

# Scent of Jasmine

VIVIEN V. LABASTILLA

*I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.*

- Invictus

**A**s a child, I had memorized the poem *Invictus* by heart, although I did not completely understand it. I did not bother to ask anyone about it either. The poem was handwritten in bold script letters—each letter the size of a matchbox, on brownish paper, protected by a glass covered antique frame. A permanent fixture hanging on a russet-colored wall, the poem was the first thing that would greet anyone who entered the house I grew up in.

I was the eldest in a brood of six and all of us were raised in Singalong, Manila. My family rented the second floor of the house owned by a famous botanist, the scientist who was known as the Luther Burbank of the Philippines. Lolo Mensio was the cousin of my great grandmother's husband.

His house and lot, a sprawling 2,000 square-meter land along Osmena Highway, was the biggest residential property on that street. Surrounded by high cement walls, it had three main doors and a huge, wooden red gate of about 12 feet in height. On the ground floor was a living room filled with heavy antique furniture including a cumbersome glass cabinet showing different kinds of antique smoking pipes. Aside from the spacious bedrooms, other rooms in the house included a library, an office,

and a plant laboratory. All of these rooms had enormous bay windows showing a vast garden with bright, multi-colored flowers that children could not resist picking. Among the fruit bearing trees, the cherry tree was my favorite. It never failed to give mouth-watering fruits.

Towering at the center of the garden was a giant Indian mango tree that I would routinely climb. From atop that tree, I could see how far the Cash and Carry supermarket was from our house. On the left end of the garden was a medium-sized swimming pool that glistened under the sun. We never got to use that pool because Lolo Mensio conducted his experiments there with his plants, especially the fibrous plant kenaf.

Near the garage where an old luxury car was parked, stood a grotto where a multitude of velvety red roses made the life-sized white statue of Mother Mary look more fragrant. In front of the grotto was a pond where fishes of different colors and sizes comfortably swam under the shade of cheerful water lilies. My siblings and I named the garden as the "Garden of Eden".

Although we were not allowed by our parents to go to any of the rooms on the ground floor, the "Garden of Eden" became our playground. My mother always reminded us—shouting from the second floor window while breastfeeding a baby sibling—to be careful with the plants because they were Lolo Mencios's experiments. Along with this reminder was the ritual of saying *tabi-tabi po* especially when we played "hide and seek" there at noon time or during late afternoons.

As far as I could remember, Lolo Mencio, together with his maid, driver and house boy, were the only ones who occupied the ground floor. His wife died young while his only daughter and two granddaughters resided in America. The second floor was occupied by my family including my German great grandmother, Lola Mabel and a maid. My mother was Lola Mabel's oldest granddaughter. My father, hailed from Manila, sold fire extinguishers for a living. He was always absent from the house in a Sisyphusean effort to meet his monthly sales quota.

I was nine years old when I sensed something strange not only in the garden but also inside the house. The "Garden of Eden," which was like a paradise especially at daytime, became an eerie place at night. Sometimes I loathed myself for having a vision of the statue of Mary as a white lady. This eerie feeling always gave me goose bumps, recalling the story about the white lady in Balete Drive published in one of the *Philippines Free Press* issues that my father bought. I happened to stumble upon the story while looking for some pictures for my homework in Social Studies. When I had the chance to ask about my father how true the story was, he gave a quick chuckle saying that it was only fiction.

### **HAUNTED HOUSE**

One night when I forgot to put the lights out in our bedroom, I saw a shadow of a man walking, reflected on the bare wall. I looked around to see if one of my siblings was awake and walking around, as all six of us shared the same bedroom. I watched walk slowly from the window to the door, unmindful of being caught. I remembered Peter Pan from the children's books I read to my brothers and sisters during weekends, but sudden fear embraced me leaving me shivering the whole night as I covered my whole body with a blanket. Gripped with terror, I could not even shout.

The next day, I suffered from high fever. I tried to tell my siblings, my mother and my Lola but they would not listen to me. "But I was so sure about it Mamang." "You're just sick. You better get some rest," my mother said with a grin as she gently pressed the folded face towel soaked in strong vinegar on my forehead. From then on, I slept in my Lola's bedroom. But after that incident, two more strange occurrences happened in one week and my fever came back. Still, no one believed me. My mother brought me to a general physician whose clinic was just beside St. Anthony School, where my siblings and I studied. After giving me some paracetamol, she called on Lola Idad who resided in Tondo to do some *tawas* for me.