fake!”

“Fake?” with a smile, Carmelo threw a glance outside the window. The silhouette of the mountain, mysteriously looking down as tiny wisps of cloud hovered around it, was distinctly etched on the sky. “If that mountain could only reveal its secret!”

“That place. Lucio and our group used the mountain to hide during the war. I am familiar with the mountain like the palm of my hand.”

“I cannot claim to have run to the mountain for protection. But it played a role in my guerrilla days.” He continued to blow smoke, memories of the past crowded his eyes still fixed on the mountain. “I was not yet a colonel then. I worked with Intelligence which took us to various missions. You know, that was a difficult task. Did you know that Yamashita passed through this town?”

“Here?”

*“Incognito.”*

“How could we not have known? That was impossible.”

“I have evidence. That’s the part played by the mountain. Which section of the mountain did you use as your camp?”

“The western section. Go further in and you’ll find a cave.”

“Did you reach the other side? I’m sure you did.”

“Of course. A balete tree stood there which was so huge the arms of five men could not encircle it. That was perhaps the oldest tree I had seen.”

“You’re right. And you probably also knew that Yamashita dragged his treasure wherever he went?”

“People have said.”

“Well, I’ll attest to its truth.” Carmelo was smugly nodding his head, as Moheng’s face started to turn pale. “I saw with my own eyes. Two of us were pursuing him, passing ourselves off as ordinary citizens, and we succeeded in gaining the enemies’ trust and we were allowed to help carry the treasures. This taxes the imagination, Moheng. These are secrets I did not reveal even to my wife and children. And I’m not even sure if I should have divulged it to you now.”

“You should take pride in that, why keep it a secret?”

“You see, you also have doubts. You won’t believe me if I offer no proof. But that was why I became a colonel.”

Moheng’s eyes were expectant for more details.

“Among Yamashita’s treasures were lamps made of gold, studded with precious stones, one foot high. We stole two of them and fled from the group in the darkness.”

“Where are they? I never believed that Yamashita hid those treasures. If you have them in your possession, you have no need for the back pay. You can command any price from the collectors.”

“I don’t know what happened to the lamp my companion carried. I have not seen him since then. My lamp. . . there’s a right time to reveal its whereabouts. And this is not the time.” Carmelo wistfully viewed the mountain.

“You buried it underneath the balete tree.”

Carmelo suddenly became agitated. He turned away and resumed taking down the frames. Moheng grabbed his fleshy arms. “You can trust me, Carmelo!”

“This is dangerous, Moheng!”

“I know.”

Carmelo took a deep breath. He pulled his arm away. “Yes, I buried it. Under the largest root.”

He was back at his house, and he could still feel the tremors that continued to shake his body. A golden lamp from Yamashita’s treasures! Lino and Tandang Anong would be so incredulous that their eyes would be wide open until only the white of their eyes could be visible. And joy overwhelmed him. But the sight of their house instantly wiped away the pleasure he felt as soon as he had climbed the hut’s three steps made of bamboo. Cita lay on the mat spread out near the door. She threw him a brief glance, turned her back after tightly shutting her eyes. Did he catch a glimpse of her resentment?

He turned to Paula who was patiently pressing her hand on her daughter’s forehead. “You stayed home?”

“I could not leave Cita.”

“A slight fever . . .” He did not hide his irritation.

“I called a doctor. He left a prescription. He said that Cita’s health is frail, and she’s prone to other diseases. He added that she needed to take the medicine at once. But I have no money. I just get a percentage from Aling Masang on the fish I sell. I hardly sold anything this morning. But Aling Masang promised to lend me some money tomorrow. Tomorrow. Money was tight, she said.” Did Paula deliberately avoid meeting his eyes?

Moheng swiftly glanced at Cita. Her face was colorless, her forehead whitish. He felt a little bit worried. For the first time, he noticed how thin her arms were. She might really be gravely ill . . .

“Where is Mando?”

“He went out. To look for money.”

There was a curved chair, donated to him by a friend who bought new furniture, near the small window. He rested his back on the chair, and a stream of ideas flooded his mind. Deep.

With bitterness, Paula griped. “Now that Cita is seriously ill, do you still have the luxury of relaxing on the chair?”

This Paula. To sit on the chair seemed a luxury he could not afford.

“I’m thinking of ways to get some money.”

He was staring at the thin rays of light spread out on the roof without a ceiling. Made from galvanized sheets as old as the Liberation. He imagined he saw a precious jewelry-studded golden lamp.

Paula fed him fish dipped in salt and vinegar and fried rice. It was dark when he went down, peeked into the low space beneath the floor. He crawled on his hands and knees. He found the shovel that Mando borrowed when he and a neighbor did a masonry job. It had not been returned. He could get a pick-axe and gas lamp. He had been able to borrow the jeep of Dandong Tsuper and he was sure that at night he would not ply his route. He would return the jeep the following morning.

