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*Report from the Abyss:
Episodes from a Coming of Age in the
Philippine Left*



A FORWARD: THIS WAY DOWN

The Communist movement in the Philippines is a tangled and colossal affair. Its history and gestation are even more so. My parents were both members of this underground organization that advocated a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist solution for the country's ills and came to prominence during the years of the Marcos

dictatorship. I refer to the triumvirate of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People's Army and the National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF).

Though my parents tried their best to lie low, to give me and my younger sister a normal life in the city (as urban intelligence agents) and still keep their dedication to The Cause, I grew up in an environment of guerrilla warfare, clandestine meetings, surveillance, and disappearances.

There are precious few dates here owing to my late start at keeping a journal and the fact that I have really bad recall for numbers. I apologize in advance for any mistakes in the timeline, in this awkward attempt at the memoirist's art.

I do however hope that this account, disjointed and prickly as it is, will be of use to those—children or adults—who have gone through the same trauma. You are not alone.

SWORDFIGHTS

My earliest memory of things being askew was of my father coming home sporadically, usually at night or near twilight.

I jumped and did cartwheels whenever my mother would tell me he'd be home. She'd also tell me to keep it secret, especially from my Uncle Roy, a police sergeant. She said that if I told him he'd call someone and they'd drag off my father to prison.

Years later, I learned that this was an inside joke since blood always protected blood, even if ideals differed by light years. In retrospect, I believe she was also subtly educating me, as to the level of secrecy I would have to bear in the future. Neither my father nor my mother ever got caught because of relatives or family. Others were not as lucky.

Swordfights were my favorite game back then. Whenever father would come home, I'd take the longer plastic sword with the He-Man pommel detail and he'd take the short sword, gnarled and notched from many battles with other playmates. We'd play till I had to go to bed.

I was six or seven years old, then, I guess. This was during the Corazon Aquino administration, when the housewife of assassinated martyr Ninoy Aquino ascended to the presidency via a bloodless coup known as the EDSA Revolt (the first one).

In those years people affiliated with the movement were called insurgents by both the media and the government. While the revolutionaries called each other cadres, or *kasama* (companion), affixing a prefix of "Ka" before their preferred false names.

MOVING HOUSE

We never stayed for long in one place, moving houses nearly every year. By the time I had finished elementary school (six years in our educational system), I could count a total of more than a dozen houses we had rented, furnished sparsely, and then abandoned at the merest sign of surveillance.

Surveillance meant a jacketed man at the corner constantly seen between 4-5 p.m., a car parked at the curb whose occupants never left the vehicle, a folded and creased note left in our mailbox that said things were getting too hot. Any or all of them were reasons to move once confirmation had been made.

We moved from Bulacan to Marikina to Diliman to various locations along Tandang Sora Road, ad infinitum. The friends I made and lost along the way are innumerable. I remember neighborhoods as fleeting caricatures of interiors and exteriors, sporadic visits to friends' homes, *barkada* outings never to be repeated—one suburban subdivision to the next.

By the time I neared adolescence and was ready for high school, I had given up trying to actively make friends. I learned, instead, how to escape into books and make up imaginary scenes of carnage with action figures and their miniature, accessory vehicles. Fantasy and science fiction were my fare, a mental diet that kept me amused and occupied with something other than the obscure danger they always said we were in. I had little need for real playmates and often found them boring, even insipid.

STONING THE BUS

I was born in 1978, the year Episode Four of *Star Wars* was released. My parents left me in the care of relatives until I was around two years old and my mother says that she watched the film while she was pregnant with me.

In any case I have no recollection of my mother or father until I was five years old. My mother tells me she cried when she tried to take me from my aunt and I wouldn't let her. It's probably true, though I don't remember that either.

One of the most vivid occasions I do remember was this one time in the late '80s, well after EDSA had shifted the power structure, when two of my aunts and I went out to buy my school uniform.

