THE STUDIO AT 57 GUANCO STREET

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It was the long concrete staircase that I remember most. It led to the second-storey portion of a large building that had the sign "Elite Studio," at its side, a curving font that was familiar to almost everyone living in Iloilo City during the 60's. Below, at street level, were a gun store, a small watch repair shop, and a restaurant named Japsie's. My parents brought me, when I was one-and-a-half years old, to live in that southern city when my father, an Accounting graduate, followed his heart and opened a photographic studio. He was a painter (oil, tempera, watercolor), an essayist (having some of his written works published in local Chinese newspapers), and most of all, a photography enthusiast. He was born in Iloilo City but went back to Xiamen, China for his secondary schooling. Coming back to the Philippines for his college degree, he worked as an accountant for a while in a company in Pulupandan, Negros Occidental, where he met my mother, who had also just finished her BSE studies.

My first memories of that house were navigating those concrete stairs, about 22 of them, each 8 inches high, on my short legs. There was a small landing at the top. Below was a vacant strip of land on which grew tall guava and tamarind trees, and a garlic vine that curled and flowered around the wire mesh that separated the property from the next-door PLDT building. The receiving areas for the studio had upholstered chairs for clients, and two large glass-enclosed store windows containing 11 x 14 colored photographs of lovely women, which we changed from time to time.

Behind the shop counter which we entered through a swinging, waist-high wooden door were corner-to-corner cabinets, with numerous drawers for negatives of the customers' pictures. Each of these negatives was enclosed in thin, glassine envelopes, the clients' names handwritten by my mother at the top center, with their corresponding code numbers. On top of the cabinets were long cardboard boxes of printed photographs, safely tucked into brown paper envelopes, ready to be claimed by customers.

A few steps away, hidden by the store windows, was the studio itself. The center piece was an elevated area at one end, with green damask curtains that could be drawn, and a light blue plywood background. A rectangular seat with curved armrests was at the center, and a few benches (for group pictures) were lined up at the side. At the center too was a Leica camera mounted on sturdy legs, with its pleated, accordion box for focusing. The negatives for this were the 5 x 7 types, inserted into a slot by plastic panels with sliding parts. Standing lights with their spindly, adjustable legs were ready for use, and at one side, attached to the wall was a panel of around fifteen black switches. These controlled the huge array of ceiling lights at the furthest end of the room facing the elevated platform, around three panels of long, white fluorescent lamps, about twenty for each panel. When fully switched on, the lights mimicked sunlight, so that the photos came out looking very natural.

At one end too was a huge wall mirror, about 8 x 10 feet, for the customers to see themselves full length. On each side were two changing rooms, with woven rattan chairs and large, rectangular mirrors. Just off to one side was the make-up room. My father had enrolled in a correspondence course for photography make-up, and he provided the service for free to customers who wished to avail of it. In this room was a stool with adjustable height. I remember my brother and me sitting on it and whirling ourselves around as the threads of the base went around and around.

Beyond the studio were the "dark rooms" where the photographs were processed. These were all done by hand by two employees, Alejandro (who had thirteen children by his first wife) and Vencio (the older one who never stopped coughing). Because the photographic papers were light-sensitive (the silver coat immediately reacted and became useless when hit by light). Alejandro and Vencio worked in semi-darkness, the only illumination coming from a muted red bulb hanging from the ceiling.

The papers were first "exposed" to a mounted machine that projected the negative's picture into the paper by the flick of a switch. These machines could enlarge and reduce the photos, as one wished. The exposed papers were first dipped in the "Developer Tray" where pictures slowly appeared before my eyes on the previously-blank papers. The dark/light tint of the photographs was manually controlled. A "Stop Bath Tray" came next, where the developing solutions were washed off; then the "Fixer Tray" where the photos were dipped for a while to stabilize the layer of the just-formed photo. The solutions had acetic acid which my father usually made them himself.

There was a basement area in the house where I would accompany him to make all the solutions. We had a ceramic-coated tin pail of distilled water, where we put in the chemicals, often in crystals, the amount of which he first carefully weighed on a small weighing scale with minute iron weights as counterbalance. Upon mixing, the water suddenly turned cold, and beads of condensation would form on the outside layer of the pail. I would be the stirrer, and felt thrilled to be with my father, as he concocted the needed solutions for the studio. The aroma of the solutions differed. But what I can still smell is the acidic whiff, as I slowly stirred the batch with a large, wooden salad spoon.

