

## Prize Roosters, Show Dogs, Pure Hogwash

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Something must have gone terribly wrong. Her health and safety were foremost on my mind. The last time she visited over two years ago she had a maid who tagged along. When I finally saw her at the gate, I didn't recognize her immediately for she was dressed as if she was going to her monthly *rigodon* at the Bacolod Country Club: a flowing silvery gown in zebra print, half-tinted glasses (those were actually doctor-prescribed for her failing eyesight), and a pair of sleek imitation Pradas two inches higher than would have been comfortable for travel and in a material suitable for a woman three times younger. Mother, unaccompanied and unannounced, was 82 when I came to pick her up at the Domestic. She called only while waiting for her baggage at the carousel belt, so I sped through the clean Saturday traffic to the airport.

I tucked her in the passenger seat. She didn't complain. Only a decade back, she would have filled the car in with a verbal treatise on the inappropriacy of the arrangement, an ornate rundown on public etiquette, and a timely moral based on a relative or a neighbor's experience by way of illustration. This time, she didn't say a word. Until the time when I turned right from Domestic Road to NAIA Road, she kept to herself, seemingly contented and looking pleased. But when she saw the marquee of Nayong Pilipino, she commanded the car to stop.

"We need to check the place out; this is perhaps the last chance for me to see the Philippines in miniature. Did you know I only saw that thing in pictures? The Sunday magazine of *Philippines Daily Express*, in May of 1974, when Caroline enrolled for first year high school. Look, *hijo*, I am at the age where everything is now or never, literally."

I dutifully pulled the Corolla to the parking lot; there was no argument over these things. We proceeded to tour the grounds disinterestedly. I waited for the reason of her visit. It was not forthcoming.

"Later we need to check Himlayan; do you buy flowers regularly for Caroline? I've been telling you for years. She was such a wonderful daughter, the most independent of all. And Bobby's new wife, how's she, and the kids, and how's Bobby?"

"They are all right; I saw them last month. Bobby's literally grown twice since you saw him last and Marita's a workhorse like she's always been. Jimboy's looking forward to high school and Mitchie's in the fourth grade, although I hear she's not doing very well in school."

"Poor Mitchie, she never knew her mother, that's why."

"They're thinking of immigrating next year. To New Zealand. An electrical engineer and a software designer earn premium points in their quota system. Bobby says the waiting

period is anywhere from six to nine months. So they might be gone by Christmas time."

"And their very own baby, what's his name, Genji, why did they ever give him such a funny Japanese name, how's that cutesy doll of a boy doing?"

"I'll call them up and check if we can drop in for dinner tonight. Mom, if you're not too tired, we'll cook *carne frita* and I'll do my *lumpia fresca*. We'll surprise them; no need for them to cook."

"That'll be nice; but you know I'm a bit rather exhausted from the trip, my feet are aching right now, they're turning into jelly I can feel it, and besides, I've seen enough of the surreal interpretations of these so-called Filipino houses that look like a Hollywood set, but at least I can say now that I've been to the Nayong Pilipino. However, if I were to write a travel book, I'd thumb it down."

"No problem, mom...hmmm, Mother, is everything all right?"

"Where can we get flowers for Caroline? Is Bechaves along Taft still there? Those were really wonderful callas I purchased two years ago."

"There's a florist right next to the Merville gate. They get tulips fresh from the Netherlands. Flown in."

"And carnations, do they get them in from Colombia, too?"

"More like China, I think, but we'll decide when we get there. And Giancarlo and Father, how are they in Bacolod?"

"The house has become a virtual zoo. Other than the fighting cocks and dogs they raise, *my* house has become a public market as well. Did you hear that? A public market. Your father's clients are almost always poor, and instead of

paying cash for *notario* or whatnot, they come bearing fish, vegetables, fruit, carabeef, you name it.”

“Groceries on delivery! Such luxury in Manila.”

“Not funny. If I go to the market, I get to choose stuff. With your father’s clients, who’s to say that a winning litigation is worth ten live chickens and a pig’s carcass?”

“Mother, it’s Father’s second wind. At least, he’s busy and productive. He’s 82 like you, Mother, and should have long retired.”

“And your Manang Mercedes is the worse of them all. My very own blood sister, your good-for-nothing aunt. Her children, your cousins from three different fathers, now come not only for lunch but also for dinner every fuc. God forgive me..king day! And to think they’re as grown up as you and Giancarlo are.”

