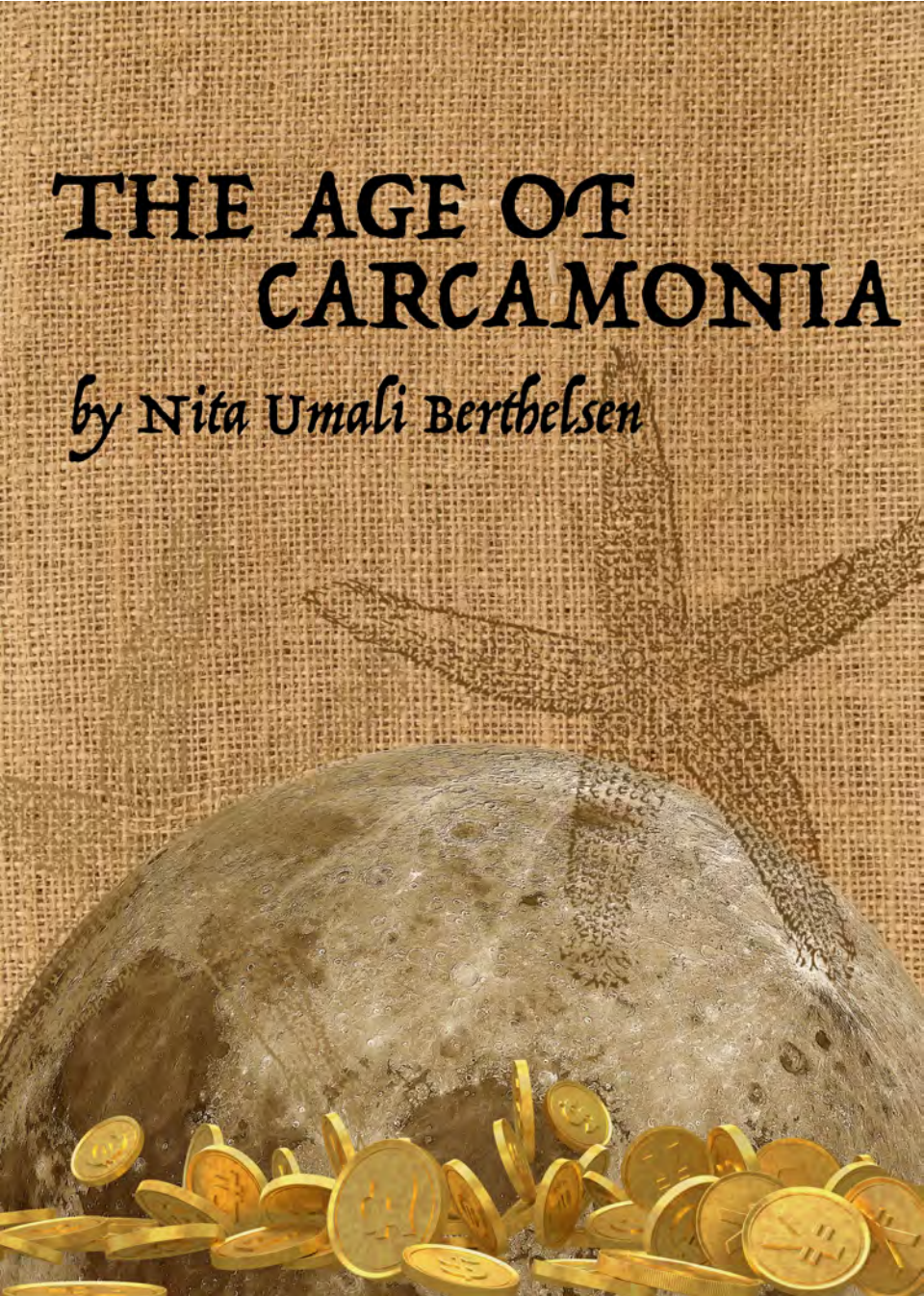
THE AGE OF CARCAMONIA

by Nita Umali Berthelsen



Copyright of this collection ©2024 Karen Berthelsen Cardenas
Copyright of the stories ©Nita Umali Berthelsen

This eBook collection or any portion thereof may not be reproduced, used, or sold in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Cover and design: kmbc
karenberethelsen@gmail.com

"A whiff of the 1940s, those heady post-war years when we were all emerging like a phoenix from the ashes. And Nita Umali catches the atmosphere verily in these youthful stories of hers."

Nick Joaquin
1992

"These stories do not paint pretty pictures. They are meant to prick the conscience."

Mary R. Tagle
1992

"There is nothing quite like this chronicle in our literature and it requires only a wider scope of treatment to make it a definitive saga of the powerful but neglected segment of our social hierarchy."

Armando D. Manalo
From the Foreword
1992



THE AGE OF CARCAMONIA
and other stories

Nita Umali Berthelsen

CONTENTS

A note from the editor *ii*
Foreword — Armando D. Manalo *iv*
Preface — Nita Umali Berthelsen *viii*



The Age of Carcamonia **1**
Like Water Lilies Floating **13**
Felix **26**
Merienda **38**
The Money-Makers **49**
Adriana **63**
Sacrifice **76**
With Fervor Burning **93**

Glossary 104

A note from the editor
Karen Berthelsen Cardenas
July 2024

Some of these stories were written for mom's masters thesis for the State University of Iowa. The Money-Makers was published when she returned to Manila, and was awarded third place in the Philippines Free Press Short Story Awards in 1949. That year, Nick Joaquin won first prize for "Guardia de Honor" and Gonzalo A. Villa won second for "Death of Illusion."

The Age of Carcamonia and Other Stories was published in print form in 1992, after consultation with my mother. And although I had significant experience in editing and publishing, it was my first production and editorial venture in book form. It was a habit-forming experience, and I will always be grateful to Ramón Sunico for first guiding me into the world of book production.

A few years later, a second edition was published in London by my sister. The title had been changed to **Emma** and included illustrations and excluded the foreword I had written.

In 2000, Mom had a stroke which changed her. Immediately after, and throughout the next couple of years, I put in a lot of resources into gathering as much of her writings as could be found. There might still be a lot I do not have because she wrote regularly – fiction, columns, and features for numerous magazines and newspapers and

under various pen names, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and then again in the 80s from Copenhagen.

As the years passed, she slowly declined into a world of vascular dementia, and she asked me to begin or continue production of what she could not manage herself.

I began with **The Tayabas Chronicles: The Early Years**, refining and expanding what she had started. It won the National Book Award for Translation in 2002.

While alert and generally of clear mind until she died in 2014, sadly, and ironically she had earlier begun to suffer from aphasia – the loss of language and speech, a result of subsequent mini strokes. She would grasp for words, annoyed with herself when they would not come, until finally she retreated into never speaking at all.

Mom was born in January 1923. I made a promise that starting on her centennial year, I would try to bring back her words.

Foreword
Armando D. Manalo
1992

Nita H. Umali – not yet a Berthelsen – burst upon the Manila scene towards the end of the Forties. She had just arrived from the United States, fresh from studies in the writing centers, and she was determined to put her impress on the literary world of the capital.

She did.

In 1949, she won a Free Press award for one of the best stories of the year with "The Money-Makers". It was only her second published story, but it made her reputation. For a long time she was known as the author of "that Free Press short story," half in a tone of surprise (with those who did not know her) and half in a tone of admiration (with those who did know her).

For about four or five years, she was a dervish, inundating the Manila periodicals with stories, essays, and, in moods of relaxation, the journalism of gossip, always harmless and never poisonous. But in 1954, she stopped writing. Not out of choice but out of necessity. She had married and raising a brood of three turned out to be a demanding occupation.

She kept writing in bits and pieces to keep her hand in, but the news today is that she has sharpened her pencils again to resume the interrupted history of the life she had known in her childhood and in her youth.

Some of these narratives have now been put together in the collection **The Age of Carcamonia and Other Stories.** There are eight altogether and, except for two, they were all written during the brief intense explosion of her creative talents in the late Forties and Fifties.

The stories, on re-reading, are a revelation. They form a continuous whole and they are – though indirectly for the most part – a chronicle of the decline of the Philippine provincial gently.

Writers appropriate the scenes they know best. Arguilla wrote of farmers and peasants, sometimes on the scale of folk epics; Rotor of the city petit bourgeoisie; Joaquin of the decayed Paco aristocracy; Alfon of heartbreak and defeat in urban Cebu; Sionil Jose of the symbolic history of a country under colonialism, mostly in terms of the dispossessed and the confused city middle class.

Ms. Umali-Berthelsen's chosen territory is the landed gentry of Southern Luzon. There is nothing quite like this chronicle in our literature and it requires only a wider scope of treatment to make it a definitive saga of the powerful, but neglected segment of our social hierarchy.

The reader gathers the story piecemeal, at first in small events of undefined significance and later in full awareness of the landed aristocracy on the eve of decay.

The slow process of revelation is deliberate for we view the successive events through the eyes of a child, then of an adolescent, and finally of the child grown to full

womanhood. This witness is Emma, the child undergoing an education in life.

The odd – and ironic – thing is that her earliest teachers were all of the "inferior social class".

Emma's first encounter is with her childhood friend, Pe Len, who is told, though gently, that there is a gulf between the classes across which bridges cannot be built. Then Felix, the ugly gardener whose poetic sensibility Emma shared and who drowned himself in the ocean in search of their common fantasy – "the man in the moon." Karia, the scavenger turned maid and the child's confidante, tells the growing Emma of the race of money-makers who amass wealth squeezed from the blood of murdered children, and in the end Emma with her sharpened sensitivities begins to understand that the money-maker is none other than her strong-willed grandmother, the archetypal matriarch of a gentry grown rapacious.

The stories, gathered here in rough temporal sequence, start in a style of disarming simplicity, as befits a child through whose eyes we view the events. Although the stories differ in weight and importance, in general they gather force and complexity as Emma matures and her grasp of the world deepens and intensifies. And here at last, in the final tales, emerges the grown Emma's bitter judgment on the deadened moral sense of a world on the brink of collapse.

The last two stories are amazingly contemporary. And it should surprise many readers, this one among them, why

"Sacrifice", that chilling mixture of primitive ritual and angry social protest, is not more widely recognized as a rare and powerful tale.

Preface
Nita H. Umali
12 November 1950
Column: The Hurt of the Matter
This Week, Sunday Magazine of The Manila Chronicle

There were the times when I loved listening to myths and tried to believe that they were true. There was the myth of the lanzones and the myth of the small people who lived in molehills, and the myth of the flowers that bloomed only once a year. I thought myths were always such beautiful explanations. I wished them true while knowing that they could not be because in school I was taught differently about how things had started.

That moonlight looked like silver because it was made of molten silver, I could never accept, although it would have been so nice to be able to. But there were other myths I accepted. Only, then I did not give them that name. Rather they were facts: I grew up with certain notions, from childhood, and surrounded by people who believed in these notions. I learned to accept them without question, without even suspicion of their untruth.

I grew to have a feeling, ingrained from one generation to another, that whites were superior. There was no wonder in my mind for the reason why there should be an awed hush in the room whenever the American who lived in our small town entered a room. Even as I learned to reason more, it was still a wish of mine that I had fairer skin than I had. Somehow, even my aesthetic values had been conditioned by what I was later to find out was called color

I was later to find out was called color consciousness, stemming or playing a part in racial prejudice.

The feeling that I was a better person than working people remained in me for a long, long time. All the generations ahead of me had lain stone upon stone to build up that myth, and generations of our farm laborers had helped build that strong wall that I thought set me apart from them.

There were many others – because I was Tagalog, I did not know what stigma attached to us, but of the others I heard much – that Ilocanos were stingy, that Visayans were not very clean, that Bicolanos were not very conventional, that Pampangos were dog-eaters.

Like the American who in 1937 was nominated to the Supreme Court and used the infamous (and unacceptable) defense of: "Well I really like them, in fact some of my best friends are Jews…", I accepted these myths as generalizations humorously apt for parlor jokes without realizing that it was in that manner that the belief could become more concrete, more vicious with the years.

How myths grow one can never trace clearly. That they stem from frustrations of some people is true. Or from ambitions. Only by building a myth of greed, of unholiness and whatever social stigma they could upon the Jews, could those who felt threatened by them get away with the numerous blocks they placed in their way living in the land of the free and the brave.

Frustration, which plays a large part in all human activity, perhaps is the largest cause of myths. In some ways it is some sort of wishful thinking. Hence, we know of a man who loved a woman of not very beautiful face nor reputation so much that he had a portrait of her painted, playing up practically non-existent good points, and believing in the portrait more than in the reality. And on the other hand, there is another who so disliked a woman that, taking reality, he put all his fantastic notions of all the evil things he could think up and had it daubed into a portrait of her in an effort to convince himself that his unfounded statements about her were justifiable.

It is of such portraits that the stuff of which pernicious myths are built stemming from imaginations that should be intelligent enough to realize that it is only themselves they fool, and that group of credulous people who without any ulterior motives still cannot rise above pedestrian thinking and would accept a fact as the conclusion that women have three legs in this century because a certain hosiery factory in the United States is producing stockings not by the pair, but in threes.

It is only when a man has learned to like himself without having to dislike other people or use them to further his own motives, either making a pose of altruism or out and out tyranny, can others really like him. It is only then that he can say to others he likes them without being a hypocrite.



The Age of Carcamonia

Last summer, when I was almost seven, Pe Len was my best friend. Pe Len's father owned a store built on my grandfather's land. It was only two blocks away from our house and one in a row of other stores. Every Sunday, on my way to church, I passed it. Pe Len's father always gave me something. At first, he used to make me choose any candy I liked from the glass jars. Lolo Pepe learned about it and told him not to because it would spoil my teeth.

After that he let me choose from whatever else there was in the store, although Lolo told me not to pick anything expensive. Once, I chose a handkerchief with an embroidered heart in one corner. Another time I asked for pencils. Each Sunday it was a different thing, until the day Pe Len came to the house with an *apa*.

Pe Len came every afternoon around the time after my nap. He was nine years old but was only as tall as I. His eyes were tiny slits, and his hair was cut in a funny way, very short at the sides and back and with a little dark spot over the forehead. He was pale-faced and had dimples. Although he never wore shoes, but came barefoot, he was always very neat and clean.

I think Pe Len became my best friend because of my grandfather. One day he arrived at our house with a message from his father. Lolo Pepe was in his bedroom, waiting for the maid to pull out the short white hairs that

he said caused his scalp to itch. Pe Len said he knew how to pull out that kind of hair, so Lolo told him to try.

Pe Len half knelt by the head of the bed. Lolo was lying with his head propped by a pillow and Pe Len began searching for the short growths with the tweezers. Before the maid came, he had pulled out fifteen.

"You're good," Lolo Pepe said.

Pe Len's smile spread all over his face when my grandfather praised him.

"May I play in your garden?" he asked.

"Of course. Come any time. Just don't harm the plants or else we will be very unhappy," Lolo said, glancing up at me with a smile.

Our garden was beautiful. There was a small pool in the center where water lilies floated lazily on the water. Around the pool were flowering plants – white azucena, red and orange daisies, and hundreds of bright pink Vietnam roses. On the left corner of the garden, near the gate, were three swings, and in the opposite comer, a slide. Lilies grew near the fence, and when they bloomed, they did so all at the same time so there would be so many pushing against each other. Over the fence crawled vines with tiny white flowers, intertwined with another that had blue ones that bloomed only in the morning.

