

Dishing with the Master

Menchu Aquino Sarmiento

For starving artists and thirsting writers, few sights outside of the buffet at an embassy to-do were quite as enthralling as the open bar beside Manong Frankie's study. Row upon row of choice whiskies, wines, vodka, rum, gin, liqueur, cognac, brandy and *sake* filed several rows deep, with the appropriate glasses close at hand, and served with *pulutan* too. Those with less adventurous tastes had their familiarly comforting local beer. For teetotalers, there might be the usual iced soft drinks, or even a samovar of brewing Benguet coffee. China cups and saucers were laid out on a tray beside the imposing sculpted, bereted portrait of the National Artist by Julie Lluch. F. Sionil Jose ate and drank well, as did we, when we were in his company.

However, when one impudent young poet suggested that she might, without permission or invitation, appropriate the commemorative coffee mugs, which were embossed with the titles of the *Rosales Saga*, lined up along a shelf, the rolling eyes and disapprovingly pursed lips of those within earshot, quickly disabused her of such gauche insolence. She was clearly a taker and even incapable of contributing to the lively conversation swirling about the second floor of 531 Padre Faura. But Jose's hospitality had to be reciprocated with respect for their property at the very least. It wouldn't do, after all, to go around swiping books with impunity from the ground floor displays. Note: Manong Frankie had a huge open carton of publisher's proofs from which his visitors might choose, after he had decided upon which he would be ordering.

Occasionally, the Jose's open table featured a leg of Jamón Serrano with an array of European cheeses, and all the gustatory accoutrements: melba toast, bruun butter, aoli, dishes of Greek and Spanish olives, pickled pearl onions. Always, there was *pancit*, usually more than one kind, as

well as cake. Two decades or so ago, the late great Nick Joaquin came, with an offering of *cochinillo* from the legendary El Comedor. Manong Frankie wanted his fellow National Artist to meet the precocious Generation X, Y & Zers and us tail-end Boomers too. He believed us to be the future of Filipino arts and letters. It was this indulgent faith in his literary progeny, which made me choose a smiling porcelain Buddha with bare-bottomed children clambering all over him, from the tchotchkes upon his impeccably well-ordered writing desk. He had confided that he was feeling his age, and wanted me to have a memento of him. The orderliness of his work space, the assurance of a room of his own from which to write undisturbed, were made possible by his wife Teresita or Lita, as her family calls her. Women writers don't have such helpmeets but must make do for themselves.

Whenever we met, Manong Frankie boomed at me: "When are you coming out with your novel?" Such was his confidence in me, that twelve years before I got around to it, he was already urging me to apply for a Rockefeller Foundation Grant at the Bellagio Center in Lake Cuomo. He is the only Filipino to have been on this fellowship twice, but both times, Tita Lita had to stay behind to look after their kids, run their household, and mind the store. The exhortation to get my novel out was inevitably followed by another to sit beside him "*at kuwentuhan mo naman ako.*" It has been said that all literature is gossip, and dishing with a master is as good as it gets. When the irrepressible Nelson Navarro was around, this would be a three-part gabfest of *alam ba ninyo. . . hindi ba si kwan 'yon. . . pero ang totoo. . .*" where our history was deconstructed, and the lesser denizens of what passed for Manila high society were held up for merciless scrutiny. Myths were recklessly debunked and fearless forecasts made from the murky crystal ball of Philippine current affairs.

When I resigned from the Philippine PEN board, due to irreconcilable differences with its leadership, Manong personally spoke to me about coming back to join the first International Conference to be held in Manila. That was a dream come true for him. Like a true father to his many fractious children, he quietly told me that "*Mabuti naman na ikaw ay palaban, pero panahon na para bumalik ka na.*"