I was around ten years old and we were on a bus bound for some mall when we had to drive through a demonstration or a picket. To me it just looked like loosely phalanxed people on either side of the road. One phalanx was on the sidewalk, the

other on the island. We were on the left seat, facing the opposite lane of the road, my two aunts were nearer the window than I was.

The demonstrators suddenly started throwing rocks and stones at our bus. The passengers were shocked at first then kicked into panic gear, wisened up and started closing the windows while rocks poured in from both sides. Luckily we were in an ordinary bus, the kind with windows made out of plywood rather than glass.

Before my aunt could get the plywood board up, a rock whizzed by me and hit a man on the seat opposite us. It cut him on the temple and where it landed he bled right away. The rock was the size of a child's fist, and brushed my brows.

The man pulled out his handkerchief to stanch the blood but the woman beside him, a middle-aged earth-mother type carrying two *bayong* bursting with vegetables and fruits, screamed for a doctor, a hospital, anybody that could help. The man tried to calm her. "It's ok, it's ok," he said, although the blood was dripping onto the woman's duster. By this time, my aunt was finally able to get the board up.

I couldn't look away from the blood, the screaming woman. The tension in the air was so palpable that you could pluck it with your fingers. Then one of my aunts cradled my head and told me to lie down. Cringing on her lap, I heard the rocks thud thud thud against the plywood windows.

The bus gained an inexplicable, dreamlike freeze frame. Eventually we moved out of range of the rocks, but we could hear the bus behind us now being stoned by the gleeful mob. That bus unfortunately didn't have plywood windows.

GUERRILLA CONCLAVE

In one of the numerous houses where we lived, a secret meeting of nearly all the top members of the Party was convened. Balweg, Baylosis, Ocampo, and Salas were prominent names then and they were all at our house that day.

I remember this tall man in glasses with curly hair and a deep bassoon voice telling me to be good. A few weeks later my mother brought me a newspaper and pointed at the front page photo.

"Who is that?" she asked. I read the headline, REDS CAPTURED AT NORZAGARAY SAFEHOUSE, and peered at the grainy group photo of five people (three men and two women) taken at medium shot. There was the curly hair and the black bottle-frame glasses. "That's Tito Toto," I replied.

That was my first lesson in how real the dangers could be. I could just imagine the consequences if somebody bombed our place. The revolution would most likely have been crippled.

CLOCKS

I suffer from a sort of dyslexia with numbers. I can't do accurate division and memorized the multiplication table with much difficulty. This condition manifested early on, though I didn't know that it was a problem yet, when I was still learning how to tell the time.

My father came home early that day and caught me playing instead of doing my homework. I am unclear about what happened next, but we were standing beside the big wall clock in our house and he was furiously asking me what time it was. For some reason I kept saying "Twelve o'clock!" when it was evidently not. The next thing I knew my father was pulling out his belt and whipping my butt and thighs.

I stood frozen, barely hurt but inexplicably crying. As tears came down my face, I also felt the warm piss trickling down my leg, bathing my shorts and making a yellow puddle on the marble floor. I was still whimpering when mother shushed me and brought me to the bathroom to clean me up.

To this day, I don't recall being more scared in my life.

EQUIPMENT, INFATUATION, ETC.

One time my mother showed me the bugging equipment they used to eavesdrop on people. We played with a small mic encapsulated inside a squarish, white plastic thing that was no bigger than a thumb. She stood in one room and I had its receiver in another. Then she taught me to use the CB Radio and told me never to answer when someone called.

She also showed me what to do in case we were about to be discovered or caught. If there was time I should tear up all the subversive documents and propaganda material, burn them all in a heap at the back. I never saw a gun in our house, though there must have been one.

By this time, we saw my father rarely. He would come home once every two months or come down from the mountains or from his new function as chief negotiator to the peace talks with the government. By this time, Ramos, the new president was cracking down on insurgents with a vengeance.

