

# ***Once Upon a Time, Under the Pine Trees in the Old Campus***

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

## I

### **GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST**

**A**fter work that day, on my way to the España gate, I saw that the campus's main roads had been closed to vehicles, and that there was a long queue of young people waiting by the barrier. And then I noticed the little booths all over the football field, and realized what was about to happen: *Paskuhan*—the university's Christmas festival.

So we made a right at the chapel and headed toward the P.Noval gate. It was just before dusk, and the campus had been lit up, in anticipation of the evening's festivities: threads of tiny lights, blue and gold, streaming from the trees, thousands of lights, showers of fairy petals. The familiar buildings, trees, lanes, lamp posts, stone benches had been transformed into a land of enchantment.

And I was seventeen and a college sophomore again, helping to set up our college's booth on the flat stretch of grass that no longer is (having been taken over by a building), the wide open space opposite the football field. Each year, there would be a small *carnivale* here, to celebrate Christmas, courtesy of the Central Board of Students. With balloons and bunnings and confetti, carousel and Ferris wheel and booths selling little toys and trinkets, and sandwiches and soft drinks and pastel-shaded stationery, and carts dispensing popcorn and dirty ice cream and cotton candy, and

Pilita Corrales singing *Ang pasko ay sumapit... tayo ay mangagsiawit...*”

We would sit on the grass and wait for the little procession, which was a re-enactment of the search for an inn on that first Christmas Eve by the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, weaving across the campus, preceded by the ROTC band and the Honor Guard in their splendid red and black uniforms, and followed by a long line of tassel-tailed paper lanterns, ruby-red and emerald-green and blue shot with gold, stopping at each building to murmur a prayer before the *belen* fashioned by the students of each college.

That Christmas when I was seventeen, the Christmas Fair’s theme must have been international brotherhood, or the United Nations, because our college’s booth was a miniature, slightly crooked replica of the Eiffel Tower, and our costumes reflected what we thought beatniks or Left Bank bohemian poets and artists wore—black, long-sleeved, turtle-necked shirts, black tights, and berets. And all the time that I was working on our booth, only one line kept going round and round in my brain: Will he come? Will he come? For that year I thought I had met him—the fair young god of all my dreams.

But as the night grew deeper, and the breeze grew cooler, I realized with a sinking feeling that he wasn’t coming, it wasn’t meant to be... Rita shook her head. Nonsense, she said, you made a wish on our old wishing well in the Pharmacy Garden, remember? You must believe, or it won’t come true... And Linda said, Yes, Christmas is a time for magic. Believe!

And suddenly, there he was. And I felt, again, oddly surprised that he was real, that I hadn’t imagined him. He said something about going home to shower and change because he had been in his medical uniform all day, but I couldn’t quite catch the words, because there was a buzzing in my ears. He was wearing a moss-green T-shirt, its collar open at the throat, and slacks... maybe light grey, maybe tan? I no longer recall... But I remember it was the first time I had seen him out of his hospital whites.

He went with Rita and Linda and me to get cokes and popcorn and pink cotton candy. And then to a tent where a girl greeted us with a tambourine. She wore wild gypsy colors and gleaming golden hoops in her ears, and her long lashes swept her cheeks as she bent to peer into a crystal ball, She whispered to us about trips to faraway places with strange-sounding names, and pots of gold at the end of rainbows, and tall, handsome men who would sweep us off our feet and bring us untold happiness. And Rita

laughed and said, why not? the first of our wishes has already been granted, hasn't it? The magic works! What magic? he asked. Rita told him about our old wishing well. And I looked away, wishing that she hadn't, afraid that the spell would be broken, that it needed to be kept secret...

Later we all sat on the grass, beside what looked like a gingerbread house but was pretending to be a German tavern, to watch the lanterns go by. And Linda sang along with the scratchy record playing over the sound system, in her sweet, slightly husky voice, *Silver bells... silver bells... it's Christmas time in the city...* under a sky studded with silvery stars.

