

Paying Respects

KAT DEL ROSARIO

“What a mess,” Mila whispered to herself. The living room floor was covered with litter; petals and leaves browned by days without sunlight, plastic wrappers, and bits of food. It was forbidden to sweep, or to tidy up, for the spirit of the dead was supposed to wander about the house soon after death, and sweeping would only usher it outside and make it resentful and violent. Sweeping was only allowed once the casket left the threshold, a gentle encouragement for the departed to leave the house in peace. An assortment of footsteps could be heard across the house, beginning strongly then fading. She and Cely had tried their best to lead people quietly, through the kitchen door so that the living room would maintain a semblance of solemnity, a silence their father would have preferred but death was never a private affair shared with people from far and wide who, however brief their interlude with the once-living, come to pay their respects. And so, people came and went; at first, Mila remembered them by the stories they told about her father, and later, by the mess they left behind.

A mess, as well, were Mila’s memories as she tried to answer repeatedly asked questions: What happened? When did it happen? How exactly? Did you see it? Have you had any sleep? Mila had not slept for three days. The mess grew bigger with every passing day. At first it had just been the litter, then the people kept coming.

In the kitchen, Cely was cooking a new batch of hot rice in a large pot. Mila could hear her restrained chortles of mirth from the living room and wished desperately to join her. The kitchen was always a good place to be in. Cely, being the firstborn daughter, ahead of her two younger sisters by eight years, had been fated to assist her mother the moment she was strong enough to lift a pot. When her mother became pregnant again, feet too swollen to squat for long periods of time in front of a hot hearth, Cely took over. When her mother could not afford to take care of the younger children all day without working, Cely took over. When their father fell dead by the chicken

coop and the entire household erupted in panic, it was Cely that took over. And now, as the elderly women in black veils mourned the dead in heart-rending elegies, Cely took over once again; the warm, sweet smell of quietly boiling rice filling the air with something other than sadness.

Mila sat in the living room, her voice borne by the memory of songs and prayers. Every night one of them—Mila, or her eldest brother Andoy, or Cely, or the second sister Ana—would sit among the old women gathered before the coffin, all in black, their veils like the heaviest of distant rain, to pray loudly for the deceased. This was the only time Mila rests; with her back against the arch of the plastic chair, her eyelids heavy as the elders' voices quavered into the deep night. She did not sing but stared occasionally at the gilded coffin, mesmerized by the lights playing on the curves, and came close to sleep. She was roused, however, by a bit of hunger and she tilted her head back to listen to the children's voices from one of the bedrooms upstairs. She heard one of them whisper, and another, whine. They must be telling ghost stories. Back in the day, children were made to sit with the elders and pray, but now the children knew different prayers or could not sit still for long.

"This feels like a birthday party, hey! Fried chicken and spaghetti and soda in one night," Cely prodded Mila, chuckling. Their sister Ana's youngest, a little girl of six, had taken one look at the *dinuguan* and *dinengdeng* and declared that she would only eat hotdogs. Until Cely returned from the next town with ingredients for spaghetti, Ana's children had subsisted on the chips and crackers meant for the guests. "This Ana," muttered their elderly aunts, "insisting on a separate batch of food, causing more trouble for her *manang!*" The older relatives cast withering looks at the festive-looking food, scowling and turning away. Ana attended to her children on the dining table. Her sisters remained near where the hearth was once situated, now paved over by concrete and tiles, replaced by gas stoves and water dispensers. This was the first time they had seen Ana in years, and she had asked something of them so unthinkable that it cast an even darker shadow over the passing of their father. Beneath all her talk of investments and profit, Ana wanted their father's share of the ancestral land.

"But she only wants it because she is never here," Cely scoffed, "she must really like the idea of owning a *manggahan*." Mila did not blame Ana; hereabout, land is treasure.

There had been a time when the Dayaos' property consisted of more than twelve hectares of field and hill, spread over portions of river and sea. As

time passed it shrank, broken up into smaller pieces for Dayao children when their elders died, and sold off by those who thought only money would last. The first Dayaos had been very successful farmers, and the land burst with green and trees and stalks and vines heavy with bright fruit; now only one or two Dayaos farmed the land, and the most magnificent of trees had been cut down to build houses. The elders remember entire lives passed underneath the shadows of trees and grown roofs of vine, childhoods spent working the fields. They did not remember it as work. They remembered instead the sugarcane that fell off the over loaded carts and the sap sticky on their chins as they tore off strips of bark with their teeth, getting lost in walls of tall grass that needed to be cut down, and the cool mud and manure against their knees in the middle of a field exposed to the splendor of a noon time. As children, they pretended to chop wood for the hearth and dreamt of being old enough to pound rice, while they watched in awe as their mothers tossed the grains into the air and caught them again; cooking *kangkong* in hot water in their small toy pots made of clay. Everything they needed could be found on trees, in the fields. They had been perfectly comfortable. They were never hungry. Home was where the land began—and ended; living was the certainty of land and its fruit.

