

NAGA: THE OLD ANCESTRAL TOWN

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It was a single pillar standing in a small plaza, with no tree under whose shade the curious bystander might seek shelter, and no bench on which she might linger. We—my younger sister, our Tita Pacita and I—stood beside the monument, shading our eyes against the glaring sunlight, while another aunt took a picture with our old Brownie camera. And then we beat a hasty retreat to a shabby hotel called the Rainbow.

The year was 1960, and we were on a day trip to Naga, having driven over dusty, bumpy roads in an open jeep for two-and-a-half hours. It was more pleasant in the Eden Hotel in Legazpi, with its view of the spectacular Mayon Volcano. But we had made the trip to indulge our Lola Mariquita, whose father had lived in Naga before he was executed in Bagumbayan during the Revolution.

That was all my sister and I knew about the man who was part of the monument, so we felt imposed upon. And what did we suffer those uncomfortable two-and-a-half hours for? To have our picture taken at high noon in an empty, dusty plaza. It just didn't make sense.

Remembering that adolescent petulance now, I am filled with remorse. Lola Mariquita asked for so little from us. How could we have begrudged her that trip?

Many long years after, when I had decided to write a novel based roughly on my mother's memoirs, and had pieced together the story of Lola Mariquita's father—partly from the fragments Mama herself had picked up from her mother, and partly from the historical accounts I had found in the UP Main Library's stacks—I wondered why we had not been told more.

I mentioned this to Mama and she replied that she herself knew very little about him or about that time in *her* mother's life. Lola Mariquita was in her early teens when her father had been dragged from his house, jailed and tortured, put on a ship and sent to Manila, jailed and tortured again, and finally shot.

Perhaps that was the reason for the silence. Perhaps Lola Mariquita could not bear the memory.

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In 1965, leafing through a copy of the *Philippines Free Press*, my eyes fell on this line: "The two plazas, the 15 Martyrs Plaza and the Rizal Plaza, swell with the entire city population, but only when Pancho Magalona and his troupe of comedians and singers breeze in to launch Mirinda, the new Pepsi-Cola drink that is its answer to Soriano's Tru-Orange."

Kerima Polotan had been to Naga and had written about it. About her drive down in an "express bus" which made endless stops to "deliver a message, inquire about a fellow-employee's sick baby," and run sundry other errands; about the mayor who had to hold office in the Camarines Sur High School because construction on the new city hall was taking forever; about the city's banks, hotels, movie theatres ("but there isn't a single bookstore"); about the dismal state of the trains.

But she seemed to have enjoyed her visit. There was a gentleness about the people and a quiet charm about the streets. The city was crime-free, and there were a large number of schools. Tennis was enormously popular. There was a new restaurant-bar called Sampaguita, which was "clean, bright, cheery with checked

table cloths." A special type of bread called "New Yorker" was better than the *pan de sal* found in Baguio or Dumaguete, or Legazpi, for that matter.

The piece ended with this description of the memories of Naga that the writer would bring away with her ... "an eddy of patient ponies hitched to weather beaten rigs, the shuttered stores near the market illuminated at night by the peanut and fruit vendors' gas lights, and the acacia trees, sleeping peacefully on Calle Peñafrancia."

And I thought: I ought to give Naga another chance.

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But it didn't happen until more than 30 years later. In 2000, I flew to Naga as part of a team from UP's English department, working in a CHED-sponsored teacher-training project headed by Jimmy Abad, called "The Roving University." Our host was the University of Nueva Caceres, and the dean, Father Dan Imperial, had sent out invitations to schools all over the Bicol Region. Some 80 teachers had accepted.

The University was small, but it was Southern Luzon's first university outside of Metro Manila (founded in 1948). Its EVP was Bienvenido Santos' daughter, Lily Anonas, whom Jimmy Abad knew personally, and it was she who had put Jimmy in touch with Father Dan.

Our schedule was tight, so there was not much time for sight-seeing, though Isabel Mooney, Judy Ick and I were able to visit the Basilica briefly, since it was walking distance from our hotel, the Villa Caceres. We turned off from the main road into a little alley that cut across a rather poor residential area, consisting of houses that were little more than hovels, with squealing pigs and squawking chickens and empty basins leaning against back doors, and found ourselves in front of the Basilica.

It did not strike us as extraordinary, save for the Lady herself, the Virgin of Peñafrancia, a petite figure resplendent in golden robes,