

THE TURN FOR HOME: MEMORIES OF SANTA ANA PARK

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1: LARGA

The track location

AT THE FRINGES OF THE CITIES OF MANILA AND MAKATI IS Santa Ana, a slice of town that seems as if it can't quite make up its mind whether it is as upscale as Makati or as down-to-earth as Manila. Filipinos being an adaptive race, residents have hit upon the happy expedient of blending both ambiances into a culture both posh and plebian. Condominiums rise beside drab one-story homes; offices with glass windows and doors are built beside *carinderias* and auto *talyers*.

At the end of Pasong Tamo, a few kilometers away from the high-rises of Ayala Avenue, the street name changes to A. P. Reyes Avenue and skyscrapers give way to humble eateries, a lotto outlet, an Andok's Manok branch. Just past the McDonald's and Jollibee on the opposite corners, high white walls stretch the length of the street and cover an entire block.

Behind the walls is Santa Ana Park, once the racetrack facility of the Philippine Racing Club. Built in 1937 close to the Manila town it was named for, the track was shut down in 2009 and moved to a far larger property in Naic, Cavite.

The Philippine Racing Club was founded by American and Filipino horsemen and entrepreneurs in the late 1920s as a counterpart to the Manila Jockey Club, enclave of Spanish and Filipino aristocrats at its foundation in 1867.

There were three main structures on the twenty-five hectare property, all in the then-fashionable Art Deco style – two grandstands and an office building. There was a mile-and-a-quarter long oval dirt track surrounded by stables that, as the sport grew over time, mushroomed to far more than the area could comfortably hold.

Until the facilities were moved to Naic, races had been held continuously at Santa Ana Park since it was built, with only a brief hiatus during the war. The place was named for St. Anne, patron saint of nearby Santa Ana, Manila, although the property itself was part of Makati. Over seven decades, the track was the scene of countless challenging races, the arena of the victory and defeat of champion racehorses and horsemen.

The area is home to my two daughters and myself. We have lived on my former father-in-law's compound behind the track since my marriage to his son, a jockey, in 1990. A veterinarian and horse trainer, he maintained his nearly 1,000-square meter property as a racing stable with stalls for twelve. We lived with the sounds of soft neighing and hoofbeats as the horses were hotwalked in the mornings after *ensayo*, and the clanking of the tin *labangans* as feeding time approached.

2: UNANG KURBADA

The gates

THERE WERE FOUR MAIN GATES TO THE TRACK, ALL ALONG A. P. REYES Avenue. Gate One was the first on the right, coming from Pasong Tamo. It opened onto several decrepit wooden stables - "*ung kina Jun Paman*", "*kina Fernando Poe*". Gate Two was open only on racedays and let out onto the parking lot. Gate 3 allowed cars inside even on non-race days; through it passed, in the morning, the neighborhood's matrons who stretched creakingly as their husbands, old men in white tee-shirts, shorts to their knees, and long white socks, took their morning constitution, huffing around the parking lot and main buildings for half-an-hour to sit upon a bench and smoke after, wheezing through their incipient emphysema saying "*Nakakahingal ang mag-jogging.*"

Gate Four opened straight to the cockpit, where the *sabungeros* were more vociferous in cheering than *kareristas*. It was the gate through which horses stabled outside the racetrack entered for their morning workouts, though

some passed through Gate One, if it was nearer. (There was another gate, along Hippodromo Street, which was perpendicular to Pasong Tamo.) Beside the crumbling *sabungan* was an alley that led to the track. It was concrete-paved but narrow and only horses passed there, or the occasional vehicle, with official approval. Another lane led down the left to more stables.

Between Gates Three and Four was another gate, which was not numbered since it was the only one through which vehicles could not pass. This was the pedestrian gate for admissions. There were two old-fashioned turnstiles painted green. Booths were built beside it, and women sold tickets for admission at ten pesos. Another turnstile was for *taga-karera* (members of the racing community who were directly responsible for putting on races) and visitors who were not charged the price of a ticket. That gate was opened only on racing days, one hour before the races began. Outside that gate and Gate Three were poised the sellers of racing programs – “*Dividendazo*,” “*Silip Sa Tiempo*,” the now-defunct but excellently-printed “Racing Time” and “*Patok*” – who also purveyed black and blue ballpoint pens (for writing down *ruta*, or betting combinations), cigarettes, cheap lighters, and candy – Orange Sweet, Mentos, and Halls.

Despite the security guards placed at all gates, residents and outsiders still found ways to enter the *karerahan* – via the labyrinth of stables built just outside the track walls but with gates leading to the track, or by scrambling over the roofs of the grooms’ quarters and stables built crowded against each other, jostling each other for space as structures grew in layers over the decades. By “residents” are meant the people who lived with the horses and were responsible for their care – grooms and their families, some trainers, and one horseowner – Jun Paman – and his family. The last I heard, he is still there, a holdout of the last days, choking on dust as the remaining structures around his are razed to the ground while he gazes, forlorn, at where a vibrant community once bustled.

Upon entering through the turnstile gate, racegoers saw two main buildings in the Art Deco style, both coated in white paint. In the late ‘90s until the track was shut down, the ground floor of the building on the left, facing the track – the main building, though both were the same size – housed *carinderias* built right inside the old betting stations, cement cubicles that were necessary to accommodate bettors in the days before off-track betting stations and races broadcast on cable television and the subsequent dwindling of track attendance.

The ballroom and studio

ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE MAIN BUILDING WERE A VAST PARQUET-TILED ballroom, the broadcast studio, horseowners' boxes, and VIP lounges.

The ballroom, one of my grand-aunts said, was where they had dances for the *alta sociedad* during the late '30s and early '40s. That conjured up for me visions of women with bobbed and marcelled hair, clad in crisp *baro at saya* whirling in the arms of men in somber suits to tunes played on a victrola. Those lofty days are long gone, because when I first saw the ballroom in 1990, it was only a wide sun-drenched space, the wooden tiles scuffed and dislodged in many places by the heels of unromantic bettors.

