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Talking to a Fu Dog
on a Wedding Afternoon



Warm chandelier light bounces off San Agustin's vaulted ceiling and descends gently on the congregation below. The air is sweet with the scent of mock orange blooms festooned on the retablo and around the nave. Interspersed with the white fragrant flowers are large heads of hydrangea and sprays of Easter lilies and asters. A string quartet plays Vivaldi as the groom and the congregation await the arrival of the bridal party. The groom has never looked more handsome. He wears a *barong* Tagalog of pineapple cloth that took three women half a month to embroider. The congregation, too, is dressed in fabrics as expensive and as painstakingly crafted as the groom's *barong*. Everyone gathered in the church's nave has waited long for this wedding, and both families have done everything possible to make it beautiful.

As one of the groom's cousins, I, too, am wearing a *barong* of embroidered pineapple cloth. This makes moving quite difficult, since *barongs* wrinkle easily. I find the atmosphere in the church stifling and slip out to get some fresh air and look for a drink. I manage to find a vending machine inside the museum in the church complex. Since my family has once again excluded me from the entourage, I figure they won't mind my absence too much.

I stand right outside the church doors sipping my Coke. A fu dog stands before me, his gaze steady and unblinking. He holds a ball in his paw, his claws partly unsheathed. He is both playful and menacing. I smile and toast him with my Coke can. This fu dog is believed to watch over the building. His partner, standing guard from the other side of the façade, is female and holds her cub instead of a ball. She is supposed to watch over all that is within the building. The female fu dog is better preserved, but I like the male better. This may be because I've always been partial to men.

I wink at the fu dog and smile. The guardian still has not moved from his position. The ball is still in his paw. He is an old friend and we've survived many weddings together—those of my family, my friends, and even those of total strangers. I stand there contrasting the current wedding with the ones we've both attended in the past. Some of them were beautiful, most of them less so, and a few were just too horrible for words. Doubtless though, members of all the wedding parties think theirs was the most beautiful by far. It costs a pretty penny to get married in this 16th century church, so those who get married here are dead serious about having a beautiful wedding.

I hear the clip clop of horse hooves on cobblestone and turn around just as a *kalesa* trundles past. The tourists on it aim their cameras at me. They expect me to raise my hand in a "*mabuhay!*-welcome-to-the-Philippine-islands" wave. Instead, I mimic the fu dog's stare. One of the tourists remarks loudly that the church is beautiful. There is an ensuing flurry as her friends, all seeming to be in agreement, snap a multitude of photos as their *kalesa* draws them off to Fort Santiago.

It is strange that most people do not realize how plain San Agustin's exterior is. I am amused by this realization. San Agustin's structure had, during the Spanish colonial period, inspired scorn from even the friars themselves. Augustinian historian Agustin Maria De Castro couldn't have been more blunt when he described the church façade as of triangular form, very ugly, and of a blackish color; flanked by two ugly and irregular towers, devoid of elevation and grace.

I take another sip from my Coke and observe San Agustin's façade. Its simplicity reveals the practical approach to building the friars had taken in the country. Following the style of High Renaissance, and thus belying its age, San Agustin's façade is, as described by one scholar, symmetrical and straightforward. Pairs of columns framing the church's massive wooden doors create a vertical movement

continued on the façade's second tier by another set of paired columns. A triangular pediment adorned by a simple rose window tops the second tier. Horizontal cornices set off each tier. In keeping with the High Renaissance penchant for symmetry, a pair of towers originally flanked the façade. This symmetry is marred now because the left belfry has been taken down. The earthquakes that hit Manila in 1863 and 1880 effectively split it into two.

The church has recently been restored and now wears a highly controversial coat of peach paint. With its candy color the façade reminds me of mission churches in Latin America. This is not surprising, since according to reports the design of the church was derived from other churches built by the Augustinians in Mexico. My cousin's bride hates the peach paint. Her entourage's gowns are maroon, and they look awful when set against a peach background. I think Father Galende, the parish priest, has done the right thing, though. At least now the church's exterior is not as boring.