But the ones I took special care of were those I had planted myself – dahlias I had asked Mother to bring me when she went up to Baguio, and one pine tree.

Pe Len liked the flowers very much. He never cut any of them. The first day he played in the garden he went from plant to plant and smelled the blossoms, touching petals gently with his fingers.

I had other friends besides Pe Len, but they cut flowers and stepped on small growths, sometimes even pulling them out. Lolo Pepe did not say anything, but I knew he did not like it. Neither did I and I quarreled with them.

The apa Pe Len brought was a biscuit that had been folded into a triangle. Each one had a gift inside, sometimes a ring, or a small tin boat, or a picture.

Pe Len asked me what I would want inside as a gift.

"A watch," I said.

"Maybe it has a watch inside," Pe Len said eagerly.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you want it."

"If I want something, I'll get it?"

He nodded, smiling so his eyes disappeared.

"Why?" I asked again.

"I don't know," he said. "Because I like you."

None of my other friends had ever told me they liked me.
"I like you too," I told him.

"Open it," he prodded, pointing to the biscuit.

I offered him the first fold in the triangle, but he refused. "You eat all, it's yours." He watched eagerly while I broke each piece, but his face fell when a rolled piece of white paper came out.

"Only *carcamonia*," he said.

It was the first time I had seen anything like it. The tiny piece of paper was plain on one side. On the other it was shiny, and there were five pictures in a row. The first was a large red rose with green leaves. The second was a tower like the one I had seen in the Chinese Cemetery on All Saints' Day. The third was a girl in long blue robes with eyes like Pe Len's – straight lines drawn upwards – holding a yellow fan and standing like a dancer. The fourth was a black cat with a yellow ball, the fifth, a boat with ends turned up. Between each picture was a little space. Pe Len said that was so I could cut each one separately. He showed me how to do it. Then, with his saliva, he wet one of them on the back side and stuck it on my arm. He made me rub the paper very carefully, so it did not move and then he removed the paper slowly, so the picture remained on my skin.

After that day, I asked for carcamonia whenever I visited the store of Pe Len's father. He gave me whole rolls of them, about fifty pictures to a roll.

In the afternoons, when he came to play, Pe Len and I covered our arms and legs with pictures.

But we never forgot the flowers.

For Christmas, Pe Len gave me a Christmas plant, with flowers so red and large, just like the pictures in cards that Father and Mother received each year in the mail. I asked our houseboy to plant it in a cool spot in the garden. Pe Len and I always visited it, even when the red flowers stopped blooming because it was so hot. I was as careful of that plant as I was of the dahlias and the pine tree.

The summer day when Mother came with her beautiful friend and the friend's daughter, I tried to show them the flowers right away. But Mother said it could wait till later. Mother stayed in Manila, and I went to see her every time my grandfather went to the city. She did not come to our town very often because she and Father were both working. But when she came. she always brought presents with her and at times even people, as she did now.

She said I should call her friend Tita Leni. Her little girl, who was taller than I, was called Vivian. She had very black hair and eyes, and she talked a lot.

"What's your name?" she asked me as soon as we were alone, although Mother had already told her what it was.

Then when I said it, she repeated it over and over again, "Emma … Emma … Emma," as if looking for something wrong with my name.

"It's a nice name," I said loudly.

She nodded and so it was all right again, and we went to play with the toys Mother had brought. There was a big doll with eyes that rolled and pale curly hair. It had several dresses, and we spent some time changing the doll's clothes. When we went out to the garden to play, I showed Vivian my plants.

"They're nice," she said. But really, she liked the doll much better.

"I like you," she said later. "Let's be best friends," Vivian said. I thought of Pe Len. He had always been my best friend, although we had never talked about it. But Vivian went on. "We can go to school together. Your Mother says you will go to school next month." Mother had not said anything to me about school. Besides I was not too sure I wanted to leave Lolo whom I loved the best in the world.

Vivian plucked a dahlia and stuck it in her buttonhole. Then she handed me something. "Here take this. Now we have exchanged, we're best friends." Vivian was handing me a watch, and even though I wanted to refuse it, I still offered my arm. It was not a real watch; the black hands were just painted on and did not move like those in Mother's watch. But it had a picture of Mickey Mouse in the center and the bracelet was a beautiful red elastic band.

"It's beautiful," I told her. "Thank you."

That was when Pe Len arrived. "Carcamonia," he said, and handed me two whole rolls. I was so happy about everything – Mother being there and the lilies starting to bloom and both Pe Len and Vivian liking me and giving me a watch and carcamonia, and Lolo somewhere in the house always. And Pe Len could see it.

"What happened?" he asked.

I showed him the watch.

"A watch," he said. "Yours?"

"From her." I nodded, pointing to Vivian.

He looked at my new friend. "You're pretty," he said.

Vivian laughed. "You're Chinese."

"Let's play with carcamonia," I said, still looking at the scrolls. "Come Pe Len, we'll teach Vivian."

We played till it was dark and Mother called from the window, which was right over where we were squatting. We had to stay near the faucet because Vivian did not want to use Pe Len's saliva for wetting the pictures as we always did.

While we were having supper Mother asked us who the little boy was with whom we played.

"Chinese *bebo*," Vivian giggled.

"Chinese!" her mother exclaimed.

"Pe Len," I said.

"He's the son of one of my good tenants near the market," Lolo said.

"They play with his saliva," Vivian said.

Mother raised her eyebrows.

Lolo Pepe glanced at me, "Your Mother is sending you to school next month."

I didn't know if I liked the idea of school, but I was grateful that grandfather talked of something else and not Pe Len.

Then Mother started again. "Do you always play with Pe Len?"

"He's my best friend," I said without looking at Vivian.

"What?" Again her eyebrows arched up, then suddenly smiling she said, "Wouldn't you like it better if Vivian was your best friend?"

"Pe Len is my best friend," I repeated. I had stopped eating and the shrimps on my plate looked dried up and stupid from my staring at them. "Pe Len likes flowers," I told her.

"So does Vivian. Don't you, Vivian?" mother said.

"I don't care." I still did not look away from the shrimps. "Pe Len is coming tomorrow and he's bringing me more carcamonia and we're going to play every day."

"Enough!" Mother's voice was angry.

Before bedtime she came to my room and sat down on the bed where I was finishing a jigsaw puzzle. First, she asked me if I liked the doll she had brought and I said yes, thank you. Then she asked me if I liked flowers very much and I said yes again.

"Papa and I are starting a garden in the new house. You'll live with us there and go to school," she said.

"School?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

She smiled like she thought I was funny. "Why?" she echoed. "So you learn how to read and write and have nice new friends."

"Lolo is teaching me, and Pe Len is my best friend." I gathered the pieces of the puzzle with my left hand, and she touched the watch Vivian had given me.

"If you don't do what I say you'll never get the watch your father was going to give you."

I studied her face and knew I would get the watch if I did what she said. A real watch with hands that moved and which Lola said cost a million centavos.

"Gold bracelet? Like yours?"

"Real gold," Mother said. "But you must have your arms clean for it."

I pretended not to know what she meant. "My arms are always clean."

"With Pe Len's saliva?" I did not answer. She went on. "I don't want you to play with Pe Len anymore. Tomorrow will be the last time. And I don't want to see your arms and legs covered with those awful pictures."

"And I don't want your stupid watch," I answered. "I don't want your dirty garden." She looked at me without speaking. It was so silent in the room I could hear all the insects outside. They chirped so loudly in the dark and I wanted to get lost in them.

"Say that again," Mother said.

"I don't want your stupid watch," I repeated. "I don't want your dirty garden."

After she had slapped me, she said with her voice so low I thought she would choke, "If you don't do what say I will take you with me tomorrow and you'll never come back to your grandfather."

When Pe Len came the next day with three rolls of carcamonia, I shook my head. "Mother says no. Mother says I must not play with you. She says Vivian should be my best friend."

At first Pe Len seemed not to understand, and then he just stared at me, the carcamonia hanging loosely in his hands.

"I hate Mother," I said. "She doesn't love me, and I don't love her. I love only Grandfather and you and Father when he comes."

Still Pe Len said nothing. I wanted him to be angry so we could run away together until Mother asked forgiveness and let me live with Lolo Pepe forever and play with Pe Len and carcamonia whenever I wished.

But Pe Len did not get angry. He looked like an old, wrinkled man who was very tired.

"I know," he said. "Father said it would be so. I go now."

"What did your father say?" I wanted to know. But he shook his head and walked away to my grandfather who was standing by the slide picking caterpillars off the rose leaves that grew in a pot nearby. Lola Pepe said something and touching Pe Len gently on the head, walked to the gate with him.

I just stood where I was because there was nothing else to do. I felt that Lolo Pepe and Pe Len shared a secret I could not yet understand. Even when Pe Len put the carcamonia

in Lolo's hands I still did not move, I just kept on rubbing my arms hard to keep from crying.

August 22, 1953
Philippines Free Press

Karia had stared at the drawn pinched face of her mother lying in the rough coffin, mouth slightly curled up at the corners revealing stained teeth, at the skin tightly stretched over bulging eyes, rough scarred skin with a pronounced yellow cast. The frozen immobility had fascinated Karia, and immobile too she stared until one of the neighbors pulled her away.

"Don't carry on so," the woman said. "She is better off now where she is. Come and drink some coffee."

Karia finally drank the black water, sitting on the bamboo floor, her back to the wall. All the chairs had been lined up in the center of the room to hold the coffin. The candles standing at either end of the oblong box remained unlighted, to be saved for the last minute before the body was carried away. On a small wooden table pushed close to the wall opposite where Karia sat, and directly under a picture of the Holy Mother, was another lighted candle, its small flame tapering off into black smoke blown by the slight wind in the direction of a picture of Veronica Lake in different shades of pink.

Karia glanced at the pictures indifferently. They were pale and ineffectual beside the living ugliness of the familiar dead. It did not matter that later they had hidden her mother's face from Karia, nor that they had covered her dead body with shovelfuls of stone, earth, and dried leaves. Death, when it came that way, was the ugliest thing in the world, and one remembered its face.

Now Karia had to walk daily to the huge pile of earth and garbage where the city waste was deposited. She joined the small band of women, marching off together before dawn. Thirty minutes each day, as they made their way to the deposit, they were friends. Never any other time, and least of all when, with clawing fingers, each one tried to get the best there was out of the mountain of filth and plenty.

For half an hour they told stories and sometimes, songs they sang of the city echoed in the slums. But always, as they neared the mound, there was silence, hurrying steps, and aloneness.

Karia became swiftly habituated to the daily routine that one day it struck her that now she was breathing freely in the air reeking of rotten food, dead animals, and live insects. The physical revulsion she had felt at the beginning had disappeared. It was then that the ugly dead face recalled itself to her, and the rank odor coming from her mother's body as they removed it from the rented coffin and lowered it into the grave lined with a white sheet.

That is where it all comes from, she thought. The filth and foulness being absorbed daily was hidden inside the living body, rising to the surface only in death. Holding the still meaty head and stomach of a fish, Karia imagined the ugliness spreading on her own dead face.

That day, after lunch, Karia walked out of the slums into the city to look for work. She tried ten places. At nine of them, after one look at her pale face and ragged clothes, they said no. The tenth, a small smoke-filled cafe, noisy

with the grating music of an old phonograph, refused her too.

"No. You are too young," the fat, heavily powdered woman said. "And thin," she added after a pause.

Karia held on. "I'm sixteen," she lied. "And I can cook and wash."

"I can do those things myself." The woman grinned.

"I can learn to wait on tables, like those girls."

"I still say you're too thin. You'd faint before the day was over," the fat woman smiled.

"Go home, put on more weight and then come back."

As Karia passed out of the door the woman called loudly after her, "Be sure to put those pounds in the right places."

Karia went home and told her father what the woman had said. He was staring out the window as she talked. After she had stopped, he turned around and asked her how old she was.

"Twelve, going on thirteen."

"Stop going around looking for work. And don't ever go to that place again, or any place like it."

"But Father, what shall we eat?"

"We'll manage."

"We can't go on this way, Father. It's so ugly and filthy out there," she gestured towards the mountain of garbage.

"So that's it." He walked to her and, with hands on her shoulders, made her sit on the chair. "I know how ugly and filthy it is. But the work that this woman has for you, it is worse...."

"No Father," Karia cut in. "The girls wait on tables, and they're clean."

"Karia, listen to me. There are rooms in that place where girls serve a different purpose. That's what she wants you for. That's why you are too thin for her because you are too thin for men. That's the kind of work you will do, give yourself to men. And the first and the second and the third time, and maybe even to the tenth time, when it still hurts you to earn money that way, you remain clean. But later the ugliness and filth will seep inside you, and you'll be part of it. Do you understand what I mean, child?"

Karia nodded, though garbage piles and noisy cafes were muddled in her head. Her father turned away. "I'll find some work tomorrow," he said.

That night, before sinking into deep sleep, she heard him tossing on his mat. In the middle of the night she was awakened by his dry rasping cough and the creak of the window as he opened it to spit out. He would never find work, not with his bad health. He had tried before, when

her mother was still alive, and shortly after she died, and it had all come to nothing.

The next day Karia woke up later than usual and hurried off to the garbage pile. The other women were already there, digging into the dirt, bringing pieces of food to their nostrils, brushing dirt off fragments of vegetables, once in a while pocketing small luxuries like broken combs, safety pins and torn handkerchiefs.

She did not stay long. The others had been much ahead of her and there would be little left from the day's fresh garbage. She walked in the direction of the swamps, half a mile away, close to where the river flowed. There she would find the rich patch of water lilies. She picked a long stick lying on the edge of the pond and started drawing plants. Swiftly she gathered enough young growths for the day. These, boiled with dried salted fish that she had hoarded for a week, and some boiled rice, would last them the whole day. She wondered if her father was going out to look for work after lunch.

It was late afternoon. Karia leaned out of the window of their thatched hut and looked out at all the other thatched brown huts. The two-peso-a-month houses were squeezed in the small space, like a crowd of brown-haired beetles, their thin legs sunk in the muddy earth. Laid carelessly on soft mud that, here and there, was covered with green stagnant water, were large stones connecting each door to the main path that led out to the small dusty street. No plant would ever grow on this earth except for hardy weeds. If there had been just a bit more water, Karia

thought, maybe water lilies would thrive, a bit less, she imagined, and maybe vegetables would.

Impatiently, she walked to the door to have a better view of the path of single-tiled stones to see if her father was coming. It was getting dark, and the rice would not remain soft much longer. Besides, he should not be out at this time of the day, especially with the cold wind blowing. Only a week ago he had spat blood again. Their last candle was out by the time he arrived.

She had eaten her share of the rice and soup and was sitting on the steps, trying to get some comfort from the faint, erratic beams of light from the neighbors' windows.

"Come up," he said, a note of urgency and excitement in his voice.

"Supper is ready, Father," she said.

He asked for light; when she told him that they had no more candles, he pulled the table closer to the window, and sat to eat. Karia stood by silently. After he was through, she picked up the empty dishes and carried them out to the small bamboo floor projection that stuck out beyond the back door, where a small earthen stove and a big jar full of water stood. She washed the dishes and put them back on the table to dry.

Her father sat quietly by the table. She walked around the small room pushing back the few chairs against the wall, still waiting for him to speak. Instead, he got up and walked to the water jar. She heard water splashing on the

ground, guessed he was washing his hands. She took an old dirty rag that hung under the table and gave it to him, hoping that now he would say something. He took the piece of cloth and turned away.