The walls above and all around the ballroom were adorned with bad murals of champion horses from the '60s and '70s – Sun God, Reporter, Fair and Square. What the pieces lacked in aesthetics was compensated for by the fact that the gaudy paintings were a sort of immortality for the winners, whose names would have faded from memory otherwise except from the minds of those who actually saw them run.

In later years the ballroom was used for community functions. It was where I staged the first *Gintong Lahi* Awards for the Philippine Thoroughbred Owners' and Breeders' Organization (Philtobo) in 1991. The industry's only recognition program, the *Gintong Lahi* ceremony recognizes annual achievements in racing and breeding. I had the raised stage on the right side of the ballroom cleaned and adorned with a painted Styrofoam set and blue and yellow balloons. At dusk, it looked quite presentable with the white-draped tables and monobloc chairs provided by Cunanan Catering, owned by a horseowner used to the preferences of his fellow horsemen. He ordered an ice sculpture of a horse set up in the center of the ballroom, lit from beneath by pink, yellow, and blue lights. It was spectacular and something that the Philtobo members and guests never forgot, even after they held the event at fancy hotels later on.

The jockeys also borrowed that ballroom several times over the years for their Christmas parties. There are usually around 150 active jockeys in a year, and they, along with retired and injured jockeys and their wives, would pack the huge space and party all night.

Off the ballroom, on the left side facing the track (always facing the track, which is how the *taga-karera* spatially oriented themselves, the track being the facility's *raison d'être* and the source of the community's livelihood) was a broadcast studio constructed in late 2004. Horse races,

for reasons of transparency and to support the off-track betting stations, have been televised on and off on free television since the 1950s and on cable soon after it became widely available in the country.

When my marriage faltered in 2002 and I had to go back to work to support my daughters, I was hired as a broadcast commentator for PRC. They outsource the production of the live horseracing coverage to two small outfits, Pro-Ads and Creative Station, and it was with them that I learned the skill of race commentating. We used a makeshift studio on the second floor of a decrepit wooden structure attached to the stewards' stand midway the two main Art Deco buildings. The wooden floor boards were ancient and warped. They sagged visibly and emitted ominous creaking noises. We joked that no one should gain any weight or else the entire structure would come down. The joke wasn't all that funny because the scenario was entirely possible. In 2004 work began on a new facility just off the ballroom.

Unbeknownst to Pro-Ads/Creative Station, PRC built the new studio for another production company that was, in effect, in-house. The Creative Station crew walked out hours before the start of the races one afternoon after learning that their contract would not be renewed. The new production company, Prime Channel, moved their broadcasting equipment – switchers, mixers, cameras – into the hastily constructed studio which was still being finished with *masilla* and painted and managed to be up and running with only three hours' notice.

I was the only race commentator remaining after the Creative Station exodus (I was an employee of “the Club”, as both racing clubs are called, not of the production company), and sat alone on the panel for an entire raceweek of six days, on board for eight races on Tuesday to Thursday, nine races on Friday, and thirteen races on the weekend. I developed an allergy to the dust raised in construction and rushed to the Makati Medical Hospital's emergency room twice that week (after the races, of course, since the show must go on) for shots of Benadryl to bring down the swelling from hives that erupted all over my arms. PRC gave me a bonus of five thousand pesos for that solo stint. I used the money to pay for medical expenses related to the allergy, grinning sourly at the irony.

I didn't have truly interesting experiences in that new studio off the ballroom because I left PRC in 2005, the year after it was constructed, to work for horseowner Hermie Esguerra at his holdings company.

I had more memorable moments at the old wooden studio where I worked for three years. In October 2002, Creative Station staged the only Halloween special in horseracing broadcasting. I dressed as Elvira, Lady of the Dark, in a long-sleeved asymmetrical top and a skirt with a jagged hem that grazed the floor; my makeup was appropriately spooky. I used half a pan of black eyeshadow and wore my eyeliner pencil down to a stub. I looked like a raccoon. Or dead. My three co-hosts were dressed as Frankenstein, a mummy, and a corpse bride who wore all white in contrast to my black. We remained in persona the entire evening. Text messages from racing fans kept our mobile phones beeping the entire night, saying how they enjoyed the humorous show. My youngest daughter, who was five years old at the time, told me later that my mother-in-law, who had taken her son's part in our marital troubles, had pointed to the television screen and screeched: "I was right! See, your mother is a witch! I told you!" Hilarious.

The breakdown of my marriage was sudden but not wholly unexpected. My ex-husband had difficulty controlling his temper and over the eleven years we were together he often exploded, leaving me beaten and weeping in a corner. The end came soon after he took a mistress for whom he bought many things. Groceries I didn't mind so much, but it was seeing a credit card bill for three television sets that finally emboldened me to confront him and risk his heavy-handed, acid-tongued wrath. Glaring at him, I waved the bills under his nose. He said, "That bill is wrong! I didn't buy her three TVs. I only bought her two!"

Over several months I cried and begged for him to come back. One day he responded to my pleas by gagging me with duct tape and binding my hands and legs with *estribera* - thin leather stirrup straps - cinching the buckles tighter than he would have for a race. I felt violated. He treated me worse than he did horses.

When he left, our housemaid, sobbing and frightened, freed me from my bonds. She embraced me and promised to be my rock during the crisis. A week later she took a fast plane to Cebu with most of my jewelry, all the cash in my ex's drawer, and a favorite quilt I had made myself.

The punches kept raining on me, despite my feeble attempts to duck. Soon after that, my ex and his parents hid my youngest daughter from me for a week. I complained to the *barangay* captain, who took my ex's side. Incensed at my "airing our dirty laundry" to other people, my ex-husband and his parents evicted my children and me from the compound.