He turned to me and said in a low voice, Open your hand. I held out my right hand, its palm up, and he dropped something into it. What is it? I asked. A coin, he said. I found it here, on the grass. Maybe it's a lucky penny. For your wishing well. Toss it in and make a wish for me too, he said, smiling at me.

And I thought: *This is my window/ just now did I so softly wake/ I could believe everything round about was still as I/ transparent as a crystal's depth, darkened, silent/ I could hold even the stars in me too, so big my heart seemed to me...*

Sitting in my car two nights ago, stuck in traffic on España, I wondered, bemused: where did it all go—the apple tree, the singing and the gold?

The spell was broken. The magic didn't last.

## II “USAHAY”

In some ways our university was a bit like our high school convent schools. It was run by a religious order of priests, as our schools were run by nuns. Prayers were said before and after every class. Each new academic year began with a High Mass followed by a *Discurso de Apertura*. We rose to our feet when a professor entered the classroom, and began and ended each class with a prayer. There was a prescribed uniform for each college. We were expected to attend spiritual retreats and religious processions.

Though it was a co-educational institution, male students and female students were kept apart. Boys and girls were not allowed to walk together

or speak to each other on campus. This policy was reinforced by having separate entrances, staircases, and classrooms for men and women. There was a counter for boys and a counter for girls in the university library; and a section for boys and a section for girls in the university canteen.

But the college Rita, Linda and I went to—the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters (the legendary Philets)—was such a small college, just two sections per year level, that this segregation could not be strictly imposed. We attended classes together, the girls occupying the front rows, and the boys, the back rows. The regular students were in the afternoon sections, and the working students, who were mostly irregular (they did not carry full loads), were in the evening sections.

Of course there were student orgs that both boys and girls could belong to and activities we could participate in. The members of the Central Board of Students were elected by their respective colleges, and the staff of the *Varsitarian* were selected by competitive exams. Anybody could apply for membership in the theatre guild and the debating society. The fraternities had their sister sororities, and the ROTC had its cadet sponsors. In our college we had the *Blue Quill*, our college paper, and a club called *Los Amantes del Español*. And then there were campus fairs, picnics, frat balls and sorority balls, class parties, proms...

Danilo Ilagan existed in the periphery of this campus life. He was a working student, assigned to the library, assisting students who wanted to check out or return books, and stamping their library cards. Between his job and his classes, he had little time for plays and debates, let alone balls.

For a while, he existed in the periphery of my consciousness as well. I think he was in two of my classes, but most of his classes were in the evening. A poem of his had been published in our college paper. Not a remarkable feat, since practically everyone in our college had published at least one or two poems or stories somewhere or other. A good number were actually working for the national dailies.

My friends and I became more aware of Danilo when we realized that he could actually be a big help when we needed to take out books from the library, especially as each semester drew to a close, and there were always such long queues at the borrowing desk. Undergraduates had to go through the card catalogue, scribble the titles and the catalogue numbers of the books they wished to borrow on a small piece of paper, hand this to

the student assistants, and wait for the required books to appear. This was a process that, on bad days, could take a long time. I asked Danilo if he could possibly give us access to the library stacks. And, with a small, shy smile, he said that, sure, he could do that.

“I think he likes you,” Rita said to me.

“Me?”

“Why else is he giving us access to the stacks?”

“Why couldn’t it be you or Linda that he likes?”

“Didn’t he give you a poem last year?”

“Yes, but so what? Emil gave you two poems yesterday. Does that mean he likes you?”

“That’s different! He’s submitting them to the *Quill*.”

I shrugged. “He’s a nice guy,” I said.

“But not your type, I know,” Rita said.

It was a casual thing, soon dismissed, soon forgotten. Danilo receded to the periphery again.

But actually I did like him. I thought he would make a good friend. He was obviously very smart, and even funny, in his shy manner. He was also cute, in a brooding, bookish sort of way.