"Let's go to sleep," he said. "I am tired." With the cloth hanging unused in his hand, he sat one of the chairs, watching Karia pull out two rolled mats from behind a corner post and lay them out on the floor, tossing a pillow on each, and putting a chair at the ends to keep them from rolling up again.

She sank into her own mat. A while later her father walked over and sat down on his. For a long time he said nothing. Finally, he fumbled in his pockets.

"Here, Karia, keep this." He stretched his hand towards her. Although her eyes had long gotten used to the dark, Karia could not see what he held out. "Keep it well. Put it inside your dress."

She reached out and felt a paper bill. Money. Here she was in the dark with money in her hands. It was a new sensation. A paper bill, not a copper coin, not hard and round and begged off people.

"I have some more here," her father continued.

"That is for you. It's yours." Without another word he stretched out on the mat and turned his back to her, his silence shutting out all questions.

She had to content herself with the wonder of her possession. She wanted to rise and look at the bill by the outside light, but her father's back forbade her. At least it could not be any less than one peso.

"Keep it well." Her father's voice came as a shock in her quiet excitement, and she hastily slipped the money inside her dress, tightening her belt so it would not fall out as she slept.

The first thing she did on waking was feel for the money. She pulled it out quickly from her bosom, and trembling, smoothed out the little roll. She caught her breath at the amount. Ten pesos! Enough money to feed her and her father for a whole month. And it was all hers. He had more with him, he said. She glanced at his back.

Where could he have gotten it? What sort of job did he have? She smiled happily. He had a job, she was sure, and it could not be too hard, because he had not coughed much the whole night long. She had to wait until he woke before she could find out. All she could do now was get some food while he slept.

She tiptoed to the jar and splashed water on her face. Wiping with the hem of her shirt, she went down the steps. On bare feet she ran swiftly over the stones, out into the street. She hurried past the small store on the corner, where the narrow street joined the main one, and ran on to a bigger store, which sold canned goods. She would buy a can of sardines. Not that they did not have them in the smaller store, but she did not feel like seeing anyone she knew.

The storekeeper counted out the change, one five-peso bill, yellow and crushed, and four one-peso ones. These he took from his pocket. Then he went behind a small desk and produced a cigar box from which he counted out seventy centavos, all in small ten centavo pieces. Karia tried not to appear too eager as she waited.

The folded bills fit into her tightly closed fist, but she did not know where to keep the coins safely. She looked around the store and spied what she was looking for.

"How much is that handkerchief?" she asked, pointing to a small square cloth, with white border stitches dotting its red.

"Ten centavos," the man said.

"I want it." She put one of the silver coins on the table. The man took the handkerchief and smiling said, "You better explain the ten centavos well to your senora. I don't want her to think I charge too much for sardines."

Karia did not immediately comprehend, so she smiled back, but as she walked away and thought more about it, a frown came to her face.

From the store she walked towards the garbage pile. They never ate breakfast until ten, her father not getting up much before that. That way they ate only two meals a day. But of course it was different now. She smiled.

She did not intend to search for food in the pile today. She had this can of sardines and had no need for what the daily

provider had to offer. But she wanted to go and look at the garbage mountain.

She was almost there when she thought of the women. Suddenly she knew she did not want them to see what she had. It was different when they exhibited to each other proudly what he had wrested from the mound. But this was bought with money and was not the same. She walked on to the lily pond and with a stick drew some growths to the edge of the pool. She looked at them closely, sniffed them, then threw them back into the water. She stood there for some minutes, then slowly retraced her steps, passing by the garbage mountain. The women were all gone.

As she turned the street to their own road someone brushed past her, running quickly in the direction of where she lived. What could be a van or a car, she could not clearly distinguish from the distance, was parked near her home. It was probably the Charity Institute van that came once every three months to give them food, enough to last a week for each family. She hurried on.

But the van was green, not the blue of the Institute. A large group of people crowded around it, but for a small, cleared space leading to the open rear of the van. Karia stretched her neck but could not see what was going on, so she tried to squeeze herself between the crowd. Some of the people made room for her to pass.

There were three men, two with their backs to her. All of them were in khaki. And then there was a small man in a white undershirt and blue pants, to whom the third man in

khaki was talking. Karia approached them, her heart beating faster.

"Father!" He turned around and so did the three men.

"Your daughter?" one asked rudely.

"Yes."

"Does she have any of the money?"

"Nah."

"Then where is the rest?"

"I told you. I went out drinking last night."

"This is not the first time you've robbed a house, is it?"

"I told you it is. We were hungry. I never stole before."

"You could have worked."

"No one will take me."

"Hah, that's what you say. None of these people steal, and they're all as poor as you are." The man nodded his head at the crowd, "Do you, now?" A small murmur went around.

"You're a thieving old rat, that's what you are."

He struck Karia's father on the shoulder. The old man doubled up and grasped the side of the van. He coughed.

"Go on now," the man said, shoving him. "Get up in there. We'll finish this in court."

The old man was still coughing and unable to move. The man in khaki gave him another push. His coughing increased and he bent his head lower, his shoulders hunched away from the side of the van, his legs supported against it. He spat and it was mingled with blood.

Karia ran and clung to his arm. With her other hand she massaged his back. Slowly his breathing eased. Some of the women covered their noses with their hands. Others turned away. "You go now," one of the policemen said, pushing Karia away.

When they had all gone, Karia climbed up the steps and sat on the chair where her father had sat the night before. She felt for the small lump of money inside her dress. She thought of the smell of swamp water and the lilies floating on them, and the smell of the garbage mountain hiding half-rotten bananas and sour milk and half-consumed sandwiches. She could see the fat heavy flies circling the heap, alighting on the barely edible food, and the women driving them away.

She thought of her father's face as he spat out blood, the faces of the neighbors, the faces of the police. The face of her dead mother.

"But later the ugliness and filth will seep inside you, and you will be part of it," he had said. But what if wherever you turned, it was there?

Slowly she wrenched the key that was glued to the top of the can of sardines.

February 26, 1950
Sunday Times Magazine

Felix

The night I first saw the man in the moon was the night Felix came. Adriana said that if I was good and looked through a fine silk handkerchief, I would be able to see the eyes and ears and nose of the full moon. I had tried it for many full moons before, but I never did see anything, though at times I looked so hard that tears came to my eyes, and when I looked away, I'd see a white sphere in all the shadows around me.

But that night the face had been there. I could make out the eyes and the dark line that was the mouth was turned up at the corners. I remember how, kneeling on a chair by the window, I looked at it raptly, believing that its eyes were fixed on me. I must have been kneeling there that way for quite a while when I heard footsteps in the garden.

"Good evening, Emma," he said. I stood up and crumpling the silk handkerchief in my hand ran to the door. The only light in the veranda was from the pale glow of the moon, so all I could see was the outline of a short, stocky man.

"Hello," I said, "Who are you?

"I'm Felix," he answered.

"What do you want?"

"Doña Marta sent me. She says your mother needs a gardener."

"You know, we had a houseboy. He was very tall and thin, like a bamboo pole." Felix laughed. "But he went back to the province to get married. Are you married?"

"Last year I was."

"What happened?"

"My wife left me."

"Why?"

"She thought I was crazy."

"Are you?"

"I don't think so, but she did."

"Why?"

"Well ... one time she wanted me to chop down a coconut tree growing in front of our house because it had stopped bearing fruit. She said we could use it for firewood. We needed firewood, you know. But I did not want to cut it down, its leaves were growing so beautifully."

"You should have cut it down though, so you could make a fire."

"Oh, I found wood for her. I cut down part of our fence. The wood was rotting anyway."

"Then you're not crazy."

"She said I was. She also said I was ugly and black and dirty."

I turned away from him and climbed a chair to reach the light switch. Then I looked at him. I didn't know what to say because he was really very ugly. He had dark curly hair, thick and messy. Everything about his face seemed exaggerated. His nose was flat and spread all over his face, his eyes were round and large, and his floppy ears stuck out through the curls. I looked away and only then noticed a small bundle of white cloth that he was holding in his right hand.

"What do you have in there?" I asked, pointing to it.

"Starfishes. Do you want to see them?" he asked.

Nodding, I jumped down from the chair. There were many of them, and as he opened his bundle, some tumbled down to the ground. They were very pretty, lying there on top of his folded clothes.

"Here, have one." He picked a small white one and handed it to me.

As I reached for it eagerly, I heard Mother coming down the stairs. "Felix," she said, "I didn't know you had arrived." I was ordered to the kitchen to see if dinner was ready, and I remembered I wanted to tell Adriana about the man in the moon.

For Emma, the kitchen held magic – huge, shadowed, full of smoke and charcoal smells, its space dwarfing the long table on which Dencia, the cook, sliced and chopped and pounded, and which she scrubbed daily with sandpaper leaves, so its surface felt like velvet.

Every day after lunch, the servants rested in the kitchen. They kept their voices low, careful not to wake the masters taking their siesta. Emma, who always managed to escape from the noonday rest, would sneak downstairs and join them.

In the deep recess under the broad staircase was a bunk where the driver sometimes took his nap, his wife combing his hair. More often, they spent the hour playing cards, while Dencia would sit by herself, yawning and complaining, or when goaded by Emma and Adriana, would tell tales about her hometown in the north.

Felix never said much. Dencia tried to draw him out, but all she ever got was a nod, or a grunt, and now and then, a puzzled look. Dencia called him *kulang-kulang*, lacking in the head. Once, an irritated Emma defended him angrily, but Felix merely walked out of the kitchen.

During noon hours, the hot sun blazed on unshaded plants and the gardener had little to do except pick dry fallen leaves. He could not sweep the grounds, for fear of breaking the midday silence. It was unwise to trim the plants in the heat, he said, or to water them, so there was time for him to listen to Emma retell kitchen tales.

As he squatted on the ground, Emma, and sometimes Adriana, sat on a flat boulder he had covered for them with old newspapers. Under the shade of the mango tree, it was cool and peaceful.

"Felix, come and help me," I called from across the garden. Lola Marta was visiting, and she wanted some flowers for the image of the Blessed Virgin on her altar. As I strung the perfumed *sampaguita* buds that Felix picked, I told him about Lola Marta and her prayers.

"She makes us pray before and after all meals. In her room is an altar where she kneels and prays before siesta, and again when she wakes up. After dinner she prays the Rosary, sometimes with Mother, sometimes alone. When my sister, Marina, is home she makes her pray too. One day, when I have received my First Holy Communion, she will make me do it too."

"Why does she pray so much?" asked Felix.

"I don't know. Maybe to ask for something. I guess she wants to go to heaven."

"She can ask for that?"

"Oh, you can ask for anything." I held up the necklace of fragrant flowers and placed it on my head. "Look at me, Felix. I can be a beautiful princess."

The gardener nodded.

"Of course, if you see the man in the moon, you will already know that you can go to heaven. I have already seen him." Felix gazed at me in wonder as I told him of that night when he first arrived to join the household. "If you are good and beautiful you will see the moon's face and that means you can join him in heaven."

"I can try to be good, but to be beautiful ... that is hard." The words came slowly. I said nothing. "I am ugly," he finally said.

I rose from the stone, removed the tiara of flowers from my head, tugging at some of the blossoms entangled in my hair. "Maybe you'll not always be ugly." I told him.

Dencia would not have agreed. She never thought much of anyone, finding fault in all she met. So it intrigued Emma that Dencia was constantly asking her about Felix. What do you talk about in the afternoons? Does he ever say anything about me? She kept on with her questions, even when Emma could not supply the answers she desired.

Finally, angrily, Dencia warned, "If he ever says anything, it's a lie. He thinks he is somebody, but he is just kulang-kulang." She flounced off, her hand making wild circular motions next to her ear, leaving behind a very bewildered Emma.

Although she liked Felix much more than she did Dencia, Emma still thought the cook very entertaining. Her best was when she and Adriana would ask Dencia to do her movie actress walk. Gladly, Dencia would first paint her mouth and cheeks. Then, with one hand on her waist, the

other raised up wide fingers delicately pointed, she took exaggerated, swaying steps, hips gyrating with sensuous jerks to the left and the right. It was even funnier when she would rise on tiptoe, swing around, her breasts moving with every spin.

Once Emma's mother came into the kitchen and found them sitting on the *piedra-china* floor, doubled up with laughter, while Dencia pranced and twirled a fan she had added to her act. Señorita Nena was stern with Emma, ignoring Dencia, who was quick to pretend she was using the fan for lighting embers in the stove.

Emma repeated to Felix what Dencia had once said – that there were five men who wanted to marry her – and that she asked for their names, but Dencia would not tell, and that once Dencia had shown her a photo, but since it was a movie actor, she had her doubts. Felix merely shook his head.

Three months after Felix came to the house, it started to rain. I woke up one morning, knowing a typhoon was coming. It was very cold and windy. Wrapping my blanket around me, I climbed on the windowsill and looked out at the sea. The sea was gray, and the sky was gray, and I could not tell where one ended and the other began. I watched the waves swelling as they neared the shore, then softly returning to the deep.

That was when I saw Felix. He was running along the beach at furious speed. His hair lay in damp curls on his head, his face was unsmiling, his jaw set, his eyes fixed intensely ahead of him. The wind whipped the clothes

away from his body and his shirt had come open in front, leaving his chest exposed to the cold blasts of wind and rain. Around his waist was tied a long string, stretching behind him on the sand, at the end of which dangled what must have been a dozen empty tin cans. He was too far away for me to hear, but I knew that as he ran, they made loud, raucous, clanking noises.

Now I knew his wife was right. I went to Mother's room.

"Oh Mama, Felix – Mama, he really is crazy. You should see him. Come here." I pulled her to the window.

"There, Mama, there look, see him running? See those cans tied to him? Mama, he is crazy after all, isn't he?" I looked up at her, pulling at her dress, trying to get an answer. Her eyes followed the running figure for what seemed a long time. "Go change your clothes," was all she said.

Adriana and Emma weathered the rainy season, occupied with games and conversation. Felix, they saw little of, but Emma would sometimes hear the clanking of the cans as he made his way to the shore.

Finally, the days began to clear. Before dawn, fishermen would once again go out to sea with nets and kerosene lamps, to be back by sunrise with their catch. Pale golden sunsets would spread across the edge of the ocean and the evening sky would be free of clouds.

One afternoon, as Emma and Adriana were making their way to the beach, they met Felix carrying his string of

cans. The sun had just begun its descent but already one could trace the moon.

“The moon is full tonight,” Felix said. He hesitated, fiddling with the end of twine which he used to tie around his waist. The knot had loosened, and a can was slipping off.

Just then they heard a laugh. Dencia stood on the seawall, towering above them, her wide skirt billowing in the wind.

“Fool,” she shouted, “Monster, not born of woman! Son of split bamboo!”

“What does she mean?” Emma asked, taking Felix’s hand. He said nothing. Dencia jumped down, confronting him.

“Too good for me, you think you are. We will see!” She snatched the string of cans from his hand and swung them around her head, over and over, like pinwheels.

“You’re crazy,” Emma said, aghast.

“Crazy?” she laughed. “He’s the crazy one.” She pointed at Felix, the cans still in her hand. “Ask him what he can have but will not take. Ask him what he wants to be so clean for. Go on… ask him … ask him.”

A change came over Felix’s face. “Be quiet, woman,” he ordered.

"Woman? You know what woman is, do you? Tell me, how does a man know a woman? Tell me, you evil monster."

"He is not evil," Emma cried. "Felix is good."

"What do you know of good?" Dencia turned to the child, her anger spreading. "That ugly monster is bad. But I'll have him yet!"

