Tales from My Lost River

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1. Stolen

THE summer he was first seen walking with his grandson Francisco, the old man no longer had his cane. He was inching onward by holding the shoulder of the skinny boy.

The old man had suffered a massive stroke the year after his youngest son, 16, was abducted by Japanese troops at home.

A trusted carpenter and fisherman, he refused to stay down and sink.

There's a story here about the old cripple who beat the count, so to say, to continue with the battle.

He later moved out of the house he had built for his family.

He decided to live alone in a tree-shrouded shack close to the river.

This morning, the old man stepped out of his borrowed hut.

He was in threadbare white shirt and colorless knee pants made out of flour sacks.

He was firm-chested with thick worker's arms the shade of copper.

His sun-chiseled face was calm, his hair ashen.

A light breeze, the *amihan,* a blessing from the northeast, was breathing in the direction of the river, through wide-open bamboo windows, on brown nipa rooftops.

There was summer murmur in the trees.

There were neighbors who would say the barefoot traveler, once he had refused to continue living with his family, should've been junked, not in a shack, but in an infirmary.

These neighbors also suggested he should have used crutches, disposed of the confounding stick that helped conceal his full lameness.The old man, moving on in creaky dignity, was not being fancy. He was comfortable walking slowly, alone.

Other villagers thought he appeared like an overstaying broken warrior from a forgotten country. Just as in the past, he took another trek along the banks of the river, testing and feeling the sandy edge with his toes. He traveled past the entrance to the next village, all the way to the river's west bend, before returning to his shack an hour later.

They had been used to these wanderings and no longer asked if, say, the straying Quijote, armed with a petty stick, was still scanning for jewels lost in the forgotten time of his own grandfather.

He never spoke about it. They would've stamped their feet had he honestly told them he was there also to keep watch over the river.

The boy had heard other stories.

The old man had indeed hacked his bamboo cane in two after it fell a third time when he leaned it on the wall.

But much earlier, it had been said that he slammed his white warrior rooster, a three-time winner, dead and convulsing on the ground.

Going by his quick-boil temper, that was rather easy to believe.

There was no debate after the gallant fighter greeted its master with a wounding peck on the left forearm the morning it was taken from the pen for a routine pampering.

Unlike the poor cane, the win-win rooster did not disobey its master.

It merely overdid itself. But it also exceeded its competence.

It was not that simple, though.

There's another story here.

It's about the river.

Nearby dwellers lived and loved by the blessed body of water as though it was their own mother.

Noble natives would need only a small step to descend into the river whose banks were practically at ground level with the bare street.

Bits of forgotten jewels, loose pearls and stray nuggets from a buried treasure, had been discovered by early villagers. These precious beads, so said old folks, were found during one season of unusual plenty. They glinted and quivered among broken blue China ceramics, pastel pebbles, jagged white seashells and the fresh year-round clams called *tulya* on the river's clear sandy edge.

That river, a slice of paradise, had been lost.

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THERE were many tales of life and death, magic and misery in the village.

The villagers were of diverse origins. They had contrasting tastes and beliefs. They were so familiar with everybody else they all got affiliated through mutual warmth or cold contempt.

There were many hidden lives, some strange and somewhat magical, if not comic and totally embarrassing; although the most known were those gladly depicted near or on the main street itself—an even stretch of sun-baked ground, the rust-colored *banlik*—that often served as riverside center stage.

Everybody knew each other in the village. It wouldn't take a whole day for the neighborhood to know who eloped, who had a miscarriage, who had gone missing, who gave birth (legitimate or not), who got bitten by Aling Titay's mad dog, who was seriously ill, who had gone berserk, who was getting married, who briefly returned from the dead, who won big in *jueteng*, whose sow had a liter, and how many.

Maybe it was only the portly Aling Luming, newly docked from the Visayas with husband David Barrientos, who did not know what was cooking in her neighbor's kitchen.

Why did terrible Tibo, the peppery transplant from far-off Aklan whose eyes were on a perpetual wild spin, chase Mang Ampong, the smallpox

king, with his *bolo* over the *sakla* table cursing?

How Ampong Bulutong, cornered, was saved from sure death after the killer blow got entangled with a backyard clothesline continued to be counted as a small miracle.

Why was Aling Titay, whose discolored bulging eyes screamed like those of a witch's from ghost town, forever on a chase with a claw stick after sun-smelling urchins who always had a fancy for her *santol* fruits overhead, impossibly sour as they were?

Wasn't it also to keep secret the afternoon sleep-in visits to her busty spinster sister by Padre Doro all the way from the Quiapo parish?

Was the fumbling town mayor speaking in riddles when he exclaimed about a village bully, a tested vote hauler, who still failed to get exactly what he was eating, although the glutton had already finished one whole *carabao*?

Was it the same wrinkled Donya Karay, red-haired widow of a known international sea vessel captain, who turned her colorfully fenced wooden house by the stagnant stream into a secret brothel after the officer's death?

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THE river was wider than a stone's throw.

It would however take someone strong as the bronze-armed Totoy Tuason, he with the heaving chest and eyes of bright marble, to bring the river to measure.

The old man, Itay Kayong had been known for his strength. But he could no longer throw a pebble far. It was however not too surprising how he reluctantly got voted top reader of rain, if not better, maybe equal to the sun-beaten chief boatman Sabas Coronado, the acknowledged weatherman.

