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Quilt of Dreams

EMENIANO ACAIN SOMOZA JR.

Now as the leader of the keeners drew her lungs out for the final bravura, mother pulled out her pristine handkerchief, and in the middle of that pestiferous sonata, she blew her nose with a resounding honk, making it all the more vexatious for all spirits—dead or half-alive—lurking there in the middle of our out-flung barrio; the housemaid who appeared from behind the heavy maroon drapery which divided the keening room and the pantry teetered bashfully on some imaginary beeline with a tray full of locally-brewed ales and home-baked cookies and waffles, was gloriously, gloriously affrighted by the cacophonic orchestration of the keener's eerie elegy and mother's grating nose-blow—the tray tilted to the left, glasses glided to that side, of course, disturbing the equilibrium; in an instant, the whole place was a mess—clinking glasses, girlish shrieks, and the sibilant *susmarioseps* of the toothless elderly. I closed my eyes. Mother half-aware of her little part in the melee tried to conceal her embarrassment by folding her handkerchief and dusting off the droplets of liquid on my repellent jacket. But when sooner she tried compulsively to wipe my face with the defiled hanky, I looked at her with a knowing look. She relented and whispered, "We'd better be going before the bamboo grove gets too dark."

After an intermittent series of leave-takings with the folks who, according to my mother, came mostly not to pay respects to the dead lady, Inday Vacion, but to catch up on the latest thread of controversy surrounding the cause of the death of this dame Salvacion Duhaylungsod, we trekked into one of the many mysterious nights in our lives as inhabitants of a remote barrio in the municipality of Larena in the island of Siquijor.

We traced our way back into the winding rugged trail and past the thick patch of ipil-ipil trees. Under the silky light of the full moon, the shadow of the leaves on the back of my hand looked like frail extremities of some non-earthlings squiggling deep into skin.

“What can you say about the dead lady’s outfit? Don’t you think it’s rather outmoded? I mean, I will not be caught dead wearing that lacy frock!”

“Mother, how could you not be caught dead wearing an outmoded outfit like that if you’re already dead?”

“Junior, I’m telling you this and I swear under the divine penumbra of this August moon, have a conscience if you please with your choices of clothes for your dead folks. You being the eldest of my ruffians of a brood.”

The minute we stepped out into the meadow, I hailed a silent ho-sanna. Up in the sky, a dark cloud filtered the floodlight of the full moon. Just a few steps away, the bamboo grove was beckoning with the impenetrable beyondness of the otherworld.

“Ma! Look!” I hung on tight to her rubber belt as a cold wad of wind wafted by with a cold hand barely touching my nape. A dog’s howl sliced into the silence. The bamboo grove creaked and while mother quickly pulled out something from her bag, the tallest of the clump bowed down before us.

“We can trace our steps back and take the feeder if we want to, but as the Holy Ghost is with us, we can pass by this bewitched place safe and unharmed,” she said with a firm voice. The wind grew harsh.

She opened her Gideonite Bible. And before she could commence with her litany, the grass, as if moved by a higher order, lifted itself up and before us was a silver-white coffin with a candle at its head. I hugged my mother and closed my eyes.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want . . .” so she began . . .

“Shoo! Get out of my sight, you spawn of unbelievers!” My step-father’s father, who was in the middle of some divination, was furiously driving my playmates away. The heckling youngsters scurried every which way at the sight of the naked old man hulking like a dispeaced turkey.

Known as the oldest living herbalist and spirit-conjurer in our barrio, I knew nothing could stop him from making that ritual even if mother showed signs of disapproval against such unscriptural spiritual

ceremony. I knew it because I saw him secretly pouching a few grains of salt in the small room before I went to sleep. Before that I also overheard him pestering my stepgrandma for four one-centavo coins.

"This is for the good of your beloved boy. I told you it's beyond my wildest imagination why you had to give him away to a woman who has an English name for a god! And besides, what is there to make out of a marriage to a prefabricated mother? And do tell me, Pastora, how could you come to like her with that obnoxious boy of hers whose eyes always seem to burn with unmouthed expletives?"

"Ram your words back down your tonsils, old man! You know she could well be the last hope for your thug of a son! Besides, tell me, dear Silverio, who else in this barrio has got a wife who reads an English Bible, huh? Well why, she even reads it with her son, eh . . ."