"Dencia," Felix cut her short. "Don't let them hear your dirt." This was the first time Felix had said her name and Dencia was silenced.

Emma added, "If you don't stop, I will tell Mother."

After dinner I hurried to find Mother so I could borrow the silk handkerchief. I heard voices coming from the kitchen.

"You should never go to a man's room," Mother was saying.

"No," Dencia sobbed.

"You know he does not want you there." The sobbing increased.

"I am not bad. He says I am, but I am not."

"Perhaps not. … Come you must join Doña Marta and me for prayers."

When the three women had disappeared into grandmother's room, I slipped away. It was bright outside, the moon high in the sky, the garden washed with its silver glow.

Felix waited for me by the gate. As soon as I was near him, I handed him the silk handkerchief and he placed it over his face, intently gazing at the sky through its fine weave.

I waited. Finally, he said, "I see him," the cloth fluttering slightly as he spoke.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Is he clear?"

"Yes. Very clear – the eyes, the nose, the mouth." He made no move to remove the cloth from his face, holding it tight so it would not slip.

I looked at the clear sea, the gentle waves reflecting splinters of the moon. Felix still gazed upwards. I began to count the stars and the lighted fishing boats. As I turned to go up the veranda, Felix said happily, "He was smiling at me." He touched the top of my head and walked on towards his room by the garage. The fragrance of sampaguita mixed with the salty smell of the sea.

Emma woke the next morning to loud, unfamiliar voices. As she dressed, she heard her grandmother pass by her room, her long skirt making crisp, starchy sounds. Emma ran behind her, wondering why she was making the sign of the cross as she hurried down the stairs.

In the veranda there were strangers crowding around a low bench. Emma edged closer, unnoticed. Felix lay on the bunk, his face as white as paper, his curly hair wet and plastered to his head, and a half smile on his face.

Emma moved nearer, but her mother saw her. She pulled Emma, lifted her in her arms and hugged her close. The men were talking to Doña Marta, describing what they had seen.

"He is always there running by the beach or wading in the water. But this time, he just walked on, as if he was heading straight for the moon. We did not think he would drown. He knew how deep it was that far out. When we reached him, it was too late."

The fisherman who spoke looked at Emma. He had often seen her with Felix. He addressed her gently, "As he walked into the ocean all we could hear was him laughing."

"Laughing?" With effort, Emma kept her voice calm.

The man nodded. "This time he did not have his cans," he said.

But that Emma knew.

May 21, 1949
Philippine Free Press

Merienda

Every afternoon, at exactly three o'clock, Adriana prepared the long dining table for *merienda*, moving the flower vase to the other end, she covered half the board with a checkered red-and-white Ilocano tablecloth. On the rough textile, which no amount of ironing could smooth, the ten-year-old maid arranged small plates, tea and cocoa cups, butter, sugar, sliced *calamansi*, and a can of condensed milk.

This day, she placed Doña Marta, as usual, at the head of the table; her daughter, Señorita Nena, and her granddaughter, Emma, on either side. Emma's sister, Marina, was in the province with their father, having irrefutably reasoned that the proximity of the town church to their provincial house would allow her to walk to church every day, and practise her Lola Marta's admonitions for Lenten piety.

The fact was that religious rituals in the province were, to Marina, desirably intense experiences. The parish priest mustered a frenzy of faith and penance among his flock, whose every sin he knew, so it followed that their fear and shame were submitted to him for Lent's feastly catharsis.

In Manila, observance of Holy Week was tame. More prayers were quietly recited, less noise allowed, and *Pasyon* chants rarely wailed in the mournful nights before Good Friday.

Emma did not mind. She liked sitting in bed in the peace of early morning, staring at the clear blue sky reaching down to the calm ocean, its surface unbroken by waves except for a gentle swell near shore. That early there already was promise of the day's yellow heat, thickened by summer's air.

Emma looked forward to the coming summer, with her father and mother in Manila. And of course Adriana for the games, the storytelling, the put-together picnics under the *ratiles* tree, or at the beach. The ratiles was a giant umbrella of soft overlapping leaves casting a huge shadow on the backyard. With each slight breeze, it dropped a thousand white petals which they chased with outstretched hands, hardly catching more than a few.

Adriana could climb the tree but Emma could not; its main trunk towering over her eight years. She could jump to reach a branch, but unlike Adriana, could not swing up. A high stool helped, but once there, she was too scared to crawl towards to the slim branches where the berries grew thickly.

At the beach Emma could do all Adriana did. They ran swiftly over long distances, feet digging into moist ground, their laughter riding the wind. Silently, ceremoniously, they covered half their bodies with sand, or waded waist-deep into calm water, shouting and splattering each other.

The ocean was across the house, held off from the street by a low wall. Steps led down to the beach where the girls played, always accompanied by an adult, usually Felix the

gardener. Until the day he walked into the ocean deep and never came back.

Emma was in the dining room alone with Adriana. Of all the meals, she liked this one best, which was not a real meal. There was only *ensaymada* and *pan de sal* on the table, now and then native cakes or boiled corn.

She lifted the corner of the napkin covering a trayful of hot *bibingka*, rice pancakes the cook sometimes bought from a specialty shop near the house. Adriana giggled when Emma dipped her nose into the burnt-banana-leaves fragrance of the bibingka, then replaced the cover before her Lola Marta could come in.

It had been a year since Adriana and her older sister had been brought by an employment agent dealing in young, inexperienced girls. Doña Marta wanted trained maids, but her daughter insisted Adriana would make a good companion to Emma, while Karia could help in their large house in the province.

Nothing much was said, but Emma and Adriana knew that Adriana was there for Emma's benefit. In turn, Emma owed no reciprocal obligations to the hired girl. This was no cause for conflict. Adriana, dark, wispy, with darting bright eyes and a quick smile revealing extremely white teeth, and Emma, fair, hair cut in straight bangs over round brown eyes and extraordinarily well-shaped eyebrows – both seemed to fit in every detail the forms molded by their parents, prescribed by their possessions, or lack of them.

In fact, Emma and Adriana had an easy, almost affectionate relationship strengthened by conspiracy against other generations, with no crossing of lines. For instance, when Adriana scattered ashes on servants in the kitchen, by blowing through the *hihip*, an iron pipe for blowing air to inflame red embers on the clay stove, all she received was a reprimand.

If Emma were to do the same, everyone would be severely scolded, including Emma. She would be forbidden to ever again go to the downstairs kitchen, that entirely different world of high vaulted ceiling, hard China stone floor, mixed fragrances and smokey fumes, and a scarred table over which Emma and Adriana had spent many enjoyable moments, tasting food with fingers dipped into salty, smelly *bagoong*, and thick coconut honey, to the bitter *lambanog*, coconut wine which they had discovered under the long-haired driver's bed, pushed all the way to the corner of the kitchen's connecting alcove.

Emma had never been forbidden, nor given permission to stay in the downstairs kitchen, such decisions having been reserved for eventuality. But, had she ever attempted any of Adriana's mischiefs, or invented any of her own, a rule would have been worded, accompanied by a strict reprimand that it was highly improper for her, Emma, to have fun with the servants, even at their expense, except with Adriana.

Adriana took her place, standing by the corner of the table, facing Emma. She held the *pagaspas,* a long stick with a circle of pliant bamboo nailed to its end.

From it hung colored strips of crepe paper, to drive off flies entering the house through the sliding *capiz* windows.

The room was brightly alive with merienda colors, unlike the chaste and formal white of other meals. Emma cheerfully observed the Ilocano cover, its cloth so equal to her faults. On it, formerly, she had dropped butter, spilled cocoa, and milk. There had been no gasp, nor quick rush for a deep plate half filled with water, to slide under the soiled spot, as would have happened had the cloth been the virgin damask or lace. On those awful occasions, a guilty Emma and sympathizing Adriana watched silently. Under Marta's measuring gaze, Nena passed the dull edge of knife over the material soaking in water, until all the food had been scraped off, and a napkin placed under it so it could dry without leaving an obstinate stain. With the Ilocano cloth, nothing was said, except perhaps a reminder that the cloth be laundered soon.

There was something else about merienda time. Perhaps it was the short sleep they had at noon, when heat made the elders take to their rooms and their beds and which melted the starch off Doña Marta. Awakened from her nap, the siesta's lassitude washed off by afternoon ablution, Marta would take her place at the table with a smile for all, looking cool and refreshed in her new change of gossamer-thin kimono with hand-embroidered edges.

Best of all, she spoke in Tagalog. Not Spanish, which was the language of lunch and dinner, when conversations matched the linen. Those times, a bored Emma was left to watching the others' faces, wondering at the gravity of their voices, the change in the women.

This was specially so when her father was there. Her mother, Nena, usually silent and gentle mannered turned over-attentive, as if her husband could not do anything for himself. Or she would be nervous, talkative, bidding a reluctant Emma to conversation.

A less imperious Marta still occupied her place at the head of the table, but she made fewer remarks on manners and proper speech to Emma and Marina. Instead, there were pleasantries. Or she would dwell on subjects way above the understanding of Emma, couched in a language more elegant and polite than usual.

Once, after they were back in their own room, Marina said that their Lola was doing a program number. She laughed when she said it and Emma did not understand. Neither could she understand why her Lola would get into arguments with her father. Often, towards the end, he turned quiet, or with a laugh, tell his mother-in-law that she was thinking like a woman, an observation that seemed to please her even as she rejected it.

Now and then, Emma cast quick, trenchant glances at Adriana, who understood nothing of what was said, but who appeared to greatly enjoy the fluency and mystery of what she heard.

Merienda was vastly different. There were no preambles, no routines. Emma could talk freely. There were times when Marta laughed. Often Adriana was dragged into the talk. When she fidgeted, Emma came to her rescue, digging into the trove of their shared experiences to introduce their world to the elders.

After a while, Adriana's eyes would begin to sparkle and an unleashed flow of words revealed wisdom only she had access to, described with anecdotes from a different past.

Emma, proud of her, marked the others' silent attention, as her friend described the garbage mountain near where she lived and which she climbed daily, or the swamp waterlily bulbs she and her sister Karia boiled for their skimpy suppers. Sometimes, during a lull, Nena would sigh, and Doña Marta ordered Adriana to get a fresh pot of tea. By the time she came back, the conversation had moved on.

The girls waited, wondering what delayed the older women. The steam from the covered bibingka had dwindled and moistened the covering napkin. Adriana went to the kitchen to get a fresh pot of tea.

Señorita Nena's voice reached her first. She sounded annoyed, nervous. "You blame her?" She spoke in Spanish. Marta's answer was inaudible.

They entered the dining room, Nena in a long dress with short sleeves, her hair in one thick braid hanging behind her head. Marta made the usual brief survey of the table, her eyes taking in every detail, including Adriana at attention with her pagaspas. Nena glanced at her daughter, Emma.

"We have bibingka today," Marta's level tone, laced by a foreign language, intimidated Emma.

Nena took the teapot, poured for Marta. "You have your cocoa?" she asked Emma in Spanish, her voice tight and precise.

It was not going well at all, Emma felt. "Yes, Mama," she answered quickly, rushing through the single syllabled Spanish. She offered the tray of bibingka to her grandmother.

Marta shook her head. "No, thank you," she acknowledged, while absent-mindedly picking an ensaymada, tearing off small, unbuttered morsels to put in her mouth. Emma watched suspiciously.

Adriana had been trying to catch Emma's eyes, to communicate her own confusion and anxiety. Was it the bibingka, she asked silently, leading Emma's eyes to the tray. Had the cook's choice been wrong and therefore irritating to Doña Marta? Small error for them in the kitchen below, nothing to be angry about. But Doña Marta would have her reasons, correct for people of her kind.

A slight turn of Emma's head said No. Still Adriana noted the apprehension on her face. Adriana moved the pagaspas nervously. The colored strips came dangerously close to Marta's arms. The old lady moved an impatient hand, as if shooing a fly.

She turned to her daughter. "There are too many things happening here," she said.

Emma knew she was being shut off. She stirred the hot cocoa with a small spoon, kept on stirring, waiting in the

long silence. When finally her mother spoke, it was to Emma.

"Would you like to spend the summer holidays in Lagalag?" she asked. Lagalag was their farm, some kilometers from their house in town.

Marta added. "You will come with me and come back here for the opening of school." Her inflections were severe, with rigidity of punishment.

Emma drew in her breath. She sat up straight, laid her spoon down carefully beside her cup, on the saucer. Not a drop spilled. She waited for her mother to say something more, to explain why the promise of summer in Manila was to be broken. Only from her mother could she get a reason. Marta never explained her decisions. She just made them. Not even her hazel green eyes gave away her feelings, nor ever said she was sorry. Cold and curtained, Emma could never guess from them what stirred her grandmother's heart.

Marta was delicately built, her small bones covered by white almost translucent flesh, with skin stretched youthfully, without wrinkles on her face. It was a complexion women coveted and even men admired.

As a young woman she had been prone to fainting spells, perhaps caused by the anemia her doctor diagnosed. She was a woman of extreme fragility, he said, making it sound like an asset. The color of her eyes was inherited from half-foreign parents. A tiny nose and small mouth with lips often drawn into thin if well-formed line, were etched on a

pale face from which dark brown hair was pulled tightly away and caught in a bun at the nape of her neck.

Her cheeks were colorless. But once, an amazed Emma had seen the soles of her feet, as her grandmother reclined on the *perezosa.* They were pink, like the inner petals of a rose, and so smooth that Emma was tempted to touch them.

But she did not. At the age of 63, Marta, to Emma, was ancient, and never to be disturbed. And even less, opposed. Even if it meant crushed plans for all the extravagances she and Adriana had dreamed up for the sixty days of summer when Marta was to be away with Marina and Karia in the farm, and Emma's father and mother with her in Manila.

Marta seemed to have finally become aware of the merienda. She placed the red can of *Bruun butter* near her plate, meticulously smearing an ensaymada. "Adriana can come along," she said.

"Can we not stay here for the summer, like you said?" Emma spoke in Tagalog to her mother, stubbornly avoiding even a sidewise glance at her grandmother. Marta frowned, as Nena answered gently.

"Someone's just died in this house. It will be better if you go."

"You mean Felix," Emma was genuinely amazed, "but he wanted to die."

Marta exploded. "You see what I mean?" Her eyes glittering like splintered glass, she turned to her granddaughter. "Only God has power and decision over death. Remember that, always!"

Almost to herself, partly to Nena, she said angrily, "The child has much to learn."

Scum had gathered on the surface of the cocoa. Emma pushed the tears to the back of her eyes causing her head to ache heavily. Even merienda could not protect her from her Lola Marta. Nor bring her closer than from where she sat at the head of the table. If only she would give a reason, a cause, whether as stark reality or contrived myth, Emma would have accepted it with childlike faith. But Marta would not give her the comfort of either and Emma refused to weep in her presence.

Adriana stood at her corner, the pagaspas still in her hand, motionless, except for the slight breeze rippling the colored paper. She barely understood what had been said. But Emma would translate it for her, and she would get to know what had made the afternoon meal so different from meriendas past.

Watching Emma closely, the unfamiliar, if hidden anger on what had always been a quiet face, Adriana wondered if merienda would ever be the same again.

August 13, 1991
Mr. & Ms.

The Money-Makers

Karia, our maid, had told me the story. She said the men with jute sacks slung on their backs who walked outside our yard at sunset were money-makers. Children were inside the sacks. The men took them to a bridge built of bones and there cut off their heads, then squeezed blood from their bodies.