I ask the fu dog what he thinks of the peach paint. He does not respond, but I surmise he is relieved the painters left him alone. He stands there staring at me, his lion-like frame looking a tough greenish gray.

I sip from my Coke can and imagine how things will be if I were to get married. It must be difficult deciding even on the venue alone. My church has to have beauty and character, and it must be at least a century old. The Philippines has several churches that meet my standards. Off the top of my head are San Sebastian in Manila, Miag-ao and Boljoon in the Visayas, and, of course, the dream churches of Northern Philippines.

I think the best churches are in the Ilocandia. They are grand in scale, steeped in history, and visually arresting. I suppose they are built that way to complement the equally dramatic topography of Northern Luzon. The churches of Sarrat, Bacarra, Laoag, Dingras, Badoc, Burgos, Sta. Maria, and Sta. Lucia in the Ilocos and Tumauni in Isabela are wedding perfect.

However there is one church that, for me, stands out. This is the Parish Church of Saint Augustine in Paoay, Ilocos Norte. Built in the 17th century, San Agustin de Paoay is the most striking and dramatic of all Philippine churches. It is a dream construction of coral stone, clay brick, stucco, and wood.

Viewed from afar, San Agustin de Paoay seems like a graceful mountain. The large undulating buttresses that flank the church create the illusion that the whole San Agustin de Paoay is a giant triangular pediment rising from the soil. Square pilasters stretching from the ground all the way up to the upper pediment divide the church façade. The vertical movement created by the pilasters and the finials that top them suggest the church's Gothic affinity. Intersecting these pilasters are cornices that stretch across the façade and all the way around the church. These cornices wrap around the buttresses and call attention to the massive side supports.

I remember clearly the first time I saw it. I was ten years old, a Catholic schoolboy vacationing from Manila. Ever since I saw a picture of it in one of my mother's art books, I had begged my father incessantly to take me to see San Agustin de Paoay. So the first chance he got he made sure I got what I wanted. I remember the car becoming very quiet as we began espying the church's belfry through the trees. When we rounded the corner and we got to see San Agustin de Paoay's façade in its full grandeur, I was ready to die. It was so beautiful, I got goose pimples, and my hair stood on end. I ran out of the car and stood on the church's front lawn gaping. The setting sun cast a soft light on the façade so that every carving and detail leapt out. My sister joined me shortly and said exactly what was on my mind, "It's like Borobudur."

San Agustin de Paoay is often likened to the Javanese temple in Borobudur. I think the church's design—its massive buttresses and the crenellations and finials on the upper pediment—has much to do with this. Couple it with the fact that, until recently, small trees and air plants have grown in the cracks in the clearly visible coral blocks that comprise most of the structure itself, it doesn't take a stretch of the imagination to picture scenes from Ramayana in bas relief.

I can never get enough of viewing the awesome façade. Its lower, earlier level of brick and stucco contrasts with the carved but weathered coral stone of the pediment and side buttresses. The façade is adorned with fernlike scrolls, Saint Augustin's miter and staff, a flaming heart pierced by many arrows, the Spanish royal coat of arms, and images of the sun. On the apex is a niche, which is assumed to have housed an image. To the lower left of this niche, on the cornice, is a statue of what is probably a fu dog; its companion to the right is missing.

The exterior walls are beautiful. Aside from the buttresses that support the side and back of the church, the walls are carved with angel heads, leaves, flowers, and more suns. The undulating lines, heavy ornamentation, and staggering size all reveal the influence of the Baroque style. The interior, however, is not as impressive as the exterior and is, in fact, the exact opposite. According to accounts, the interior had retablos, murals, and scrollwork that would rival that of San Agustin de Intramuros. None of that has remained. The unremarkable wooden retablo, wobbly pews, and cracked tiles of the current interior are better suited for a small community chapel and give no hint of the former grandeur of the church. Word is the interior was victim of years of gradual looting by politician's wives, art historians, and heritage conservators themselves. The original retablo, the side altars, the images in the niches, the sculpted cornices, like the exterior's missing image and fu dog, are believed to currently be in the receiving rooms and studies of the perfumed set.