It was around this time that a fellow female cadre of theirs and her daughter, Sandra, came to live in our house. Our house had three stories back then and they settled down in our attic. I instantly fell in love with Sandra, a mestiza with a bob cut and sparkling eyes. The fact that she was ten years older than me, that she was nearly in college, and that I called her "Ate Sandra" didn't make any difference to me.

I loved the way she spoke in a soft, husky voice, the way she doted on me, the way she seemed both strong and vulnerable and the way she kissed me on the cheek whenever she would go out. Oh, how I anticipated those kisses. I never asked my mother why Sandra and her mom lived with us, though years later I realized that they were in hiding.

Sandra had a BMX bike that was way sturdier and cooler than my cheap, stainless steel bike. The fact that my cheapskate father had bought my bike said much about why I often had to have the main body welded to the steering frame. I eventually ran Sandra's bike ragged with my trips through mud, uneven terrain, and down staircases.

Years later, while I was in college, I would meet Sandra again and realize that most of the girls I had been attracted to in high school, up to early college, were cast in her mold.

NAMES

I was in my first year in high school when I learned that my real name was De Mesa, and not Soriano which is the surname of one of the notable old rich families in the country. So my false name was well-chosen, at least.

In that year grunge was on the rise and the Left had fractured into two groups: the "Re-affirmists," who remained loyal to the CCP founder, Jose Maria Sison, exiled in Utrecht, and the "Rejectionists" who sought a new paradigm for social change. My parents belonged to the latter. Soon after, what would be called The Purge (the witch hunt, trial and in some cases, summary execution of suspected government spies within the Left organizations enacted by the governing council) would come knocking at our door, as well as those of so many others.

I was writing a lot in those days. My first attempts at poetry were filled with angst and a barely discernible outrage at something I could not pin down. I typed out pages and pages of nonsensical, lyrical and furious free verse, on a battered old typewriter. To this day, I pound too strongly on the keyboard, a carry-over from my pre-PC days.

To prepare for my graduation from college (though it was still four years away) my parents worked to have my name, as well as my sister's, officially changed.

It was also at this time that I learned that my father was an ex-priest and that he and my mother met in one of the legal organizations that fronted for "The Cause." I learned that they continued their relationship in the mountains, managed to get assigned to the same unit together, and then married within the movement.

Marriages among cadres back then entailed a flurry of gunfire, crossed semi-automatics in lieu of church arches and a handful of bullet casings clutched by the couple and held aloft. With the casings in hand they recited an oath that bound each to the significant other. They vowed that the union would be in the service of the people and The Cause. I might have gotten some details wrong, but this is what I was told.

These marriages weren't legal of course, and this would cause problems with our (me and my sister's) name change.

NEW IDENTITY

By third year high school, the problems regarding my name change had been solved. Seattle bands were still the vogue and poetry—or at least its music—was getting easier to write.

I remember being called out from class by my instructor in the middle of Science class. "Someone's waiting for you outside," she said. When I stepped out of the room our high school principal handed me a rolled up scroll tied with a red ribbon. She shook my hand, smiled said "Congratulations," then turned away.

On that day I became Karl De Mesa. I wrote my first story a few months later. It was a soliloquy, the swan song and last words of a man who decides to kill himself, broken here and there with Kurt Cobain's equally angst-ridden lyrics.

PRISON

When my father was arrested things were going quite well. I had passed the exams for university and eager for classes to begin. When the phone call came everything became a blur of activity. He had been charged with "possession of firearms in furtherance of rebellion," apparently a new charge invented by the then Ramos Administration (Fidel Ramos was the general and West Point graduate who had replaced the erstwhile housewife Aquino).

To keep my father from getting "salvaged" or slain without trace we had to do three things: (1) get media exposure—once a detainee is known to the press "salvaging" is more difficult since the military would be required to present him/her alive. Plus it would be easier to get cause-oriented groups to rally around the detainee. The revolution had to be televised; (2) get a lawyer who sympathized, or identified, with the Cause—this was essential in order to reduce charges to aailable offense, and since the fees for such political lawyers are astronomical; (3) get family to visit the detainee—guards and soldiers, were human and it would greatly help if they identified with the detainee as a fellow human, not as an enemy of the state.

