

Malate, My Malate

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My longstanding affair with Malate has always been a love-hate relationship, a bittersweet romance. Right from the very beginning, it alternately attracted and repulsed me, like the two ends of magnet. Malate represents for me the most appealing, as well as the most appalling, aspects of being gay in the Metropolis.

I love Malate for its bohemian spirit and laid back atmosphere; I also hate it for its frivolity and facetiousness. I cherish the prewar charm of its architectural landmarks; I also despise the rampant sex trade that goes around in its red-light district. I adore Malate for providing me with the most passionate romance of my entire life; I also abhor it for being the site of that affair's extinction.

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There is no end to the surprises one encounters in the countless bars, restaurants, discos, cafés, and bistros of Malate, a place where both the illusory and the essential meet. Located on several streets radiating from Remedios Circle like the spokes of a concrete wheel, these nightspots offer a whirling variety of entertainment: live bands and drag shows, sing-along masters and striptease acts.

The kind of people one meets in these smoke-filled joints is an interesting mix of the serious and the mock serious, the happy-go-lucky and the hapless. One might bump into ageless Mamu Andrew, successful entrepreneur and impresario, looking young

and cheerful as ever, despite the long nights spent in The Library year in and year out.

In contrast, one might glimpse the once fabulous Fabiola, former drag queen *par excellence* of Blue Café, now a big-bellied, stooped-shouldered chronic alcoholic. Or one might see Denisa, artistic director of Ballet Philippines, intensely discussing with her collaborators the latest trend in choreography and costume design at the Penguin Café. Or Simon, a theater actor and movie director, big-big guy in a small-small shirt, lording it over a group of friends at the Sonata, booming voice, grand gestures and all. Or Alex, a dark-skinned *afamista*, who has lived through several reversals of fortune, ranging from sporting signature clothes and staying in a condominium provided by his foreign patrons, to wearing rags and tatters as a *taong grasa* living at the back of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

The nightscape of Malate - like the vampire people who inhabit it - is also a strange combination of the old and the new, the sacred and the profane, the chichi and the sleazy. Ancestral homes turned into fine dining restaurants hobnob with ultramodern steel and glass bistros. A short ride away from Malate Church and voila you are already in Sogo Hotel where illicit lovers have their secret meetings. Expensive bars for the gay elite, where the price of a beer can feed for a day an entire family in the slums of San Andres, coexist with seedy gay discos where anything goes: from harmless flirtations on the dance floor to quickie blowjobs inside the men's room.

But by daybreak, Malate turns into a ghost town, a shell of its nocturnal self. After the street parties and the product launchings, the place suddenly becomes deserted, except for a few late-goers wearily plodding home like lost souls. What remains scattered all over the sidewalks and the roads are empty bottles of beer, cigarette butts, barbecue sticks, candy wrappers and flyers for various events. This morning-after debris constantly reminds me that nothing lasts in Malate, not the festivities nor the laughter, nor even true love.

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