That incident heralded the non-resurrectible death of our marriage. I found an apartment for rent on nearby Syquia Street, on the boundary of Manila and Makati. It was a walking distance from the track; I could not bear to be too far away from the familiar.

Since I had no money of my own, I could not stop working and could not take charge on moving day. I had broadcast duty at the track the day of our transfer. My new *yaya*, an intrepid woman who had good culinary and social skills, assured me she could take care of things and shooed me off to Santa Ana Park. With the help of grooms from nearby stables, she stuffed our possessions into feed sacks. I had to bring our Siamese cat, Bastet, with me to work as there was no one to take care of the cat.

That afternoon, Bastet jumped out of my bag and onto the desk as I and another racing analyst, jockey Joey Macaraig, were on air live doing our opening spiel. She sat on the desk and meowed plaintively. The director yelled “Cut!” when Joey and I burst out laughing. The director ordered a production assistant to grab the nonchalant Siamese as we did the opening again, barely able to contain our giggles.

The tension I was under this time was cruelly intense. I had to keep up my spirits to buoy up the children, who were upset and afraid. Every little instance of joy that came my way, like the incident with the cat, was savored and treasured.

Infidelity is tolerated and common among men within the racing culture, as it is in the mainstream, but there is an unspoken code that dictates a man should never leave his wife and children. What my ex did was considered beyond the pale. Yet since it was *away mag-asawa*, no one could interfere, only support. I was devastated at the breakup of our family, but had no choice but to take the hits and soldier on. Among the *taga-karera*, strength in adversity and resilience are considered core virtues.

Taga-karera are those people directly involved with the races. They are set apart from *karerista* – bettors or racing aficionados. In the racing community, jobs are handed down through generations. There are surnames that resound in the sport through the years – Guce, Basco, Dilema. These are *batang karera* – people born into racing. My two daughters are *batang karera*. I am not.

I received a lot of advice during this time. The one that sustained me most came from veteran jockey Joe Noel Camu who said: “*Huwag kang paa-api sa kanila. Tandaan mo, batang karera ka!*” It was his way of saying,

“You are one of us.” To me it was a conferment of that elite status within the community. It was then that I felt I truly belonged and accepted in the world that I had embraced.

3: CINCO-OCTAVO

The boxes and grandstands

BOTH THE ART DECO BUILDINGS ON THE PROPERTY HAD PRIVATE BOXES ON THE second floor leased by horseowners or big bettors. The boxes all faced the track and had huge glass windows and air conditioning with a television monitor dedicated to the racing channel. However, those boxes were tiny, with space only for a small table and about five chairs. One horseowner told me that his maids’ bathroom was bigger. But Filipinos, being inured to cramped spaces, sometimes crowded as many as ten at a time in the boxes, especially during blockbuster races.

The boxes could be decorated according to the owners’ taste and means, as long as he did not add nor subtract anything to the basic structure. Hermie Esguerra had the walls of his covered with wallpaper, and he brought in sofas and huge leather office chairs. Jun Almeda’s window was covered with one-way tint, through which one would peer and sometimes see, dimly, Mikey Arroyo laughing with Jun and their other friends.

Betting stands were positioned at intervals right outside the boxes; the horseowners were pampered by the club, since the heavy bettors among them were known to plunk down fifty thousand pesos or more on just one race. To cater to their wishes, “runners” or betting assistants, not necessarily club employees, ingratiated themselves with particular horseowners or bettors and stayed the entire racing evening or day with them, running with their bets to the nearest *takilya*. In turn they received meals and, should the bettor win, *balato*. If the bettor was the generous type, everyone in the box received something, and sometimes the teller at the *takilya* who had sold the winning ticket was given a little cash as well.

A word on *balato*: the term has been tarnished with the connotation of “obligatory handout,” given to friends and family when one has gained sudden good fortune from gambling, the lottery, or competitions. The denizens who lined up for cash or goods outside boxer Manny Pacquiao’s (who, by the way, had visited Santa Ana Park at least twice) home were asking for *balato*.

However, in the racing culture, one does not ask for *balato*; it is considered *bastos* – vulgar – to do so; it is not what a true *taga-karera* would do. One waits to be given a share of a friend's winnings, which may be in cash or in kind, such as the gesture of paying for the group's meals and drinks. If none is forthcoming, that is all right, as it is not obligatory though it may be hoped for, especially if the *dividendo* (winnings) are huge compared to the *puhunan* (capital). It is considered good form to give a share to the tipster who gave the winning combination, anywhere from ten to twenty percent, again depending on the size of the dividends.

Where did the masses who could not afford their own boxes stay? On the lower floors of both buildings were the grandstands. Racegoers on a budget would crowd into the low spaces underneath, where there were no seats save for concrete benches here and there built around the pillars holding up the rickety wooden structure under the main building. Wooden seats were neatly ranged on the level above; the club charged ten pesos per person for the privilege of sitting on the benches coated in chipped dark green paint. In the other building (neither building had a name; people just said "sa *kaliwang* building" or "sa *kanan*"), concrete bleachers above wide steps seemed always littered with crumpled betting tickets, cigarette butts, candy wrappers, and drinking straws no matter how often janitors shuffled around with their brooms and dustpans.

On the ground levels of both buildings there were eateries hawking *arroz caldo*, *bulalo*, and beer. Laguinto's Carinderia was perhaps the most popular, owned as it was by veteran jockey Angelito Laguinto. Folks lined up for their hot *goto* and *palabok*, hanging around the stall hoping for racing tips from the Laguinto clan or from jockey Angelito himself when he occasionally dropped by. Shakey's Pizza once set up a kiosk and a portable oven. They were mobbed the first couple of months, but after the novelty of having a brand-name fast food at the track faded for racing fans Shakey's sales dipped and they left, pizza not being traditional *inuman* or *karera* fare. Savory Restaurant with their famous chicken recipe did much better and was always packed, as was the Main Track Bar and Grill at the parking lot, which, with its air of seedy gentility, was the meeting place of choice for minor horseowners and heavy bettors, the air inside choked with cigarette smoke and the heady hops aroma of San Miguel beer.

