# REMEMBERING MÁMANG

Alice M. Sun-Cua

**The Blue Dress**

I remember that blue dress very well—it was gauzy, with small white roses scattered against a light blue background. My mother and I shopped for the cloth material in one of the "emporiums" along J.M. Basa St.—the street we called "Calle Real"—in the commercial hub back then, of Iloilo City during the 1960s. I was around 8 years old, and at the behest of my mother, enrolled in piano lessons under Sor Celia Garganera, D.C. at the Conservatory of Music of the Colegio del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus, one of the religious schools in the city run by the Daughters of Charity sisters. I was just in the children's level, but we were to have a piano recital. I cannot even remember the music piece that I played—something from a red "Thompson" book, if I recall rightly.

But I remember the dress vividly. It had a Peter Pan collar, puffed sleeves, nipped at the waist, and a skirt falling gracefully in soft pleats to my knees. My mother was a graduate of the Cosmopolitan School of Dress Design. According to her, the school was in Azcárraga, now called C.M. Recto St. She even had a diploma and a graduation picture of herself in a pink sleeveless gown, a confection she made herself as a requirement for graduation.

She started measuring me, and I saw how she drew the template on a large brown paper, which was later carefully snipped to form a dummy. The dress had a light blue silk lining which was also carefully measured. She pinned the brown paper on the cloth with fine round-headed pins, and

meticulously cut the cloth according to the paper figure. I remember she had a special pair of large scissors, the handles of which were protected with a tightly wound green strip of cloth. These scissors were to be used only to cut cloth material, she said, and never on anything else. Sometimes though, when she was not looking, my brother Anthony and I defied her prohibition and used that particular pair of scissors to cut paper and (horrors!) cardboard for our personal projects. She would of course eventually find out, when it could no longer cut cloth as sharply and cleanly as it should. Woe unto us then, for a scolding would eventually follow!

After shaping the cloth, she would open her Singer sewing machine, mounted on a shiny wooden, table-like piece of equipment. This was one of her treasures, given to her by my father's friend Andy, when I was born. My parents brought this sewing machine all the way from Manila to Iloilo City, and I often heard them talking about Andy, and what a waste it was, they said, because he had met an untimely death at a young age.

My mother's Singer was a treadle sewing machine, and she would lovingly tend to its parts, using a Singer-brand oil in its green tin bottle with a long nozzle and a red cap. The machine was always well-oiled and shiny, and the wooden housing encased in a green printed cloth especially made for it by my mother to keep the machine free from dust and dirt. Often, we would hear the hum-hum-hum of the machine, as she evenly stepped on the rectangular pedal, with the name "SINGER" in ironwork, along with the horizontal bars where she placed her feet. Later, when we saw that the pedaling left her a bit out of breath, we offered to attach a motor to the machine. But she refused, saying it would not be the same without her foot pedaling away.

I watched the blue dress take form. From time to time, she would call me to come over, first to try on the lining, and then, the dress. Adjustments had to be made in the waist as I was no thin gazelle, even then. The shoulders too, and even the length of the skirt needed slight modifications. Like any

child, I became impatient with the sewing and the many times I had to try the dress on. But my mother never lost her patience.

And as a "pièce de résistance" she fashioned a large rose out of an extra piece of gauzy cloth, twirling the folded material several times to form the petals of a flower, finally pinning it on a stiff belt separate from the dress. The belt, also covered with the blue material, had a cardboard stiffener, and was anchored by hooks and eyes.

To this day, I can still see very clearly that rose on the belt, although I can no longer find a photo of the recital. I am very sure that my father, ever the photographer, took many pictures during that occasion. But in my mind's eye this is one picture I see: myself in that light blue dress, short white socks, and black shoes after the recital, smiling self-consciously at the camera, my hair done in a tight chignon with a blue velvet ribbon around it.

My mother graduated with a B.S.E.Ed. degree from CEU in Mendiola St., Manila, but she had a strong creative bent. I remember the checkered red-and-white schoolbag she made for me when I started kindergarten, using the "craze" then: long, flat, colored plastic strips woven artistically to form a bag. She was also into crocheting. One of her masterpieces was a large, dark blue "mantilla" with a seashell design. After long years of being unused and kept in her closet, parts of its edges had become faded, but the entire piece is intact. I used to wash it gently, and wear it from time to time. It was a veritable heirloom.

That she found time to indulge in her many sewing projects, including darning and adjusting hems of school uniforms, using her trusty ivory thimble on her third finger, plus innumerable other creative pursuits, in between taking care of two children, managing a household, and helping my father in his studio, was a testament to her multi-faceted life.

She left us five years ago, at almost 90 years old, one day after Mother's Day. But, on early mornings before the day starts when I sit quietly

to read or write, I search my heart and I always find her there. She looks young, younger than myself, and happy. And sometimes I see her holding up that little blue dress, adjusting the collar, the sleeves, and especially that blue rose adorning its belt.

**The Aroma of Adobo**

I remember my mother's chicken adobo most vividly. Often, when we visited her on Sundays, the enticing smell of garlicky adobo greeted us as we entered her garden. From outside the screened doors we could already guess what was for lunch that day: my favorite comfort food, chicken adobo cooked in my mother's special way. She called it "Ilonggo Adobo," to differentiate it from the soupy dish often found here in Manila. The chicken parts were lightly coated with a sauce, most of which settled at the bottom of the dish. Before serving she would use a tablespoon to scoop up this aromatic oil, bringing up a lot of fried garlic, and spread it over the chicken pieces. She knew the dish was my favorite.