One time, I was working late in what we liked to call the “city room” of the Blue Quill. Danilo stopped by to pick up something one of the editors had left for him, and stayed to chat a bit with me. The chat turned out to be a pretty long one. We found out we both liked Jack Kerouac and Albert Camus. And that I didn’t fancy Dostoevsky (whom he liked), because I found him too dark and strange, and he didn’t fancy Graham Greene (whom I liked) because he couldn’t stand “all that Catholic guilt.” He told me I should read Nikos Kazantzakis and promised to lend me his copy of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and I promised to lend him my stack of Frank Sinatra records. I had not enjoyed *Vertigo* (starring James Stewart), and he hadn’t even watched *Gidget* (starring Sandra Dee). But we agreed that “Usahay” was a beautiful song—somehow we both knew its lyrics, even if neither of us was Cebuano (“Usahay nagadamgo ako... ” that one), and we figured, laughing, that this must have meant that we were both romantic. And when he asked me if I wanted to take a break from what I was doing, and have a coke or maybe coffee at this little place he knew in one of

the lanes off Dapitan, I surprised myself by saying, “Sure, why not?”

I did remember to lend him the Sinatra records and Danilo did bring his battered copy of the Kazantzakis book, which he insisted on giving me, as a small present, he said. But, because he was never in the places where Rita, Linda and I used to hang out, like the canteen, or the Pharmacy Garden, or Wilfranor’s on Dapitan, and Eugene’s on España; and was always so quiet when he now and again showed up at a meeting of the *Los Amantes*, that we tended to forget that he was there.

When I turned 18, my parents organized a party for me. It wasn’t quite a debut but it was pretty special. Mama decorated the garage with balloons and paper flowers, and had lights strung up all along the driveway and the garden. I invited a few of my cousins, my old high school barkada, my new college friends, the boyfriends of those of my friends who had boyfriends, and guys whom Rita and Linda and I were either dating, or regarded as good friends. Guests were asked to come in balintawak or kimona and patadyong, and barong Tagalog (we didn’t call the national attire “Filipiniana” then). There was a hired band (in those days called a “combo”), and a made-to-order cake supplied by an uncle who was a pastry chef by avocation.

That was the era of the “gangs,” which considered certain neighborhoods their turf, and got their kicks by gate crashing parties, and starting fights with the male guests. The intruders were usually armed with knives. The invited guests broke beer bottles and used them to fight back with. (Nobody carried guns then.) These gangs were not actual hoodlums; they were referred to as “juvenile delinquents,” and were mostly the spoiled sons of well-off families, who fancied themselves rebels without a cause, like the characters James Dean played in his movies. Damage was not usually serious, but some people did get hurt. And, eventually, parents whose sons or daughters were throwing a party took to hiring security guards for the night, whose job it was to check invitations at the gate and prevent people without invitations from entering.

My party was going really well. The music was good and the dancing, lively. When dinner was served, everyone was in high spirits and had worked up a good appetite.

Then I noticed one of our hired security guards talking to my mother. As I approached them, I heard my mother saying, “If they have no

invitations, they are not invited.”

“Ma’am, he says, they are classmates of your daughter,” the security guard said.

“Who is it who says that?” I asked.

“*Ilagan daw po ang pangalan niya,*” the guard replied.

“Danilo!” I thought. “Let him in, please,” I said, and turned to assure my mother that they were indeed my classmates.

When I reached the gate, Danilo and his two companions had been let in, and were standing in a tight little group at the edge of the driveway. I recognized the two other guys as Ernie and Jun, Danilo’s classmates. All three were dressed in dark suits, Jun’s, a size too large for him.

“Come in, please,” I said, murmuring apologies about there having been some misunderstanding. It was a terribly awkward moment which I tried to cover up by leading them to the buffet table, chattering away about how they were just in time for dinner, and how the combo was taking a break but would soon be back and the dancing would resume. One of the boys—Ernie, I think—mumbled something about not really being much for dancing. I don’t recall Danilo saying anything at all.

I stayed with them while they filled their plates with embotido and chicken potato salad, and fruit salad, and a specialty of Mama’s that she called “party pork and beans,” which combined hot dog slices, pork and beans, bacon strips and onions in a thick sauce made from crushed tomatoes, Worcester Sauce and brown sugar. Then I led them to some empty chairs and sat with them. Their being dressed differently from everyone else clearly added to their discomfort. And my attempts to get a conversation going met with dismal results.