"By our dead ancestors' name, I swear, the ritual has never been shunned away like a horrible plague. Only this woman, only this woman; but since you seem to have been hexed by her as to immensely favor her to be our dear Julito's wife, shush you old woman, nobody's going to stop me from laying down the necessary ingredients with the foundations of their planned house. Now get me another centavo. I lack one for the west direction."

"I will find one for you my king salmon . . . only you please, please promise not to go through it without your decent habiliments on. It's a shame to be doing it in the lowlands with those, uh, endowments of yours, you know . . . I swear it's a shame now. Besides I'm sure the spirits would consider for now. I mean, they sure would not take it against you if they see you spiffed up."

"Woman, what's all this sudden vituperation about my stuff, huh? Hush it. I shall do the ceremony as I please."

I was all drenched in sweat and squirming behind the dusty rattan hammock all throughout the short whispery verbal tussle. I didn't have to tell mother, of course, she seemed to know everything; so on second thoughts, I tipped on the incoming butt-show to my playmates, who waited hidden in the nearby bush of coronitas and cadena de amor.

"Shoo! Go back all you rascals to the woeful wombs of your heretic mothers!" The old man was mad. A giant bat glided straight to the last unfelled tree in the middle of the lot where our future home was envisioned to grow.

So we lived in a small nipa hut built out of folk beliefs and rituals in the middle of a coconut plantation where my kid brother Levis was born many many months later after we three—mother, my stepfather, and I—moved in at three in the morning at the behest of dear old master, Silverio. Three years later, when I was in Grade 4, wide-eyed, frail, and stringy-haired, adopted sister Virgie joined us.

“Kids, you will treat her as if she’s your own. Remember, she has been motherless all her life, and now she has just lost a father; a word, a look could send her down the bog of depression . . . so, now listen, if I hear just a sob or see a track of tear on her cheek because one of you caused it, I will not spare a lashing from you . . .” Levis nodded. I thought it was rather uneventful to be having a girl around without a nag, a scream, or anything prissy.

“Are we communicating clearly about little Virgie’s not-crying, Junior?” I naturally had to nod to that.

She was delicate as a dewdrop. Levis and I couldn’t get through her. My stepfather, her full-blooded uncle, had a tough time with her. Mother was her only friend, spokesperson, interpreter, and refuge. I thought it was painful to be a girl. In time all of her defenses crumbled and she was sunny again. Her singlemost quirk which I found rather crummy was eating the inside first of a ripe guava before the sappy peelings.

Afternoons were always like this. First, mother would gather us around her after finishing up whatever staple provision was set on our plastic plates. So there was Virgie, Levis, and me, Junior—wiry all three, like praying mantises, as she led the afternoon prayers before commanding us to sleep.

But that was long before I discovered that the world had two dimensions—the divine and the diabolic.

The first, pure and sacred, memories of it were set against a white backdrop of white shirts, my stepfather’s white leather shoes, Virgie’s frilly white dress and those white ribbonets, Levis’s white belt, and mother’s church hymnals covered with white paper which she recycled from those large waxy Chinese calendars.

Saturday was the official day of the divine plane with *Jesus Loves Me* as its music theme, which to my childish cerebration, sounded more elegiac than panegyric. I guessed it was due mostly to mother’s vocal gymnastics that lilted along the untuneful pentatonic octave—tintinabulantly sopranic at its best, and gravelingly basso at its worst.

“Children, human beings are the only creatures gifted with a lot of faculties for praising the Lord. If you know you have the gift, hone it, then use it for His greater glory.”

“Mother, there is no greater glory in singing without a gift.”

“Look here, Junior, you would know you have the gift just by looking at how others close their eyes when you sing. I mean, have you often wondered how enrapt the whole parish had been since I started singing on top of my lungs?”

“Yes, mother. They wished some people would realize that some talents were not meant for public exhibition.”

“At least I’m giving them a classical side show with my soprano renderings.”

“Mother, you’re not actually admitting you were born for the circus, are you?”

“Hush, you giftless boy. Now kids, let’s move on to our next exercise on blending . . . You see . . .”

Mother was a stylist of a dressmaker which, as she would often tell us, was the most special of the gifts she had ever received from the Lord.

“Well why, I had never walked in to any formal instruction just to learn it.”

How she really made all those divine dresses for each and every customer fascinated me especially when I see them—even the most aristocratic of ladies in the high-end of our local caste system—daintily slithering into a dress cut and sewn by her. When I told her that she had better focus on this one special gift instead of displaying teeth, tongue, and tonsils in church, she sent me out to gather firewood in the forest so that I would learn to listen to the birdsongs, which according to her were just as God-inspired as hers. I eventually stopped bugging her.

