



In the Name of the Father

Jenny Ortuoste

THAT WHICH WAS FROM THE BEGINNING

IN MY FATHER'S second-favorite photograph of me, I am two going on three. My shoulder-length hair is a tangled mess, my chubby hands are clutching a book, and I am seated naked on a toddler's potty. The book—or maybe it is a comic book, because the covers are soft and folded over—hides most of my body so all that is seen of me are plump arms and thighs. My face is earnest as I read, or maybe I am just looking at pictures.

My father's favorite photograph of me, he'd taken when I was three or four. It shows me in three-quarters profile standing close to the edge of a cliff in Tagaytay. I am wearing striped overalls without a shirt. My hair is short, my hands are on my hips, and I am gazing into the distance with a slight smile, a child with her whole future ahead of her, confident and assured, full of the kind of happiness that comes from family and a sense of safety and security.

Things went downhill from there.

WHO ART THOU?

My father was born in Kiamba, Cotabato, on Valentine's Day 1940, the tenth of twelve children of Martin Santos Ortuoste, a dentist, and Carmen Araneta, a homemaker.





Dr. Ortuoste was the son of the Datu sa Kutawato, Ignacio Ortuoste, who in the 1920s made himself useful to the US colonial forces as an intermediary between them and anti-colonial Muslim groups.

He sometimes played both sides, in one instance assuring the Americans that a resistant Iranun datu's surrender was imminent, and at the same time counseling the datu on what terms to ask in exchange. For Ignacio Ortuoste's services to bring about peace in the area (albeit under colonial rule), Sultan Mastura of Maguindanao ennobled him and bestowed the singular title by which he would always be known.

When the Datu died in 1936, my father said, there was a long line of people that followed the funeral procession. Lolo Ignacio was borne on a great dark catafalque through the city streets. He had amassed large tracts of property in and around the city before his death, but he'd given many away and his large family was poor.

Martin as the eldest son assumed the mantle of community leadership, acting as conflict resolver among members of the Muslim community, though he was himself Christian.

My father recalls that as a child he was sometimes taken along to *pambichara* or councils at which disputes were settled by my grandfather. "The Muslims had great speaking skills," he said. Each party would narrate their side of an incident in flowery, long-winded language, an oratorical style rooted in tradition:

"It was a sunny morning, honored Datu, when I took my banca out to sea. The sunlight glimmered on the waves like jewels. I gave thanks to Allah for the wondrous beauty around me . . ." and so on for many minutes, until the point of the matter was reached almost an hour or so later.

My grandfather would listen solemnly, asking questions once in a while to clarify an issue here or argument there. When the entire problem was made clear to him, he would render a judgment for one side or the other or encourage a compromise or settlement, depending on the merits of the case.

"*Banar ka, datu, banar ka,*' they would say, bowing to him," my father said. "You are wise, datu, you are wise.' Whatever your *lolo* (grandfather) said, they abided by. There was no appeal."

Mediation in community matters being part of Lolo Martin's hereditary duties as son of the datu, he received no payment for such services, only gifts of fish, fruit, and vegetables. "We were poor," my father said. "But we had enough to eat."

Whenever I asked, "But what happened to all that land of Lolo Ignacio's? And there must have been money?" he would only hold up his hands. "Ah," he would say, tightening his lips and shaking his head. "Ahh."





MY FATHER WORKETH HITHERTO

My sister and I grew up poor, too. Not poor by the standards of most of the nation under the Marcos regime, under which poverty incidence rose from 41 percent in 1965 to 58.9 percent in 1985, but enough to always be a little bit hungry.

My father's first job was as houseboy to a wealthy family in Iloilo City. As a teenager, he left Cotabato City after his parents died in the 1950s. I did not hear this story from him, but from someone else, who told me that a kindly woman named Mrs. Natividad Mallari took him in, saw his intelligence and promise, and sent him to the Seventh-Day Adventist school in Bukidnon.