In later years, the ground floor of the right-hand building, which used to be filled with betting cubicles, required when there were no off-track

betting stations, was converted into indoor badminton courts. A bridgeway was built to connect both buildings much later on, which made it convenient to cross over to see friends on both sides.

4: LIKURAN

The track

THE SANTA ANA TRACK WAS A MILE-AND-A-QUARTER LONG DIRT TRACK, “DIRT” being a racing term that refers to a surface that is not “turf” or grass. Most dirt tracks around the world use sea sand, a semi-coarse variety as powder sand is too fine and will cause horses to slip, while rocky sand will injure their hooves. Modern surfaces such as the Cushion Track and Poly-Track brands mix synthetic fiber and wax with sand to provide an all-weather surface that is kinder to horses’ hooves. But as Santa Anita Park in California found out, synthetics are a bitch to drain, causing a halt to their racemeets until their track was rehabilitated. On my visit there in July 2009, Santa Anita Park then-president Ron Charles took me down to the track one morning. He bent down, took up a handful of the dirt, and pressed some into my hand. He told me to recommend it to Santa Ana Park management for their new track at Naic, Cavite.

I crumbled the material between my fingers, marvelling at how much softer it was than sea sand, but since my shoes had sunk halfway into the synthetic, I felt this was something Philippine racing could do without, because compacted sand provides a firmer surface for good track times while still having the yield and cushioning to protect horses’ hooves and jockeys in case of a fall. Besides, the Philippines being an archipelago, sea sand is plentiful, whereas the synthetic costs millions of pesos the industry can ill afford. A year after my visit, Santa Anita Park took up their synthetic track and returned to sand.

The track was marked along its length into sections. Philippine racing still uses Spanish terms in its lingo, mixed with American. There’s ‘first bend’ or “clubhouse turn”; *tres-octavo* (three-eighth’s mile); *media milya* or half-mile; *cinco octavo* (five-eighth’s mile); *meta* (finish line); and much more. The graceful cadences of Castilian trip lightly on Filipino tongues that segue between languages as fluidly as horses gallop.

Workouts on the track took place in the mornings as early as four. In the still dark, horses and riders emerged, gray shadows moving clip-clop

towards the sand-filled oval. Horses grunted *hruhmm*, pawing the ground, impatient to be taken on their one-trot, two-canter, *tranco*, or whatever work the trainer prescribed for them that day.

I first stepped on that dirt oval in 1990, a sports correspondent for the *Manila Chronicle* gathering material on horseracing via direct participation, *ala* Hunter Thompson. I signed up as an apprentice jockey and was given a feisty two-year-old colt the groom called “*anak ni Alamat*,” *Alamat* being the colt’s dam. He hadn’t been given his own name yet as his owner had not registered him.

I started the colt off on three rounds of the track on a walk. As we both got stronger and developed muscles, we graduated to a harder routine. First a walk and a trot, then two rounds of trotting, then one day the trainer, leaning against the rail, held up three fingers and yelled, “*Tatlong torote*.” This was the routine the other exercise riders and apprentices did most often. I felt I had arrived.

I wrote a series of articles for *Chronicle* detailing my adventures as an apprentice, from the morning works to the physical training that my male classmates breezed through while I did my best to get by. The day I stopped feeling gonzo was when *Alamat*’s colt shied at a piece of paper on the track and galloped at top speed. I had not learned to gallop yet and could not control my mount. Jockeys and grooms yelled for others to clear the track – “*Kaskas! Runaway!*” as I hung on to the reins, the wind whipping my shirt against my chest.

The colt spied a gap in the rails that led to our stables. He swerved to go through it, threw me off-balance, and I spun in mid-air, landing flat on my back on the sand.

I felt no fear. There was no pain. The sky was very blue and the clouds were very white. The sand was gritty under my fingers, and I thought, this is not Santa Ana sand, there are no beaches here, only the Pasig River. The sand was alien to the place, trucked there from some shoreline in northern Luzon. But it had been trodden by people and horses and that made it part of the town. There I was, lying in several inches of dirt, embedded in Santa Ana in a way few people ever experienced.

Jockeys rode past me; unseated apprentices were not an unusual sight, in fact it was expected for one to fall several times during training, and since it was obvious I wasn’t dead – yet - there was no cause for alarm. One jockey did stop beside me as I lay in the sand, staring blankly up at the sky.

He halted his horse and leaned over me. I saw him upside down. It was some wiry guy clad in layers of t-shirt, sweatshirt, and jacket. They all looked alike in their helmets.

“*Okay ka lang?*” he asked.

Of course not, you idiot, I nearly broke my neck when I fell and I could have been paralyzed from the neck down like Ron Turcotte who rode Secretariat who was the greatest racehorse of all time in my opinion and he spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair until he died in a car accident – Turcotte, not Secretariat, was what I wanted to say.

“I’m fine,” was what I actually said.

We were married at Don Bosco Church five months later.

The wedding was simple yet moving and heartfelt and many said after what a wonderful couple we looked, he in a cutwork-embellished *jusi* barong from Lumban and I in an ecru faille *terno* with dense embroidery of white *sampaguita* and green vines and leaves on hem, sleeves, and *panuelo*. One of my aunts, who ran an embroidery-for-export business, stayed up late the night before the wedding stitching beads on my *panuelo*. She had also arranged for the creation of my wedding bouquet of *sampaguita*, telling me she had a difficult time finding a florist who would agree to handling the tiny, delicate, fragrant florets.

Among the guests at my wedding were my fellow apprentices and they sat at one table. Our riding teacher said much later that my best friend among them, Bener Nepomuceno, could not stop weeping at the ceremony and reception. He was my guide and defender during the time I was with them for training and I had no idea he liked me.

