

# Bagnet Salad and a Bookstore

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When National Artist for Literature F. Sionil Jose passed on, we weren't on good terms. This does not mean I did not love him—I still do, and so do my daughters. He was more than simply an important figure in our country's letters to my family, and to me. He was a cherished family friend who could, and did, call on me to cook for him. He was someone whose summonses were met with alacrity, and whose silence in the end was grieved much more than the disagreements that spawned it.

This writer from Rosales, Pangasinan and his lovely wife, Tita Tessie, captured my heart with their kindness to me and mine, and their generosity to those who frequented Solidaridad Bookshop, and its literary salon, on the third floor of that little building down the street from the Supreme Court. There was even a time when, after receiving what he'd called a "windfall," Manong Frankie generously sent me a check of P20,000 as *balato*. That money went to my daughters' college tuition, in its entirety, as I heeded the old gent's advice to "put it to the best possible use."

We had engaged in spirited arguments during many gatherings at Solidaridad, mostly with me being irreverent (but respectful), and he laughing delightedly, relishing the debates we would engage in. Despite those not-quite-polite interactions, I retained my role as unofficial bartender of Solidaridad's booze stock. Maybe it is because Tita Tessie and my late aunt, Monet Achacoso, were schoolmates at Holy *Mamaw*—pardon me, Holy Ghost College. I also got my fill of stories, about the aunt I resembled most closely as a youngling, from Tita Tessie, and those stories are precious to me. At any rate, Tita Tessie and Manong Frankie took me in as their own, a family friend, after they found out that bit about me, with Tita Tessie telling me how much like my beloved aunt I look.

One afternoon I had dropped by Solidaridad to purchase a book I had been coveting for weeks. I checked to see if Manong Frankie and Tita Tessie were there, and they were, so I went upstairs to greet them. “Ah, Alma! You’re here,” he said, booming a welcome from somewhere in his writing cave. “I enjoyed that *bagnet* salad you made for the *Tres Marias* book launch, but I have one complaint about it: there should be more *bagnet* than salad.” Tita Tessie smiled at me, then looked at her husband in disapproval: “*Hay naku*, Frankie, you know the doctor told you to watch your diet.” *Bagnet*, that heavenly *lechon kawali* of the north, was verboten to Manong Frankie, which is why I put it in a salad in the first place. I left with a loot: a loaf of freshly-baked wholewheat bread, Tita Tessie’s lovely smile, and a firm pat on the shoulder from Manong Frankie—riches that still make me smile, years later.

A few months after that visit, I returned to Solidaridad with more-*bagnet*-than-salad *bagnet* salad, a tray full of chicken thighs I had baked, and apple pie prepared by my daughters for Tita Tessie and Manong Frankie. Alma Miclat had arrived, too, for she was scheduled to interview Manong Frankie. I watched the Joses enjoy their feast, my heart full of warmth for how much love I was watching unfold between them: Tita Tessie let her beloved have a slim slice of *her* pie. He turned the other way as she picked the biggest slice of his *bagnet* from the salad. It soon became my habit to cook food and bring it to Solidaridad for the Joses, a habit I sorely miss now.

Throughout my tenure as *Philippines Graphic’s* literary editor, the Joses always graciously accepted our invitation to the Nick Joaquin Literary Awards, and they always graced the ceremonies with their presence. When we’d meet, Manong Frankie proved to be a treasure trove of stories, the best of which were the ones about his days as a journalist, working for the *Manila Times*. Other people sought him out for his literary bent. I preferred his stories from the news trenches. To each their own.

I would get notes from him on the contents of the magazine, too, and some gifts that are still dear to me: little notebooks I’d take into the field when on coverage; a signed copy of his Samsons novel anthology; a whole bin of books he’d let me cart from Solidaridad’s advanced copies of titles from all over the world; a book on aswang lore I’d borrowed but haven’t returned. None of these things will leave my life, or writing cave, unless I bring them with me.

Was he a disagreeable man? Perhaps, but not to me. I have read his disagreeable pieces and disagreed with him, face-to-face, about almost all of

them. Almost, because the last two disagreements I had with him were via email, to which he did not respond. The public matter of those disagreeable posts made it so that I, as a journalist, had to make public what would otherwise have been private—and I used the same medium: social media.

It was out of love that I reminded him of the power of his pen—he being a National Artist for Literature and all. It was out of love that I reminded him of his calling as a writer and former journalist, because it is a journalist's courtesy to police our own ranks, never mind if I will never stand his equal in stature. Whatever else he may be, Manong Frankie loved this country, and that was what I reminded him of, too, in my disagreements with him: you love this country, in its entirety, and stand for what is best for her, no less.

What is wrong is wrong, and the best love I know to give is to tell people when they are wrong, clearly, with basis presented, and without deviating from the truth I try to tell. Things, I fear, did not end well between us. But I don't, and never will, regret my honesty with him.

I can't help but think about how this echoed Manong Frankie's own stories of his relationship with another National Artist for Literature: Nick Joaquin. Nick, too, had been a regular visitor to Solidaridad's upper levels. "We would debate, and loudly, sometimes shouting at each other, but there was always friendship there," Manong Frankie told me. Tita Tessie also chimed in: "We'd keep stock of beer for Nick, because Frankie does not drink."

"Nick was a dear, dear friend," Frankie told me softly, wiping tears from his eyes with a handkerchief supplied by his wife. "The world did not understand that. How I grieved when he died, how much I loved his company, our discussions, even our arguments. He had a brilliant mind, one I was so lucky to learn about and interact with when we spoke. He was a good friend to me."

When I think of Manong Frankie now, Mark Anthony's soliloquy rolls in my head—this poem by Shakespeare that my mother had me memorize, when I was five, is very apt for my feelings. I cannot say Manong Frankie was in any way the ideal, for he was imperfect as humans are wont to be. But I love him, for he was good to me.

I choose not to remember him as a literary lion in an unforgiving arena. I choose to go past the bread and circuses that are part of our existence

in this benighted country—the same bread and circuses that spawned those last two disagreements between us that saw us part ways.

Rather, I choose to remember the nonagenarian my twin daughters taught to selfie on his Samsung, right along with the late Bien Lumbera, one muggy midsummer evening. I choose to let his surprised laughter ring in my ears after one or the other irreverent remark from me. I choose to remember the grandfatherly hugs that enfolded my daughters in love, and the *halo-halo* we'd share from the Chowking down the street from Solidaridad while discussing the craft of fiction writing. I choose to remember how he scarfed down my bagnet salad with utter relish and a mischievous gleam in his kind, dark eyes.

Oh, I am more than painfully aware of the rest of the truths about Manong Frankie, and I don't ignore them. I can't. Yet, still, here is a man whose heart loved well, and truly. Here is a man who also held out a helping hand to many, many writers, myself included. He gave me and my family friendship and concern, and I did not even get to thank him in the end. Knowing him, though, he would have waved my thanks off with a low snort.

For all the controversial content of several of his opinion pieces in his *Philippine Star* column, "Hindsight," Manong Frankie loved this country and its people. My heart breaks that, in the end, that love of country I share with him brought my own words up against his and, perhaps, drew our interactions to a close.

As Neruda put it, "Love is so short, forgetting is so long." I am sure Manong Frankie has reunited with his beloved friend Nick now. I have to believe that, because that means that when it is my time to go, I will be reunited with both of them, and Bien, in a literary salon where there are no hurts.