Although it had been years since he trudged through this dark area, the forest remained a familiar terrain. He was convinced that no amount of change would make him lose his way. In returning to the mountain, he felt the same camaraderie, that close connection that did not wane as the years, he barely noticed, passed him by. Paula, Cita and Mando were the sole reminders of the passage of time. And they were not with him.

He drove the jeep deep into the forest, and hid it among the trees. He lit the gas lamp, and carrying his tools for digging on his back, he began the trek toward the giant balet tree.

It had been years since this forest had seen the disruptive action of men, driven by the terrifying, revolting, destructive motives that subverted God's design. The animals fled, the birds stopped singing. The strange thumping of metal broke the silence, the pointed edge rammed itself deep into the earth, frantically digging, searching for its core. All through the night.

He knew that soon it would be morning. The shovel slipped from his hand, fell within an inch of the gas lamp patiently watching, his mouth open at the sight of the deep hole he had dug up in the night. Almost out of breath, shoulders sagging, he tried to regain his strength as he leaned against the thickest root of the tree. For minutes, he calculated the depth of the cavernous hole he had made. The correct depth according to Carmelo's calculations, the right spot underneath the largest root. He looked up and stared at the highest point of the tree still shrouded in darkness. To his weary mind, the tree was looking down at him, imparting the knowledge for which he had worked hard and which now stared him in the face.

No lamp, made of gold or not, belonging to Yamashita or anyone else, lay buried underneath.

He moved his spent, exhausted body, and gathered his tools. He had promised to return them to their owners first thing in the morning.



The bamboo steps groaned under the weight of his heavy and tired footsteps. He slowly pushed the bamboo door, and Paula turned to him with her sad eyes. She was sprawled on the floor, looking after their daughter, with dark rings around her eyes grown lifeless by her all-night vigil.

“How is she?” He briefly paused.

“Here she is, barely . . .” She said, her voice hardly audible with despair.

He closed the door behind him. When he lifted his foot, the weight was intolerable. That he threw himself into the curved chair near the window.

“Where’s Mando?” He wanted to know.

“He has not been home. I am sick with worry, not knowing what he might do. He saw how Cita’s condition has turned for the worse. He might just . . .”

Was that his fault? His fault?

“All of this is Colonel Carmelo’s fault!” He smacked the armchair with his bare fist.

“Why Colonel Carmelo?” she asked tonelessly. Indifferent on whom to blame.

Unfathomable depth of bitterness.

“He!”

The single word was drowned in the indifferent silence. He felt utterly humiliated, as his fury intensified. If he could only get to Colonel Carmelo . . .

Paula dipped the piece of cloth, she had removed from Cita’s burning forehead, in a dipper of water, squeezed it and pressed it on her daughter’s forehead. “Do you have some money?”

Light was spreading on the horizon. The pharmacy was about to open, Paula was saying. He pulled himself upward. “I’m going to Colonel Carmelo.”

He was in a hurry to leave the house, and for the first time that morning, he detected some anxiety in Paula's voice.

"Moheng!"

The coffee drinkers were all seated on the bench in front of Tikang's store as they waited for their usual dose of coffee. Maciong, Baste, Turing were all there. He also caught a glimpse of the detestable figure of Tandang Anong in the same corner, hands clasping his old cane.

Maciong noticed him. "Oh, Moheng. Where are you off to now?"

He slowed down. "To Carmelo."

"It's too early to worry about the back pay," Baste cracked. "Join us for coffee first."

Moheng approached the group. He ignored the quivering smirk on the wrinkled lips of Tandang Anong. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Lino at a table inside the store. The young man had a smile on his face as he stirred the coffee in front of him, and Moheng was clueless on what was going on in Lino's mind. But he felt oppressed, and his anger deepened.

"Your hands are covered with mud, Mang Moheng," Lina observed. "Did you do some gardening?"

Moheng's face turned livid. He walked into the eatery and sat at another table. He asked Tikang for coffee.

"Are you on your way to Colonel Carmelo?" Lino asked.

He did not bother to face Lino, he chose to ignore him. He paid attention to his coffee, to gauge how hot it was.

"You won't catch him in his house, Mang Moheng. The PC picked him up last night."

He heard the teaspoon clinking in the cup. He had caught Maciong's question. "Is that so? But why?"

"I have no idea. But we will find out eventually. He was about to leave for Manila when he was arrested last night. He had no plans

of coming back. The rumor was he had sold his house, including the furniture.”

Moheng’s eyes were on the black liquid in front of him. He moved the teaspoon and caught a glimpse of the dried mud covering his hands. More than this, he saw the protruding giant roots, deep holes between sharp stones, the wrinkle in the loosely hanging flesh.

He was old.

In an instant, the fury flowed in a cascading stream, the profound disquiet, drenching the ground he walked on. Drained of strength, he was overcome by a profound sadness.

Of his horrendous defeat.