Bener worked horses where I did – the Nicky Jacinto stables – and he unfolded the intricacies of track life to me. He taught me how to read the racing programs, how to watch a race with a critical eye, and how to go around horses without being kicked. He showed me how to center a saddle on a horse’s back on top of the mattress pad, how to buckle the overgirth tight to avoid a slip and fall, and how to hold the reins – not too loosely that the horse could not feel the bit, not too hard to damage their sensitive mouths and create a *bisyo* horse. It was sad that after my marriage, I had to give up my old friends. They understood. My then-husband was the jealous type.

As a young mother, I took my babies to the track nearly every day their first couple of months to catch the morning sun. When they were older,

they learned to toddle on the grass that ringed the track by the outer rail as their father rode by, smiling indulgently. My youngest daughter, born with a severe case of jaundice brought about by the incompatibility between her father's blood type and mine (showing we never should have married in the first place), recovered from it after I took her to the track to bathe in the sun's rays. From yellow, her skin turned pink in increments; proof, I thought, that the sunlight at the track was more efficacious than anywhere else.

The old track at Santa Ana Park saw some of the most thrilling battles the sport has known. It was Wind Blown's home track, Wind Blown the idol of racing fans, who could carry an impost of sixty kilos and still run as fleet as thought. He is now standing stud at Herma Farms in Batangas, the prize stallion of top-ranked horseowner and breeder Hermie Esguerra's ranch.

Bred by Sandy Javier, Wind Blown (Hazm – Wind in My Hair by Cox's Ridge) looked like a tadpole as a foal, his former groom Esting Labra commented in an interview I did with him before he died. Esting loved his *alaga*, bathing him not with *bareta* soap, as is the common practice, but with Sunsilk shampoo in sachets that he'd open with his teeth and drop to the *paliguan* floor.

As a colt Wind Blown was ungainly and moved awkwardly, even after training, so Sandy sold him to Hermie as a three-year-old, knowing the colt had potential that had not yet manifested itself. A late bloomer, Wind Blown began asserting himself in the latter part of that season, winning the third leg of the Triple Crown in 2000. He went on to triumph in that year's Philippine Charity Sweepstakes-sponsored Presidential Gold Cup, the most prestigious event on the calendar, and scored again the following year in the same race, a feat performed by only three other horses – Fair and Square (1981 and 1982), who later stood at stud and threw some excellent stakes runners; the incomparable filly Sun Dancer (1989 and 1990), who later became a broodmare but did not produce champions; and the feisty and aptly-named Bulldozer (1996 and 1997).

Wind Blown tried for a three-peat in 2002, but carried sixty kilograms and lost to Free Wind who had a handicap weight of fifty-six. For years after that, Hermie would recall that incident and say, "*Sino nga iyong tumalo sa atin sa Gold Cup, Jen?*" And I would make sure to forget the name of the horse that beat the track idol.

5: MEDIA MILYA

The jockeys' quarters

BY THE TRACK'S FIRST BEND WERE THE CLINIC, JOCKEYS' QUARTERS, AND saddling paddock. There was always at least one nurse on duty whenever there were workouts and races. The nurse at Santa Ana Park, whom I only knew by her first name, Chit, was plump and jolly and sold food on the side – *longganiza*, *daing na bangus*, *embotido*. After we separated, my ex used to buy whatever she had and send it to my place to make up for not giving a montly *sustento* for our children.

There was also an ambulance parked in front of the clinic during workouts. During races, it followed the horses around the track but outside the rail. Should any jockey or exercise rider be injured badly enough to have to be taken to the hospital, Chit or the other nurse, Marlyn, would ride in the ambulance with them. They also had to monitor the jockeys' vital signs before the races; should a rider's blood pressure shoot up too high, he would be declared "unfit to ride" by the racing stewards and be replaced by another jockey of the same classification. Otherwise, the horse would be scratched from the race, an outcome no one wanted as it meant loss of potential income.

What people know of horseracing jockeys is, in general, only what they see on cable television's *Karera* Channel. Short muscular men dressed in colorful eye-popping silks swing a leg atop Thoroughbreds taller than themselves and ride them at top speed around an elliptical track. Their faces are barely discernible under their helmets and the straps criss-crossing their cheeks; they are recognized by their eyes and smiles. Theirs is a physically demanding and very stressful job. To ease the pressure they sing karaoke, dance, drink light beer from cans, and, at parties, some sport spiked hair and wear weird clothing like tartan kilts. Well, that was just this one rider, Noriel Cannoay, and he wore that red and black monstrosity one year to the jockeys' Christmas party. This was a year after he was thrown off a horse during *laban* and smashed half his face to smithereens; he recovered nicely but after that began to behave oddly, more than what was usually odd for him, anyway. Others eschew the man-skirts and decorate themselves with misspelled tattoos of banal religious platitudes like "Jesus is my Saviuor".

The jockeys' quarters at Santa Ana Park was a two-story wood-frame building, as decrepit and dirty as the other old wooden structures on the

premises. On the ground floor were a dining table and a space for the meal concessionaire, a former rider named Atik Salvador who had broken his thigh during a race and never fully healed. There was a television on the wall. Club regulations prohibited showing the betting matrix on any of the jockeys' quarters monitors to discourage race fixing, so the sets were usually tuned to game shows, variety shows, or *telenovelas*.

Behind the table were the "whipping benches" for training apprentices. These were ordinary wooden benches with metal eyes on one end to fasten reins to, while padded rectangles on the other end simulated the flanks of a horse. Apprentices would straddle the bench, crouch low in the 'monkey ride' or *tonka* ride position, chest as close to the bench as possible, and scrub the reins, all the while wielding a whip on the pads.

