

Frankie

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As a high school student in the sixties fascinated by books and art, I took Saturday walking pilgrimages to Padre Faura and Mabini streets from our house in Paco, visiting Erehwon, Solidaridad, and Alemar's bookstores to browse mainly art books and pocketbooks with interesting covers, before moving on to the various art galleries along Mabini, including the Contemporary Art Gallery of Rodriquez, Philippine Art Gallery in Arquiza, and the Luz Gallery in Harrison, and ending at the AAP office cum gallery at the corner of Herran and Taft Avenue. Solidaridad was interesting because it had local books and imported books I didn't see anywhere else, and had framed artworks by Asian artists on its walls. (There would later be the Solidaridad Galleries near Malate Church on M.H. del Pilar where I would first see the works of Nena Saguil, Onib Olmedo, and David Medalla's "Bubble Machines.") The bookstore was small but roomier, and it felt lived-in by books! Besides, it had a cute young thing manning the cashier's desk beside the display window, who would turn out to be Frankie's daughter Jet, who I hoped watched us one night during the Christmas season while our Kinkstones band played atop the narrow cantilèvered roof of the first floor of the Caltex building in front of it.

One morning a few years later, I was browsing at Soli when I heard raised voices some three feet behind me. I don't remember now what the argument was about but when I turned to look I saw a balding portly man pointing at the door and yelling at a white man to get out because he had been saying things about the bookstore and Filipinos that he shouldn't be saying because he did not know any better. When the foreigner left, the balding man was still muttering to himself as he patted the books on the display table as

though to calm them down before going through a narrow door at the back and climbing to the second floor. Man's got balls, I thought, and that must be the owner. I made it a point to ask the cashier who owned the bookstore.

I don't recall now who introduced me to Frankie. It was before I even became a member of PEN Philippines. Maybe it was Godofredo Burce Bunao or Federico Licsi Espino who I usually saw there and was always trying to sell me any of his books which he fished out of the small bag he carried with him. Or Cirilo Baustista who was my teacher at La Salle. The bookshop was a special place for me also because it was there where I saw and heard famous writers speak, like Nick Joaquin, Greg Brillantes, Wole Soyinka, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gunther Grass, and Norman Mailer, among many others.

Eventually, I was able to win a few prizes in the Palanca contests, and to publish a few books that he must have read, such that whenever he chanced upon me in the bookstore he would talk to me. Soon we would continue the conversation in the second floor of the store, that functioned as the business office. And later in the third floor, that had a small gallery with a round table and chairs, and a small room by the stairs that had a shelf of books, a sofa, a toilet, and a wide desk where he worked. Beside it, curtained off from view, was a nice cushioned and pillowed nook big enough for him to lie down for some rest or shut-eye. Occasionally, he would invite me to merienda at Za's Café nearby, where he would tell me more stories about himself and other writers of his generation. Sometimes he'd give me a book from his shelves upstairs or else have me choose one from the books in the shop. I appreciated those gestures of kindness from him, knowing he was an Ilocano. He was always writing, and when asked about it, he would point proudly at a folder on his desk.

After I moved to Davao, I always found time to visit and see what new stocks the bookstore had. His shop assistant Cesar Quinagan would see me and tell Frankie I was around and Frankie would have me come up for coffee and conversation. And there were many times he took me to dinner with his wife Tess, and we'd be even more a livelier threesome, with Tess adding footnotes to Frankie's stories.

What did we talk about? A lot of things: writing, writers here and abroad, politics, issues of the day, his life and travels, and much more. Am surprised, on hindsight, how we were able to talk for hours. I didn't indulge in small talk, knowing that my tongue was often quick to flash its horns and

slash away. I preferred to listen to others and observe how they thought. I was more ears than mouth. But I guess we both provoked and teased out thoughts from each other—not deep thoughts really, but natural thoughts muscled out of strong personalities of different ages, alive at the same period of time. There wasn't much to disagree about in terms of ideas of social justice, elitist politics, coloniality of being, artistic relevance, and the like. And there'd be episodes of laughter from time to time. It was simply that he had more personal experiences with the reality of those things, and I learned much about those things coming from deep in his bones. I appreciated his rage and his impatience for change, seeing that they could also be mine.

Whenever I read any column or article of his that seethes, I know that the wrong he messes with again in order to try straightening it out again has impinged on him again because despite the passage of time and the changes in national leadership, nothing has sunk in and moved us out of the deep pit we are sinking in clamorously, merrily, heedlessly. He'd say what was in his mind—on anything and anybody—and damn the torpedoes. And what was in his mind was most often, and defiantly, not the same as most everybody else. Which is what I appreciated in him, and what I already miss.

On the eve of his death, perhaps sensing something, Frankie, who wrote all his life, wrote to his heart wishing it to stay with him so he could write another day.

Frankie, thank you for the friendship and generosity of spirit all these years. Without you, the bookshop will be different—and the same, because I know you'll just be spread all over it.

Hugs to you Tess! Stay strong! Take it easy now, and let the kids run the store.

See you!

Ricky