It was a clear sunny day.

The roadside *bakya* brigade—men in sleeveless undershirts, the *sando*, pampering warrior roosters, full-breasted mothers in windy blouses hanging the day's wash—was there in full force.

The scent of the *sabon luto* laundry soap wafted with the drizzling breath of newly cut grass. Neighborhood laundry danced on the clothesline like pennants in a parade.

There was no chance of rain whatsoever.

But shortly before noon, the old man reappeared from the shack.

He was limping as usual, but now in totally different attire. In full battle armor, he was a storm warrior raring to dig into enemy territory alone.

He had a new cane.

As expected, the roadside crowd, often behaving like a chorale, could only stare in awe.

He had his head gear on: the *salakot* made from an old pot-sized gourd. Strapped on his back was the reliable raincoat of woven *anahaw* strips.

They were one in swearing the crazy warrior must've irrevocably tripped over.

He was funny, a little sensational. But the streetside chorus, composed mainly of excitable, olive-skinned housewives, had no choice but take the old man as the day's headline.

He was suddenly top item in the busy rumor mill.

Meanwhile, the sidestreet crowd proceeded to regale with mirthful sneers.

But once the old man had come near the summer sun dimmed.

The peal of laughter next turned into the crick-crack of tiny bullets pelting the dry rooftops, the thirsty street.

Dust rose as parched earth got assaulted by angry rain.

There was a stampede to retrieve laundry from the clothesline.

A smell, closer to a stench—the stinging *alimuom*—issued like devils's breath from nowhere.

Everybody ran for cover, also for a slug of drinking water to comfort uneasy intestines.

The old man moved away.

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EACH and every villager followed his own whim in reading the weather.

If today's sunset was salmon-hued or bathed in romantic pink, the next sunrise would be bright, sparkling.

After the rain stopped, hastily as it had started, the *bakya* brigade settled back in place.

It was not easy getting over what they had witnessed.

Did the old man talk to the trees?

How was he able to do that?

Was he tipped off by devotional birds?

What about the moth and other insect friends?

The old man was too remote to sense widespread wonderment.

He had no idea whatsoever he had posed a puzzle to other villagers, mainly the carefree ones who may never be able to see or feel hints from cloud and wind.

If he had allowed himself to be mystified, it was at how these schooled neighbors strayed off and next stayed at a proud distance.

Of course, they too had their own stories on how and why they squandered their birthright, the honest bond with native earth. They couldn't be blamed, but these younger villagers, unable to relate, could be partly right about the trees.

The old man was not alone because other village elders, the gut-feel therapist Endiong Medina, the *revolucionarios* Kikong Bararat, Lelong Ilyo Bartolome, Kaka Endong Cruz, the old man's violinist brother Vicente and the lead *herbolario* Jacinto Carlos, harbored reverence for great trees, man's original residence and sanctuary ahead of caves and temples.

Everything was related to everything else, no matter how distant, different.

Wasn't the night cry of the lonesome owl a call to the song of summer?

Weren't the anger and shriek of lightning ushers to the smile of morning?

The old man, humbly attuned, had long ceased to wonder.

Insects and birds, they too never hesitated to burrow like infants feeding from mother's breast, the musical cicadas digging at dusk under old branches into the tree's own armpit, playful *maya* and other warblers warm in the embrace of strong foliage.

The river itself was always there, never failing to provide, and no fisher was ever heard to have returned home empty-handed even on so-called lean days.

Prodigious as the river was, it also hummed an endless hymn, more of a mother's lullaby, straight from its bosom of virgin sand as it rolled from the mythical upper lake, emptying into the sunset bend towards Manila Bay.

It would not be an exaggeration to say the river had also lent villagers an idiom of calm and firmness. Therefore, it was only normal for folks to warn strangers before letting them get into the water.

So far there had been no case of a citizen of the community drowning therein or being stolen by the river.

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THERE was a heated argument before his children, who insisted on caring for the old man, that finally allowed Itay Kayong to leave home. As part of the concession a full meal was delivered daily in a covered rattan basket to his borrowed shack.

After regaining remnant power, the old man would still descend, limping, into the river. But he made sure he took only as little as he honestly needed.

He was perfectly content with what was at hand.

He refused proud, useless wear.

He could neither read nor write. He could not sign his own name.

He found it fancy, if not foolish, to use or wear a watch.

He relied on the shade and shadows of the day, the behaviour of insects in his immediate surroundings, to tell time.

For example, the moth, *gamugamo*, would swirl and swarm at vespers to report an abundance of the silvery catfish and other related species in the river.

The old man also traced the possibility of rain based on the slant, shape and size of the moon, the temper and direction of wind.

Before suffering a stroke, he was always secure whenever fishing hard or paddling through another gentle season. He had always gone for quality

catch that would be taken to the town market or peddled around the village.

His rigless boat, whitish and carved out of a mighty tree, had since been hauled up the river, moored. The *banca* had served as ally and an extension of his old home whenever he would fish overnight.

The old man loved to drop bait and spear fish now from the edge of the river near his shack. It was a simple box-like hut with a roof of matted *nipa* strips topped by used galvanized iron. It had a wide window fronting the river, its main doorless back entrance facing the sunrise side to the east.