So, as soon as possible, we all went to visit. I remember the ISG Prison in Fort Bonifacio as a clash of angles and curves. There were impossibly high walls and guard towers in every corner. The concertina barbed wires that circled the tops of the walls presented a queer sort of aesthetic to my eye—symmetrically pleasing yet apparently meant to maim.

To get to your political detainee you passed through a lobby of sorts. There, you had to submit to a procedure that verged on a cavity search. Every inch of kettles, thermoses, household items, chairs, and whatever you carried was searched for hidden stuff that could aid an escape. On your person, clothes were patted down, pockets were emptied, shoes taken off, inseams inspected for hidden zippers. They didn't make you take your clothes off, and inspectors of the appropriate gender were assigned to each visitor but I remember that I was shaking throughout the entire procedure.

Inside, the "cells" resembled small bungalow apartments with a single window. The whole compound was quite large and more than thirty prisoners were in that area, most of them affiliated with the Left. There were bars at the windows, the locks at the doors were all positioned on the outside and a quick peek from the window would tell you you're within sight of a guard tower. But if you stood at the door and faced the interior, everything looked normal like in a seedy motel. There was a refrigerator, a sink, an electric stove, two narrow beds, a small bathroom, even curtains.

Despite all this, we all quickly saw that my father's hair had turned mostly gray, and that his face was lined like a crosshatch caricature. He brightened up when he saw us, however.

His cellmate was Satur Ocampo, a prominent personality in the Left who once served as the Party's negotiator with the government during peace talks. He worked primarily as an urban agent for the National Democratic Front. My father's other friend (though he lived in the cell next door) was an NPA officer named Rolly Kintanar. He was another prominent personality in the Left owing to the number of "kills" attributed to him that nearly rivaled the impossibly high number of successful armed operations he had led. The atmosphere inside the compound was one of neither despair nor hopelessness. It felt like a vacation, albeit one that had started on a very sour note. Everything was relaxed and unusually calm, an enforced calm.

I called them both "Tito," since it was assumed we were all kin within the Cause.

Tito Satur was a mestizo, wiry, aloof, and dignified. His stance always reminded me of someone standing behind a podium, about to address a crowd, with the crowd about to take notes. He was a quiet man who spoke in a studied manner, smiling infrequently but widely. It didn't take a genius to realize that he was the kind of intellectual you didn't want to tangle with. He kept a small library inside their cell and I always found him reading, writing, or dozing.

On the other hand, Tito Rolly was a dark, brown-skinned man who sported curly, disheveled hair and a mischievous grin. He was big and built like a safe, jolly, full of jokes. He had an air of casual danger about him, the kind of derring-do aura I now associate with real soldier types—not necessarily of the military. When you shook his rough hand, you felt the contrast between the callused palm and the gentle, warm way he pumped your hand while laying another hand over your wrist. He liked to play darts and jokingly, fondly, called my father “Monsignor.”

Tito Satur would later become a Representative in Congress, running under a party whose Leftist leanings were clear if not prominent. This was a few years after the NDF was recognized as a legal entity. His fame as a leader of the Left helped catapult him to the other side of the fence even as many of his former comrades accused him of selling out. I saw him on the cover of a local magazine one time, posing beside the daughter of former President Marcos and another politician. He remains a congressman today.

Tito Rolly would be killed in the later half of 2002. Shot in the back of the head inside a Japanese restaurant in Quezon City that he frequented. The precise and vengeful manner of the hit—the gunman stood over him and shot a few more times to make sure he was dead—pointed to his former comrades as the likely assassins. Rumors abounded about him being a government informant selling secrets he had access to.