When a couple of other guys—also from our college—walked up to greet the three newcomers, I heaved a sigh of relief, and rose from my chair, ready to move away. But Danilo rose too, and stopped me with a small gesture.

“I’m sorry to have barged into your party.” His voice was barely above a whisper, so I had to move a little closer to hear him. “I didn’t know it was a private thing. I... I assumed... wrongly, I see that now... that we would be welcome because... well, because we... are... friends. Please forgive my stupidity... my ignorance.”

I began to protest: he *was* welcome, and I *did* consider him my friend... But the pained look on his face made the words catch in my throat, and trail away.

“We won’t stay long,” he said. “I just wanted to greet you a happy birthday... and... to give you... this.”

He handed me a small, white envelope, almost surreptitiously. Then he gave me a little awkward bow, turned around, nodded to his mates, and walked quickly away from me.

I waited till the guests had gone, the family had retired to their bedrooms, and I had showered and changed. Then I sat on my bed—facing the wall with the small framed prints of Picasso’s little harlequin and two Degas ballerinas, gifts from Ninang Sally—and I opened the envelope Danilo had given me.

On a plain sheet of paper, much folded, to fit into the small white envelope, he had typed what I knew was a new poem. Its title was a single word: “Usahay.”

### III NORMA

The e-mail came in while I was on my way to work on Friday, the third of May.

I was still staring at my cell phone’s screen, making sure that I had read the words right, when the phone rang. It was Rita. She was driving but had pulled up to the side, to reread her e-mail. “What does it mean?” she demanded. “Norma died? How?”

The message from Norma’s husband—whom Rita had never met, and whom I had met only once, a long time ago—was very brief. It said Norma had returned to Sydney the day before, after a two-months’ stay in Manila, had gone straight to the hospital, and had passed away that morning. It didn’t say what she had died of.

“Was she in Manila? Did you know she was here?” Rita pressed.

“No, I didn’t! ... Wait, I did get a call...” When was that? I tried to remember. I was on my way to the hospital, where my oldest daughter Lara



had yet again been admitted. This was after her surgery. She had been discharged in March, but had to keep going back because of fluid accumulating in her lungs. A bad time...

"She did call," I said to Rita. "Was that last month? No, maybe two months ago. I couldn't talk for long. I was rushing to the hospital to meet with Lara's pulmonologist. Norma told me not to worry about it—she just wanted me to know she was praying for Lara. I had assumed she was calling from Singapore or Sydney." Actually, I hadn't asked.

The rest of the day, we were to try to piece the story together over a flurry of e-mails, Rita, Vere, Fely and I in Manila; and the rest of our group of old classmates from college, scattered in other parts of the globe—Linda in Baden, Vicky in Kansas City, Isa in L.A., Josie in New Delhi. We had all responded to the identical e-mails we had received, expressing sympathy, requesting some details. But there was no reply.

My thoughts were bleak. My friend had called and I had not thought to ask where she was calling from. She had not sounded sick at all, but I might have asked. I might have said, as friends do, when they're not too self-absorbed and sunk in their own problems to notice the rest of the world around them, "And how about you, Norma, how have you been?" And then she might have told me.

When had I last seen her? During her last visit to Manila—was that it? Yes, we had managed a reunion at Kanin Club in the Hub. We have pictures, standing in the sunlight, smiling. I closed my eyes, trying to recall how Norma had looked, what she had worn, what she had said...

It is another Norma that I see: the young Norma whom I had first met when she applied for admission into our sorority. I had joined it the year before as a Freshman, and was already a "Sister." She was the neophyte assigned to me. This meant that I could boss her around as I pleased, but also that I was responsible for her.

Sororities in our day were nothing like they are now. Ours was more like an honor society. And absolutely no physical hazing was allowed in our university. But there was an initiation period for neophytes, and the Sisters were experts in the art of petty humiliation. For college freshman, straight out of convent school, the Sisters, in their chic blue-grey suits, crisp white blouses, and high heels, chins in the air, saddle bags swinging from their shoulders, were an intimidating lot. Their commands were to be obeyed

without question.