I take a sip from my Coke and wonder if the theft and destruction of the fu dogs in the church's pediment has something to do with the destruction of its interior. Did the removal of the fu dogs leave the building and its interior unprotected? I ask

my guardian friend if I'm right. The fu dog doesn't seem to hear me and keeps staring on.

In subsequent return trips to San Agustin de Paoay I have noticed that the exterior, too, is going the way of its interior. Through the years, human neglect and the elements have weathered the exterior's details. Now, when I view the façade from the same spot I stood on as a kid, the carved details are no longer as sharp, and the entire façade has tilted forward. The erosion of the stucco, the protective layer, has speeded up the destruction of the coral stone.

I remember that as a kid I had marveled at the use of corals. Being the child of environmentalists, I had grown up knowing that corals were not supposed to be removed from the sea. And there I was exploring a building complex the size of two football fields built almost entirely of coral. The extravagance of the idea added to my awe of the place.

It would not be until after I had graduated from college that my geologist ex-boyfriend would explain to me coral stones and karst landscapes. Apparently, coral stones are ancient coral, long dead remnants of the prehistoric seas. They are made primarily of calcium carbonate and are called by the less intriguing name, fossilized limestone. Coral stones are quarried in karst areas, landscapes rich in limestone. Limestone is susceptible to water corrosion, so karst areas are full of caves and sinkholes and underground rivers. Much of Ilocandia is karst country, and coral stone is abundant. This makes it a practical building material. The coral stone blocks used in San Agustin de Paoay's belfry are larger than those in the church and show more coral fossils.

One afternoon several years ago, when I was still working for the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, I visited Paoay with a Japanese geologist who specialized in terrestrial vibrations. The UNESCO had sent him to help counter the tilting of the façade and preserve the monument which has been, together with San Agustin de Intramuros and two other Philippine Baroque churches, inscribed in the list of World Heritage Sites. As I waited for him to finish taking measurements, I sat in the shade of the belfry and marveled at a block of coral stone whose corallites were clearly showing. They looked like beige flowers and starbursts. I remember remarking how pretty they looked even though they have been dead for centuries.

I find it poetic that the church is built of coral skeletons. My mother, believing they are built on carnage, often fails to understand how why I swoon over old churches like San Agustin de Paoay. Though she is perfectly capable of admiring architecture, she finds it difficult separating the idea of these beautiful monuments from the tremendous amount of suffering many Filipinos had to go through to build them. According to reports, a large number of the churches established during the Spanish colonial era were built with forced labor. Farmers and fishermen

were forced to abandon their traditional means of livelihood to work on these religious structures. Forced labor often led to abject poverty, starvation, and death. In some areas the memory of the sacrificed lives was so strong that these churches were eventually abandoned by the townspeople. One example is the church in my father's hometown, Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte. All that remains of this once grand structure are a few arches and pillars and the outline of the church courtyard.

I ask the fu dog if he thinks my mother is overly dramatic. His mouth is set in a grim line. He doesn't blink. I take a sip from my Coke and notice a couple of Taiwanese tourists reading the writings inscribed on San Agustin's floor. Like most first time visitors to the church, the two are bending down to read the gravestones that pave the church's vestibule. They whisper to each other and I surmise that they are wondering if the ghosts of the people who are buried under it haunt the church. I smile at the fu dog and wonder if he also finds it funny that San Agustin de Intramuros is built on skeletons, just as the polyps in the coral stones of San Agustin de Paoay were built on the skeletons of their ilk to form reefs.

I return my attention to the Taiwanese couple and wonder if they will be just as thrilled as I was when they find out the bones of Spanish *conquistador* Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, the founder of Manila, are kept under the church.