Just outside the kitchen, Mila's daughter showed Cely's younger children the book she brought along with her to read. She was fifteen; Mila could not remember how often she had said this, to strangers who kept asking about the girl's age. How strange it was they must think, that she was so dark when city girls were supposed to be fair. Her name is Carmela, this was what Mila wanted to say. She looked so much like her grandfather, with her sharp jaw and handsome eyes. Mila wondered if her daughter sensed the tension that simmered among the adults just from watching and listening. Carmela made Cely's little children, three small boys and a girl aged four, read a sentence from the book. The little girl and one of the boys, who did not know how to read yet, laughed uproariously and rolled around the *papag* in frustration. Carmela had been on the papag the whole day, leaving it only to eat or go to the bathroom. Cely's smaller children took turns on the papag with Carmela, adoring the city girl who looked like them but did not join the other cousins her age. She had once done a project for school about how the indigenous people of Mindanao were fighting for their lives and their land, a topic Mila was startled to find out was part of the curriculum in the exclusive all-girls' school Carmela attended. Since then Carmela had been interested in knowing more about her parents and grandparents. She would ask her parents about

the many rituals of the regions they came from, while Mila and her husband could only shrug and say, “Ask your *lolos* or *lolas* when they visit.” That part of their lives was so distant now, from their office jobs and suburban house and big city cares. They were baffled at why Carmela was suddenly fascinated by their pasts, and that she was especially enamored at her grandfather, who had the habit of bringing *caimito* for people he visited. How she had watched him make baskets out of palm leaves!

“We should be happy she’s taking an interest in her roots,” Mila’s husband told her the night before they left for the wake, but Mila only smiled and kissed him on the cheek, thinking that not all roots grow into trees. And when they arrived at the old house, Mila could not help but feel the dread in her heart as the younger widows surrounded her daughter and bore her off to see her dead Lolo while whispering to her words that would keep misfortune away.

“What did they whisper to me?” she had asked her mother after meeting the rest of the family. “Did you understand what they said to me? What was it for?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Mila said. They were out in the backyard with the rest of the little children who had been taken there so as to not get in the way. Carmela had been so frightened by the whole thing she seemed to hide within herself, away from her mother, growing distant every day. Mila wished only that the wake ended.

“Lolo Jun made us a papag just like this when he visited us,” Carmela whispered, running her hands over the smoothed bamboo. And she had since stayed mostly on the rattan and bamboo cot.

Apo Jun, or *kapitan*, was what they called him by. “He was so kind, he was so severe, they were frightened of him, in his ragged blue cap in the barangay hall,” people said. Apo Jun was eighteen when he first got a job as a carpenter, doing short contract work in bigger and bigger cities. He found cities strange and temporary, the people frail. The girls were bafflingly beautiful and difficult to talk to, the men easily irked. Several feet above the city, it did not look as pretty as promised; there was too much of the sky, and everything was jagged and gross. He would return home to the fields trees, mountains, and clear skies every time his contracts, which took six months at the most, ended. When he was twenty-three he visited a *kumpadre*’s house with a basket of *caimito* and fell in love with the sister who sat sewing by the steps. Luming, she was called, and they had not spoken to each other until

three days before the wedding. Inang Luming had said of this, “He courted my father first, then my brothers. I had no say in it at all.” They moved into his mother’s house, with several other Dayaos living nearby. For two years they lived there until work brought them to the big city, and the first son Andoy was born. When they returned home they built a house of their own.

That was what Inang Luming told her brood; no stories of Apo Jun’s life came from the man himself. And one would think, from her stories, that Inang Luming had not liked her husband very much, if not for her mourning and wearing of the widow’s veil. Their brother Andoy had several horror stories as well, of how, when he misbehaved or missed his chores as a boy, he would be tied up in a sack hung by their father from the rafters and beaten with a bamboo stick still green with youth. Cely told Mila that when their father dropped dead, Andoy turned the radio on, as he did every morning, and began rearranging the furniture.

DINNER WAS A noisy affair, but everybody was pleased. The dinuguan was rich and tart and delicious, the dinengdeng clear and fragrant. For an hour the kitchen was filled with a happy noise.