He had been using this place that belonged to a fellow carpenter, who sold him the lot for his original residence near the chapel, as a station during his great fishing days.They decided to bring in the rough wooden bed, placed on a platform a step above the earthen floor, once it had been agreed upon for the old man to move in.

He lost his dear wife to severe anemia the year after she had given birth to their seventh and youngest child, Gregorio.

He would have a regular change of weekday wear under the supervision of his second daughter, the demure former river maiden Jacinta.

He would be up before the sun, praying before preparing his needs. He sipped the honeyed pungence of steaming ginger tea, the *salabat*, before tending to his small garden, pruning plants that counted the bloomy *sampaguita*, the succulent *tampuhin* banana among his favorites.

The old man often took one mudfish, the *dalag*, which would end up broiled over embers, if not boiled into the clear *pinesa* soup. Tiny silvery shrimps, the *tagunton*, were always in abundance, clinging onto hyacinth roots like fancy earrings, a daily blessing there for the picking. The *talangka*, fresh water crablet, was always a welcome bonus, crawling out in full view like an army of festival clowns from the river's rich bosom.There was a host of other species to choose from, the spiky catfish called *kandule*, the *biya*, *ayungin*, and other gifts.

On top of these, there was the *tulya*, boiled into the humble but nourishing *sinuam* soup, together with rice washing, tomatoes and crushed ginger, a year-round favorite garnished with either chili shoots or *malungay* tips.

A gifted hard worker, the old man was seldom in need.

He was too proud to borrow anything from anybody.

He kept reminding: if you borrow today, you beg or cheat tomorrow.

The old man discouraged visitors.

He did not want to be bothered. Neither would he be a burden.

He would amaze neighbors, though, by taking an unannounced bus trip alone to the place of his elder cousins, Tiyo Simon and Ti Ibio, in a swampy barrio of Kawit, Cavite. There, he would buy at a bargain a dozen crescent thin blades, the *karet*. He would pit these reaping implements with wooden handle and sell them to regular customers who would call on him at the back of his shack.

He continued to make mid-week morning visits to his old house at the back of the faded but dignified wooden chapel facing the river.

He never waited for them to come over.

He shared by going out to distribute his small harvest, like the *duhat* berry thick as a thumb, fragrant healing herbs, ripe golden papaya, banana and the *dayap*, a shrill native lemon fruit, devoted aromatic to the delicate nectared egg custard, a favorite on fiesta tables.

The old man treasured silence.

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DID Itay Kayong also see a glint of gold over his win-win rooster before the tested assassin itself got assassinated?

Francisco, who had been lent secret hints on how to pick cockfight winners, did not have the guts to ask.

It was taboo to address elders, unless young ones were called in or first talked to.

The boy, who among the grandsons was charged with delivering the daily meal, soon learned to visit the old man regularly. A religious type, the boy loved to do errands for his handicapped grandfather. He made it a point to pick up Itay Kayong's weekly three-pack purchase of native cigarettes from the sari-sari store run by the loving couple (Ms.) Celing and (Mr.) Tibang.

Were the mermaids, *sirena*, for real?

Was it true the last Japanese soldier—who stayed behind, was caught and beheaded in front of a vengeful village mob—a colonel in the Japanese army?

The old man spoke to the boy in a husky but sure voice.

There were ghosts, assorted ogres that the prayerful kid—honestly afraid of fire in hell and horned potbellied, greasy demons who leered from illustrations of weekly komiks publications—had wanted to verify.

What made them warn him against looking into the mirror after midnight, as he might find himself headless there?

The old man and the boy talked clearly, evenly with a humble accent typical of riverside folks, the Taga-ilog. The boy always punctuated his sentences with the conjunctive *po*, a reverential dangle also used by villagers in addressing elders and visitors.

The old man also loved to poke fun at the neat, calm-eyed kid. Often asked to guess riddles, Francisco didn't have to be told before sharing the latest news and rumors with his attentive grandfather. He would also be subjected to tests of young strength, like climbing trees, swimming back dog-like to the bank after being let loose in a deep portion of the river; freeing his right wrist from grandpa's whole grip, or simply fetching drinking water in a fat glass jug from the artesian well under the *camachile* tree close to the village chapel.

For his washing needs, the old man had earthen jars, the *tapayan*, and a big steel drum catching rain water through a funnel from his roof.

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ONE Saturday morning, Francisco skipped his regular weekend slingshot hunt for sunbirds, the pesky *pipit*, in Kaka Censia's guava kingdom that was separated from Itay Kayong's adopted backyard by a pasture.

The boy decided to rejoin the old man who had just returned from the riverside trek. As soon as he had stepped through the makeshift gate, the old man addressed the boy from his window. He asked him to take off his white t-shirt. The boy was next told to go up the towering palm tree by the window and bring down a coconut. It was all unexpected. The boy had

never even once tried the chore. But if he had to think twice, he had no chance even to hesitate.

It was a task best left to his two elder brothers, his bigger cousins. Getting up was a real ordeal. Climbing the *duhat* tree was fun, so was moving from tree to tree without having to step down, biting off and eating marble-sized golden guavas straight from the twig, or picking and keeping green half-ripe ones, the *manibalang*, in his pocket on his way back to the ground.