Also practiced were flipping the whip up from a tucked position to whipping position, and switching the whip to either hand. Some apprentices would imitate the older veterans and add their own flourishes that made them look like band majorettes. Our riding instructor, an elderly American named George Stribling, discouraged the *arte* among his 'boys' and taught a simpler form of the 'whip up' and the 'switch', although once the apprentices graduated to journeymen and were out from under his thumb, they pretty much did what they wanted in those terms out on the track.

Also on the ground floor was a sauna, in which nearly all the riders spent at least an hour each raceday. "Making weight" is the most difficult thing a jockey has to accomplish. Riding, in contrast, is considered easy and even pleasurable. Other jockeys went to extremes to keep their weight down, such as fasting and taking appetite suppressant drugs such as Ionamin. It was said that excessive use of the latter led to star jockey Jesus Guce's deafness and consequent speech impediment in his later years. I could barely understand him, I remember, and would whisper to bystanders: "*Ano raw sabi ni Bong?*" Because of that, most riders today back up their morning workouts on the track with visits to the gym while exercising discipline and self-control at the dining table.

The second floor was one huge room, divided into two – an airconditioned area, and one that was not. Beds filled both, and it was here that the jockeys passed the time between races – napping, having massages, and playing video games. My ex was considered odd because he preferred to read novels – during the '90s, he had his favorite Tom Clancy and John

Grisham, and later Dan Brown and David Baldacci. “*Matalino kasi*,” the other riders shrugged.

Once in a while I had to wander inside for interviews or on other errands and it always disconcerted me to come in and see men whom I knew and interacted with as friends walking around in their underwear or with towels around their waists. They were used to seeing me, and in any case I was not a stranger – I was *taga-karera* and they knew if I was there, seeing them half-naked, I had good reason. For me it was like seeing twenty clones of my ex-husband walking around or lounging.

Someone told me that there were ghosts in that building – shadows that would flit hither and yon, only to be seen from the corner of your eye. Or there would be strange noises at night. The same was said of the main buildings – the old man in the ladies’ bathroom who glared at everyone who came in, looking for someone in particular. And so on. Not being sensitive myself to such things, I never saw anything out of the ordinary, but did sense an eeriness when walking around the place late at night or in the wee hours.

6: HULING KURBADA

The stables

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AREAS OF THE TRACK WAS THE STABLES. IT WAS where the racehorses were housed, those magnificent animals that pounded the sand with their hooves during races, manes and tails flying, sharing for a few minutes the gift of their speed with the slow, plodding humans who could only watch and marvel.

The horses that are registered to race on Philippine tracks are all Thoroughbreds. The word is always spelled with a capital T, as if it were a brand name. This is a particular breed of horse, and all of today’s Thoroughbreds are descended from three stocky and sturdy ancestor horses brought to England centuries ago – the Byerley Turk (1680), the Darley Arabian (1704), and the Godolphin Arabian (1729). They were cross-bred with native mares and in time, through the process of artificial selection, T-breds emerged with the ability to do only one thing well – to run very fast.

Through the centuries of human tinkering, these horses have developed a handsome conformation, with narrow heads, lean bodies, and sleek legs. Being cared for by humans all their lives and not having to contend with conditions in the wild, Thoroughbreds are not good survivors. Their legs, so slender and elegant, can carry them at speeds averaging sixty kilometers per hour – but only for a couple of minutes. Their lungs are powerful, but the legs, developed to be thin and fast, may snap in the heat of battle and down they go, eight hundred to one thousand pounds of expensive horseflesh crashing into the sand, their eyes rolling back in their heads in agony. Some struggle up, valiantly, on three legs, the broken leg dangling at a painful angle, still trying to finish the race. It is heartbreaking. It is heartbreaking.

But when they run it is poetry, it is magic. A well-trained racehorse will look forward to the battle. Horses are herd animals and run as a pack, but years of human conditioning have instilled in them the spirit of competition – the urge to compete for mates, superiority within the herd, and *lebensraum* was channeled into the drive to run faster than the others on the track, to cross the wire first, to win.

The stables are crucial to racing operations and the success of the sport. The cleaner and more well-maintained the stables, the healthier the horses. Considered the showcase facility was Hermie Esguerra's, the top horseowner in rankings for many years now. He takes a hands-on role in managing his stables and did the same at Santa Ana Park. He leased a stand-alone facility for twenty-five horses that used to belong to the top horseowner before him, Rolly Rojas. Hermie turned it into a model place, clean and airy, with its own weighing scale and wide viewing box, the glass windows of which gave out onto the top of the stretch. Other areas were not as well-kept, due to financial constraints on the part of their owners.

Humans lived alongside horses in the stables, partly for economic reasons, partly to be close enough to care properly for the animals from which they derived their livelihood. It was not unusual to see horses come out of the track gates followed by children in school uniforms. In other racing countries, only grooms are allowed to live on site, since racetrack stables are not meant to be residential communities.

But at Santa Ana Park, human lives were so closely linked to horses that the environment and practices reflected the depth of this bond.

7: REKTA

The track environs

A LARGE PART OF MAKATI WITH ITS GLITTERING BUILDINGS AND AIR-conditioned malls is considered the country's central business district. Yet in some areas of the city, many still pursue agricultural activities in connection with sports and gaming. It shows, perhaps, that there are some Filipinos in the city who are unable to shake off the provincial soil from their shoes. Maybe it is part of the culture, an echo of our tribal past, that accepts as a norm humans living with animals as part of an intermeshed, interdependent ecology.

Stepping out of Gate Four, one sees the Barangay Carmona Sports Complex right in front of the gate. There was a hexagonal sign right there, made to look exactly like a traffic sign, that said: "Caution – Race Horses Crossing." The day they took down that sign marked the end of racing in Santa Ana.

Take a right, and AP Reyes divides into two – one way leading to P. Domingo Street, the PEMCO lightbulb factory, and Havana Bridge, which divides Makati City from Manila, and from thence to Lamayan and Kalentong streets.