Not so for Norma. She was indignant. She was outraged. She waited for me outside my Philosophy classroom to tell me she would have none of it. Astonished, I took her to the ladies' room where we could have some privacy, and stood helplessly beside her as—through a storm of tears—she furiously declared the whole thing a demented exercise in absurd cruelty and a petty display of power. She was quitting, she announced, she was withdrawing her application. I must have at some point asked her to sleep on it, to think it over. But she shook her head: there was nothing to think about.

I have actually kept the slips of paper on which *my* sorority “masters” scribbled their daily “orders” to me, in a yellowing envelope tucked between pages of a scrapbook. And looking through them now, I am bemused by how mild those instructions actually were. Most demanded an essay or a poem on topics ranging from “How to Be Humble” (was I perhaps perceived to be lacking in humility as a Freshman?), to “The Right Book for the Right Child at the Right Time;” some required attendance at daily mass in the university chapel. others ordered me to deliver three roses to the boyfriend of our Most Exalted Sister. There were demands for live lizards and rare stamps and old issues of particular magazines, and “five garden flowers (like daisies, roses, dahlias) wrapped nicely.” One—from my personal “master,” Willie Fletcher—actually advised me to drink a glass of milk and get a good night’s sleep every night as “you will need all your strength for the coming final initiation.” Perhaps the feeling of harassment that all of us neophytes suffered from was caused simply by having to do so many tasks in so short a period of time, while attending regular classes.

What could Norma have found so galling about the whole business?

I mentioned Norma’s defection to Joe Burgos, Editor-in-Chief of the *Blue Quill*, our college paper. “She’s from Torres High School, right?” he said, “And I think she wrote for the *Torch*. She must have found the whole business silly.” This was another surprise for me. After all, Joe was himself the “most exalted” head of our brother-fraternity, and his girlfriend, Amada Tipace, was our sorority’s “Most Exalted Sister,” succeeding Julie Yap.

I realized that, despite myself, I was impressed. I think that because she came from a public school, I must have expected Norma to be tougher somehow. And her quitting had been a disappointment. But now, I was be-

ginning to recognize the possibility that there are different kinds of toughness.

One year after the scene in the ladies room, Norma again surprised us by applying to the sorority again. And that time she took everything stoically, following every single order—including the most absurd—to the letter, without the smallest murmur. And, when she had become a Sister, she wore the uniform—which she had once described to me as “the perfect costume for silly snobs”—with good grace and the occasional grin.

“What made you change your mind?” I asked curiously.

She shrugged. “Maybe I like you and Rita. Or maybe I just wanted to belong to something. Why not a sorority?”

I got to know Norma better when we all became staff members of *The Varsitarian*, our university’s student paper. And I got to see a bit more of that toughness I had vaguely suspected. She was certainly tougher than any of us ex-colegialas. She was also practical and down-to-earth and funny, able to laugh at us—and at herself—while all of us were still taking ourselves and our troubles (real or imagined) much too seriously.

She would sit there, behind one of our ancient Underwood typewriters, under the slow, creaking, fat-bladed ceiling fans—listening with a quizzical expression on her face, as one or the other of us spilled out the details of the latest weepy episode of the teen-age melodrama we all thought we were living. And when the drippy tale was over, she would gather her galley proofs, or her notebooks, stuff them into her large old bag, and say drily, “And now, Rita (or Jing or Linda), turn it into maudlin poetry and move on.” Her own personal pains and passions were never a subject for conversation even then. To get at them we had to read her stories.

Through all the later milestones and upheavals, in her life and in mine, our friendship held: graduation, hers one year after mine... my marriage... our first jobs... the birth of my children... the wave of student protest that swept the campuses in the late 60s and culminated in the declaration of martial law in ’72... the loss of our jobs... Norma’s sudden move to Singapore... her partnership, and eventual marriage to Ian... Tony’s decision to join UNICEF which led to a gypsy life that lasted 15 years...