For the coconut climb, Francisco was told to first breathe deep down his navel, the better to maintain balance, groping and gripping at the same time, in clinging safely to the thick scaly trunk. The true test was on his young legs, mainly on the heels that he had to use with chimpish dexterity. He had to gamble with his chest whenever forced to pause and cling bodily onto the palm trunk.

It took time and great effort, but he was up there soon, the bunch of young coconuts now close to his face. He succeeded in completing the chore, but only after he first fondled hard and twisted one young coconut to the right, then farther back to the left, feeling its hardy twig break, and sending it blogging to the ground with one hard snapping pull.

Francisco did not expect it but after he had clambered down, Itay Kayong was already there waiting to hand him something.

The old man, looking good and robust minus his thick spectacles, dug into his pocket and brought out a folding pocket knife, every neighborhood boy's obsession, with a deer horn for a handle.

Franciso had passed his first test of courage.

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THE old man's younger brother, the bachelor musician Vicente, was a more convivial conversationalist. He would go out of his way, have simple supper in the old house on rainy weekends before regaling nephews, gathered breathless like tiny pups on the smooth bamboo-slat floor, with gripping tales.

To the thrilled kids that included Francisco, who like his handsome younger brother Jaime still had to see and know fully what a refrigerator was, Tiyo

Enteng's colorfully woven stories rivaled the *Mga Kuwento ni Lola Basyang* and the adventures of *Kapitan Kidlat*, whenever the box-like brown radio would break down or if electricity was temporarily out.

Much later, Francisco would be amazed to learn from his mother Jacinta that Tiyo Enteng played lead violin in the national orchestra that would be sent up to Baguio to serenade the vacationing MacArthurs.

His mother told Francisco that his Ti Enteng was supposed to have joined his band on a voyage to the United States. But the musician was stopped on his tracks by his own mother, who personally recalled the luggage Vicente had spirited out to the ship on the eve of departure.

A part-time fisherman who dived down the pristine river bottom for the sharp, silvery *kandule*, he never ever again played his violin.

The instrument was hung on a raw wooden post of the two-room *nipa* hut Vicente shared with his elder sister Criscencia, the silent, hunched healer who tended to the vast guava orchard.

Before the aborted voyage, Vicente always had a tune at the tip of his handsome nose, trying to lend life to a budding composition.

The violin was left to rot in the cold corner untouched.

Nobody knew whatever happened to Vicente's unfinished works.

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ANYWAY, that summer they were seen walking together was not the first time Francisco had given his grandfather a hand.

They had first linked up while the old man was about to limp to his right, onto the main street, on his way to hear the *simbang gabi*.

This was the Christmas season following the Maytime when the boy turned nine.

Francisco, himself headed for church, chanced upon his grandfather leaning on his cane through the pre-dawn December haze. The old man wore thick, steel-rimmed eyeglasses.

Francisco kissed his hand and they next moved on, the old man's free hand now thankful, gentle on the boy's shoulder. The old man's ill-fated arm had

felt like a wooden baby cross when he, minus his cane, leaned on Francisco that summer morning the two were first seen together.

It was now shivering cold. The boy wore an old brown woolen jacket over his school uniform of white t-shirt and khaki shorts.The old man was in his Sunday attire of buttoned-up light cotton shirt and matching brown trousers. He wore his old shoes made of canvas. He had a thick *sando* underneath his shirt.

It was not a tiring walk, a little over a kilometer given a few uneven steps. The old man would allow himself to be roused by the early bells from the Sampiro Church, which started to peal exactly at 2:00 a.m. during the entire Christmas season from across the river. He would be in church in time for the 3:00 a.m. Mass.

In that first walk together, they did not talk about the omen, seen earlier in a water oracle by the old man's sister Kaka Censia, of how the river would be desecrated.

But even then, Francisco knew how his Itay Kayong had lost his youngest son Gregorio.

Francissco had himself been told by his mother Jacinta how Itay Kayong one night dreamt of having lost all his front teeth.

The old man, the boy was told, woke up terrified and failed to return to sleep that evening.

That omen next translated into a daytime nightmare.

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IN the village deeply scarred by the last war, it was no secret how the young Gregorio had been nabbed by fearsome Japanese troops at home.

The day Gregorio was taken the old man came home unusually early from a carpentry job in a palatial residence near the San Felipe Neri parish church in the *poblacion*.

He was in the process of putting the finishing touches to a majestic *narra* stairway, a job exclusive to a gifted few who could firm up the hardwood architecture without the use of a single nail.

There were conflicting versions of how they were able to break the news of Gregorio's abduction.

All the old man's grandaughter Rosalina, a bubbly aspirant songstress, could clearly remember were sparks from a commotion on the floor.

There was a convulsive struggle after Tata Kanor, husband of Delfina and Rosalina's stubby, big-bodied father, grappled with the old man, before pinning him down.

The old man, after letting out a curse, would not let loose the glistening bolo which he had grabbed from the wall, jumping upon being told Gregorio had been nabbed.

It would have been a gory mismatch had the old man chased after the heavily armed Japanese soldiers.

Before the outbreak of the war, the old man had had to work longer hours; he would spend nights after returning from the day's carpentry assignment, to spread out his vast fishnet, the *pante*, marking boundaries with tiny floating lamps, in order to make sure he earned enough to send his youngest, a high school senior, all the way to college.