That was what money was made of – the children's blood. Karia showed me a bright new coin of reddish gold. She said money-makers did not like the blood of older people because they no longer had the innocence needed to make good shiny coins.

Before she told me that story, I had spent afternoons outdoors watching the sunset. There were guava trees growing in the yard. I could sit on a top branch to watch the orange sun take back the light it gave to the farm all day. At about five o'clock, the yellow heat changed to cool colors of honeysuckle. Then the gray dusk came, and all the happy pink, orange and lavender tints gathered together on the borders of clouds behind mountains, until they all melted into the sun.

When all was gray except for a few gold-hemmed clouds, the sun, like a bright coin, would slip away into a slot at the slope of the green mountain.

After Karia told me about the money-makers, I was too scared to stay outdoors. I kept to my room in the afternoons, waiting for them to pass. Always, there was at least one who

did, with sack and scythe, his face hidden by a wide-brimmed hat. As soon as he was in sight, I'd lock my door.

When I was alone, I'd squeeze into the corner of the room. From a crack in the wall I'd watch, keeping as quiet as possible. I never asked Grandma about these men because Grandma did not like questions. My father answered questions, but when he was around, I forgot to ask them, there were so many other things to say. He came every Sunday, stayed only a few hours, then went back to the city.

So I had only Karia from whom to ask what the money-makers did with all the money they made.

"They buy food and clothes. They have houses and families."

"Do they kill their own children?"

"Not often. There are many others."

One afternoon I saw two money-makers approaching from a distance. One was not wearing a hat.

That would mean that I could see his face when he came closer. For sure he would have red eyes, and I imagined what the rest of his face would look like. Once our parish priest had preached about "the gaping caverns of Hell". That was what money-makers must look like.

The hatless one separated from the other and crossed the boundary of our yard. He was coming so close to our

house. I could hardly move or breathe. When he took the path that passed right by the wall of my room, I began to sweat and feel cold at the same time.

But what a disappointment his face was! Black hair, dark eyes, flat nose, just enough mouth, correct ears, just like any other face. Of course, money-makers could probably change their appearance, just like witches could. Still, I thought, the color of his eyes should have been red, since eye colors never change.

His young, ordinary face had all my attention, so I did not immediately notice Karia standing some meters away, also watching him. She had on her red silk dress with silver buttons all the way down the back She never wore that dress except when she went to town with Grandmother and me.

She was smiling, not at all afraid of him. I was not surprised, anyway she was too old to be made into money. He walked to where she was. Their lips moved but, hard as I tried, I could not hear anything. Once he looked up in my direction and I pressed tightly against the corner of my room even if I knew he could not see me. He and Karia talked some more and then he left.

I was bent over, clutching my stomach, and when I could not stand it any longer, I called Karia, whispering her name through the crack in the wall. She was still watching his back and probably did not hear me, so I opened the window a little and called her again.

I pulled her into the bedroom.

"Did he have children? Did he?"

"Children?"

"Yes, in his sack. To make into money."

"Oh, that," she smiled. "No, he is not a money-maker. He is Tino."

"What did he have in his sack then, if he is not a money-maker."

"Rice he just harvested."

"That's why he did not have a hat like the others?"

"Yes, that's right." But Karia wasn't paying attention.

"Karia, listen. Do you think money-makers have red eyes?"

"Why should they?"

"I don't know ... because they kill." Karia still seemed to have her mind on something else. "Karia, why do you have your special dress on? Are you going anywhere?"

"No. Where would I go?"

"Then it is for Tino."

"Of course not," but she smiled. "I have to go get supper ready."

Tino now stopped by our house every afternoon at about the same time the money-makers passed farther away. One day he came earlier than usual. I was not very sure that I was not afraid of him, even if Karia did say he was not a money-maker. But I knew I would never find out what he really was unless I joined them outside the house. First, I made Karia swear by all the elves in the mounds that no harm would come to me.

As they talked and laughed, I tried to make out what was inside his sack. He must have noticed because before he left he asked if I wanted to see what was in it. When I shook my head he smiled, "You don't really think I am a money-maker, do you? Karia has told me but look into this sack and you'll see."

Karia nodded. She had promised that no harm would happen. I looked inside. It really was rice.

"Is it yours?" I asked. A strange look shadowed Karia's face and then neither of them was smiling.

"Yes." He sounded angry.

Grandma always woke earlier than I did. She read in her room or took a short walk in the yard. I cannot remember any day that she did not have breakfast with me. But that morning when I came the dining room she was already having her last cup of coffee.

She said she had to hurry to the granary to portion out the shares of the rice harvest to the laborers. I had never been to the granary although I had heard so much about it from

our friends in town, how the *palay* almost spilled out of the doors, and the great wealth that was stored inside.

I asked Grandma if I could go along but she said she could not wait, I should have my breakfast, then ask Karia to take me there after she had finished washing the dishes.

From the window I could see Grandma as she walked away. She carried Grandpa's cane which Karia said he never used, just kept hidden in his closet. Grandpa kept the dried tail of a *pagi,* a sea creature. The cane was old and brown, its slim length covered with knobs and knots. Karia said anyone whipped by the cane, no matter how lightly, would get thinner and wither away. Because Grandma was frail she needed protection, so it was right she should have it with her when she went out alone. Although in reality, even without the cane, everyone was afraid of Grandma.

We walked to the granary as soon as Karia was done with the dishes, taking a short cut across rice paddies. The granary was a few hundred yards away from the rice fields, under coconut trees. I walked behind Karia along the narrow trail of the plantation.

On the ground were plenty of young fruit blown down by the wind. The size of eggs, they hardly looked like the coconut into which they could have grown. On one end they had hard petal-shaped covers which could be broken off, and once removed, revealed the smooth surface crowned by a ring of pink.
Karia asked me to hurry. She appeared quite impatient and although there were some questions I wanted to ask, she

looked so serious, I thought it better to tease her first into good humor.

I started peeling a nut, singing as I tore each petal. "You love him, you love him not...."

She said nothing. "You love Tino, you love him not, you love Tino." Finally, she smiled.

"*A ha,* you love Tino, you love Tino!!!" I threw the nut as far away as I could.

"Karia, why do they become money-makers?"

"Who?"

"The money-makers," I said impatiently.

"Oh you're still thinking of them?"

"Of course. I watch for them every afternoon from my room."

We had reached the granary. There was dust billowing around the mounds of gold. In one of them Tino stood, knee-deep. Of course it was only rice, but from a distance it did look like gold.

Tino glanced at us as we entered, but he did not smile.

Now and then he passed his hand over his brow and fiercely shook sweat from his fingers. I stepped closer to

touch the rich swell of flowing rice, but Grandma motioned me away. "The dust will get into your lungs," she said.

Three men were measuring the grain, using big cans. Grandma seldom took her eyes off them except to quickly note down numbers in her notebook. I soon tired of just standing there, not being allowed to touch anything. Grandma was like that, always forbidding me to do the things she forced others to do.

I left to play in the yard outside the granary. Karia stood by the door, but her eyes were often on Tino. It was past mid-day when they finished.

The shadows of the coconut trees had moved from left to right and my own shadow had crept from behind me and now squeezed ahead as we walked away – Grandma, Karia, and me. We were crossing the rice fields, walking on the raised edge of the dry paddies when Tino came hurrying behind us. I thought he came because of Karia, but instead he followed a step behind Grandma. I was a few paces ahead and could hardly hear what they said.

Once Grandma's voice rose. "What can I do?" she said. "It's your fault. You should not have borrowed last year. You must learn to live with what you earn, not spend beyond your harvest."

Tino sounded angry. I looked back quickly. His face was turning red. "You say that. You have never tried to live on so little."
First Grandma's voice was low, Tino's a growl. Then loud and firm she said, "You're not getting any more rice or

money from me so you can marry her. And if you think I will forget her father's debts and let her go without serving her time, you are wrong."

She sounded very angry. I looked back at Karia who had stopped walking, but could not read anything in her face. Tino had turned away, taking a short cut across the paddy, his bare feet sinking into thick piles of dried grain stalks. Suddenly he turned towards us, a terrible fierce expression on his face. He shouted at Grandma. "You are killing us. But you will not get your way, you greedy old usurer. You'll see!"

I shivered in the sun, as I waited for Grandma to say she had never killed anyone. But all she shouted was "You imbecile, get out of my land!" as she brandished the pagi cane threateningly in the air.

She seemed so proud and brave standing there, her white hands waving Grandpa's cane. Although she was tiny, she appeared taller than Tino, who stood at the center of the sunken paddy, his dark face shining with sweat in the noonday sun.

That night it did not take much persuading from Karia for me to go to bed early. As she pulled the blanket over me, I took her hand, but did not know what to say. She stroked my head and looked like she was going to cry. But I was so sleepy and tired I did not even know when she put out the kerosene lamp and left the room.

I woke up the next morning before dawn. The day began like all other days on the farm. The cocks were just starting to crow. From my bed the mountain was still a solid dark green form, giant clouds about its peak. I reversed my position in bed, and with pillow under my chin, waited for the yellow-pink light of morning to awaken the mountain so that the purple and pale yellow and fresh green hues would emerge. A quiet hum of voices came from downstairs.

Every morning, farm hands passed by the house and stayed a few minutes before they continued on their way to the fields. There was nothing unusual about it, nor the hush, when it came. These sounds and silences had always been part of the morning stillness.

Lavender was spreading over one side of the mountain. I was following its progress when the new, but familiar voice carried to my room. I jumped out of bed. I was sure it was Papa, although I knew it was not Sunday yet. I ran to the window. His car was there. I almost tripped on my long flannel nightgown, running down the stairs and into the hall. Quite a few of our workers were there, some sitting on benches, others squatting on the floor. But unlike other mornings, they were now strangely quiet. Only the overseer and his wife talked together in one corner of the room, but quietly so even if I had been interested, I could not have heard what they were saying.

"Good morning," I smiled at everyone. Only a few smiled back.

“Where’s Papa?” I asked. One of the men pointed to Grandma’s room. The absence of words was strange.

“Papa,” I called even before I entered.

Almost at the same time, he was at doorway. “Shhh,’ he had his finger to his lips, although I thought Grandma could not be asleep at this hour.

I was too glad to see my father to ask about what was happening. But as he bent down to kiss me, and I put my arms around his neck, I saw Grandma’s room. A nurse was leaning over Grandma’s bed so all I could see of her was her face, pale and wrinkled.

When she was asleep, everything about Grandma’s face seemed small, and now it had shrunk even more. Her eyes were tight slits, her nose tiny, and there were no lips to see.

On the floor by Grandma’s bed was the white tub in which I used to float toy ducks and boats. Now it was half-filled with cotton and gauze, red and messy with blood. There was dried blood on the sides of the tub, blood stains on the floor. I was frightened and tried to stop my trembling by holding in my stomach and keeping my shoulders straight.

“She will be all right,” a voice said from behind me. Our doctor entered the room. “The blows she gave him were surprisingly strong, breaking his skin. But neither he, nor your mother-in-law, are in serious condition."

“Did he say why he did it?” Papa asked.

"He says Karia had asked him to beg Doña Marta again about money they owed. But when he entered the room she sprang at him with the cane. He came back at her with a blade, although he says it was only at the cane." My father was silent.

"Are you sending him to prison?" asked the doctor.

I recalled how the day before Tino and Grandma had fought, while he raised his fist and she her cane.

Papa had not answered the doctor. I touched his arm. "It's Tino, isn't it? He was very angry yesterday, he called her a usurer. What does that mean?"

He looked at me, but I could not tell if he was listening. "He also called her greedy and said she was killing them. That's not true, is it?"

Still he said nothing. "You should have seen Grandma. She shouted and scolded and waved her cane, telling him to get out."

Papa put a finger to my lips and glanced at the doctor who had walked to the window, his back to us.

"Papa, did Grandma ever kill anyone?" I whispered.

"Of course not."

Grandma groaned and he approached her bed, motioning me away. I remained by the door, trying to put it all together. Tino wanted money. Grandma had not wanted to

give any. Had Tino tried to kill Grandma? There was all that blood in the tub. Suddenly it all became clear.

"Papa," I called softly. He waved me away.

I had to tell somebody.

Where was Karia? She was the one who would really understand. I bunched my nightgown at the waist so the hem would not gather dust outside the hall. In the kitchen some women were busy rolling cigarettes and weaving sacks. Only Karia was idle. She sat on the floor, near the door, her chin resting on her knees, staring at her toes.

"Karia, I think Tino is a money-maker," I said. She looked at me, then at the window with its square of morning-blue sky. "You said money-makers made money only out of innocent children, but I think Tino was going to try and make money out of Grandma, wasn't he?" Her face twitched as if she was going to cry. I felt sorry for her.

"Stop that!" Papa said as he entered the kitchen. But he did not know what I knew. Karia's hunched shoulders were shaking. Her head was bowed, her face hidden.

Papa laid his hand on her head. "He will get well, Karia, and we will help him," he said.

Karia's shoulders continued shaking, "The cane, the *buntot pagi*, she hit him with the pagi." Her eyes were full of fear. Tino would get thinner and thinner.

I wondered if it was better to die while being made into money or to slowly wither away. I put my arms around Karia, loving her. She hugged me and broke into loud sobs.

July 23, 1949
Philippines Free Press

Adriana

Temptation may take unexpected shape. For my mother, it came as an offer of three remaining seats in a boxlike, charcoal-fueled vehicle traveling south. Its owner exhibited a 'strong' military pass, signed by General Yamamoto. That, and the two hundred-thousand-peso cost per seat, in what had come to be known as Mickey Mouse currency, were unbeatable, he claimed. "But," he added, knowing our destination was just a little more than halfway to his final stop, "even if you don't travel all the way, the price is the same."

Mother had made up her mind. Passenger vehicles with permits were very rare. As to dangers on the road, my mother, usually a very cautious person, now merely shrugged them off. What could happen under the open sky, she reasoned, that could not be happening under protective roofs?

"Besides," she reminded me with uncustomary flightiness, "there is to be a wedding on the day we will be there. You could attend." I could do without that, and I knew she was merely finding cause for me to share her eagerness. Gentle, stubborn mother had made a decision. There was no changing her mind. It was the same when we had left six months before. Father had been offered a post in the capital, three townships away. Mother insisted that the appointment to the provincial council would be an excellent cover for the underground resistance work he was doing.

Father had agreed. In fact, it had been time to leave the town. which had already been overrun by Japanese soldiers. By then, half the male population had spent time or were still in concentration camps. Those who could had escaped to the mountains despite watchful Japanese and Filipino spies. Whenever possible women and children, ostensibly on the way to church or market, had continued walking away to safety. Our exit had been easier, official, although several times the pass issued by our Filipino provincial governor had been scrutinized by the soldiers.

Now, it was reported, the town was back to normal. The army had been transferred, leaving behind only a small detachment of soldiers. Curfew had been lifted. Former evacuees had returned. Insiong, the garbage man, rode the streets once more, his horse and cart clattering behind him. Selmo, the *cobrador,* made the rounds, collecting *jueteng* bets. There was even enough flour for the bakery to make pan de sal, however small in size. It was quite safe to make a visit, Mother said, so we could fetch documents and valuables we had left behind.

A third seat remained. Timorously, Adriana approached Mother. Could she come along? She would like to visit her sister, Karia, now wife to our widowed overseer. Besides, she could help during the trip. Why not, Mother said, looking as pleased as if she had thought of it herself.