One busy morning or one lazy afternoon, in Bangkok or Beirut or Seoul or Rangoon or New York City, the phone would ring. And it would be Norma, calling from a hotel somewhere in the city, telling me she had

just flown in from Singapore or Sydney or Frankfurt and had a couple of days, and could we manage coffee or a drink or something? And—in my office at the U-Chuliang Building on Rama IV Road, or my garden on Kaba Aye Pagoda Road, or wherever I happened to be—coffee would extend into lunch, cocktails would spill over into dinner, as Norma and I would return to our days as co-eds under the pine trees on the campus along España in Manila.

One time—it must have been in Rangoon—she phoned from the Strand Hotel.

“You’re in the Strand?” I repeated. “The Strand Hotel here in Rangoon?”

“Where the rats are as big as the cats? The very same,” she replied.

I would give her lunch, I said. She had to be careful about what she ate... “Exactly what I had in mind,” Norma interrupted. “Where do you live?”

I told her I’d come fetch her. “No need,” she said. “I’ll take a taxi and find you.”

“Norma, there are no taxis in Rangoon,” I said.

“What? How about a horse and carriage? Oh, all right then. I’ll be waiting in the lobby where I’m told Joseph Conrad used to sit at sunset, drinking Mandalay beer.”

And over our cook Pusu’s incomparable Ohn No Khao Swe, Norma told me that she was on her way back to Singapore after a quick business trip to Manila. By then she and Ian were running a successful publishing company (later I was to learn that their outfit published the first real best-sellers in Singapore). She had just met with Nanay Coring, the Ramos matriarch, who still ran National Bookstore, and had negotiated a good deal for one of their company’s titles—a book on summer wines, I think.

“I like her, you know,” Norma said. “I have a soft spot for women like her. Tough business women who retain something of the old ways, something which the younger generation has forgotten, or never learned. Just as I liked Doña Trining.”

“Who’s Doña Trining?” I asked.

“Of the old D ‘n’ E,” she replied. “You got me that job, remember? My first job, in fact.”

I had actually forgotten about that. But Norma hadn't. It was a big thing for her, she told me. "The teaching job in St. Theresa's was a part time thing. The pay was modest. Not that Doña Trining was over-generous. But with the two jobs one could manage. It was a big improvement on the allowance from the V."

"What do you mean from the V? The *Varsitarian*? Were we paid?"

"Of course. You don't remember? No, you wouldn't. It was a small amount. Peanuts, actually. But it made such a difference for me. I actually announced to my father that he need no longer give me an allowance, that I could now look after myself. I had no idea how tiny that allowance actually was. I had my school uniforms made—yes, including that snotty sorority one—and I wore them everywhere. There were days when I went hungry."

I was hearing all of this for the first time. "But—but, Norma, why didn't you say something? Surely we could have helped?"

Norma shook her head. "Oh no, never. I couldn't have done that. You don't remember what I was like then? And I couldn't take back what I had told my father either. I may have even flung it at him, or at my mother, most likely. You know how she could be sometimes."

I tried to recall what her mother was like—or what Norma had told me about her—but the memory was too distant. Perhaps it was the mother figure in Norma's early fiction that I had in my mind's eye: a proud, demanding woman, with a keen eye and a sharp tongue. She polished her window sills and her floors to a fine shine, cooked terrific meals, did the family ironing herself, was an English teacher, insisted on piano lessons for her daughters, taught them to mind their manners.

But I did recall Norma's telling me of times when she and her siblings had to be pulled out of school, because there was no money. And I have a sharp memory of the first time I went to her house. I was EIC of the *Varsitarian* then, and I think I needed to get the pages for her section. The issue was already very late, and I couldn't contact her. She had no telephone at home. And of course cell phones were a long way away. I asked Theni, our Sports Editor, if he knew where Norma lived, and since he did, I told him to take me. We went in my car.

We had to leave the car on a street corner, and walk the rest of the way. The lane was too narrow—there were too many children running around, too many people walking around, walking in the middle of the

street, like it was their backyard.