The old man had neither seen nor entered a schoolroom.

There had been no hint whatsoever of what finally happened to Gregorio; where he was buried, if he had been garroted, stabbed by a bayonet, or shot in the head.

In the first place, who among the villagers, from the elders to the infants, had not been either wounded, choked, trampled, scarred, stabbed, slapped, shocked, or orphaned in the last war?

Didn't Itay Kayong himself suffer irreparably after he was crippled by a stroke the year after Gregorio was taken?

He was no longer told about it but, if it were any consolation, Gregorio, although in agony, took no bruises on his fair face.

This would not be the case with his Tiya Sofia who got slapped cross-eyed by a foul-smelling Japanese soldier after she shoved her nephew in a failed attempt to hide Gregorio inside the living room aparador.

What would stand out as the last detail on Gregorio immediately before he disappeared for good had been preserved in one cruel canvas: the young

man with six other male neighbors that included Tirso, husband of Tiya Sofia, being dragged like farm animals across the old Sta. Ana church, in the direction of Intramuros. One eyewitness said Gregorio's arms were tied together at his back. Based on the description, a bone or two had visibly snapped. The arms were themselves bloodless pale, the elbows neatly joined at the rear, inches above the waistline, with steel wire cut off by the invading soldiers from a backyard clothesline.

A framed yellowed picture of the fair Gregorio, quiet eyes in an angelic stare, was hung in the *sala* of the old house, while his books were left out among mice and insects in the bodega, a favorite all-weather hideout and breeding place for stray cats, back of the old man's original residence.

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FROM whom did Kaka Censia inherit her gifts of healing and clairvoyance?

Was it true Gat. Andres Bonifacio, father of the Katipunan (KKK), had been made to kneel and beg before he was killed by rivals from Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo's Magdalo faction in Cavite?

Wasn't it mere hearsay how the great Pancho Villa, the first world boxing champion from the Orient named after a revered Mexican bandit, had worked as a groom, a *pastol*, in the pasture back of Itay Kayong's shack?

Can they kill the river?

The old man boiled rice in a clay pot. He always had a small meal at sundown. He ate with his bare hands. He was careful not to spill or leave a morsel on his plate. He would have simple supper solemnly, like a priest celebrating Mass at twilight, before lighting the tiny kerosene lamp to keep him company through the night.

A devotee of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, he made it a point always to pray to Christ's Hidden Wound.

The Wound, the old man loved to assure, was most meaningful and truly represented the core of Christ's Divine Wholeness.

In the Nazarene novena booklet, it was stated that Jesus Christ, asked once by San Bernardo at Claraval, bared a forgotten wound He had on his right

shoulder, while bearing the Cross to Calvary, which caused Him insufferable pain more than all His other afflictions.

The Wound, defined by an exposed broken shoulder bone and dug flesh that bled, was never remembered because it had been wholly unknown.

It was said Christ had all but given up because of that undefinable suffering.

San Bernardo had been advised to venerate the Wound in order for his prayers to be surely answered.

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AFTER his evening prayer, the old man always made sure everything was in place, embers from the fire used in cooking the rice put out, before washing up.

He worshipped at Angelus by giving his thanksgiving, praying to the Nazarene, before retiring on his hard, mat-covered wooden bed protected by a white mosquito net.

The old man also heard Mass regularly but he received Communion only once a year, on Resurrection Sunday.

Asked once by Francisco why he didn't go to confession to receive Communion more often, the old man replied that there was no need.

The old man tried to explain that, whenever he would take and eat the Lord's body in Communion, he separately also allowed himself to be swept over. He would be wholly consumed, conquered in an honest bid to inherit Christ's love, humility and fortitude.

This way, the old man told the boy, he would be totally overtaken by a Divine Infection.

"Lord, I need You in my life, I now receive You, please put me under Your power and care. Come, reside in my heart."

The old man said that you—and not God who is perfectly permanent—must be the one to be moved in prayer.

He said the practice of offering bread as symbolic body during the sacred sacrifice was not original and had been done in much earlier times.

For honest change to happen the miraculous transformation must take place, not inside the chalice, but in the heart and soul, the core of the believer's being.

The old man took care for that bond not to be broken for the entire year.

Francisco, stunned by the unusual vehemence, found the unscheduled sermon crude and vague.

He failed to fully comprehend.

The boy honestly thought his grandfather did not know what he was taking about. Itay Kayong was tough but strange and could, in fact, appear like a central figure in a barber's tale.

Left alone, he remained like an apparition by Rembrandt, a singular shadow dusted in bronze. There was an assuring little light, a glint of serenity in that nameless corner where he had dared live and love his own way.

He cared for the river in the same way he was perfectly proud of his country and race.

All the while though, he had no inkling the President of the Republic, a monument of a man described as a God-sent champion of the masses, had ignorantly meted out a death sentence by approving a foreign outfit to operate in the river.

Next, his river, which had nurtured the well-being of the Tagalog race, got secretly savaged.

An American firm, alleging trouble-free quarrying, instead perpetrated a pagan rape and abortion—a hidden slaughter—of the benevolent waterway.

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HERE was how it all started:

After getting up from the stroke, the old man assumed the role of bell-ringer in the village chapel, heralding the morning Fiesta Mass for the Mahal na Poong Santa Cruz ahead of the jumpy, screaming glee of brass bands.