The other way leads to H. Santos Street – a cul-de-sac named after *Kapitan* Hermenegildo of Philippine Revolutionary fame. A few meters from the corner is the compound where we live; a bit further down, the neighborhood public elementary school, where lessons and elections are held in a cramped yet airy campus in the middle of a packed residential community. The street ends at the banks of the Pasig River, which separates us and our community from the Pandacan oil depot.

At the end of the street, facing the water, there used to be the Ramon Balatbat stables on the left. Another set of stables was on the right, leading into the track in a maze of alleys and narrow easements. Close to the street, on that property, the Metropolitan Association of Race Horse Owners (MARHO) rented space upon which they had a room built which for many years served as the office of the oldest such organization in the country, founded in 1974.

As MARHO manager since 2008, I went five days a week to that little office for over a year. It was a great convenience to walk to work and be there in three minutes. I was glad not to be cramped in between tall buildings

or decaying apartment houses. There's something to be said for cool winds, wide-open spaces, and elbow room, in sight of Ayala Avenue's gleaming office buildings, sunlight reflecting off the banks of glass windows.

Beside the MARHO office was a larger room used by veterinarian Rey Miranda as his surgery. It was where he performed minor procedures – chip bones, *sobrecaña* – that often afflict juveniles (two-year-olds) and three-year-olds, those put through their toughest training.

Aesthetically, the view at the end of H. Santos Street disappoints. The Pasig River is a drab gray, choked with sheets of bright green water plants; the Pandacan oil tanks are industrial steel and boring. Once one of them caught fire – late at night – and we watched the conflagration safely from across the water, the blue, red, and yellow flames leaping up against the dark sky, the thick smoke swirling and made visible by the fire's glare. (It was put out quickly and no one was hurt.)

What the river lacks in beauty, it makes up for with action. Tugs and ferries pass at regular times throughout the day. This is the new ferry that is such a boon to travelers going to and from Manila. They are somewhat slow, the tugs even slower, but the ferries are clean and bravely fly the Philippine flag from their masts.

There were also gamefowl farms along H. Santos Street. Two are still there, beside our house, while another is right on the banks of the river. A couple of others moved to Cavite with the horses when operations were halted at Santa Ana Park.

One morning, Marvin, the keeper of the cocks at the riverbank farm, showed off a Philippine python that he caught at the back of the pens. The snake was caught while attempting to devour a rat as large as a kitten. Placed in a small cage in the center of the fighting cocks' training arena, the python looked sulky. Who wouldn't be, interrupted in the middle of breakfast and cooped up in a wire box? It was around five and a half feet long and its back bore a magnificent pattern of harlequin diamonds in shades of yellow, black, and taupe.

Marvin placed the cage with its grumpy occupant in the center of the small training *sabungan* and neighbours gathered around to gawk. Dr. Miranda said the python is not poisonous but kills its prey by crushing. Onofre, MARHO's messenger and a part-time waiter at the track, said that a bigger python, its body as thick around as his thigh, was found last month in the same area. Our office was just five meters away. Could a snake find

its way inside and hide under my desk? The men said, oh yes, it could. They were quite serious. I was apprehensive about the possibility of finding such deadly beauty entwined around my ankles someday, but I would never have traded the excitement of my unusual job for a conventional and boring career imprisoned in a Makati cubicle, where the highlight of my day would have been meager lunches from plastic bags and trips in claustrophobia-inducing elevators.

Whenever my lower back began pinging pain signals to my brain from hours of being hunched over a computer keyboard, I'd step out of our little office to stretch my legs along the river bank. Sometimes I'd cross the quiet residential street – it was a matter of a couple of meters – to the Mon Balatbat stables, which had a peaceful river view cross-hatched by a cyclone wire fence that broke up the vista into diamond-shaped chunks that let brisk breezes through.

Whenever Mon, a horseowner and breeder, would visit the place, he would send for me and we'd chat. He'd smoke cigarette after cigarette, grinding the butts into the sawdust scattered on the stable grounds, and I'd cajole him, a self-acknowledged tightwad, into spending for *merienda*. He'd send his driver Raul to the McDonald's on the corner of AP Reyes Avenue, and we'd eat fries and slurp Coke through plastic straws and trade the latest *karera* gossip while Mon ordered his horses brought out one by one and paraded in front of us by grooms who fidgeted while holding the halters, eager for Mon to be off so they could return to lounging by the river or studying the day's racing program.

Mon had quality horseflesh in his stables. Some of the horses were his, the others boarders, whose owners paid him a monthly sum that covered the basics of stall rent, feeds, and grooms' salaries. (Medicines and supplements were extra and to the owner's account.)

Since his stable area was open to the sky, unlike most of the the trackside stables, we could see the horses much closer and under better viewing conditions. The sunlight would gleam off the horses' backs and flanks, throwing the pale brands on their shoulders in sharp detail. I'd amuse myself by trying to identify the brands – Aristeo Puyat's "AP" standing for his Paris Match Farm, Hermie Esguerra's Herma Farms and Stud sun-and-waves, Norberto Quisumbing's "NQ". The horse's place of birth is marked with a letter – "L" for Lipa, Batangas, where 90% of the country's ranches are located, "R" for Rosario, Batangas – indicating that it is with these

municipalities that the foaling slips, the equivalent of birth certificates, are archived. The year of birth and birth order on the ranch would also be indicated by numerals. For instance, “26” on top of “06” means that the horse was the twenty-sixth born on that ranch in the year 2006.

Life in the neighborhood when the track was still around was like living in the *probinsiya*, but in the middle of the busiest urban area of the country. Modernity seemed to have passed this area by, going straight to a post-modern model and its paradigm of progress being obsolete. But that would be being unfair to the vibrant spirit of ‘make-do’ that was the community’s norm, its way of doing things, of raising farm animals for fun and profit within sight of the towering skyscrapers of the country’s most powerful and influential business district.