He did well there and later worked as a disc jockey in a Bacolod City radio station. His last name being hard to spell and pronounce, he took his foster mother's surname and used it as his nom de plume ever after that.

It was as a DJ that he met my mother and, I would think, other young girls of landed families and standing in the city. He played the popular hits of the '50s and '60s, and when a music lover handed him, for the first time, a record of that new group The Beatles, he recalled "I was not impressed." He liked show tunes because he enjoyed the Hollywood musicals with Kelly and Astaire and Donald O'Connor. He liked Sinatra, Streisand, and Nat King Cole. "When I die," he said, "play Nat King Cole and I will be there."

He loved classical music, and tuned in to DZFE every night after having dinner and a bath. Or he would put on his turntable a record from my mother's Reader's Digest collection of Rimsky-Korsakov, Strauss, Brahms, and other composers. Even there he favored what was light and joyous and enchanting—Tschaikovsky's "1812 Overture," Debussy's "Clair de Lune," Ravel's "Bolero," but none of the melancholy or plaintive Bach or Beethoven.

My father did not like rock n' roll. He did not like the blues, nor jazz, nor, later on, disco. He did not like the sad, moody, nor brooding. For a DJ he did not embrace innovation or novelty beyond the type of music he enjoyed, and perhaps that is why he never went back on radio.

He married my mother in Malate Church on February 1967. After petals were thrown and cake eaten and doves released, they rented an apartment on Scout Torillo Street, Quezon City. A car's trunkful worth of groceries back then cost two hundred pesos. My father's salary was fifty pesos more than that—my mother's relatives, the Lopezes of ABS-CBN, had given him work as a newscaster.

He interviewed the Marcoses several times and was singled out for a conversation once or twice with Imelda, because she said they were related on the Araneta side, his mother's family. He interviewed Gerald Ford in 1975. Martial





law had been imposed for three years, since 1972, and Marcos was continuing to consolidate his power.

Some of these stories might be untrue. With my father, you never knew.

WE KNOW THAT THIS IS OUR SON

I was born in Medical Center Manila and, save for a few years in Quezon City, grew up in the Vito Cruz area.

My father told me he was waiting outside the delivery room door when it opened and a little boy came out: "He told me, 'My name is Patrick; I will come to you soon, but first I sent my little sister ahead.' Then the doctor came out and told me we had a baby girl. That was you." I do not know what this story means. Did my father want a son? Was he disappointed he had a daughter? Was this how he consoled himself?

My parents separated when I was seven, but I didn't know that until I was eight. I didn't see them fight, but apparently they had been quarrelling about my father's unfaithfulness. During that stormy period of push and pull, I was sent to my mother's hometown, Bacolod City, where I lived with her aunt for a year.

I wondered why I was sent away while my sister stayed with my parents; she saw them fighting and was traumatized. It wasn't until after my birthday that year that my mother told me, in a lengthy letter written in her elegant convent-school handwriting, that I was to stay with my great-aunt while my parents sorted out their problems, and to be a good girl and study hard.

My father was a *homosexual*, she said. I did not know what that meant, but I gathered it was a reason for her to leave him and to send me away. I sensed it was something serious, something *not done*. I shrugged. I loved it in Bacolod. We lived in a sprawling bungalow in Taculing, close to where the airport used to be, on a *hacienda* planted to *tubo* as far as the horizon. This was during the late 1970s but even by present standards that house would look fresh and contemporary. Constructed in a gated area behind high walls across the road from the cane field, it stuck out from its surroundings like a crystal in the mud. It stood on pillars above a pond stocked with golden koi.

GATHER UP THE FRAGMENTS THAT REMAIN

After a year, my father took my then seven-year-old sister to Bacolod and, knocking on the gate of that beautiful house, claimed me and took us both back to Manila to live with him. We children were pawns in a power struggle between him and my mother, but we did not know that at the time. We went where we were taken and no one told us why.





From Bacolod City, we flew to Iloilo City where we stayed in Jaro with Mrs. Vita Jamandre, the daughter of my father's foster mother Mrs. Mallari, who we were taught to call "Lalu."