He had gone legal a few years before his murder and had set up several prosperous enterprises. Despite his disfigurement his wife, defiant, insisted on an open coffin wake which the cameras ate up.

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CURIOSLY ENOUGH, THAT’S pretty much what I remember of our several dozen visits to the ISG prison. The infrequent trials and hearings, the meeting of, and bunking with, other family members, and the advocacy activities designed to raise awareness of these detainees are a blur.

I remember that we spent a Christmas in prison. I remember having a shirt printed with a stylized barbed wire and candle flame that had all the names of the prisoners inside the ISG under it. I remember that I felt closer to my father than I ever had before. I remember being proud of The Cause. I even argued with my guidance counselor once, during a session, about the values of Communism and how it was probably just one of the words that they’d found a despicable definition for. I remember crying at that session. I remember meeting that counselor again in a bus. I was with my mother, and I asked her if it was all right that I had told an outsider about the secret. She said, yes. Come to think of it, where is that shirt?

The biggest problem in such a “prison,” I later discovered, was having too much time on your hands. How to pass the time without going batty was the primary concern of the prisoners. Talismans, books, letters, and other stuff that could get you through the night were treasured.

Eventually, we got my father out on bail after a year or so, having proved that firearms they supposedly found inside the house were planted, or some such finagling. The court hearings continued, but at least we were able to take him home. There was some talk of him “disappearing,” but that was later shut down. So we remained visible.

I don’t think my father ever quite recovered from this last, his longest, detention.

THE DARKNESS IS MY LAUGHTERHOUSE

My shift to writing horror from fantasy was crystallized by two things:

(1) the scathing, but ultimately disillusioning, ordeal of caring for my broken father in prison, and (2) the majestic, nearly Lovecraftian beating of mighty wings at my window at a time when brownouts were frequent (when I think about it now, I figure that it was most likely a huge bat; back then however I firmly believed it was a *manananggal*—a flying viscera sucker, one of the monsters of our Lower Mythology).

The gestalt of the two resolved for me how essentially two-dimensional fantasy characters were, how limiting the genre was in terms of actualizing what I wanted to express. I still love fantasy to this day, but for an adolescent, back then, who was struggling into adulthood, wrestling with a rite of passage and trying to find the means to accurately convey what he had experienced, the genre was not adequate.

I wanted to draw the attention of the reader to real life, albeit indirectly, in a manner as subtly as an acupuncture needle being thrust into the skin. I didn’t want escape; I wanted confrontation. Horror had it in spades. Plus I was naturally drawn to the occult, the macabre, and mysterious. I dabbled in witchcraft, magick, psychic powers, energy healing, conspiracy theory, alien abductions, minor spells, conjurations, and other esoteric stuff.

To further my education in this new (consequently, lifelong) obsession I read horror authors, from King to Barker. Later on I would come to know the Existentialists. I was also drawn to music that gave voice to the eloquence and rage, beauty and terror, the turmoil I felt inside. Beyond the Seattle groups was a plethora of music that conjured darkness with relish. These were my new heroes.

Here was art that spoke to me. Here were stories of my state, characters I could identify with, voices that whispered to me of kinship. Here were my weapons

and a side I could ally myself with in a war that had been raging for years, a conflict I barely understood.

THE REVOLUTION DEVOURS ITS CHILDREN

Fights and arguments and shouting matches between my parents became more frequent and escalated steadily along with the legal proceedings involving my father's case.

Once, while I was playing outside our house in Tandang Sora, my playmates and I heard a crash that came from our house. Rushing to open the door I found my mother holding my father's bloody hands. All around them were the shattered remains of our plates. They had been fighting, apparently about whether to surface and go legal or continue their work with the underground, consequently neglecting their children. My playmates crowded behind me and looked over my shoulder. Then we slowly retreated.

Another time, at a different house, my aunts and I found my parents screaming at each other and I opened the door just in time to see my mother slap my father. The slap was so hard that it made my father's nose bleed and brought on palpitations (they both had heart problems). The cause of that argument was the whole reason for their separation.