8: META

The end of an era

AFTER 72 YEARS ON THE SITE, PRC’S RACING OPERATIONS WERE TRANSFERRED to a new facility at Naic, Cavite, and the first race was held there on 6 January 2009. Structures at the old track came down swiftly— grandstands, betting windows, paddocks, stables. Everything was reduced to piles of rubble and stacks of wood.

The once-vibrant and noisy neighborhood is quieter. Yes, that’s a good thing, but we were used to the racket – the chatter of grooms and their families, the neighing and snorting of horses, the clatter of hooves on the street in the morning, the faintly-heard voice of the racecaller over the PA system during race meetings. All gone from here, now.

PRC management says that part of the property, around four hectares, has been purchased by *taipan* Lucio Tan’s group, perhaps for an Allied Bank data center or some other purpose. The rest of the property, 21 hectares, will also be developed in time by Ayala Land, into a mixed-use residential and commercial area much like the Rockwell area, also in Makati. It’s hard to imagine a Rockwell here, but if it does happen, it’ll be good for the ‘hood. Property prices will rise. There’ll be jobs and other economic benefits.

But I miss the old track. It’s where I trained every morning for two months back in 1990 as the country’s first female apprentice jockey. It’s

where my ex-husband asked me on our very first date, to marry five months later. It's where I sunned my babies; it's where they learned to walk, on the strip of grass beside the rail, while their father exercised horses in the mornings, all of us coming home smelling of sun and dust and the sweat of horses. It's where I picked up my career when I had to go back to work after my marriage failed.

And I never thought, when I married a jockey twenty years ago, that the time would ever come that I would be a historian of this track's demise.

When a mall or condominium is built here, right on the track, will the ghosts of gone horses still race, silently, where they used to run free? Shall phantasms of riders and horses, or their manifestations of psychic energy remaining in the rocks, in the soil, and carried on the breeze, still run races until entropy consumes the sun and time runs backward?

The racetrack that stood here for generations, and that some thought would never be torn down in our lifetime, is no more. A rich part of Santa Ana's history has disappeared. Had enough photographs been taken? Videos? Are there still old-timers around who remember the place when it was still *Sampiro*, San Pedro de Makati, when the air was cool and you could faintly see, behind the track, the blue shadows of the mountains of Rizal in the distance before the high-rises rose up to obscure them?

No matter. We will run the races over and over in our heads, and savor the memories of the track in the quiet times or over raucous kitbitzing with fellow *taga-karera*. And wherever fortune takes us and racing, it is at this place, Santa Ana, at the fringes of Makati and Manila, where we still, and always will, take the turn for home.

“...AND FINALLY...”

Salitang Karera

- Aparato.** Starting gate.
- Apprentice.** An inexperienced or new rider granted weight allowances; a student rider.
- Ayuda.** Full exertion, usually under whipping.
- Backstretch.** Straight part of track opposite the homestretch.
- Bandera.** Lead or front in a race.
- Banderista.** A front runner or a horse with early speed; a horse that prefers to run in front rather than come from behind.
- Barrier.** A trial race.
- Besiro.** Yearling (year-old horse).
- Cinco-octavo.** The 5/8 mile post or 1,000 meters; the bend or turn just before the backstretch.
- Colt.** An unaltered (uncastrated) male horse aged four or less.
- Dead heat.** When two (or more) horses are judged to have reached the finish line simultaneously.
- Deboka.** A sprinter, pacer, or front runner.
- Deklarado.** A horse declared or entered to run in a particular race.
- Dehado.** An underrated racehorse that wins; a non-favorite; a longshot.
- Deremate.** A come-from-behind runner, one that is able to race well at longer distances; a stayer.
- Divisa.** Racing silks or colors identified with a particular owner or stable.
- Ensayador.** An exercise rider.
- Ensayo.** Morning workout or airing intended for conditioning or training.
- Filly.** A female horse aged four or less.
- Gelding.** A castrated male horse.
- Hinete.** A jockey.
- Huling kurbada.** The final turn or bend.
- Hugando.** A decisive victory without much urging or undue effort.
- Judge.** A racing official who decided the winners and placers of a race.
- Juvenile.** A two-year old horse.
- Kurbada.** The bends (“curves”) of the track, ie, ‘first bend’ (unang kurbada), ‘last bend’ (huling kurbada).
- Larga.** The start of the race, when the horses jump out of the starting gate.
- Latigo.** The whip.
- Likuran.** The backstretch.
- Llamado.** The favorite in a race.
- Lucha.** Speed duel usually between two horses.
- May-ari.** A racehorse owner.
- Media milya.** The half-mile post.
- Meta.** The finish line.
- Milya.** A mile or 1,600 meters.
- Mola.** A Thoroughbred.
- Novato.** A new horse, usually a juvenile, that has yet to win a race.
- Octavo.** 1/8 mile or 200 meters; a furlong.
- Photo-finish.** A race too close to call that is decided by the use of a photograph taken by automated cameras at the finish line.

- Pista.** The racetrack.
- Quarto.** Fractions of every mile or every 400 meters of the race.
- Rekta.** The homestretch or last straight run until the finish.
- Remate.** To come from behind.
- Salida.** The break or start of the race.
- Scratch.** A declared horse withdrawn from a race.
- Siete-octavo.** 7/8 of a mile or 1,400 meters.
- Sota.** Groom; syce.
- Sota mayor.** Chief or head groom of a stable or ranch.
- Steward.** A racing official who monitors race conduct and control.
- Taya.** Bet or wager.
- Thoroughbred.** The particular breed of horse used in Philippine racing.
- Tiyempista.** Clockers or timekeepers of the races.
- Tres-octavo.** 3/8 of a mile or 600 meters.
- Tres-quarto.** ¾ of a mile or 1,200 meters.
- Unang kurbada.** The first turn that begins on the homestretch; also, “clubhouse turn”.
- Ultimo quarto.** The last quarter of the race.

(Most definitions above courtesy of the Manila Jockey Club)