The whirr of a camera calls my attention to an Australian taking photographs of the façade. I am amazed at the number of shots he is taking and wonder if he has enough left for the interior. If this man has not done his research, he is in for great disappointment. San Agustin's boring exterior hints at nothing of its ornate interior. In 1875 two Italian painters, Alberoni and Dibella, enlivened the drab interior with intricate trompe l'oeil. Literally meaning 'to fool the eye,' the technique employed by the two created for San Agustin floral motifs, geometric patterns, classic architectural themes, coffers, and religious images. Almost the entire interior is covered with trompe l'oeil. The great beauty of the Italians's handiwork is said to have inspired the celebrated Filipino artisan Simon Flores who is credited for beautifying the church interiors of the Baroque churches in Pampanga.

Trompe l'oeil and other art techniques were fashionable in the Baroque period. The move then was toward opulence, hence the ornate exterior of San Agustin de Paoay and the painted interior of San Agustin de Intramuros. The idea was to make art accessible to the regular person. Cynics say that the idea really was to remove the people's attention from the goings-on within the Church by distracting them with beautiful things. Why bother with what the priest is doing when you have such lovely paintings to marvel at? Art was used to remove attention from what was truly important.

I marvel at this and realize that the wedding taking place within the church isn't really that much different from the old priest's idea. Like most weddings held in this church, what is going on inside is a spectacle, something designed to hold everyone

in thrall. What matter that the bride is two months pregnant and still insisted on wearing virginal white? What does it matter that my cousin doesn't really believe in marriage and that he only agreed to get married when his father threatened to disinherit him?

The significance of weddings and the monuments and rites incorporated into them—like these churches, like most religions—have long died. Like polyps stuck in coral stones, they have been allowed to persist simply because we find them beautiful. Form has taken over function.

Form taking over function. This thought causes me to smile. As someone who works actively in built-heritage conservation, I am surrounded by this problem. What to do when a structure, beautiful though it may be, has lost its practical use? Do I have the right to tell a parish priest not to demolish his century-old church because we find it particularly pretty even though it can no longer accommodate even a third of his congregation? Most of the people I work with don't have such qualms. I am, unfortunately, still saddled with this pragmatic sensibility, and it makes my appreciation of beauty of this nature rather guilty. For me, function should, at the end of it all, still take precedence over form.

I take another sip from my Coke can and return my attention to the fu dog. The guardian still has not moved from his position. I hear familiar voices and the brush of beaded slippers on the church courtyard. The bridal party has arrived. I see my sister among the women in maroon gowns. She flashes me a smile as they fall in line for the bridal entrance.

I decide to give in to my stomach's grumbling and walk across the courtyard to buy fried quail eggs. From my new vantage point I watch the phalanx of maroon gowns and ecru pineapple cloth *barongs* get swallowed by the maw of San Agustin's doorway. My cousin's bride hesitates at the doorway before she, too, disappears into the interior. The fu dogs continue to stare, forever vigilant in their watch. I notice them eyeing me, perhaps wondering if I'd do harm to their building and those within it. I scoop vinegar onto my quail eggs and look for a bench to sit on. I find one under a young fire tree. In less than an hour my cousin will be married. That will make me officially the only male cousin still single, the last man standing.

I sit on the bench and imagine my own wedding. Mine will be the most beautiful wedding of all. It will be in a church with the exterior just like San Agustin de Paoay with graceful buttresses and an ornate pediment that makes it look Spanish colonial and Asian at the same time and an interior just like San Agustin de Intramuros with ornate trompe l'oeil, filigree, scrollwork, sculptures, and chandeliers. And the fu dogs will be there to bless the church and everyone in it. All this will happen once I figure out what to do for a bride. I wonder what kind of trompe l'oeil and undulating architecture I will have to invent to distract the Church and finally allow two men to marry.

The quail eggs make me thirsty, so I decide to get myself another Coke from the museum vending machine. Armed with my fresh drink, I cross the courtyard once more. I hear choral music as I pass the church doors. My cousin's wedding is well underway.

Again, I position myself in front of the fu dog. The Chinese guardian continues to stare at me. I raise my can to him and silently recite my toast: may there come a time that I, too, will be kneeling beside my beloved before a gorgeous retablo; and may our families look gladly upon us being married by a priest; and may everything within the church be bathed with the perfume of flowers and the light of crystal chandeliers; and may a pair of fu dogs protect my beautiful church and all that I treasure within.

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