On days when the sun was up and yellow wrens twittered on top of our sagging eaves, I would see her tinkering with some man’s craft, say metallurgy, which was a bit dangerous because she would be setting fire here and there while warning us kids not to come close to her within a ten-meter radius with that ubiquitous twig for a whip.

And on such days, too, I was the object of the world’s most stinging lashes, some scars are so stubborn a million baths in the river or the sea could not bring them to a complete healing, or worse, forget-

ting, because along with them are memorable snippets now vividly etched in my sacred hall of precious memories.

“Come Levis, let’s go take a short dip before we go home. A little cooling would not be bad, eh. What do you think?” I was trying to cajole him into swimming without mother’s permission.

“I will not be getting one of her lashings anymore, Manoy. You can’t pull me just to get a bite of your slimy toffee.”

“Yes, you will come with me as I say. Besides who will look after you if you go ahead? Guess what, the bamboo grove is a little shady today . . . you reckon, little brother?”

“Err . . . I will not!”

“Yes, you will! Here now, let’s go for a short swim without dipping our heads into the water. That way we won’t be giving mother a start. . . . Brilliant idea, eh?”

That day, an hour after lunchtime, on a hillock overlooking the sea, and while a seagull is gearing up for a nose-dive, I received my first soul-splitting lashing that left me with an indelible scar on my left leg.

Summers came breezing in with the scent of promise of freedom from the rigors of classroom work. Each one was always a time to temporarily abandon academic fetters and burying grudges toward a regimenting system along with its pedantic implementers inside our recycled school net-bags. Fortunately, mother always made sure ours looked presentable—denim patches here and there, depending on wherever the frayed part was. Eventually, our school bags transformed into psychedelic quilts—of swatches of fabrics, of our nothingness, and of our dreams.

“Mother, school year ends next week. Reynaldo, the principal’s son, gets the second honors and Mr. Maglinte is allegedly going to take him on a trip to the far and big city for a prize.”

“I bet he is going to buy his son the whole island if he gets your honors. Oh, let them do whatever they fancy.”

“Uhm, mother, it’s not that . . .”

“You are not going to let him beat you into it, are you?”

“Mother, I was just wondering if you could also mete out a reward system for us. I mean, I want a real school bag this time. For J. D. Salinger’s sake, mother, this is my fifth first honors.”

She looked at me like I was big and strong enough a man already. Then she hugged me.

“Junior, just because you are inches taller than me now doesn’t mean you cannot carry that cute quilt bag of yours. Didn’t I tell I will get you a real one when you are in high school already? Okay, let’s split it. You raise the ten pesos, I will answer the other half. Deal, huh?”

I choked down half of the despair, but I smiled on the other for the flicker of hope. Yes, I could have a real school bag at last.

“Wait. What kind of bag does this friend of yours wear to school?”

“Friend?”

“Yes. This J.D. Sali . . . does he brandish it to you like it’s the most precious thing in this world? I’ll tell you what . . . a person who pesters you with something, say, a bag, just so you can keep up with him has no genuine friendly intentions.”

I wiped off the scowl on my face with a smile. Then, I hugged my mother tight. At that moment, next to my obsession with a school bag, mother was the best thing I ever held close to my heart. I saw her eyes filming with tears as she withdrew to the kitchen.

The piece of sky I saw from my window was a calming soft blue as night slowly broke out into the horizon. A few minutes passed, Virgie signaled supper.

I thought it was a rather fancy supper. I was surprised. Instead of the usual fare of green leafy vegetables and unpolished rice, mother opened the last can of sardines she had kept behind the big earthen jar. I knew it was spared for the visit of a church elder. At the table, my stepfather proudly announced my scholastic achievement. Then everybody feasted like mad on the sardines until we all forgot about the little gardens of green leafy vegetables we had grown inside our stomachs.

We were running barefoot now on the powder-white sands of our shoreline, past the estuary that divided our barrio and the next going up north. The sea was an endless field of metal slivers sparkling under the noon sun. A solitary gull shot upwards and in seconds it darted swiftly down into the sea. In a moment, a fish was wiggling at its beak.

A kingfisher was perched on a rock. I stopped and tiptoed toward it as a picture of a bird in a cage swung before me. I was inches

closer now when a pebble whizzed past it. I threw an angry look at the culprit.