“Mother, they’re *all* our relatives and since there’s food in abundance, I’d be charitable myself.”

“You’d be charitable, but you don’t live in Bacolod and you don’t know your Manang Mercedes and your three useless cousins Jomar, Wilma, and Chinky from Adam. We shouldn’t have left Davao.”

“I say you practice Christian charity, loving your neighbor is what it is.”

“Christian charity, my foot!”

“Mother, you shouldn’t get so worked up; you know how your blood pressure shoots to high heavens at these excitable moments.”

“Give me those pills in my bag then, the green ones; I’m beginning to feel a bit dizzy myself; and I had thought I’d simply relax in Manila, do a bit of shopping, you know. Really, that hag of a woman, your Manang Mercedes.”

When we reached home, Mother was asleep on the passenger seat, slumped to her side. I had to gently rouse her. I asked her to rest for an hour or so while I drove over to the supermarket for the ingredients we were going to cook together. I'd convinced her that the planned visit for Himlayan was best done the next day, a Sunday when I imagined the traffic would be lighter than usual. I could also order the flowers in advance and just pick them up on the way.

That evening I ended up cooking alone. Mother adored Jennifer Aniston in "Friends," so she sat three episodes in a row. She nested dreamily on the rattan couch she gave me as a present when I moved to the big city. "Oh, what a lovely woman, simply gorgeous." From the kitchen, I could hear the running commentaries. "Such an impeccable taste in fashion; oh to be so young and lovely; my, what I'd do to snatch that guy, Jennifer; come on, jilt him now, he's not worth even a momentary look." In between the simmering hiss of the *carne frita* and the gurgling lid of the rice cooker, I asked a question or two about the developing plot, but she couldn't be bothered. She stood up only when it was time for us to leave for Greenhills where Bobby, my once-brother-in-law and his family lived.

Nine years had passed since Caroline died while giving birth; she first suffered from a bout of severe asthma in the delivery room, which then overworked her lungs and heart until they gave out. The bulletin board at the Ateneo where she worked read that our *ate* had died a result of "a massive coronary arrest." And to think that we were all there at the hospital that day, ready for the flowers, the customary cigars and champagne. Ateng Caroline, whose asthma traced back from early childhood, was 27.

In the years that followed, I thought it wise to gradually convince Father and Mother to give Bobby's new family some space. While it was true that Jimboy and Mitchie were their grandchildren, Bobby and Marita were trying to reestablish

themselves together. Indeed, Marita took Bobby's children, who were then three and one, like they were her own, too, and when she gave birth to Genji, Jimboy and Mitchie had totally forgotten that their mother was dead, or even that they had another mother. That was what we hoped for and that was what had happened.

When we went to their family that evening, the visit was more of a courtesy rather than a family affair. Mother and I understood this. Bobby and Marita did, too. Mother knew better than dredging up those memories of Jimboy and Mitchie's childhood. Throughout the hour, we refrained from mentioning Caroline's name. Grateful for our tacit cooperation, Bobby winked at me as he saw us to the door.

On the third day of her holiday, an old friend of Mother's came to pick her up to stay for two nights at her Tagaytay Highlands property. Mrs. Laguardia was Mother's childhood friend from Binalbagan. She became a rather prosperous real estate entrepreneur, turning the profits from her sugar plantation inheritance (which was not much really, since the world prices of sugarcane had fluctuated maddeningly in the late 70s). However, Mrs. Laguardia was not one of those Negrense *matronas* who hied off to Hong Kong in the guise of a holiday when in fact they went there to sell their heirloom jewelry and antique pieces. Instead, she developed a modest subdivision in La Carlota and a smaller one in Silay, a wise move at a time when the price of construction materials ebbed at record lows. With the profits she earned, Mrs. Laguardia plowed them back into two commercial buildings in Makati and a row of ten townhouses in Merville, one of which I rented for a pittance. In exchange, I managed the property, collecting the rent, and checking the structural upkeep of the whole place regularly.

Because Mother really enjoyed Mrs. Laguardia's company and the attention she gave her, I hinted that they might extend their reunion, if only for old times' sake. They did. In truth, I

wanted more time and space for myself, trying to understand what was happening to my family back in Negros. Father and Mother communicated with each other less and less. She became more cantankerous and complaining. In Davao, where we lived through high school and university, Mother was affable and easygoing, managing the household with a deft hand. When we graduated (at a time when Father lost his job managing the Digos Central – one of those that succumbed in the aftermath of the moribund sugar industry), both decided to return to Negros. Mother still had her ancestral home in Binalbagan. The remodeling kept her busy for a couple of years and Father resuscitated his forgotten law practice. That actually came easy, since you could count the number of lawyers with one hand in that sleepy town south of Bacolod.