When we still lived in Iloilo City where my father opened a photographic studio, my mother was very busy helping out in the shop. There were negative films to be sorted out and placed inside plasticine envelopes, properly labeled; photos to be inspected and counted daily before they were placed on brown paper envelopes with the names of the customers neatly written in front with the correct dates. These were registered in a master logbook. We had an all-around secretary, Leticia, but her handwriting left so much to be desired. My mother, with her clear, cursive hand, did these entries herself. To this day I've always thanked my mother for passing down to me this ability to write in a very legible longhand, an outlier perhaps among the many medical prescription scrawls of colleagues. But my handwriting never matched hers in beauty and fluidity, although I could do a passable counterfeit. She and my father took turns tutoring my brother Anthony and

I daily on our school lessons, sessions which would sometimes last till before dinnertime. The studio closed at seven in the evening after a full day, so the cooking was delegated to our house help, who fortunately were up to the task. My mother often declared that she was a housewife, who didn't know how to cook, but she certainly found her bearings in the kitchen later in life.

When we transferred to Manila, my mother had more time on her hands. She started looking at recipes for Filipino food in magazines, and pored through some old cookbooks. I remember Betty Crocker's, a well-thumbed volume that allowed the reader to add more recipes because it had a three-ring binder. I loved leafing through its colorful pages when I was in high school, more to read its contents than to learn how to cook. I remember too, getting my mother some new cookbooks, and newer pots and pans for her birthdays. Slowly she surprised us with her culinary skills. She remembered the food of her childhood in Negros, and even ventured into dishes with coconut cream and chili. My husband Alex loves chili in his food, and my mother would often tell us that she added extra chilies in the curry dish just for him, and would we try tasting it if it was hot enough?

Yet she never forgot my penchant for the Ilonggo adobo. Many times, we cooked it together. The chicken parts would have been marinating in a little salt, soy sauce, and *calamansi* juice for at least three hours before we arrived. Then she would lightly sauté the meat, and set it aside. Lots of crushed garlic would then be fried, with the chicken added afterwards. A little water was poured into the pot, and then some vinegar, and a little bay leaf would be added. When the chicken was cooked through, she would add the soy sauce and then turn the heat to low.

This simmering was where the magic begins, I think. The low heat caused the reduction of whatever liquid remained, and left in its trace a slightly thick, oily, and garlicky sauce that could be placed on hot rice, a viand

by itself! She would often ask me to taste the "unaw," which was the sauce. Was it too salty?

It was always perfect, and I would tell her so. And her face would light up with delight.

She even had a special heavy black wok for her adobo, and she would not cook it anywhere else. The thickness distributed the heat evenly, she said, and there was never the fear of a "dukot," or burnt food sticking to the bottom of the pan. The chicken adobo was always cooked so thoroughly, that the meat even fell from the bones.

When we went home in the evenings, she would often tell us to bring home almost all the leftover adobo with us. She was alone on weekdays, she said, and she couldn't consume all the leftovers by herself. We would enjoy that dish for several more days, down to the last bit of garlicky sauce.

There were other dishes that she loved to cook. I remember her Steamed Chicken with Lemongrass, which was always so soft, tender, and aromatic. She didn't have a steamer, and refused to use the Salad Master set that we surprised her with one Christmas. She had her improvised steamer, she said, which worked very well. The proof of course was in her steamed chicken, which often had a clear lemongrass suffused sauce in the serving dish. This liquid tasted like chicken essence, the result of the three-hour steaming on a wok, the heavy oval dish sitting gingerly on top of an inverted thick cup that had lost its ear long go.

And who could forget her Minced Pork with Salty Egg Yolk Surprise? When she was still strong enough to take a jeep all by herself to the Arranque Market, she would head for her "suki" to get uncooked salted eggs. She trusted this shop, she said, because the shopkeeper never gave her spoiled ones. She would mix the minced pork with the whites of the salted eggs very well, and put this mixture in a deep rectangular clear dish. Then she

would "bury" the salted egg yolks a little apart from one another and cover the top with more minced pork. Finally, she would steam this in her favorite "steamer." And the result was a mouth-watering pork dish with just enough saltiness that needed no other seasoning. The "surprise" was in finding the golden yolk among the moist and luscious minced pork.

When in the mood, even while we were still living in Iloilo City, she would find time on Sundays to cook "kumbo," fried ripe *saba* bananas covered in a flour-and-egg batter, which were best eaten while hot. This usually occurred when a relative from the countryside gave us loads of ripe *saba* bananas that needed to be eaten the soonest.

There was also the Puto Lanson that she patiently made. The peeled cassava (we call them *balinghoy* in Hiligaynon) tubers had to be grated, then mixed with young coconut meat and sugar, before being steamed in round Liberty milk cans. This concoction was topped with grated coconut and brown sugar.

But it is her adobo chicken that I remember most. And miss. When my husband Alex and I lived in Sydney and Jakarta, I tried to duplicate my mother's recipe, but never got the right consistency of her "unaw." I was always so afraid of burning the dish, so most of the time the chicken came out looking pale. I had to add more soy sauce, and the dish didn't taste the same as hers. Sometimes in my mind, I would ask her what was her secret for this tasty bit of comfort food, and I imagine her laughing merrily. I see her in the kitchen, in her element, doing something that she loved because she knew we appreciated her cooking so much.

She left us a day after Mother's Day six years ago, perhaps making sure we spent that special May day with her, by her hospital bed. These days, I draw comfort in these memories, and then I know that she is still with us.