

SUMMER AT THE BARRIO

Jose P. Mojica

It was Holy Week and the sun was about to set when my parents and I arrived at the *barrio*. The sky seemed awash in orange paint. Even the white orchid flowers in the garden seemed to be taking on the same hue. From a distance, Lolo's and Lola's old *narra* house shone like a lighthouse, because of the light reflected on the stainless roof, which had been installed when a typhoon struck and the strong wind stripped off a portion of the original roof. Papa put down the car blinders on his and Mama's side. She had been sleeping the entire time, perhaps feeling dizzy from the zig-zag road. Papa looked at me through the rear-view mirror.

As we pulled up in the front yard, I went down and dashed inside the house. Not even the tinkling sound of sea shell curtain, hanging between the living room and the kitchen welcomed me. There was only silence. I inspected each room, moving closer to the back of the house. The smell got stronger. It was a sour smell. I realized that Lolo, Lola, and Jed were at the backyard preparing supper.

After we ate, we stayed in the back porch to finish our *minatamis* made of coconut meat with milk, sugar, and ice cubes. We hoped it would be cooler, but the summer air was warm and dry.

"Jed, let's wake up early tomorrow," I said to my cousin, "Let's go to the river. This heat is killing me."

"Yes. Tomorrow, we will. The water is cold there. You will enjoy it."

When Lolo heard our conversation, he lit his cigarette and flashed a smile, baring his coffee-and-nicotine stained teeth. He was seated in his shabby chair, which according to Lola was already in his possession even before they got married, and which he had sat on when he wrote poems and love letters to her. (I still remember the dreamy look appeared in Lola's eyes

when she said the words “love letters”). Lolo leaned back in his chair like a master about to pronounce the law. Then he began to speak in his dry, rough voice. “Ha! The river. I haven’t been there for a long time.”

“Why, Lolo? Can’t you swim?” I asked.

Lolo laughed loudly then coughed strenuously, as if he were forcing something to come out. But nothing did; it only made his face flush.

“I have a story that none of you have ever heard, not even your parents,” Lolo said.

He puffed on his cigarette and blew out the smoke.

Jed and I lifted the wooden bench beneath the coconut tree and moved closer to him.

“Once upon a time, Lolo said, out in the vast ocean, there lived beautiful twin water serpents named Pirana and Amira. Their skin shone and glistened. They swam in different bodies of water, looking for food and shelter. Eventually, they found themselves in the river. The towns people began to interact with them, and they easily formed a strong connection. Eventually, the river became the twins’ second home.

That town served as a stopover for many travelers going to different barrios. People sold their harvests at a somewhat lower price there. There was this traveler who learned about this, and decided to journey to the town, hoping to make cheap purchases to resell in his own town.

Prinana and the traveler came across each other one day while he was resting by the river, and she was looking for algae that would cure Amira, who had fallen ill. The traveler would go searching with her. They met frequently, and soon started having feelings for each other.

In the meantime, the twin serpents’ relationship was changing. Pirana was always leaving Amira by herself. Amira began to suspect that something was going on with her sister.

One morning, when Pirana left to meet with the traveler, Amira followed her and saw the couple from a distance. Pirana was swinging, springing, and splashing in the water. It was the first time Amira saw her twin sister really happy. She felt pangs of jealousy. She also yearned to experience the same joy for herself. When she heard them say that they would meet again, Amira devised a plan to steal the traveler from Pirana

Amira went to the river earlier than her twin. She saw the traveler and pretended to be Pirana. The traveler, having no idea that Pirana had a twin, thought that it was Pirana he was talking to. Amira told him that people were envious of their relationship, since she was getting close to an outsider. She then asked him to meet her at the Maragondon River, instead of at Laboc River in Naic, so that no one would see them.

The traveler kept this a secret from everyone. He believed that, though it was forbidden, there was a chance for them to stay together.

Everyday, Pirana would wait for the traveler at the Naic River but he would never come. This made her feel that human beings were not to be trusted.

One day, as Pirana was on her way home, feeling deeply distressed, she decided to take a different, longer route, to clear her mind. Thus she found herself at Maragondon River. To her surprise, she saw the traveler kissing Amira on the forehead. Pirana swam straight for them, and in her rage, attacked them. The traveler was quick to escape. But Pirana accidentally bit Amira's neck, which instantly killed the poor twin sister. From that day on, the beautiful serpent Pirana turned into a wrathful monster, killing all men who swam alone in the river.