I was disturbed. Why should I have been? I don't know what I had expected. Not what I found anyway. And then we were standing in front of Norma's house. And I stood there, staring at it for a while. It looked totally out of place in that neighborhood, with its hawkers and peddlers and tri-cycles, the men in undershirts sitting on benches outside sari-sari stores, smoking and laughing over their bottles of beer, the women in loose house dresses and slippers, calling out to each other in loud voices, children screeching and squabbling.

Norma's house was a two-story wooden house, its windows covered with a profusion of plants in clay pots, standing behind a fence against which grew more plants, and a thick hedge—was it *gumamela*? *santan*? There was also a vine, I remember, *cadena de amor*, I think. And trees, I'm sure there were two or three or more trees—*chico*, *aratiles*, *avocado*? It was charming!

And there was Norma's mother at the door—a striking figure with long hair fastened behind her neck in a bun, large dark eyes, a long, flowing skirt, violet flowers against aquamarine—an attractive woman. She received us graciously and gave us glasses of ice-cold calamansi juice... Do I actually remember this, or was this part of one of Norma's stories?

Trying to piece the picture together these many years later is difficult. Did the family fall upon hard times? Did her father lose his job? What was his job? Was he a government clerk perhaps? Or was he a lawyer who had had to make do with a job as a government clerk? Had Norma and I actually talked about it? Or was I just guessing?

I shall never know. The time when I could have asked for details is over. But then, in those days, I could not have probed. Norma was too reserved. She revealed only as much as she wished to reveal.

And then I recalled another phone call. Tony and I were back in Manila by then. The call came late at night, interrupting our quiet evening. Tony and I were watching TV, or a DVD of some film we had missed on the big screen. Norma was calling from Sydney.

She had looked in the directory, she explained, and had found Tony's name, and what she realized was our old number. We had not changed it since we bought our townhouse in the 80s, while we were still living overseas.

I asked if she was in town. And Norma said no, she wasn't. And then, abruptly she asked me if I remembered her sister, Erlinda.

"Linda? Of course I remember her," I replied. "Why?"

"She just died," Norma said flatly. "She died today."

And before I could gather my thoughts, she added that she had wanted to tell someone. Her sister had died and she just wanted to tell someone. "You knew her," Norma said, "so I decided I would tell you."

I found the words then, words of commiseration and sympathy. I knew she and Erlinda had been very close. More than sisters to each other, they were best friends. And fellow-writers too. For as Norma wrote stories and essays, Erlinda wrote poems.

It was only much later that I learned the details of that illness. Norma must have revealed them during another visit.

Her sister had not told anyone she had cancer, Norma said. "Her office called me. She was working in Jakarta, you know. They said she had collapsed and been taken to the hospital. I took the first flight I could get on. The illness was far advanced, was, actually, beyond help. I decided right then to take Linda home with me. I packed everything—her office, her house. I brought her home with me to Sydney... to die. I put everything else on hold, and looked after her during those last months. It was hard."

She wrote about this death in the Preface to her novel, *Available Light*, which was published by our old university's publishing house, about a year before her own passing.

*The seasons of that death watch were not entirely without cheer. We designed pocket gardens, we sowed seeds and she got to see them germinate and produce either fruit or flowers; we dug into our collection of sheet music and recalled old piano pieces. The sibling closeness we enjoyed in our youth was restored to us. I don't know whether she had hoped for a miracle. But I can vouch that together we prayed daily for grace. Above all, she wanted dignity.*

When Norma learned of Tony's fatal illness, she phoned me from Singapore to tell me that she was in tears as she read my e-mail. And after he died, she phoned again. I was so mired in sorrow that I barely heard what she was saying. She had been there from the beginning of our youthful romance. There was no need for words. Before she hung up, she said. "I know what sort of man Tony was. And I know what he would expect you

to do now. He would expect you to soldier on without him. And you know that you can do it.” At that moment, soldiering on without him seemed the very thing I could not do. But I knew that, as usual, Norma was right.

And now she, too, was gone, without warning, without word of farewell.

In my mind, I asked her: did it have to be this way? But I knew the answer to that one. And I could not imagine her wanting it to happen in any other way.