There is little I recall of my youth in which Adriana does not figure. I remember the first time I saw her; I was sitting on the wooden steps leading up to the veranda of our house in Manila. Behind me, Lola Marta and Mother were

talking to a lady from the agency and a girl she had brought to be our maid.

"Please," she said, her young, pained eyes turning towards the garden, "Please take my sister, too." I had followed her gaze to the child, barely two years older than I, who was chasing dragonflies, unmindful of my grandmother's discerning stare.

"But, this Adriana, she is only nine," Lola Marta had questioned, "Of what use would she be to us?"

It was Mother who answered, "Mama, she could be good company for Emma." At first Lola Marta would not be swayed. Adriana was just another mouth to feed, another responsibility. Whatever service she might provide would not outweigh the costs. But Mother argued that since my sister, Marina, was now a young lady, I would need a playmate. Besides wasn't Marina going to stay in the farm for longer periods with grandmother? This must have finally moved Lola Marta, for grudgingly she nodded her consent.

Of approval, that was all she ever gave Adriana. In the years that followed Lola Marta saw all the mischief and misdemeanors we contrived, and meted out the punishment. When we were out of hearing range we laughed about how Adriana's ears might shrivel and fall off from Lola Marta's unending litanies.

Adriana did whatever was required of her, and she did so, lightheartedly and satisfactorily. But Lola Marta seemed blind to this. Praise was never showered on Adriana; table

napkins were never laid straight enough, darning stitches were too tight, her scalp massage was either too heavy or too light. In spite of this, because Adriana remained bright-eyed and cheerful, Lola Marta kept her on, and so Adriana and I were seldom apart.

I was enrolled in the convent school of Benedictine nuns. Adriana was granted a place in their charity public school, a hedge away from our own spacious grounds. Until I was older and felt secure enough to sleep alone in my room, Adriana had a bunk in one corner. On it, we played card games or read books. But that was only when we were alone. As soon as we heard anyone outside my door, Adriana would jump to her feet and stand at attention while I carried on with whatever I was doing.

She was careful to obey the injunctions of Lola Marta, one of which was that servants should keep their place. Lola Marta had norms of conduct for both masters and servants. Once Adriana had presented me with a freshly plucked bunch of *lanzones* that caused me to exclaim my thanks in the presence of Lola Marta. She frowned, dismissed Adriana after a curt "Never take anything from the garden without permission," then turned to me and severely said, "You do not say Thank You to your maid, and especially not if what she has given you is yours."

We learned to be clever conspirators, Adriana and I, each using the personal license of the other. For instance, I was forbidden from husking the floor because, according to Lola Marta, it would make childbirth difficult. But when Adriana frisked about, polishing the hardwood floor with half the coconut husk under her nimble feet, I pushed her

off and enjoyed myself, while she went to the piano, which she was forbidden to touch, and played the scales and arpeggios. The appropriate sounds received the approval of those on the other side of the closed door. And we kept our secret.

The journey was extremely uncomfortable. The motor spewed granulated smoke, the roads were rutted, and the seats were hard. We shared the van and its two small windows with a nurse, a nun, and two men.

At every stop the nun's prayers became more audible, the beads sliding faster through her fingers. Mother tried to look composed, but I knew from the way she clutched her rosary that like the others, she too was nervous whenever the soldiers hailed the driver for his papers. I was nervous also. It seemed it was only Adriana who was completely at ease.

We spent two days in our house. Mother walked from room to room, up the spiral staircase and down the other, smiling dreamily as she stroked the polished banisters. She would gaze out of the second story windows, her eyes roving over rooftops, the church steeple, distant mountains. "Nothing has changed," she mused. I did not remind her that the war was not over. Nor that we still had a worrisome trip before us.

An unexpected matter had come up. Some hours after our arrival, a ban had been imposed on vehicular traffic on the highway. This was not unusual when military convoys were on the move. Nor would it disrupt our plans. Twenty-five kilometers was not such a long way, we could walk.

We would be accompanied by a farm laborer with a carabao-drawn sled for carrying clothes, and if she tired, Mother and her precious valise of letters and old photographs.

I had looked through Marina's old dresses, picking some for myself and two for Adriana – a blouse and skirt with floral patterns, and a gray dress with demure white collar and mother of pearl buttons down the front. If she could fit into them, I said, she could have them. Adriana was overjoyed. A seam let out, a tuck sewn in, and she could be *Rosa del Rosario*, she grinned. The new acquisitions were carefully laid in a small buri bag she would carry.

For the long walk, she and Mother had dressed to look like farm workers. The loose clothing, reaching almost to their ankles, were practical for concealing the girdles lined with genuine currency and valuables. Around their heads they had faded cotton bandanas, tied under the chin, their folds and shadows hiding all but the tips of their noses.

I decided my faded brown dress was disguise enough. Anything on my head would make my scalp itch, so I merely pulled back my hair and tied it with a band.

We started out at dawn, trailing behind the farm hands on their way to the fields. We made good time. A short way past the center of the next town we had our first encounter with the Japanese. We had made sure to skirt around all the guardhouses, but two soldiers were bathing by a nearby well and had seen us. One, with bare torso, wet and glistening in the sunshine, stepped forward, calling out loudly, "*daraga, daraga*." I bowed deeply, deeper than what

was expected in the presence of Japanese. I walked on, bent, my face hidden, until we were safely out of sight and could no longer hear their howling laughter. Mother and Adriana walked stiffly on either side of me.

The few houses we passed along the road looked empty, or fearful of intrusion, kept their windows closed against the street. But farther on, through a stretch of trees and tall grass, we could see a hut almost hidden by thick overgrowths.

By then the sun was setting and we were hungry. We turned into what seemed to be a seldom trodden path. If the house was abandoned, we could at least rest in it and eat the food we had with us. But before reaching it, we were welcomed by a middle-aged woman, a child straddled on her hip. She insisted we share their meager dinner and stay for the night. It was dangerous, she warned, with soldiers, guerillas, and bandits roaming about at night. Mother accepted her offer gratefully but refused to take the only bed in the only bedroom of the hut. Instead, she instructed Adriana to lay out our sleeping mat in a tiny partition used for storage, a space half-concealed by giant carrying sacks, and handwoven *bayong* filled with produce.

Mother and I lay beside each other, Adriana curled at our feet, insisting she was fine. We were weary from the day's walking and sleep came quickly. All was quiet except for the occasional heavy thump of single coconuts dropping to the ground, or a solitary palm frond breaking from the trunk. It must have been close to midnight, the cicadas had laid their wings to rest, even the *tuko* had refrained from

their exchanges, the only sign of their presence, a rustling of dried leaves as they moved about in the dark.

Then, from below the house a man's whispered cry broke the silence, "Ka Talia wake up!"

The door creaked open. Conversation followed, faint but distinguishable. After bidding her good evening, the new arrival said, "Major *Mestizo* ... *Tuwoy*, he knows the young girl is here."

"What girl? I am alone with my grandson," Talia denied.

"Ka Talia, our courier saw them. They were followed here from the army outpost." He paused. "The major is eating, but he'll be here in an hour."

"No, she is only sixteen," Talia muttered nervously. "I shall hide her in the bamboo grove by the river."

"They will find her. We have dogs, and then it will be worse ... Ka Talia, I do this for you, for your late husband. But don't make the Major angry. If she is not here when he comes, you know he will burn your house."

"But my husband was one of his men," she protested.

"I know. And he will not harm any of you as long as the girl is here. You know how he likes young girls ... I must go before they miss me. You decide."

For the first time in my life, I faced panic. The blood had drained from my body. I was limp, trembling, flushing hot and cold. I clung to Mother as Ka Talia repeated what we had already heard. "No, no," Mother kept repeating, her arms around my quivering shoulders. Adriana had been standing silently behind us, and I did not notice when she had turned away. When she returned, she had on Marina's gray dress. Her newly combed hair hung loose about her shoulders. When she spoke, in a low steady voice, it was to Talia.

"Where can you hide her?"

"No. I have to be here for him," I mumbled without thinking.

"I will take your place."

"But he wants me," I heard my voice, hoarse and pleading, and did not recognize it as my own.

"I will kill him if he touches you," Mother said to me.

"Then all of us will be killed… Hide her," Adriana ordered.

"Adriana," I begged. For what, I was not sure. I was petrified, Mother was near hysterics and Talia looked at us helplessly. Only Adriana was steadfast.

"Be quiet. This is the only thing to do." She had taken charge, pushing me towards Talia, who was at the far end of the room, holding open a sack. It was partly filled with grain. "I can't," I said.

"Get in," Adriana ordered. "Be quiet. Pray. Stay till I fetch you."

I was half immersed in rough grain, surrounded by garlic and onions, my head and arms free, but covered by clothes Adriana had thrown over me. Mother had been quietly watching the scene in front of her, a glazed, faraway look in her eyes. Adriana had made her sit on the mat and now gently pushed her to lie down. "Señora Nena," she said, "Lie down. Rest." Her touch unleashed a flow of words and tears from Mother. "We should not have come; we should not have come."

"Sssh, Señora. It will be all right," Adriana comforted her.

Ensconced within the rough womb of grain and spices, I followed the tormenting sounds of deepest night. First, mother's quiet weeping and Adriana's wooing her to silence. Then Talia's and Adriana's muffled conversation as the older woman offered whatever advice she could. And finally the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

The Major's voice was low, even courteous. He said Good Evening loudly, as if l knowing there were others in the house besides Talia who had bid him enter.

"Shall I go down with my grandson," she asked.

"No, my men are below. They may not respect your age. Stay here."

Other sounds followed. I heard Talia moving nearby and felt her weight as she leaned against the sacks. I heard Mother's labored breathing. I prayed hard, as Adriana said I should. I bargained with God: Please don't make her suffer, take from me what you will. But I did not know what I could possibly have that could equal what Adriana gave for me.

I shivered even as I sweat, and remembered the giggling imaginings Adriana and I shared as we exchanged whatever theories we had about sex, our fears and expectations always embellished with romance. Never like this.

The sound of a shoe dropping on the floor reminded me of where I was. Then a muffled exclamation, and the sound of bamboo in orgiastic frenzy.

I don't know why I had expected her voice to have been different, but it was clear and unchanged.

They stood at the top of the stairs, saying goodbye. "You're a good girl," he said. "I hope you were not hurt."

"No, Sir," she said.

"If there is anything you want, send me a message," he said. I heard him call out, "O, Talia, I am going now," and without waiting, he left.

No one rose, and the only sounds were those that Adriana made. I heard her drawing water from the well and the splashing as she washed herself. She was out for a long

time and when I finally heard her returning footsteps, the roosters were already crowing.

She joined Talia who, by then, was busy preparing food. I heard the sizzling of eggs and smelled the frying of dried fish. When Adriana came to me, I sat leaning on an upright sack. I put my head on my knees, hiding it with my arms, and bit my lips.

I could not bear looking at her. She looked freshly scrubbed as she did every morning when she woke me for school. Her dress, worn and faded but impeccably starched, her hair washed and oiled, still smelling of coconuts. The corners of her lips were turned up in a little smile. But her eyes had lost the merriment, and in its place, a sadness like that of Karia's when she had begged Lola Marta, "Please, take my little sister, too."

"Your mother is already at the breakfast table. Come we must have something to eat before we go."

The remainder of our trip was made on a *carretela* delivering bananas to army headquarters. Talia had somehow managed to secure space for us. Mother and I sat side by side, Adriana across us. Our previous escort, who had slept through the night's events on his sled by the river, had been dismissed by Adriana back to town on some pretense.

Only once during the ride did anyone speak of what had happened. It was Adriana. "Señora, please do not tell Doña Marta. Please."

I had hoped to tell my grandmother, make Lola Marta admit an Adriana more than equal to her demands. I begged Adriana to allow me, but she would not.

Mother said, "I will never tell anyone." She looked as if ready to weep again and Adriana quickly produced the valise she was holding and placed it on Mother's lap.

"Maybe you would like to show us some of the photos," she smiled. "I would like to see some, especially those of Emma when she was very young."

Repeatedly the pictures exchanged hands. "Emma, look," Mother said. She was holding a photograph Father took of me when I was twelve.

I was dressed as a fairy princess for a school play, and Adriana was holding up the train of my gown to keep it from getting dirtied. As she handed the photo to me, a slight breeze lifted it from her hand, and it fell on top of the pile of bananas.

February 1992

Sacrifice

Even with eyes closed, Emma could tell when the car turned off from the highway to the smaller road flanked by scenery of green and purple slopes. The village air had always been cool and fresh. Yet now, in the backseat of the car, there was only intense heat wrapped around her legs, pressed against her face, coiled about her neck. Her outstretched hand felt the rush of air outside the window. The wind was hot, as if blown from an oven fired by embers. Like the heat that burns sinners in hell.

"How is Lola Marta, Macario?" she asked the driver.

"All right. The same," he answered. That meant that her grandmother still kept to her wheelchair, her life turning with the revolution of its wheels.

"And Marina?" She glanced at the driver's rearview mirror, saw only his eyes flicker, revealing nothing. From his pocket he pulled a scented handkerchief and wiped his face.

"She is all right too." The heavy fragrance, the nauseating heat, pushed her back against the seat. She closed her eyes.

As the car drove through the iron gate, the front door opened. Her Lola Marta wheeled out to the veranda. It was three months since Emma's last visit. Her grandmother's face was unchanged, except that a few more wrinkles had disappeared as her skin stretched taut against

her bones. Her eyes seemed younger too, still holding a child's secretiveness in their gaze.

"You're here to stay?" She glanced at the suitcase Macario carried up the broad stone steps. It was the same question each time.

"Just a week."

"You can't leave the city, can you?" A crafty wisdom diminished her eyes, aging them.

"Lola, I have a job."

"With you it's a job." She laughed mockingly. "For your father it was business. You don't need a job, Emma. Something else keeps you there. Pleasure perhaps?"

Emma was used to the tone of voice, the way she had finally gotten used to the protestations whenever she tried to help with the wheelchair. "No, no. I can do it alone. Don't help me. You're just like your parents, thinking there was not much I could do. But look who lasted longer!"

Emma ignored her Lola Marta's words. Instead, she asked for Marina.

"Out in the farm. But she'll be back soon. I don't know what I would do without her."

Emma looked down at her grandmother and thought, well for one thing, you would not be in that wheelchair.

In the past it had not been all praise for Marina, not when she could no longer control her eldest grandchild. There had been quarrels every day, to the time Marina married Rodolfo and more quarrels after the marriage was over. One day Marina had come home raging, "He has women. He comes home after midnight, only to compare me with his *queriða*." Lola Marta had stood by the door of what was now Marina's room with neither sympathy nor censure and said, "I told you so." Then she had looked at Emma sitting on the bed and said with a sarcasm that puzzled the young girl Emma was then, "You're not like Emma here. She would take it."

Less than two months later, Marina tried to run off with the driver, the one before Macario. Down the steps she ran in her high-heeled shoes, and would not have stopped except that their grandmother, running after her, had taken a fall right by her feet.

Emma was standing by the window of her grandmother's room when Marina arrived, moving leisurely along the garden path lined with trees and flowering shrubs. She and her companion were half hidden from the house. Before reaching the open space in front of the veranda, they stopped. Marina turned on booted feet to move closer to the young man walking beside her. They were concealed by the low-hanging branches of the chico tree, and as Emma turned away from the window she heard Marina's tinkled laughter.

"Is Marina there?" their grandmother asked, wheeling into the room.