Our lives revolved around the studio. We lived in quarters just behind it. I studied my lessons on the dining table, and heard our photographers (Ulysses, Mars, and Romulo) shouting, "Ready! One, two, three!" as they squeezed the rubber ball attached to the shutter of the Leica camera. I could hear babies fussing and wailing, as older members of the family cajoled and shushed.

Christmas and graduation were peak times for the studio, and I remember father being up till 3AM helping out in the dark room, a lighted cigarette in his hand. Weddings, too, were happy occasions, as I silently stood to one side and observed the beautiful beaded gowns, colorful ensembles of the entourage, the laughter and the general gaiety. I would later collect the sequins and beads that fell from the gowns, and put them in a special clean Gerber bottle kept especially for these gems.

Because colored pictures were not yet in vogue then, my father used oil pigments to color the large photographs. He would first dip the pictures in a solution to turn them into sepia brown (more akin to skin tones, he

said). When dried, he would first lightly brush the surface with linseed oil, and start his art work. Even today, the smell of linseed oil transports me to those days when I saw him bent over the photos, carefully adding on colors, using brushes, thick and delicate ones, and even cotton balls twirled into pinpoint ends to color the reflections on the eyes.

This was no different from my memory of him in his lighted work bench with so many tools. One time he carefully emptied some fresh eggs, cleaned the shells, and transformed them into "Put-To-Ongs." (literally, Non-Falling Dolls). Inside the base of the shells he glued round lead washers to stabilize the standing eggs. He then painted faces on the shells' surfaces, in some he put goatees or beards; and to cover the open ends, he attached magician hats or fluffy cotton hair. One of the most elaborate he had done were those of Chinese Peking Opera faces/masks. These were lined up in my bedroom, and because of the heavy base, they would, when lightly tipped to one side, wobble a bit as if nodding, then return to the center.

Childhood memories then always returned to that photographic studio along Guanco St. just a corner away from J.M. Basa, the main street, which we called Calle Real. In front of us were the Tan-Guzman Jewelry Shop, Agencia de Empeños, I remember the sign, and a small alley that led to the second floor apartment of a Chinese music teacher, Mr. Ng. He played the violin beautifully, and when my mother and I were seated on one of the balconies that looked out into the street, we would hear him play, and the music melded softly into that quiet, tranquil street.

Beside us was a movie theater, the Ever Theater. Our water pump was on the ground level, and accessible only by opening a large trap door on the floor in the studio, hidden at daytime by a green and white linoleum. There was a door near the water pump that led to the Ever Movie Theater next door. Often, maintenance people whom we knew by first names, and had become friends with, would say hello when we opened the door. Although we seldom went, we had carte blanche of the theater because we knew the ladies who took the tickets, especially when the movie theater was not yet air-conditioned, and there was only a thick, cloth curtain separating the movie house from the street.

When we transferred to Manila, the studio became a small department store, which eventually was razed to the ground.

A few years back, I returned to our old home, and only the façade and the balcony where we used to sit remained. The whole building had become an empty hulk. The long concrete stairs were still there though, and I could almost smell the ripe guavas and the flowers of the garlic vine, and see myself as a child, slowly climbing up the stairs after school, clutching my school bag. I would enter the studio and my mother would be there at the counter attending to the customers, and she would tell me to have merienda before studying my lessons.

Remembering the details of growing up in Iloilo City not only brings nostalgia, but also a swift pang of sadness. Both my father and mother are gone now, including my younger brother, and I couldn't reminisce about the house in Guanco St. without remembering them. Those were long, beautiful days when we were all together, and I feel grateful for those memories, when getting up in the morning meant a ready breakfast of hot bread, freshly-fried eggs, and barako coffee (my parents never believed children should only drink milk). Somehow by writing them down I relive those days all over, bask in their remembered warmth, listen to the flurry of their voices when family pictures meant bawling babies, teasing laughter.

I finally realize that I've never really left 57 Guanco St. at all—I continually live in it, day by day, climbing its long concrete stairs, greeting my mother from school, collecting the colorful beads left after a wedding shoot. I see my father seated at his lighted drawing board, hunching over a large sepia portrait, coloring in the details. My five-year-old brother laughs aloud as he crosses my path, showing me his new red and white bicycle.