With more time on her hands, Mother was lost and bewildered. She began traveling across Negros and Cebu all by herself to visit long-lost friends and relatives. At home, she micro-managed the maids that Father kept hiring because they couldn't stand her and left. She felt the noise of the show dogs and prize roosters that he and my young brother Giancarlo raised was more than she could bear; she threatened cooking those roosters and giving the puppies away. She began to hoard things, anywhere from Tupperware tumblers to an incredible variety of scissors, picture frames, table runners, and whatnot. The house creaked with the weight of odds and ends, things that the maids were told to dust off every day, and things that were multiplying at an alarming rate every single day. Her cooking repertoire widened, most of them recollections of recipes from her younger days, or learned from cousins or gleaned from yellowing magazines of yore. That way, she demanded more arcane and esoteric ingredients, of *landang* starch, native *biasong* limes, and wild *piguk* fish. If these didn't come, she would harp all day over her small frustrations, weaving them into novels of disenchantment for dinner.

Still she would get up early each morning for daily mass. For breakfast, she would report the goings-on of our hometown, pieces of news she picked up from other mass-goers. She sat in judgment over Manong Guillermo the old fireman's running away with a woman half his age, or of Lucinda the seamstress's benign neglect of her children all because the husband left for Riyadh to find work there. She disapproved of squandering municipal funds for the mayor's "basketball courts for the barangays" program. Mother had nothing good to say about "Eat Bulaga," which she kept watching at lunchtime anyway. Cory was next to useless, Rene Saguisag a faggot, Solita Monsod a fishwife. The sugar industry could not be revived. The new parish priest was not worth his salt; he was too inexperienced to understand life and so his sermons lacked fire.

Then, from out of the blue, Mrs. Laguardia called long distance on Wednesday evening. Her voice was conspiratorially soft. "Need to talk to you in private. Tomorrow, half past six, Glenda Barreto's place at Greenbelt whatever it's called. I'll get your mother to watch a movie upstairs or send her on a shopping spree."

Was Mother sick? Had something happened? It could not be. Otherwise, Mrs. Laguardia would have been more straightforward in relaying the emergency.

Except for a glass of orange juice, she didn't order anything. I just picked on my *palitaw*, unhungry from the prospect of any kind of news.

"Your mother's basically alright, *hijo*. But the thing is, she's not getting any younger...well, I'm not either, but her mind, her mind's not at rest. As far as I can gather, something's going on there at the homefront."

"You mean between her and Father?"

"I suspect it is. Tell me first your take on things."



“Well, I keep abreast through Giancarlo. He tells me they keep to themselves now, speaking little. Father and my brother would rather go out than listen to Mother’s daily raves and rants; it’s all too much really. What’s happening I think are two things. Firstly, she’s not finding a place for herself in Binalbagan. Since they returned from Davao, her life has lost its meaning, you know, in the sense of being useful and productive. She’s done with the housewife bit, now that we’re on our own. And I think she’s rather envious of Father, who soon began to tinker around and pick up his long-forgotten practice.”

“Hmmm, I see. And what would that second thing be?”

“She’s not getting any attention from anyone, so she tries to roll the drums for herself, in a manner of speaking. I think that she’s also afraid of death, I mean aren’t we all, now that it’s a close reality. This business of collecting stuff, if you heard about it, is a kind of holding on.

“Might, but I have a curious question, the maids’ stuff. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Other than their high turnover, that’s because Mother ah..., oh, you mean, is there something going on between Father and...”

“That Jessica girl, and Marilyn, your mother only has the purest spite for them, I suspect, out of jealousy.”

I feigned shock at the suggestion. But this was not a surprise at all. Father had a history way back in Davao. And I thought that in his 70s and 80s, his urges would have abated somewhat.

“And your Manang Mercedes, where is she in the overall picture?”

“Well, she’s just proving to be a headache for Mother, you know feeding them and her family. They still live next door.”

“Well, as the old saw goes, you can’t choose your relatives.”

“A necessary nuisance, I say.”