Months later, the traveler and his men were sailing down the river in a boat, in search of a fabled treasure buried by Chinese merchants. Suddenly, from the stillness of the water, something shook their boat until it was overturned. The traveler had jumped out and tried to swim away, but Pirana caught him, bit him on his neck, and sucked all his blood.

Many years have passed since all of that happened. But, though she was able to avenge herself on the traveler, Pirana never stopped killing men. She would take men, and men alone.

His story over, Lolo went back to slowly puffing on his cigarette. I watched the smoke coming out of his mouth and disappearing into the dark. Lolo's story stuck with me. It felt like fingers brushing the back of my neck.

Lola in her old faded *bestida* stepped out on the porch, sipping her ginger tea.

"*Naku!* You're still awake! That's enough. That's enough. It's late. You better go to sleep." The night was still young, but for Lola, and for the entire *barrio*, it was bedtime. Jed and I wanted to hear more stories from Lolo, but she shoed us off to our room. Lolo did not say another word. He just lit

another cigarette. Jed and I stood up and returned the bench to its place under the coconut tree.

“Don’t forget to pray,” Lola called out as we were leaving the porch.

Mama and Papa were staying in my grandparents’ room at the insistence of Lolo and Lola. The older couple said that they would stay in the small *kubo* in the backyard. Their room, Lola argued, was actually for their guests. It was a small, simple room, with a large *capiz* window on one wall, which allowed the fresh air and light to enter. There was one grand thing about it: the bed, which seemed to me like a bed for a Cleopatra.

As always, I decided to sleep in Jed’s room. Unlike Lolo’s and Lola’s bed, Jed’s was a large bamboo bed he had made himself. The cabinet from our childhood was still there, full of scribbles and doodles. Behind the cabinet where no one could see, I spotted crude drawings of male genitals which Jed and I had drawn. I knew Jed could easily have disposed of them but he seemed sentimentally attached to it.

I looked out the window. The moon was bright and large above us. “Jed, what time are we leaving tomorrow?” I asked. But Jed was already snoring.

I felt the slots of the bed frame against my back. It was covered by only a large thick blanket. There was no foam mattress or even mat. But what made the night unbearable was not really the bed—it was the heat.

Thoughts ran through my head. Lolo’s story grew more vivid: the scales of the monstrous serpent turning from shiny to rough, to thorny, and in some parts flaky. Her large, bloodstained fangs stuck out. The image in my head combined with the heat, made me sweat even more, so I shook off the blanket. To get me through the night, I tried imagining a gush of cold water running through my skin.

To my surprise, when I woke up, I found the blanket wrapped around me. And the morning air was cold, almost like in December. It was so chilly, that I couldn’t go back to sleep. I heard the crowing of Lolo’s roosters, and thought I had awakened earlier than everyone else, but the room was empty. And I could smell the coffee brewing from the backyard.

The leaves and the grass had gathered dew, and as I walked through the fog, my feet felt damp. My parents and grandparents were having nothing

but coffee, since it was a day of fasting. Only Jed was munching on his *pan de sal*.

“Nick, let’s eat!” Jed called to me.

I picked out a piece from the brown paper bag, which felt hot in my hands. The bread was larger than the *pan de sal* sold in our village, and I learned it was also cheaper.

As I was trying to chew on the huge bite I had stuffed into my mouth, I asked Jed again, “What time are we going to the river?”

Lola noisily sipped her coffee and gave me a stern look.

“It’s Black Friday,” she said. “God is dead and everyone is forbidden to go to the river. No one would watch you and save you from trouble if (knock on wood) you were to drown. No one would heal your wound if (knock on wood) you were to get hurt. Also, the devil’s spirits are strong at this time. It’s very dangerous. You must wait until the Savior resurrects.”

My heart sank, like the piece of bread that Jed was dumping into his coffee cup.

I moved to the hammock under the mango tree, and started solving crossword puzzles instead. The sweet scent of ripe mangoes wafted in the wind. And it struck me how different it was from Papa’s mango-scented car freshener. Jed startled me by flipping my hammock over. My book of crosswords fell on to the dirty ground, scattering tiny dark ants away.

“Don’t feel bad, Nick. You know Lola is very strict, especially when it comes to her religious beliefs.”

“But if we don’t go there today, I might need to wait for next summer to return. We rarely get to play.”