Behind our backs were sacks heavy with our finds—trash from people's junk pits which we would sell to scrap dealers. I was proud of my merchandise as a ten-peso bill wadded in my mind.

Coming in from the sea, it always felt like we were some pirates or bandits pillaging through villages for precious metal scraps, bottles, cans, and tins. First, we would spread ourselves into a chosen village, rummage into their backyards, then zero in on their garbage cans, and finally sacking whatever we deemed marketable.

Excitedly, I took to the open backyard of a concrete house. To my right, a hammock was still in the shade of an ancient acacia. I found it rather unusual. Nobody was stirring. The air was ominously still as the deadly sigh of a ghost town.

I slowly headed toward the heap of junks by the giant metal water tank. I was disappointed. I only found two empty cans of milk. Suddenly, my eyes caught sight of bottles, hundreds or a thousand of them stocked behind the outhouse. My heart jumped. I struck good luck.

I figured a sacking of six or seven of the bottles wouldn't be too much of a loot considering that a dozen or two looked like they were intentionally smashed. Besides I hurt my right foot with a shard of glass. So I thought of adding one for the injury.

"Ruelito? What are you doing with my bottle?" It almost slipped off my hand.

"G-good afternoon, Ma'am . . . I'm s-sorry . . . I can e-explain . . ."

"No need! Get out of my yard! Go home, you filthy son of a scavenger!"

Inday Vacion, or Miss Salvacion Duhaylungsod, still looked witchy and waspy in a lacy frock and even with make-up. Her face, waxy gray, bore the burden of bitterness toward a world that she had thought would mourn her passing.

She was wrong in many ways. For instance, a huddle of mothers was close to celebrating her death because she had allegedly caused the sufferings and anguish of their children.

"I know Salvacion is death's most priceless collection now."

"Ladies, let the lovelorn find true happiness now. Let her pass you

by with nary a grudge. We should be happy now for our dear children.”

I was behind mother who insisted that I should pay respects to the dead.

“My son, death is the arbiter of enmities. There is no use in nursing ill thoughts when your enemy is already dead. Come now, let’s take a look at how she handled death.”

“She looks like she is grimacing in pain, mother. Was death unkind to her?” I whispered.

“I cannot exactly tell myself, but I think you are right. Given her expression, I think death gave her a hell of a time. Or it could be just the frock. I’m not really sure. It just kind of added to the ugliness of death.”

I remembered the deceased wearing that lacy frock during our United Nations celebration in school. Her class was assigned by the principal to represent Austria, ours our own country. The whole school paraded through the dusty trails of the barrio with our respective national costumes. In the middle of the production, Miss Duhaylungsod, terror teacher of the highest order, looked like a bantam fowl swell for fiesta banquet. A week after the celebration, she left her lover of two years, Mr. Sitti Jainal, a certified womanizer who was rumored to have fathered all of the Turkish-looking kids in town.

The frock now also reminded me of her other favorite dress that she wore in school on the first day of classes after that summer of rummaging through people’s junkyards.

It was in our Home Economics class where I first experienced a heartless act of humiliation. Her words stung me more painfully than the shard of glass that injured my foot that summer.

“Class, we have a saying that one cannot expect to grow berries out of tomato seeds. If you have a whore for a mother, naturally you’d bear a son who would grow up to be a problem citizen in the future no matter how intellectually gifted he may be. I am telling you this because one of you dared to steal some of my belongings right from my backyard last summer.”

Everybody was edgy. I was crushed.

“You hold your horses! I have made peace with the Lord already. I trust He will avenge for me . . . So, now tell me, what dish did you try to cook last summer? . . .”

I came home teary-eyed. I wanted to tear the school bag into pieces, but I thought of the other ten pesos mother paid for . . . my recycled quilt-bag . . . the gardens in our stomachs . . . my dreams . . .

“Junior, are those tears in your eyes? How terribly do you miss your teacher?” Mother’s nudge brought me back to the wakeful realm of the living.

“Good god, mother, no! I just feel sleepy. Can we go now?”

“Let’s wait until the prayer-vigil is over. I just wanted to take a bite or two on Inday’s famous cookies. I was told, it was her cookies that had endeared Mr. Jainal to her. That I should find out myself.”

Now as the leader of the keeners drew her lungs out for the final bravura, mother pulled out her pristine handkerchief, and in the middle of that pestiferous sonata, she blew her nose with a resounding honk, making it all the more vexatious for all spirits—dead, or half-alive—lurking there in the middle of our out-flung barrio . . .