On Thursday, her last night in Tagaytay, I drove over to pick Mother up. She was in high spirits. The mountain air must have done her good. She said she was ready to cook anything I’d ask for back in Manila, as long as my household help did all the peeling, dicing, and chopping. Or me if I were up to it. Mother usually cooked the dishes that would keep for a week, like *adobo* or *caldereta*, as her way of saying ‘thank you’. She normally did that on the day before she left. Normally, too, she would clean the whole house inside out two days before her departure.

“Let’s see, what else do you have to do, Mother?”

“Hong Kong. A weekend trip to Hong Kong, courtesy of the oldest son, just like they do in the movies.”

“But, Mother, do you realize the weekend’s tomorrow and it’s kind of hard to squeeze in a last-minute reservation?”

“They do that in the movies, too, and they come out of it pleased as Punch.”

“I can’t promise anything, Mother, but I’ll do what I can... beginning tonight.”

“I’m very sure you can; there are 21 flights for Hong Kong every single day, virtually that’s every hour on the clock. I did my homework, *hijo*. No excuses now, you’re mom’s 82.”

That night, I invoked my network of colleagues and friends. Luckily, an old acquaintance of mine who now operates a travel agency booked us two return tickets for early afternoon the next day. We would fly back to Manila midnight on Sunday.

We checked in at a reasonably-priced but ageing hotel along Nathan Road, not minding sharing the bedroom, which

had, at least, an ensuite bathroom. The British were always cheapskates and only in the 60s did they start putting in private bathrooms to their hotels. Of course, that came with a price. Mother had no particular plan in mind; the walking was now out of the question and so we limited ourselves to that iconic street of shopping and eating. Hong Kong was cooler than we expected so we purchased a blue woolen cardigan and a pair of black stockings for her. I got a tracksuit for myself. For dinner, we tracked down the old haunt of Cantonese noodles and dimsum of two decades before when the whole family was still together, back when we were in high school.

The noise of the place seemed to have rubbed off on Mother, for she became more animated and voluble. She began to narrate our childhood days in Binalbagan, then recounted the move to Digos, where on the ship bound for Davao from Bacolod, all of us became seasick, and felt seasick three days even after we settled in our new home. She recalled how, when it was time for Caroline to study high school in Manila, it dawned on her for the first time that she was getting old. My parents married late, but they married well. She feared that Giancarlo, who was then only three or four, would be orphaned by the time he reached high school and that we would have nowhere to go.

“I thank God that I’ve reached this ripe old age.”

“I’d thank Him for making you hale and hearty all this time.”

“I thank God that in spite of all we’ve been through, we’re still here, alive and kicking if you please, although I will be dishonest if I said I didn’t have any regrets in life.”

“Regrets like not having worked a job, for example?”

“Oh no, nothing like that; my degree in education was useful when you were all growing up, if you remember my very patient tutoring of you, and most especially of Giancarlo.”

“So what do you regret then?”

“I would have done more things, like traveling or learned more skills beyond housekeeping, or even entertained more suitors before I married your father.”

“Speaking of whom, is everything all right with you and Father?”

Mother didn't answer. She was deep in thought. Her eyes gleamed as if they came from the bottom of a pond looking out.

Without saying a word, she signaled it was time for us to go. Walking back to the hotel, I held her hand to steady and calm her. Something was bothering her; and that something had to do with Father. I knew.

Before she turned in, I told her I was going out for a walk and perhaps drink a beer or two somewhere. I'd see her in the morning. At the lobby, I took the opportunity to text Giancarlo on roaming mode and that I'd call him long distance in half an hour. Good, he said, that'll give him a chance to go out somewhere and talk in private.

“What's with Father, Gian? Mother seems quite agitated.”

“Well, to make the story short, it's got something to do with Manang Merceding; I don't know how to put this across... but Mother has accused her of carrying an affair with Father.”

“Good gracious heavens, in their creeping and crawling, creaking and tottering dotage?”

“I don't think it's the affair that upsets Mother in the first place; it's the talk that she hears from behind her back. You know how small our hometown is.”

“Well, is it true anyway?”

“I really haven't had the chance, nor the inclination to confront either or both of them on this, but if you like to know, Manang Merceding is here with us right now, tonight, in our

parents' bedroom. That's what she does every time Mother is away."

"Pray tell, Gian, how should be we deal with this mess, you and I?"