For this special occasion the old man would report in his Sunday best: brown pair of pants, matching light checkered shirt, and canvas shoes. After his assigned chore with the morning fiesta bell, the old man would be back in front of the chapel in the evening.

He was in the same dignified outfit, shaven chin defining a regal nose, ashen hair oiled and silvery like a small crown. He soon took centerstage and proceeded to set off a big bunch of bamboo rockets, the *kuwitis*, from a makeshift stand.

He was definitely pleased, truly glad at being able to provide some thrill to sun-smelling kids, his momentary subjects.

Then, once down to the final bunch of about a dozen dazzlers, he allowed himself to get carried away. He loaded the standard and junked the launching platform before gathering the remaining *kuwitis*, a dozen, in his hand.

He proceeded to set off the mini rockets, cooly handling them one at a time. It was smooth sailing as in past fiestas. He wasn't exactly being heroic, but was visibly proud and grateful at the chance for a special spot in the celebration.

He was however down to the final four when the next rocket stayed. There was an abnormal dazzle.

He had no choice. He let go and dropped the stalled firework

Kids gasped and scampered, startled by the impending explosion.

The face of the old man froze into an idiotic mask

He did try to jump out but was coldly stalled by his sick legs.

Meanwhile, the missile in mutinee went pfft, whistling like a car tire instantly deflating. The dreaded big bang fizzled into a cloudy fart—prruuttt—right on his right foot.

The old man managed an empty smile while kids nearby hollered, thankful for the breezy sounding cloud of a miracle that saved them from possible harm.

He could've exploded as in the times when he hacked his cane or slammed dead his favorite warrior rooster.

The old man, humbled, shaken, tarried a bit before leaving the scene.

He was supposed to proceed to his daughter Jacinta's place a block from the riverside chapel.

He skipped the great traditional 10-course dinner prepared by Tiyo Magen Vasquez, the invited special chef from the Manila Hotel, for Itay Kayong's debonire son-in-law Macario, a well-loved orator and respected town councilor.

This was a very special Sunday, night of nights in the village.

There was a stun of firelies, the air dreamy with the breath of Maytime blossoms.

But everything suddenly felt as though it was the darkest night of the year.

Upon reaching his shack, the old man changed to his simple daily wear.

He took a glass of water, said his prayers and went to sleep.

Deep in the night, he woke up from a bad, bad dream, sister to a nightmare.

He dreamt he had dropped and lost his main molar, his own jawbone maybe, while trying to spear a great fish out in the river.

He was terribly shaken. It was an omen doubly dreadful than the one he had seen in his sleep before dear Gergorio was stolen.

**

IT was Celo Guillarte, a lean aspirant healer with a quiet brown face, who told the boy Francisco that the river would be lost.

Celo, son of Nana Sabel, a lead devotee to San Antonio de Padua, was apprenticing as a healer with Kaka Censia.

As told by Celo, his Kaka Censia, product of the masteral mystical institution up in Mount Banahaw, asked him to return in the afternoon after he dropped by her guava kingdom in the morning.

It was Good Friday, an exclusive day for testing amulets, and Kaka Censia, together with her brother Vicente, kept a wordless whole-day vigil around their bamboo house that sat by an old, massive mango tree whose thick trunk was sprawled on the damp mossy ground.

Celo returned after five, shortly before Angelus.

Kaka Censia brought out her *batya*, a big basin with corrugated edges, and poured water into it.

She readily lit a candle.

Celo stood by in total silence while the hunched lady with a small virginal face proceeded with her silent prayers.

Celo was asked which procession—the one at San Felipe Neri or Antipolo—he wanted to watch.

Puzzled, Celo did not say a word. The gentle-moving Kaka Censia next pried off what looked like a tea bag from her waistline. She pressed the tiny object on the edge of the basin whose water content were already shimmering in candle light.

Kaka Censia told Celo that what he was seeing on the basin that now functioned like a crude circular movie screen was the Good Friday procession at the parish of the Nuestra Virgen de la Buenviaje in Antipolo.

Cello said there were glittering shadows, apparently devotees ascending towards a wooden cross planted on top of a hill.

When Celo next asked to see the main Lenten procession at San Felipe Neri, Kaka Censia pressed the tea bag against the shoulder of the basin a second time.There was no gleaming shadow. The screen shuddered and next produced a dark, barreling blur that rolled and slithered through what appeared like the river surface.

It was huge, serpentine, but indistinguishable.

The fearsome object was next blotted out, the glimmer and the shadows were all gone.

The show was over in Kaka Censia's special Lenten theater.

Warned against a Secret Beast, Celo was told the river would be in for a dark fate.

**

THE river did not get lost. It was stolen.

That bright summer day when he allowed himself to be caught in the sudden noontime downpour, the old man was headed for an urgent destination.

He had to make a spot check after he was told by an excited Francisco that a big American firm, Norton & Harrison, was all set and ready to proceed with the approved quarrying of the river.

Everything happened too fast.

Early in the week, news of the impending job on the river had been whispered excitedly around the village.When Itay Kayong came, the main gear for the operation was already in its pre-determined perch. It stood out across the main road, a gigantic black rubber hose snaking from a vast open field all the way to the river's edge.