“What should be done about Manang Ana?” Mila asked her oldest sister while they cleared up the plates. In the living room, the *padasal* (ritual prayers) had begun again, and it was Ana’s turn to sit in the living room to pray along with the elderly women. Cely shrugged and laughed. For her, the conflict would resolve itself, on its own, with no help from her. She had little interest in the land that was in her father’s name. She had a good handful of businesses that kept her many children fed and her husband loyal, and she had just opened a canteen in a nearby school. She had no use for the land, had no knowledge of caring for mangoes, no patience for learning to, and was indignant at the idea of hiring people she did not know to tend the farm in her stead. Besides, she had a good chunk of land behind her own house, where she could plant whatever she wanted. She did not want a large and unfamiliar piece of land for her children. She would rather buy other property, if need be, with clean papers and no familial encumbrances.

There had been rivalry among their father’s generation of Dayaos. When Apo Jun was kapitan, his male cousins were said to have hidden in the overgrowth, watching jealously, at times disrupting fiestas and birthday parties with gunshots. For months, before his death, Apo Jun’s sisters and cousins had come over on the pretense of visiting, but invariably brought up the matter of clan property. But Apo Jun cared only for the chicken he

tended religiously as he scattered feed and cleaned the cages. Beyond that, he was vacant as air, not remembering how to do two things at the same time. When he died, they had hoped to speak instead with Inang Luming, hoping that her gentle nature would be pliant to their whims. They had brought the paperwork, hoping to confuse her, especially in her fragile state. Cely had them sent away, but today, not even the wake could stop them from trying.

“Who knows why they brought those papers? Are they trying to scare Inang?” Cely grumbled. She wiped the sink with a small cloth. As it turned out, Apo Jun had been owner of a rather large expanse of mango orchard that they—Inang Luming, Andoy, Cely, and Mila—had been paying taxes for over twenty years. But due to a clerical error, they thought that they had been paying for the land where their childhood home stood. They only vaguely remembered the mango orchard, but Ana owned most of it; as a teenager she had worked for some of her paternal aunts who had been living there their whole lives. She awoke early in the mornings, her breath misting in the air, to walk to the orchard, make them breakfast, clean house. She was very unlike a Dayao in appearance, fair and slender, like her mother, whom she said the Dayao women despised. The aunts were cruel to Ana. They would not feed her, would not pay her on time, and would send her home late. It was dangerous time to be out late, with rumors of children and *dalagitas* snatched off the roads, their throats slit, and the blood used to fortify the new bridges. How frightening it must have been for Ana, with not even the stars to light her way and only the moon casting stranger shadows across the night, distorting the trees into evil, twisted shapes. Once, Myrna said she had seen the beast, enormous and dark, tall as a tree, a bulging sack in its hand. “Fool! It must have just been a langka tree!” Inang Luming had scolded Ana when she begged her mother not to make her return to her aunts. “Don’t you understand, it is only propaganda to keep idiots inside the house at night?”

“It’s ours by right. We’re the ones who have been paying for the land all this time!” Ana said when Cely told them about their cousins’ claim to the property. “And we should fight for it,” Ana insisted. She did not realize what such disputes entailed. In the city where Ana had married, such disputes were easily settled by threats of litigation. She had forgotten how different things were back home, how precarious the meaning of words. “My friend is a lawyer,” she declared. Even the way she spoke sounded different now, as the way she looked, the way she walked around chicken feces and wrinkled her nose when a breeze blew in with the smell of pigs. She met her husband in the ports and had stayed away until today.

“What we should do is acquire the proper papers for *this* house,” Cely said. She dumped the scraps and leftovers into a small pot and asked her son to feed the dogs.

“I can’t remember your children’s names,” Mila said to Cely. She thought the boy who just took out the dog feed looked so unremarkable she’d forget his face in a week.

“There’s something wrong with you.” Cely laughed. “That one was Jun-jun. Those little ones with Carmela are Pau-pau, Len-len, and Popoy. Don’t you get the pattern? It should be easy to remember!”

Outside, their brother Andoy played cards with the cousins. His son Jonas, who looked to be twelve, seemed to be learning the game beside his dad. Mila saw the boy look meekly at the faces around him, his eyes bright, smiling in the way boys do when accepted by men. There had been a time when aunts and uncles knew the names of all their nieces and nephews, no matter how many. She could feel the warmth of the coffee in her styro cup, and she watched them for a while from the grilled window. The coffee singed her throat, her stomach and spread to her arms and face. When Andoy caught sight of her by the window, she raised the cup slightly, inquiring if they wanted coffee, and he nodded. She took the thermos, some cups, and a string of three-in-one coffee packets to the table. Her brother had not ventured inside, the whole day.