"I haven't the haziest notion; I say live and let live for what's it worth. But I think it's important to keep Mother calm, sedate her, you know, metaphorically, and give in to everything she says or asks. Truth to tell, I'm fed up with Mother, too and here I am alone in Binalbagan pressed between the devil and the deep blue sea."

"Say good luck for me; I think I'll talk with Mother first thing in the morning."

"Just tread very carefully and have the Metropolol ready, and the Thorazine, too. Both of you will need it, ha ha ha. And the best of luck - I'm sure you'll handle it well."

The following day, I changed my mind. I decided it was best breaking it to her back home in Manila. I thought of enlisting Mrs. Laguardia's help. The woman was levelheaded and steady. Besides, she had Mother's confidence. Best of all, she could keep a secret.

So when Mother did her last-minute shopping at Rustan's, Mrs. Laguardia and I met up for coffee and cake. I lost no time in explaining to her my concern and neither was she niggardly nor shy about her views.

"I say talk to her now. But before you do, doll her up. Buy a new *rigodon* gown for her, a new pair of spiffy shoes, cool designer glasses. Then bring her to David Sassoon, get her hair done, do a rejuvenating mask. In other words, make her over. Then after you do, praise how comely she has turned out, that her friends have been going down and under in the last few years, and that she has outlasted them all. But most importantly, bring her around; show her off to your friends and colleagues and proudly say that she's your mother."

“Will that be all?”

“Oh no, but it will do wonders for her psychology. What she needs most at this point in her life is attention, attention, attention.”

“And when do I drop the bomb?”

“After a week of showing her off to your friends.”

“Should I get you to be there, too?”

“Not a good idea; it’s a family affair after all. And no matter how hard it may be for you out there, it has to be done. There’s simply no time left; the closure must be done willy-nilly.”

“And Father?”

“Best to go home and talk to him like a man, after you’re done talking with your mother. Get Giancarlo on your side, and together, you, him and your Father, go over the fence literally and lay your cards down to Merceditas and her children. It’s important that your Father go. Perhaps it would help to bring in the parish priest, what’s his name, Fr. Berenguer, during that showdown of a conference.”

“And Mother doesn’t have to be there.”

“No, she doesn’t have to be there.”

I rebooked Mother’s tickets. I purchased the items Mrs. Laguardia suggested and showed her off to my friends like a trophy mother. Indeed, they had nothing but praise for her, considering that the old woman was going 83. Mother glowed. She basked at the attention people gave her. Like a movie star, she answered all the questions posed her with apparent ease and confidence. When she wasn’t sure, she primped her clothes as if she needed more time to extract a thoughtful answer. She patted her cheeks and tweaked her nose or temple demurely when she was complimented on her elegance or youthful looks. Asked if she ever had a facelift, she feigned ignorance of the

procedure, saying that natural beauty was best for her. She beamed when she was compared to Gloria Romero. In the last few days of her Manila holiday, she felt like having it all. Mother was at the prime of her life.

Still I couldn't muster the courage to ask the final question. I decided to bring her once more to Caroline's grave, with the view in mind that whatever happened, the solemnity of the place and the symbolism of our gesture would place things in perspective. I imagined that if I invoked Caroline's memory, there would be little of the drama that accompanied such emotional tipping points. However, Mother cut me short.

"I knew all along that you knew all along that your father's having an affair with my kid sister, your Manang Merceditas. This I cannot undo unfortunately. However, isn't it downright comical that he at 82 is still *that* libidinal and Merceditas, who's not exactly a spring chicken at 79 either, has returned his amorous attentions?"

"I...I only learned about this recently. And felt utterly bewildered."

"My concern for now is something quite practical. I could push your Father out, it's still my house after all – this, the whole town knows – but he will have no way to survive on his own. He could, of course, live next door and shack up with Merceditas, and the whole comedy would come to its rightful ending. But as it happens, I've been supporting him and your brother financially all along. Their talk of profits from the chickens and show dogs is pure hogwash. ...Do you get the idea, the idea that I'm also sustaining his concubine, my sister Merceditas and her children, too?"

"Where's this leading then, Mother?"

"To the grave, if you ask me, I mean, facetiousness aside. Neither he or she – nor me for that matter – have more than a few years tops. And since I am healthier than the rest of them, I plan to outlive them all."

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I must now make the ultimatum for your  
Father: ‘choose my sister or me — or *go to hell once and for all.*”

The following night, I found myself accompanying  
Mother on the plane to Bacolod.