If you ask them, my parents would tell you that they separated because my father cheated on my mother with another woman. Evidence to the contrary would suggest that they had ideological as well as emotional differences, unresolved and callously passed over, accumulated over the years like ghosts inside an empty house. They often argued as much over going legal and taking care of the children as they argued over certain government provisions that impacted The Cause. They did not make up after these arguments.

When my mother got a job, my father's depression deepened. Things at home got more and more sour. The other woman was probably just the last straw. In any case, I remain alienated from my father to this day.

I started my work as a writer doing odd jobs in the NGOs at the legal fringe of the Left. I met the same people that my father and mother knew, worked with quite a few of them. During the course of my work much concern was given to being "*mulat*"—that is, aware of the prevailing system of capitalist exploitation that has kept the country shackled to colonial powers. To many of these workers being *mulat* meant being exposed to The Cause. My awareness was never questioned. I had only to mention who my father or mother was and my colleagues would nod knowingly, as if we shared some common sorrow.

Tito Satur Ocampo, in an interview I had with him and his family, told me that there were extreme cases where parents left their children in a kind of collective day care center and never returned for them. Those who did come back did so not as parents but as long-lost uncles or aunts, unable to work up the courage to reclaim their children.

He also said that they were so “blinded” by The Cause back then that they forgot about the basic, instinctual values that made us human. Perhaps that is the gist of my parents’ dilemma.

UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

This is what I wrote in my journal, the morning after the esteemed August Highland (editor and founder of the Muse Apprentice Guild) urged me to write about my experiences regarding childhood in The Cause:

Oct. 1, 2003. A dream.

A stretch of desolate beach. The sand is a bluish-grey, the landscape of some alien terrain.

Whales, gigantic and blackened, are beached along the coast as far as the eye can see. Some of them are dead, most lie gasping for breath while tigers with fur the color of fire, and nearly as huge as the whales, gnaw, devour, and feast on the whales’ blubber. A harsh wind blows. The sea gives up its dead and its secrets.

To say that I feel nervous writing about my childhood and The Movement would be an understatement. I recall Yeats: “Why should we honor those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as much reckless courage in entering into the abyss of himself.”

I agree. I don’t feel that reckless however. I feel as if I were clearing up a cloud that has long obscured my vision. I feel an exhausting exhilaration, as if from a long run.

Somewhere between the books and the music I discovered a word, a subculture that described people of my disposition: “Goth.” I allied myself with its precepts, if not with its trappings. Years later, I would have a stylized ankh tattooed on my arm. When the last line was drawn and the blood wiped away, I felt whole.

AN UNBEHELD WAR

It occurs to me that I have never learned to pray and—though I'd like to think my morals and ethics are discernible—that I have had to discover spirituality on my own.

I find this supremely funny since my father was an ex-priest. A friend of mine has also pointed out that I have a habit of whispering and accumulating gossip and secrets about my friends and acquaintances. These, I keep like a miser. The nature of our secrets—especially the ones we keep to ourselves—are, I think, more telling than those that we tell friends or even lovers. They define us.

I don't know if the circumstances of our childhood are to blame for our damaged selves. Or perhaps it's our inability to adjust and to live a healthy life amidst the ashes. It is too easy to point to wars, secret or otherwise, that leave us irreparably broken. If I am broken then I am at least balanced: I have a chip on both shoulders. These days those chips are sources of great amusement. Today, I think it's quite comic how seriously I took it all.

Nobody has yet criticized me for not being an overtly political writer. Though I do feel that I should write about my experiences, I also feel that I should have an original way of telling them before I can even presume to impose on the reader's attention. My fiction follows this edict. I hope that this essay has at least been an interesting, if not entirely instructive, read.

This adventure into my personal abyss is long overdue. Yes, I think I see them go in Rilkean fashion—ghosts, wraiths, phantoms ... Thank you for this exorcism.