Emma nodded. "Does she go to the farm often?"

"Very often. She attends to everything."

"The overseer. What does he do?"

"Overseers are not to be trusted. Not anymore. Nor are they much help in collecting debts. They side with the tenants. After all, once they were tenants also."

"Debts?"

"Yes," her Lola Marta chortled. "But of course you do not know. All you know is Manila," she said with malice. "Like your father." Contempt shadowed her face, "that weak man."

Emma winced. She thought of her father. Was it weakness to want to live fully, and not having that, wish himself to die? Once he tried to explain to Emma. "Your mother, she was brought up to be a saint ... a virgin. You understand?" Vaguely he had continued, "You and Marina were born because... I willed it ...Women like your Mother should have stayed in heaven." His sadness was tinged with regret, even a plea for understanding.

Marina had not changed – the same slightly flared nostrils in a nose saved from flatness by the upturned tip, eyes slanted, shadowed by extraordinarily long lashes, full lips set in stern, ungracious lines when she was displeased, or on occasion, breaking into a sensuous smile, fawnlike ears on a narrow face, like those of a doe seeking to escape. They gave her a look of fear, desire, cruelty.

Her white silk shirt clung to her still young body. Emma tried to recall her age. Thirty-two, since she herself was now twenty-five. Age did not come early to the women in her family. Not to their grandmother whose few grey hairs were like ornamental wisps of time on her head, nor to Marina, her dark tresses hanging over her shoulders softly, lending an agelessness to her face. And least of all to Emma, her close-cropped waves framing the open, happy face.

Emma heard the sensuous laugh again. "How you stare at me, little sister."

Emma blushed, ruffled the notes Marina had handed her. "Kario, ten *cavans*. Angge, twenty-five."

"Why do they borrow so much?"

"Silly. That's what they owe, not what they borrowed."

"You charge interest?" Emma exclaimed.

"Certainly."

"Lola Marta knows?"

Marina shrugged. "I suppose so. We don't talk about it."

She paused, "Maybe you don't approve?"

"Of course not! It's wrong."

"That's up to you. They're your tenants."

"What about yours?"

"That's my own affair," Marina said coldly. "You should not concern yourself with my soul. Save yours first."

Emma crumpled the notes in her hand. This always happened whenever she visited, barbs tolerated, perhaps even encouraged by their grandmother, had become second nature to Marina.

"That was uncalled for," Emma said.

"As uncalled for as your window-watching me and Sencio?"

"I have not said anything."

"No. But I am sure you have made judgments."

"You're wrong, Marina. I do not judge." Her anger faded as she watched her older sister standing by the window, the riding whip she held in her hand twisting and untwisting, as if alive. It was not at Emma that the harshness was directed, and both knew it.

That night Emma slept fitfully, beset with dreams broken by wakefulness. Nightmares shuffled with remembrances, like parenthetical notes: the lessons learned from the nuns in elementary school, and the jokes heard in her office.

She saw hell in the dream, a place strangely supervised by St. Peter, who took turns looking like her father or the Mother Superior. There were rooms with smokey dividers,

and sinners of many types. Poor liars ridiculously standing on their heads, a greedy duck drowning in gold coins, sinners against the sixth commandment, a ghostly vaporous mass without sensation. In unbidden seconds of wakefulness, Emma recalled the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, but not the Virtues.

Towards the end of the dream, Marina floated in with a warm coat she tried to wrap around Emma. Emma screamed, awoke. Her blanket was gathered at her chin, and her nightgown was twisted around her body. She threw off the covers and rushed to the window for some air. There, shivering, she looked out at the quiet town, the sky glittering with stars and the trees casting black shadows against the heavens.

The next morning the town held a procession to ask the same heavens for rain. It had been dry for months. If the soil's thirst was not quenched, there would be no harvest this season. From the grilled garden gate, Emma watched the procession, women holding candles in their left hands, rosaries in their right. Between the double line of the pious, the priest walked under a canopy of gold and white, chanting incantations, accompanied by the tinkle of the sacristan's bell.

Almost at the end of the file was Marina, in pale blue, a white cordon around her waist. Her eyes were downcast, on her head a black lace veil. Behind Emma stood Sencio, the overseer's son, also watching the procession.

"Are you waiting for Marina?" Emma asked him.

He flushed, removed his hat, and nodded awkwardly. "Yes. Yes, Señorita. She said she would go to the farm after."

"The procession will be over soon. You can wait," she said kindly.

He was silent. Emma studied his square-jawed, young face, already weather-beaten and furrowed.

"Sencio, this year's crop will be bad?" He seemed to relax.

"Very bad," he answered. "Everything is dying. The wells are dry, the irrigation ditches have only mud."

"The dams?"

He shook his head.

"Is there nothing that can be done?"

"We need rain."

"If rain does not come, what then?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"How will our tenants eat? Pay debts?"

He stared at her. "We need rain. Maybe they'll do what they have talked about. Make a sacrifice to the gods."

"Sacrifice?"

"If after this, the God in church still does not send rain, the harvest gods will."

"Would it not be better to keep the animals as food?"

"Animals? Harvest gods want more than four-legged creatures."

"Sencio!" Emma exclaimed. "What are you saying? How...?"

"*Suertehan*. They draw lots."

They could not do it, Emma thought. It was not possible. "You don't believe in that, do you?" Sencio shrugged. His eyes were drawn to the street. Emma saw her sister at the corner, coming from church. Marina's face was calm, almost saintly. As she entered the gate, she smiled at Emma and walked with her up the front steps. Sencio followed far behind. Before reaching the door, Marina turned to him.

"Wait there. I shall be down in a few minutes."

She was making a quick trip to the farm, she told Emma. "I'll be back by dark. Shall I tell your tenants you'll be there tomorrow? Sencio can fetch you. I leave ahead, at dawn."

"We will not go together?" Emma asked.

Marina laughed. "Better not."

It was late when Marina returned. Their grandmother had spent the day interrogating Emma.

"Maybe I will go with you to Manila and meet your young men," she said.

"I have only one." Emma was exasperated by the endless questions and insinuations. "I will bring him next time I come, if you wish."

"Ah, so you'll marry him?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe? ... But already he is like a husband to you," she accused.

Angrily, Emma retorted, "I please myself."

Confronted by admission of sin, the grandmother was silent. "What keeps that sister of yours out so late?" she finally asked. But when Marina came, Lola Marta said little. While wheeling out of the room where she and Emma had been talking and reading, she told the elder girl, "Emma might bring her young man next time. Maybe we'll have a man in the house at last." The sarcasm lingered behind her.

Silently the sisters climbed the stairs, Emma trailing Marina to her bedroom. Marina stretched out on the bed, closed her eyes.

"You're getting married?"

"Maybe."

"Make your man happy."

"I love him."

"You're not much different from Mother, you know." Marina spoke in monotone, as if half-asleep.

"What do you mean?"

"Two sides of the same coin. Chastity. Love. Passwords to heaven."

"At least I discriminate." Emma wished she not spoken rashly, but the words were out.

Marina opened her eyes. "So you have heard. Not from Lola Marta, of course. She refuses to know." She laughed, as at a joke. "She'd have to send me away, otherwise. And of course . . . Marina takes care of everything … The tenants depend on Marina. What would we do without Marina...." She mimicked their grandmother's genteel effusions.

"Marina, please."

Marina sat up, gave Emma a quick hug, then turned to remove her clothes. "I need a shower. I have to leave early tomorrow."

"Can we not go together?"

Marina ignored the question. She sat beside Emma, speaking thought-spaced words. "What you know is their need to eat, to be out of debt. Rice… money… the familiar and attainable. Landowners are central to those needs. Whether or not they get them, we must keep up the class myth."

She paused. Emma was silent trying to read Marina's thoughts. Outside cicadas made crisp, staccato sounds. The air was heavy. "I have my, my ... sins, as Lola would say." Marina smiled wryly. "But I am still the *batang Señora*, and *mayaman*, a tradition, and beyond their kind. Anything else would spoil it for them."

She rose to go to the shower. "Unlike you, Emma, they are not prepared to become iconoclasts."

"They have a right to eat," Emma said as soon as Marina came back to the room, wrapped in a white bathrobe, her hair within a turbaned towel. Beautiful Aladdin, Emma thought, what magic do you possess? In the few minutes she had been alone, she had sorted out thoughts, forming the words.

"Marina, what you do is your business. But they have to be helped."

"I can perhaps be party to their sacrifice?" The mockery was evident. Ignoring it, Emma continued. "Write off debts, increase their share."

Marina laughed. "Next thing you'll say I should owe them land." She faced the mirror, her back to Emma, creaming

her face, then wiping it off with tissue, and dabbing lotion on her neck.

"Why not?" Emma snapped back; her impatience edged with sharpness.

"Emma!" Marina turned to face her sister in disbelief. "You're crazy, really crazy. Give what we got from our great, great grandparents?"

"Why not?" Emma repeated obstinately.

"Lola would never! You're mad." Her voice was harsh, nervous. "This is our life. You, you come and judge. You say, give them rice, land." Her voice rose as the words rushed out. "You don't know them. They're ignorant, prodigal. They'd gamble, drink, buy televisions. They'd lose it all."

"You don't lose what you need. They've lived on the land all their lives, given it more than we ever have."

Marina threw her brush on the dresser. It bounced and clattered to the floor. "You're stupid, as stupid as they are. Give them yours, not mine."

They were both on their feet, facing each other. In anger Emma spoke the unguarded thought. "You give yourself, but not your land?"

When Marina slapped her, she turned and left the room silently.

Marina had left by the time Emma came down for breakfast. Their grandmother, dipping toasted strips of bread into hot cocoa, her eyes on the cup, asked, "You quarreled with Marina?"

"We argued."

"When Marina was small and even as she grew up, she spent long months in the farm with me. She loves the land."

Emma rose. "It's getting late. I have to go."

Sencio helped her jump the ditch that separated the town road from the small foot path. It was a kilometer to her own land. They passed the patched fields of the first plantation. Undergrowth was sparse, the dry leaves hanging limp on scrawny branches.

"Where can we find Marina?" she asked Sencio.

"She did not wish to say." He sounded sullen.

"Sencio, have you talked to my sister about the hard times our farmers are facing?"

"Yes, Señorita." he hesitated. "She does not want to promise anything."

"You should insist."

"How can I insist to the batang Señora?" He pointed to a dry irrigation canal. "Across this, your land begins."

They walked on the narrow, raised path enclosing rice paddies. The soil was hard and cracked. From a distance they could see nipa huts under mango trees with dusty leaves.

"Sencio," Emma questioned, "There is no one around. Why?"

He looked here and there, peered at the distance. The morning sun was gone. The air was heavy and still.

"Yes," Sencio said, quickening his pace. Emma, behind him, attempted to keep up. "They must be near the well. They said they would hold it by the well." He began to run, pointing to the edge of the vast rice fields, towards a clump of trees. Her shoes slowed her down, but she kept Sencio in sight.

"The batang Señora..." He had turned his head so Emma could hear his words, rasped with anxiety. "What are you saying?" she shouted, but he ran on.

What about Marina? Sencio was afraid, but of what? Emma frightened, cried out, "Sencio. Is it the sacrifice?" His terror was unashamed.

A few meters away from the well, a large crowd was gathered. With heaving chest, Emma caught up with Sencio. Men, women, and children stood around listening to an old man who was stirring bits of dried banana leaves in half a coconut shell.

As Emma approached, they eyed her curiously and the hum of whispers began.

"That's the Señorita Emma, the younger one," someone said. Two small children approached her timorously.

Emma searched among the crowd, finally saw Marina standing apart, in her white cotton shirt and riding pants. She disengaged herself from the group around her and walked towards Emma.

"Marina!" The relief in her sister's voice made Marina smile. As she passed Sencio who had moved closer to the well, she ordered, "Sencio, get the young Señorita something to drink. She is exhausted from so much running."

Emma stared, awed by her composed, imperious sister. The crowd watched them, their batang Señora and her young sister. Emma laughed nervously. Marina was every bit the master of the land and its people. As she made her way through the crowd, they quickly stepped aside, apologizing for being in her way. Bending low, one hand pointing to their path, they scuttled off.

"We ... I thought ... Sencio suddenly began running." Emma stammered.

"The drawing of lots? No, they have not done it."

She looked up at the sky. "And now it looks like it might rain. You can even smell it in the air. My God might win, they say." Marina laughed cheerfully. "I had offered myself

for the sacrifice, but they would not have me." Emma tried to read her sister's face. Was she joking? "They will not even have me pick from the lottery slips. I'm not one of them, they said." She tossed her unbound hair back, put an arm around Emma. "You see little sister, I was right. Their gods also protect their human idols."

"You're crazy," Emma said. "Mad."

"That's what I said to you yesterday." Marina smiled, as she led Emma towards the farmhouse.

"Remember this place?" she asked her.

Emma nodded. Here, as a little girl, she had often rested after a day of riding with Marina on the elder girl's horse. Emma rode in front, Marina half-embracing her to keep her from falling, because she did not know the dips and turns and the lie of the land. Marina would point out the best parts of the river where one could swim or catch shrimps and tiny crabs, or the mounds Emma should skirt because of the elves who lived in them. And all the rice fields and valley plantations their grandparents owned, and which one day they would have to preserve for their own grandchildren.

August 13, 1955
Philippines Free Press

At a certain time of day, between the high heat of noon and the cool of afternoon, the streets of Casay have a strange quietness – as of a leaf arrested in its fall, or of a vacuum from which air and life have suddenly been drained, a quietness that seems to bide its time. Very infrequently, a car, a truck, or a cart may disturb the stillness, raising brown dust in its trail and sowing screeching echoes into the silence. But a minute after, the dust settles, the noise fades away, and it is quiet again. Even when the wind blows and rustles leaves, sways branches, scatters blossoms, it is still quiet.

It stays so till the hour when the fading sun gives way to lengthening shadows and the church bells ring the hour of Angelus, the coming of the day's second dawn. Then slowly, the streets come to life. Cockfighters gather at corners, stroking their roosters, while wives and chickens cackle in coops and kitchens.

An hour later, the silent street has vanished, the rustle of leaves drowned by the noise of people. Of course, truly, the streets themselves have remained unchanged through the years. Sandy gray, grass-grown on either side, and wide enough for two cars to pass at the same time, it is what have been borne on their uneven course that varied – senators' cars and carts of junkmen, carriages with beauties, armored trucks with guns, soldiers and rebels — and while the people themselves have changed, have grown older or wiser, more stupefied or more afraid, the streets have remained the same, circling round the town,

ending on rivers that edge a mountain, or ending near the foot of the mountain itself, their five-pace breadth narrowing to footpaths that rise up to the hills, upwards to the imposing peaks of Anak-Dagat and Arawan.

Thus, the town lies, the round bottom of a cup, for its rim, the clouds that wreath the mountain tops, like a beloved one, guarded on all sides by him who loves. Or like a prisoner whose only bid to freedom is a winding, asphalted road that leads to the city, a road that must pass right under the green-purple peak of Arawan.

Some, in their youth, reached this freedom, and now grown old in their swivel chairs or on their golf links, they call the city their home. But many others come back, a few because they must, others because they want to.

When I returned, not so long ago, I looked forward to the peace of Casay. I had been born there, spent many drowsy summers in the town whose deepest impression on me, after more than ten years of absence, was the quiet of noontime.

As I drove to the municipal hall, I waited for the familiar breeze that blew at all hours, a soft wind that carried with it the tang of far-away sea and tender green leaves from cool groves, mingled with the scents of the flower gardens of Casay. But the air was arid, the drive dusty.