It was monstrous, to say the least, and could readily suck up a pair of horses. The ancient mahogany tree, the *mabolo* that reportedly hosted a cigar-chomping ogre, the *kapre*, had been chopped down to give way to the gigantic black gear. The great tree, a riverside landmark, had loomed like a sentinel watching over the vast vacant field separated by the street from the river.

There was a wooden hump being put up over the gigantic snaking tube to allow vehicles to cross through when the old man came.

It readily became a top feature, a main attraction among curious villagers, young and old.

Right there and then though, Itay Kayong swore the river would be in for trouble.

He knew he had to do something, quick.

In the first place, the river had been undergoing year-round dredging through the daily toils of other fishermen who also scooped up sand from the shallow portions of the river.

These poor folks would load collected sand on their waiting rigless boats, the *casco*, through which they would deliver to commercial users. That showed the river had needed no great outside intervention for it to remain clean and productive.

The old man tried to think of ways to at least let the neighborhood know that the operation in the river by an American company was neither foolproof nor safe.

He could have approached the tall, burly village chief but they were no longer on speaking terms.

As a last resort, the old man had thought of going to Malacanang for a possible audience with the popular pro-poor President, who had thrown the Palace gates open to the masses.

It was the only sane, safe thing to do.

He would plead the case of the river with his President.

**

THE following Saturday was unusually humid.The old man holed up in his shack after having seen the monstrous black hose.

He swore the awesome imported American gear would not be good for the river.

He was trying to find solutions.

He had wanted to check with Francisco for an update on the quarrying project by Norton & Harrison.

He also wanted to ask Francisco if he could be of help.

The old man wondered if Francisco could complete a letter he would try to dictate.

The boy had not shown up for the week.

By midmorning, Itay Kayong was stunned by the bang and blare from a brass band that was marching by. Something big was definitely happening, or a very important personage could be coming to the village.

This was the same street scream, a wake-up serenata played very early during the riverside fiesta celebrated every third Sunday of May.

The old man took a bite, put on his old brown cotton shirt and moved out, barefoot. When he reached the chapel, Francisco was running out of their place. The boy, in red t-shirt, paused to kiss Itay Kayong's hand and scampered off without saying a word.

The old man moved on towards where Francisco, in a big hurry to catch a big event, was headed.

There was a crowd milling on the grassy earthen edge of the river through where the gigantic hose had been made to snake up onto a brand new steel barge. The brass band was on stand-by.

The old man, refusing to mingle, stood alone under a tree.

There was a hush, then a commotion when a tall, handsome man, luminous in a national shirt woven out of pineapple hemp, strolled in. It was Ramon Magsay, President of the Republic.

Everybody stared in awe. The President was with a couple of Americans in casual wear and five Filipinos in formal attire. He towered like the legendary basketball star Carlos Loyzaga, toast of the sporting town.

President Magsaysay, a mechanic and former secretary of defense, indeed loomed like a living monument.

Everybody wanted to shake his hand.

The President was next made to ride a wide wooden ramp. Once he had gotten up and settled on the waiting steel barge, he was led by one of the two Americans to an elevated steel box. The band played Mabuhay and the President pulled down a waiting steel lever with a red ribbon on it, thereby sending into operation the Norton & Harrison Jackbilt Blocks Co.

The men on the barge that now served as a stage congratulated one another as the band played louder. There was a great cheer. But what rose through the applause, the instant celebration, was a monster's gurgle, a dreadful metalic grind and growl that seemed to rock the Earth's foundation.

The black hose whose heavy brass noozle had been dropped and landed like an anchor proceeded to suck up violently and wholesale fresh sand from the river's virgin bosom.

The old man stood alone dumbfounded.

This indeed was the Secret Beast his sister Crisencia had warned against.

The hidden desecration, the rape and abortion of his beloved river, had begun.

**

THE next day Francisco was early in Itay Kayong's place. The boy wasted no time to report that he had shaken hands with the President, not only once but twice.

The old man no longer bothered to comment. He did not bother to remind the boy that the awesome black rubber suction pump could be exactly what Kaka Censia had mysteriously featured as a slithering thick blur in her Good Friday presentation through a basin that served as makeshift movie screen.

In fact, the old man, feeling deeply disappointed, could not find a way to explain to Francisco how he had been shocked at the President, a living hero whom he honestly thought could be his last chance in trying to save the river.

The old man had indeed been dismayed, betrayed.

But he tried to keep everything to himself.

Anyway, it took little time before Norton & Harriswon went into full operation.

One year later, there was a visible change in the village. There were more jobs for young residents who worked out in the vast field, where they collected fresh sand transferred by the giant suction pump to the trenches and open ponds and then mass-produced into first-class concrete hollow blocks, an aid to faster reconstruction.

Residents got special prices, while others were allowed to buy the revolutionary construction material on credit

Soon, the young face of the village also started to harden.

Simple *nipa* houses one by one gave way to stiff concrete ones.

The fresh face of the riverside village had turned into a dry smirking mask.

Around the same time, a good number of working young males were also able to enroll in night school to complete a college degree. A group of village collegians that included the likes of Lino Licuanan, Terry and Bonie Matubang, Johnny Ignacio, Maning Reyes, Elen Jocson, Vergel Ahillion and Minong Mariano formed the Varsitarians.