We stayed a week there playing board games - Cluedo and Life and Monopoly—with Tita Vita's children, then teenagers. They were Seventh-Day Adventists and taught us children's hymns—"Oh friend, do you love Jesus? Oh yes, I love Jesus. Are you sure you love Jesus? I'm sure I love Jesus"—with *Manang* Dawn playing the piano and *Manang* Aileen (for whom my father insists my sister was named) singing along with *Manong* Boysie.

Upon Tita Vita and Lalu's advice, my father sent my sister and I to the SDA school in Pasay City. My sister was in first grade, I was in fourth. We lived in an apartment in Vito Cruz, Manila, half-an-hour's jeepney ride away.

On our first day of school, either because of lack of funds or sheer negligence, my father told me to dress in the uniform from my school in Bacolod, St. Scholastica's Academy. The blouse and skirt colors were the same, dark blue and white, but the cut and style were certainly not. My sister wore *bakya* (wooden clogs) instead of black shoes.

Because we were dropped off at the gate on our own, through a mix-up I ended up in the third grade classroom, not the fourth, until a kind-hearted classmate took me to the correct one—where, as in the other, I was ridiculed for wearing the wrong uniform. This was the first of many humiliations I endured growing up, because my father and my mother left us to mostly fend for ourselves, they being occupied with other things.

IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

From the time I returned to Manila in 1978 until I graduated from sixth grade in 1980, we lived in the old apartment where I grew up, near Vito Cruz. It was during "Marcos time" and as a child all I can remember about that turbulent period is that the streets were full of potholes that would flood waist-deep whenever it rained.

We would wade through the dirty, chilly waters with schoolbags raised above our heads. As children we were unaware of how the Marcoses ruled with iron fists from Malacañang Palace, committed human rights' violations under martial law, and triggered the First Quarter Storm. We played in the potholed streets, endured regular brownouts, and wondered what "carfew" was.

As a child, I was socially awkward and too thin, perhaps malnourished. There was a *sari-sari* store at the corner of our street—Conchu, perpendicular to Zobel Roxas and Vito Cruz—where I bought Manor House chocolate-and-peanut bars for



sixty centavos. They also had Sergs chocolate, Choc-Nut, Ricoa Curly tops, Chippy, and “family-size” Pepsi in glass bottles for ninety centavos.

My father was a mild-mannered man who hardly ever raised his voice, but he was annoyed, and I embarrassed, the day he sent me to the store with one peso and I came back with the empty bottle, because the price of the beverage had been raised to one peso and fifteen centavos.

Across the street was a humbler hole-in-the-wall store that sold chalk for five centavos for marking *piko* and *patintero* lines, “plastic balloon” gunk in metal tubes, striped orange-and-white paper balls that you blew up through a hole in one side, and Tarzan bubblegum at only ten centavos each. I can still taste the sugary burst of flavor released with just one chew.

Across the street in a row of apartments lived “the Thailanders”—students who came and went, were very quiet, smiled a lot, and kept to themselves, maybe because they didn’t speak Tagalog and spoke very little English. Sometimes my father would have lunch or dinner with them. He never told us what they talked about or what they ate or why he visited those young men.

Our apartment was on the third floor of a four-story building. First-time visitors always commented on several long deep parallel knife gouges on our front door. They were made by my mother one night when she had left the house after discovering my father was a homosexual. She returned to take back the furniture she’d paid for, and my sister.

My father refused to open the door, leaving my mother to rant outside ineffectively with a *binangon*, a long curved knife that had been kept under our kitchen sink. My sister remembers our father that night calmly listening to classical music on the radio. He’d just taken a shower and sat at the dining table, a towel wrapped around his hips and beads of water drying on his skin, poring over a *Reader’s Digest* as if he couldn’t hear my mother trying to hack her way in, casting blow upon blow upon the door and lifting the knife out of the wood to do it again and again—*thud eek thud eek thud*—till she tired and put down the knife and went away, while my sister trembled and cried in her room. My sister was six.