It was only two o'clock. The village seemed asleep, but in the municipal hall, the hub of the town, there was a constant wake, a vigil of noise and activity fenced in from the rest of the community by barbed wire on three sides,

the broken-down bamboo enclosure of the puericulture center's lot on the fourth.

Three old men with red lips and hardly any teeth sat on the porch steps chewing betel nut. Above them, on the railing, straddled two policemen, their guns hanging by their sides and a tommy gun on the floor near them. They watched me walking under the shower of dried acacia leaves and feathery, pink-tipped blooms that each slight gust of wind brought down. One old man, his mouth full, spat out red saliva. The rest stared, the old ones knowing they didn't know me, and the two policemen feeling that they should.

A tight little knot of women stood on one end of the porch, young except for one or two, all noisy, dressed well, but shabbily shod. As I climbed up the steps one of the older women detached herself from the group, hesitated, then met me halfway on the porch, drawing tightly over her thin breast the edges of a messily fringed shawl which she wore over a bottle-green dress. Her thick-soled Batangas slippers, topped with brown velvet, dragged on the floor, and before she spoke she glanced down at them, as if annoyed that they should intrude on the silence that settled on the hall as she approached me.

"Emma," she paused, half-questioning.

I smiled and nodded. She gasped. "You really are Emma! I could tell right away, even though you were so young when you left. Do you know me?"

I pretended trying to remember. She interrupted. "Of course not," she said. "But my husband was your

grandfather's clerk." She crossed herself quickly. "May they both rest in peace."

"Inggo? I remember him. You're Femia." Inggo was a dark, gentle man with prematurely white hair and very white teeth. "Dead?"

"Yes, last year."

"What of?"

A cloud shadowed her face. "He was shot. He'd gone to Barrio Lubak to get our pig. There was some shooting on the way, and he got caught in it."

"But why? Who did it? Did you find out?"

"There are many shootings these days," she said. "It was the will of God." She paused. I had nothing to say. "But we must not talk of those things," she smiled brightly. "Come, you must meet your townmates."

I shook my head, saying I was in a hurry, that I had to get back to the city right away. But some other day, I promised vaguely. Now I had time only to get my birth certificate.

The *Municipio*'s offices looked the same, mottoes on the walls: "Honesty is the best policy," "In God we trust," "Do unto others as you would they should do unto you"; busts on the shelves – Rizal, Mabini, Quezon – dust on everything, even on the splinters on the unvarnished walls.

All the male employees wore sports shirts hanging loosely on their bodies, and the women, with the exception of Femia, pretty frocks. The young man who looked through the records for my birth certificate had a shirt more stylish than the others, dark blue with yellow prints of pineapples entwined with red leis. When we came into his room he was sitting on a corner of his desk, one leg swinging freely and brushing now and again against the polka-dotted skirt of a young girl standing by the filing cabinet. She giggled as he stumbled against a chair in his rush to get up, and he threw her a furious glance.

I stood by a wire net window laced with cobwebs while Femia helped him in the search. "Emma needs it for her passport," she said. "It must be here."

Behind me I could hear the pages being rifled, files long unopened lustily giving way to their hunt. Their combined murmurs droned on, while outside a thick cloud covered the sun and a welcome shade cooled the heat of noon. Several policemen now paced the grounds, walking on the green grass and avoiding the potholed lanes.

The girls had all gone to their desks and next door the hinges of the puericulture center's gate creaked. A young nurse in starched white, black umbrella in one hand, a black bag in the other, pushed back the bolts and smiled across the broken fence at the postman leaving with his bag of mail.

This was Casay then, all of this. And the mossy ruins of a Spanish church across the street, the dazzling white of the concrete plaza to its right.

Picture-book *calachuchi* shedding wax-like white blossoms on green velvet, a red-white-and-blue kite entangled in the branches of the enormous flame tree whose roots threatened to topple a streetlight. In the heat of noon, one heard the sound of a horse's neigh, the twitter of brown birds, the sound of a large truck driving away.

The voices behind me rose and fell. "It must be here," my companion insisted. "Why, I can tell you the very day she was born."

"I can't find it anywhere," he said.

"It was, let me see, it was May... the *hermano mayor* had just been to our house...."

"It is not here." There was banality in his tone.

"May... May..." From a distance the soft wail of a siren approached, sibilance pushing through the silent town. Like children playing a game of statues, everyone on the lawn paused, immobile in the fraction of a second.

It was reminiscent of the past world war. The siren. The armored car. The machine guns. The three corpses.

"Outsiders," a man standing near me on the porch said.

I shivered. As if sensing it, Femia turned and took my hand. "Child," she said, "Your hands are cold." I did not answer letting my hand rest in hers. "We are used to this," she said.

Two soldiers climbed up on the truck and lifted a body, swung it one, two, three, and let it fall to the ground. The two other corpses were thrown down the same way. Like practiced pitchers, the soldiers grinned triumphantly as they viewed their work, three dead bodies all in a row.

Three corpses, eyes still open, arms flung outward like dolls thrown on the ground, blood spreading on clothes, on grass.

The first was an old man, naked to the waist, a trickle of blood running diagonally on his brown chest where old skin was drawn skimpily over aging bones. His faded denim shorts, torn and beltless, lay loosely on his caved-in belly. The second one was emaciated, tall, but there was little left of him that one could look at. He had no face. The last was just a boy in a ragged t-shirt, short pants of some unnamable color. His hair was matted with blood. His left leg was missing, the stump coagulated with brown mud.

I felt myself getting dizzy, meaningless voices buzzing around me, like the hissing of flies feasting on rotting mangoes on a summer day. Men kept walking to and from the corpses.

"Sheets," I mumbled, but no one heard.

Through the closely packed crowd that had assembled, a dog edged its way into the clearing where the corpses lay. It sniffed at the ring of live humans, wagged its shaggy tail, then turning around, trotted to the dead. It licked the boy's outstretched hand.

"Shoo," someone said. The animal moved on to the faceless corpse. Body arched as if ready to leap, it stood by the mass of serrated flesh and sticky strands of black hair. A low growl came from the dog and retreating, it stumbled over the old man's body. The dog's nostrils dilated as it sniffed the gray hair, the open mouth. Its pink tongue caressed the old man's bare chest, licked his armpits, his side.

The crowd watched the mayor, a young gangling man, nod his head approvingly at the soldiers, then turn to the woman who had just arrived. Pushing aside the people in her way she ran to the boy and, sobbing, fell on his body.

The mayor cleared his throat. She did not look at him.

"*Ale*," he said. Her sobs continued. He shrugged his shoulders. "Her son should not have been where there are Huks," he said to the crowd. "He should have left the house when the Huks came."

She shook her head without lifting her face, her sobs changing to low moans. The dog, unmolested, tugged at the old man's shorts. A man snickered as the garment gave way. The animal barked softly at the naked thighs and old withered belly.

"I'm sorry," I said to Femia, shoving the tin wastebasket behind me. I had not been able to stop throwing up. "I'm sorry," I turned to the man in the Hawaiian sports shirt, "that I dirtied your wastebasket."

I was angry with him, sitting once more on the corner of his desk, ogling the girl in the polka-dotted skirt who was now chewing gum beside him.

"You're not used to it," he shrugged, looking at the girl, as if they shared a funny secret about me.

"No," I said. "No, I'm not."

"The blood makes you dizzy?" It was the first time the girl had spoken to me.

"Yes," I said, not looking at her, "and the naked dead bodies."

"You shouldn't have looked at them," Femia said. "We here, we are used to these things."

I didn't say anything. I turned to the young man. "My birth certificate?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "Not here."

"But I was born here," my voice rose. "I was registered."

"We looked for it. It's not here." He rose and sauntered to the window at the other end of the room.

"No birth certificate. No sheets for the dead," I shouted.

"What do you have?"

He turned around. "Nothing. This is not the city. Go back and buy a birth certificate there. That's where you come from." His face was red as the leis on his shirt.

I left just as the afternoon bells began to peal. I could hear the footsteps of aging Femia hurrying after me, but I did not slow down. The yard was still full of people standing by the dead. I walked on, but she caught up with me just outside the gate.

"Wait," she gasped, "wait. You must not be angry. He is really like that. He does not like city people."

"No," I said.

"But you shouldn't mind him."

"I do not, really," I tried to reassure her.

"You can get a signed document. You were really born here. I can sign it." I nodded my thanks.

A group of children ran past us, babbling about corpses, their faces bright with expectancy. From somewhere a radio announced the afternoon Tagalog plays. The sun was a pale amber on the newly awakened town.

I paused in mid-step and took her hand. "I'm sorry." I said goodbye and hurried away.

January 23, 1954
Philippines Free Press



GLOSSARY

The Age of Carcamonia

apa (Tagalog) – wafer, biscuit

azucena (Spanish) – tuberose; in Tagalog *asusena*; scientific name: *Polianthes tuberosa*

Vietnam rose (English) – portulaca; scientific name: *Portulaca grandiflora*

*carcamonia (*Tagalog*)*– transfer stickers; from the Spanish *calcamonia* for "decal"

Chinese beho – colloquial offensive term for Chinese; from the Spanish *viejo* for "old"

Lolo/Lola (Tagalog) – Grandfather/Grandmother

Like Water Lilies Floating

Veronica Lake – American actress in the 1940s known for her femme fatale roles

Felix

*kulang-kulang (*Tagalog*)* – half-witted; colloquialism from *kulang* for lacking, literally "lacking-lacking"

sampaguita (Tagalog) – national flower of the Philippines; Arabian jasmine or sambac jasmine; scientific name: *Jasminun sambac*

piedra-china (Spanish) – granite paving stone originally from China; from Spanish *piedra* for "stone" and *china* for "China"

Merienda

merienda (Spanish) – snack or smaller meal between main meals, originally from the Latin *merenda* and then through the Galician, Italian and Portuguese *merenda*

*calamansi (*English, Tagalog*)* – small hybrid citrus plant native to the Philippines; scientific name: *Citrofortunella macrocarpa*

Pasyón (Tagalog) – Philippine epic narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, focused on his passion, death, and resurrection, recited through Holy Week; from the Spanish *Pasión*

*ratiles / aratiles (*Tagalog*)* — cotton candy berry, Jamaica cherry, Singapore cherry, wild cherry; scientific name: *Muntingia calabura*

*ensaymada (*Tagalog*)* – spiral shaped pastry topped with powdered sugar and sometimes cheese; from Spanish *ensaimada*

pan de sal (Tagalog) – bread buns/rolls typically for breakfast or merienda; from the Spanish *pan de sal* (literally bread-of-salt)

bibingka (Tagalog) – baked glutinous rice cake cooked with coconut milk in a terracotta oven lined with banana leaves

hibip (Tagalog) – air blower; an iron pipe for blowing air to inflame red embers on the clay stove

bagoong (Tagalog) – a condiment / sauce or paste made from fermented or salted fish

lambanog (Tagalog) – distilled coconut palm liquor usually of very high alcohol content, likened to vodka or sake

pagaspas / pamaspas (Tagalog) – a stick with strips of light material such as gauze or Japanese/tissue paper used to shoo away flies and bugs during a meal; from the Tagalog word *paspas* for "a gust of wind"

capiz (Tagalog) – shells made into decorative items, such as windows, maps, trays, from the windowpane oyster; scientific name: *Placuna placenta*

*perezosa / butaca (*Spanish*)* – lounging chair of wood 'and rattan weave, from the Spanish *silla perezosa* for "lazy chair"

Bruun butter – popular brand of Danish butter imported in iconic red tins in the1890s to the 1960s. The name is derived from the name of the entrepreneur Lars Emil Bruun (1852-1923) who established the canning company in 1883.

The Money-Makers

palay (Tagalog) – unhusked rice grain

pagi (Tagalog) – stingray; scientific name: *Dasyatis pastinaca*

buntot pagi (Tagalog) – the tail of the stingray, used primarily as whip or a secondary weapon; also as an amulet or protection against folkloric creatures; several can be woven together and wrapped to use as a cane

Adriana

cobrador / kubrador (Tagalog) – the solicitor or collector of jueteng bets who goes from house to house; from the Spanish *cobrador* for debt collector

jueteng (Tagalog) – numbers game played in the Philippines, especially among the poorer communities, dating back to the Spanish times and mentioned in the penal code of 1887; the origin of the word is believed to be from Chinese, particularly Hokkien, with the characters representing "flower pawnshop"

lanzones / lansones (Tagalog) – fruit bearing tree and its fruit; scientific name *Lansium parasiticum*

Rosa del Rosario – stage name of Rose del Rosario Stagner, a Filipina-American film actress active from 1932 to 1950

daraga – Japanized pronunciation of *dalaga* (Tagalog); a young unmarried woman, maiden

bayong (Tagalog) – a shopping bag made of woven dried leaves, traditionally of buri, pandas, abaca, or rattan; modern ones are made of plastic

tuko (Tagalog) – a nocturnal arboreal gecko; its name derives from the sound it makes; scientific name: *Tokay gecko*

Mestizo - Tisoy (Spanish / Tagalog) – a person of mixed European and non-European indigenous ancestry; usage in this case depicts a nickname culled from facial features of the Major. *Tisoy* is a Tagalog slang abbreviation for *mestizo*

carretela (Spanish) – light horse-drawn vehicle or calash

Sacrifice

querida (Spanish) – mistress, paramour; from the Spanish *querida* for "beloved or mistress"

cavan / caban (Tagalog) – Philippine unit of measure equal to 75 liters, used especially for measuring rice grains

suertehan (Tagalog) – by the luck of the draw; from the Spanish *suerte* for "luck"

batang Señora (Tagalog) – young mistress of the household; a colloquialism from the Tagalog word *bata* meaning young or youth, and the Spanish word *Señora* for "lady" or "mistress of the household"

mayaman (Tagalog) – technically an adjective meaning rich or wealthy, but used in this context as a noun meaning "The Rich Ones", rather than the correct nominal form *ang mayayaman* (the rich ones)

With Fervor Burning

Municipio (Spanish/Tagalog) – Municipal Hall; chief administrative building in a provincial town in the Philippines

calachuchi / kalachuchi (Tagalog) – frangipani, temple flower; scientific name: *Plumeria rubra*

hermano mayor (Spanish) – person chosen by the parish priest or a religious organization to sponsor the fiesta activities for the year; from Spanish for "older brother"

Ale (Tagalog) – respectful address to a married or unmarried mature female who is a stranger, similar to madam (pronounced as ah-leh)



Winners of the FREE PRESS Short Story Contest

FIRST PRIZE, P1,000: "GUARDIA DE HONOR" BY NICK JOAQUIN (F.P., Oct. 1, 1949)

SECOND PRIZE, P500: "DEATH OF ILLUSION" BY GONZALO A. VILLA (F.P., MAY 14, 1949)

THIRD PRIZE, P250: "THE MONEY-MAKERS" BY NITA UMALI (F.P., July 23, 1949)





NITA UMALI
Third Prize.

One of the best of the new writers, Nita Umali is a small, slim slip of a girl whose first stories found ready recognition by local publications. Of five stories so far submitted by her to the FREE PRESS, *three have been published, one returned, one scheduled for early publication. She is 26 years old, went to Sta. Scholastica's College, then University of Sto. Tomas, where she got her Litt. B., left for the United States where she got a Master's degree in English from the State University of Iowa, came back to the Philippines July 6, 1949.*