“You’re sure your mother is fine with you gambling with these lowlifes?” Mila teased the boy, hand on his shoulder. The boy tensed as the men hooted with laughter. These were cousins she had not seen in years, some since when they were teenagers. Those whom she did not remember by face she remembered by name, and those whose names she could not remember, she could see traces of their faces as boys. She had played with them, and they had feared her father and his bamboo stick. She had not seen them inside the house throughout the whole wake, as they seldom left the card table.

The smell of coffee began attracting people to the card table; soon the game became a spectacle, guests rooting for the boy, chiding him gently on which card to play. Mila left for more coffee, making her way through the dimness by memory. Not very many of the fruit trees of her childhood had remained. She could name twenty. She wondered if she could still climb trees as expertly as she did when she was a girl. In the dark she almost tripped over a stump, which she remembered to be the caimito tree. It wants to be remembered, Mila thought. It had once been magnificent. She did not know

when it had been cut down. She left home when she was twenty, and settled in a different region with her husband and children after a nearby volcano exploded, drowning the area in lahar and ash. The soil had never been quite arable and given the finicky nature of trees, some of the fruit could not live to be happily consumed by the children of a new generation. As far as she knew, none of her nieces and nephew climbed trees. How long had it been also when she had fallen off this caimito tree, and her father had been there to pick up her limp body and shake it violently until the air returned to her lungs? She stepped on the stump, trying to remember how it had felt to be young and on top of the world. Now she was only on top of a reminder.

She found Carmela on the papag, but with one of her paternal aunts, although she was not sure if her name was Auntie Sabel. Her hair was short, gray streaked with black. She was wearing a printed shirt over her *daster*. They had been talking when Mila came.

“Ma,” Carmela called out gently, and the auntie motioned for her to come and join them.

“Auntie,” Mila said, because she was not sure this was indeed an Auntie Sabel or another of her many similar-faced aunties. She had not seen this auntie come in; perhaps she had stayed in one of the benches by the front porch.

“Let’s talk,” said Auntie Sabel.

“Help your Auntie Cely in the kitchen, Carmela.”

“No, she can stay—”

“Mama, she told me all about the orchard.”

All at once Mila noted the stillness of the air and the small moths dancing blindly over the hanging lamp, the soft voices of people speaking from inside the house, two of Auntie Sabel’s hands clasping Carmela’s.

“Oh?”

“Mama, she said they had been living there for a long time.”

Mila looked hard at Auntie Sabel, who continued, “She’s been very attentive, this one. A great weight has lifted from my heart. I told her I had been looking to speak with you or Cely, but ... you had seemed too preoccupied to attend to your aunt. Andoy, you know how men are—it is difficult to speak with him.”

“Have you not tried speaking to Ana?” Mila asked in the dialect. Carmela, who did not speak and the dialect, fascinated by the switch in tongues, watched, apt. Auntie Sabel smiled, unshaken, patting young Carmela’s hands but still not letting them go.

“I have not seen Ana,” the old woman declared, using the dialect to mask her growing disdain.

“It would seem that you are avoiding her, Auntie.”

“That is the problem with you city girls. You become rude to your elders.”

Mila smiled and took a step forward, holding on to Carmela’s shoulder and drawing the girl to her side. Auntie Sabel let go as if she had been holding hot coals.

“I mean no disrespect, Auntie. My father has died. This is no time to be settling matters of land ownership.”

“I, too, am a Dayao; I mourn for my brother.”

“Then you should know better than to take his land from him before he is even laid to rest,” Mila could not resist saying. Her chest was burning with rage that began to creep in tendrils up her throat. Carmela, unable to decipher the conversation, tried to detach from her mother, but Mila only tightened her grip.

“So we’re thieves. Is this what you mean?” Auntie Sabel stood up, her smile gone, her hands tight behind her back.

“What I mean is that my father would want no animosity between families tonight,” Mila replied as she pulled Carmela to her feet, desperate for the conversation to end; she did not want to reason with unreasonable people. “Please come back when my mother is ready to discuss this matter with you.”

Auntie Sabel chuckled and coughed, then gazed at her feet. She turned and spat on the ground before walking idly away, glancing at the windows.

“What did you talk about?” Carmela asked. Her mother did not answer.