Two years after the inauguration of the Norton & Harrison Jackbilt Blocks Co. the President of the Republic perished in a plane crash, a tragedy that

crushed the heart of the masses and shook the foundations of state.

There were two survivors in that tragedy over Mt. Manungal in Cebu. These were the dimunitive journalist Nestor Mata of the *Philippines Herald* and a red-feathered fighting cock.

There were unfounded reports of a bomb, which could have been concealed among eggs in a basket, causing the explosion. It was generally believed that the very popular chief-of-state was a product of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) political machinery.

**

EVERYTHING was related to everything else, no matter how distant, different.

A little over three years after Norton & Harrison started mass-producing construction sand-and-cement blocks, the deterioration of the river started to surface.

Fish did not only become scarce, their once mythic quality dipped. The once very useful water inevitably turned into waste. Villagers still took a dip and swam, but they no longer returned to the river to wash clothes there.

Meanwhile, the old man stayed through the secret desecration. He had long given up on the river. But he decided to stand his ground. He remained in his borrowed shack.

Years went by. The first to go, by the old man's quiet count, were his insect friends, like warblers, hummers, chirpers, led by the cicada and cricket that would lull and soothe him with a random symphony, both incredible and heavenly, from the river's shrubby edge and mossy banks deep on damp, cold evenings.

The river was still there but it was often mostly murky, if not lifeless.

The river of the old man was no longer there.

What continued to roll along was decay, if not the river's own grave.

This afternoon, the old man again took a trek to the west bend of the river, through the old path leading to the next village. It was now the height of

summer. Once the water level up in the Laguna Bay had dipped, the river current would turn around slowly and reverse from its original outlet at the mouth of the Manila Bay.

Before the great river was ravaged and fouled up, there was a period of supreme plenty, the *kaguno*, when freshwater fish, stunned and stirred by saltwater suddenly rushing in from the Manila Bay, would freely surface and mill dazed on the banks, thereby becoming easy pickings even for mothers and their kids, not unlike manna from heaven.

This unscheduled glorious event also would take place at the height of summer.

Not anymore. This one before the old man now was the dreadful *sibakong*, completely different, with the sick polluted river at its worst.

The old man paused to watch the sunset.

While watching the sick river, gurgling, frothing and drowning in its own filth, he also started to wonder: couldn't he have tried harder in his bid to save the river?

Too bad he could not even write his own name. How dumb could he get? The old man was quite sure President Ramon Magsaysay would have responded favorably, considering he had earlier decreed that "those who have less in life must have more in law."

The old man had felt totally helpless. He could have thought up other ways to send his message across. He had the guts but not the right training and intelligence for such an urgent noble venture.

At the same time though, he started to honestly ask himself: wasn't President Magsaysay, hailed as a champion of democracy, just as dumb as he was?

Or did the President play deaf and blind in signing a death sentence for his river?

Didn't President Magsasay allow himself to be a puppet of American enterprise?

Or was the President nothing better than a certified running dog of both Uncle Sam and the CIA?

**

THE old man returned shortly before Angelus.

He skipped supper, washed up and changed to an old white cotton shirt, his favorite.

He took a glass of water, lit the tiny lamp, said his prayers and went to sleep.

In his sleep, the old man dreamt of that blessed season, the summer of summers, in the village. There was a live orchestra and a guest nightingale featured in the grand village ball. There was the drizzling breath of sweet *narra* blossoms. Pairs of starry-eyed lovers were all on the well-lit dance floor, the lead songstress warbling a sweet, fiery number, when the skies up north of the village suddenly lit up, followed by repeated thunderous explosions. The great balls of fire in the sky were not fireworks, but the killer boom-boom and horrible bang of burning barrels of fuel oil stored in the nearby glass factory. Curtains fell on the old man's dream with that fiery scene.

The old man had allowed himself to be roused.

But upon realizing the colorful dream was nothing but a replay of the real-life fire that had hit the Choan Huat Glass Factory in the village about five years ago, he smiled it off. In that real-life conflagration, the sweet, pretty Carmen Perina, visiting with relatives at the gothic Salamanca residence across the two-room wooden schoolhouse, was singing a top-hit number when the glass factory that employed many residents got struck by a fire.

That grand affair was the annual ball of the Cactus Club. Perina was singing "Kiss of Fire" while the glass factory burned.

After shrugging off what he felt was a meaningless, uneventful dream, the old man went back to sleep.

Maybe he failed to refill the old lamp.

Shortly after midnight, a small breeze snuffed out the light.

Unlike before, the old man no longer bothered to restore it.

There was none of the required dampness but there, again, was the secret serenade.

It was sweet and shrill, nectar and poison, lullaby and dirge, greeting and goodbye from fetching secret friends in the old man's final solitude.

He had dreamt about the last summer of the great river.

**

(Note: There's a marked grave of Itay Kayong — Macario Ahillion, born March 10, 1893 — in the San Felipe Neri Cemetery in Mandaluyong. He died on July 20, 1962. He was interred in a concrete niche whose floor was made of patented concrete hollow blocks manufactured by Norton and Harrison, the American firm that had savaged and sucked up the virginal sandbed of the Pasig. Needless to say, Itay Kayong, by poetic design, ended up lying in what could now be considered the old bosom of his lost mother river. Thank you, indeed, and God Bless America!)