“Well, that’s right.”

“What should we do?”

Jed climbed up the the *dagta*-smeared tree and, for a while, just sat there silently, his eyes closed. Knowing how easy it was for him to doze off, I feared he was already asleep. But suddenly, he jumped back down and quickly hastily headed for the kitchen.

“Come on. Hurry up!” he said. “I have a plan!”

Jed snatched the water jug that was still half full. He opened the back door and emptied the jug into the soil, drowning the dark ants that had survived my crosswords book. We sat on the stool outside. Jed said we should wait for someone to notice the jug was now empty.

“Trust me. This will work,” Jed said.

I sneaked in and hid under the kitchen table. Hunched, I held my breath, trying my best not make a sound. Lola entered, through the sea shell curtain, holding a cup in one hand and the sea shell curtain in another. She sliced some ginger and chewed it to extract the juice. Then she spit it into her cup and added some sugar. Next, she went to the cabinet, and took out the kettle to boil water for tea. After checking the jug, she called out: “Jed! Nick! *Susmaryosep!* We ran out of water!” So Jed was right.

Jed told me the river was only a block from our grandparents’ house. But it wasn’t. The “entrance” was a block away, and it was another fifteen-minute trek on a rough, stony road before we reached the part where people could safely swim.

The *ilog* that I remembered from my visit two years earlier was different. It had been surrounded by luxuriant trees of every kind. The water was clear.

I cupped some of the water in my hand as it ran down from the portion of the trimmed bamboo that I had used to collect some of the cool spring water. Jed jumped into the river and splashed water on me as I was filling up the jug.

“What are you waiting for?” Jed said.

I set aside the jug and jumped into the water. What a relief to be submerged in that coolness.

“Jed!” I heard a voice echo from above. Other boys from the neighborhood had arrived. From their faces, I thought they were probably around thirteen—my age. But they were dark and lean, like the men whom we bought *palay* from in the *barrio*. And unlike me, their muscles were probably toned by years of trekking, climbing trees, and swimming in that river.

Jed called out to the boys: “Oy *tara!* Join us,” waving his arms.

They pushed each other as they rushed down the steps and jumped into the water.

I said to myself, if people come swimming today, Lola's religious beliefs must not be true. The boys swam fearlessly, completely at ease in the water. Jed threw a stone and told us we had to find underwater. Some stayed at the bottom for a long time, which made me wonder what kind of lungs they must have had, to be able to hold their breath under water that long.

One of the boys resurfaced, holding the stone. We swam toward him to check if it was the one we were diving for. When we called for Jed to check, he was nowhere to be found. All of a sudden, he called to us from a huge tree root that was protruding from the cliff twenty feet high from the water.

"Oy! Watch me!" he shouted. We scattered away, making space for him to dive.

He whirled, and dove straight into the water. The boys were envious and decided to climb up, and do the same dive. One by one, they jumped off, even doing different tricks up in the air. After jumping, they climbed up again.

I was left alone. The water suddenly felt vast, as though the river had turned into an ocean. I felt like a lone island in it, an outsider. That sense of aloneness made me want to belong. They were up there looking down on me. Their eyes seemed encouraging. It upset me that I was not like them, that I was unwilling to go up there and dive. Lola's warnings made me hesitate. I also remembered *Pirana* and feared that she might attack me. But I did not want to embarrass myself in front of the other boys.

I wasn't even sure if I could dive, but up I went.

They boys were cheering me on. I was cold, and terrified. But I jumped and only realized the great height as I was plummeting downward. I hit the water, feet first. I could not swim nor shout for help. There was a strong current, like large hands, pulling me downward. The pain I felt was gut-wrenching. There were tiny knots on my leg and they got tighter every second. I gulped. And gulped. And gulped again. The green water turned black. Everything turned black. That was the last thing I remember.

When I regained consciousness, I was back at my grandparent's house. Lola was praying, facing the cloth-covered icon of Jesus standing at one end of the room. Mama was clutching my hand. Papa was rubbing Mama's shoulder. Lolo was out of sight, probably smoking.

Jed and the other boys were clapping and giving me the thumbs-up. I heard people—the entire neighborhood of that small barrio, I think—standing outside the house talking about me. What had happened?

Later, I was told that two versions of the story which had spread: according to one, one the devil tried to get me; according to the other, the serpent tried to attack me. Which of those versions was the true one, I will never know.