WHEN THEY WERE children, they were made to exit the house walking backwards, their hands tucked beneath their elbows, as old widows spilled across the porch the blood of a young hen. Only, when the family was outside would the coffin be carried out on neighbors’ shoulders head first, as if the dead were being reborn but to another existence. There was none of that

now. Ana's kids would have been made hysterical by the ritual slaughter of chicken, and Inang Luming did not fancy blood stains on her porch. Their childhood home, originally built with wood, had been reinforced with cement and plaster over the years, and Apo Jun had the porch painted peach, his wife's favorite color. "I don't want to have the porch painted over," Inang Luming said as her older sisters insisted on pursuing tradition, "the colors won't match." Only Apo Jun knew how to achieve the desired peach. The paint job had never faded, never peeled, withstanding the lahar, outliving the hands that did it. Mila suspected that her mother's refusal to perform ritual had less to do with spilling blood or repainting the porch.

"There are no Dayaos," Ana declared. Inside, young men from the *funeraria* were preparing to take the casket out.

"Joy is here," Mila referred to the youngest Dayao sister, who was in the back helping the elders prepare to rid the house of the ills that death leaves behind. All morning they had been searching for another young hen, the younger aunties muttering under their breath why it had to be a white chicken, as if that made any difference.

"Spy," Ana sniffed.

"Don't be that way," Cely said. Their Auntie Joy had always been kind to them.

Mila tried to recall the previous night's events. "What was our Auntie's name; the one with streaked hair, in the daster. Do you remember?"

"We have too many Dayao aunties with streaked hair and dasters."

"Was it Auntie Sabel ...?"

"Can't remember which of them is Auntie Sabel—"

"Does it matter? They are all the same."

They were to walk the casket to the cemetery; it would be slow and painful and bitter, a desperate bid to delay the inevitable, to keep a loved one amongst them. Mila saw the funny side of it, and told Cely that she had sometimes, despite herself, cursed the excessive funeral processions for the traffic they caused. The sisters giggled quietly among themselves. It was only Ana that wept; Inang Luming was too exhausted even as Andoy held her up throughout the procession.

The burial was quick, almost dismissive, with the casket slid into a square shaped hole in a wall where countless many others already lay. Inang Luming

began to weep again, her shoulders shaking as the casket entered its final resting place. Beside her, Cely sighed deeply. Mila knew the silent despair of her sister, and the relief. She had taken care of Apo Jun, for he had refused to leave home, to live with Mila in the city where there were doctors and specialists. Cely had only heard a thud, which could have been the sound of a branch falling off a tree, and the chickens banging restlessly into the walls of their cages, squawking their displeasure. She had run outside expecting to see her father staring blankly at a fallen tree limb, only to find him dead, in a pool of vomit and feces, his most recent medication still bright and intact, pecked at by curious escaped chickens. She had bathed him, she had carried him in her arms to the street, to bring to the funeraria. She had left the house behind her drowning in the sound of her mother shrieking in her room and her brother putting on an Eagles record. How frightening it had sounded in the distance.

Upon returning home from the funeral, all immediate family ushered their children into a line, to leap over a pyre of the burning trash that had accumulated in the house. Nearby, another chicken had been left to bleed over ash and warm water, the elders then rubbing the mixture on the children's scalps. Later that afternoon they would be brought to a river by the widows, to be cleansed with gugo, and the barely alive chicken left to float in the current.

“What does it all mean, Ma?” Carmela asked.

“I don't know,” Mila said; she knew all too well that scowl on her daughter's face, subtle and quick, as if it were merely a trick of light. She left her daughter to her many little cousins and headed back to the living room. It was dark, the lace curtains drawn over the windows, little pinpricks of escaped sunlight dancing hazily across the floor. Not a whisper remained of the dead that had lain here only hours ago. On the altar, Apo Jun's picture was framed, lit by electric candles. Mila could smell flowers and the raw mixture of ash and blood in her hair. She did not know the meaning of these rituals; only that they were performed, according to elders, as a sign of respect for the dead, and she wondered if the elders themselves knew how exactly, these traditions, all too familiar and all too strange, work to honor the memory of the departed. She remembered now her quiet father, always at work about the house making baskets and coops, whispering to the plants and the trees as he tended them, and gathering his children to share slices of caimito in cold vinegar. Mila finally decided that later she would go to the Dayaos and

she would see the victory in their faces, but she knew there was nothing for hers to lose. She knew that amid the fierce arguments over property and the confusion of empty rituals something once true, and quiet, and gentle had been lost and only then did she begin to weep.