My mother returned to the battlefield several days later when my father wasn’t home. Our nanny, *Nanay* Violy, who had been my mother’s nanny until she turned sixteen, opened the door to her and let her make off with the furniture, which she had bought with her own money in the first place, my father not winning awards at any time for being a good provider. My mother also took my sister, but for some reason unknown gave her back to our father after a year, although she kept the furniture.





We came back from Iloilo to a bare house and ate meals at our children's table, which my mother had left behind. We laughed at my father seated in a tiny chair. He only smiled. It was quite some time before he was able to buy a new dining table.

To solve the problem of an empty living room, my father brought in a carpenter who fashioned to his specifications, from *paleta* pine, a daybed on casters that served as our sofa and low bookshelves that ran along the floor of the living room where we could reach them.

On the walls he hung gaily-colored framed prints of Yugoslavian *naif* paintings, all bright colors, red, yellow, green, blue, and black, given him by his friend Marita Manuel, who that time was running the Metropolitan Museum.

On the shelves he placed books by W. Somerset Maugham, John O' Hara, Norman Mailer, Sholom Aleichem, Truman Capote, Ray Bradbury, Gore Vidal, and biographies. His taste in books was more forward than his preference in music.

Once a man came to the house and asked for my father, who was out. This fellow insisted on coming inside and I let him in. He saw Maugham's *Cakes and Ale* on the shelf, took it, and left. It exasperated my father when he found out. To this day, I am reluctant to lend out books, but I realize that it is a knee-jerk reaction from this incident in my childhood. I find it much easier to give books away.

WE DID EAT MANNA IN THE DESERT

My father was among the first practitioners of yoga in the 1970s, during the hippie age here and abroad. He said he helped the first Krishna devotees set up in Manila, having met their founder guru, an American man, at the airport, and befriended him. He helped find an apartment for the group.

He recounted many times how the guru insisted on glass or ceramic things for drinking and eating, never plastic, which he said were unclean. Or couldn't be cleaned properly, or something like that. In any case, that meeting heralded the start of my father's interest in Eastern religions and rituals.

He would sit cross-legged in the living room at night with his eyes closed, an incense stick burning, the only illumination the light from streetlamps coming in through the window. Once my sister and I, smelling the incense, got up from bed and went into the living room, where he sat in lotus position upon a mat. We tiptoed hush-hush around him, wondering if he had fallen asleep sitting up. Later he said he was "meditating." We wondered if that meant "napping uncomfortably."





Having spent many years with SDAs my father knew the benefits of vegetarianism and avoided processed food when he could. He took no white sugar; brown sugar and honey were his preferred sweeteners. He ate brown rice instead of white, wheat bread instead of Tasty, cottage cheese instead of supermarket cheddar.

My father could barely cook; I saw him do it only twice. Once he boiled a pot of rice and opened a can of Philip's luncheon meat for my sister and me, clumsily cutting the meat and frying the misshapen slices in a skillet that he had forgotten to put cooking oil in. He was puzzled when the meat slices stuck to the pan and he had to scrape them off. "It doesn't look like this when Nanay cooks," he said. The rice was gritty and watery. We ate it anyway. We were hungry. We always were. Today, I order everything I want on the menu.

Sometimes he took my sister and I to dine out. Only once did he take us to a chain restaurant. It was Max's, and we devoured a whole chicken in one meal. We were celebrating something, perhaps a new voice-over contract for him. For me, the meal was riches and abundance beyond imagining; to this day, I love the buttery tender goodness of Max's chicken, all crisp and golden brown on the outside, and I can summon the taste of UFC ketchup from memory.

We went several times to the long-defunct Gandharva restaurant in Manila, which smelled more of incense than food. It was a self-service cafeteria where one took trays to a counter, piled them with curries, brown rice, and *rotis*, and took them to eat at tables beside colorful hand-painted murals of blue-skinned immortal Krishna and brown-skinned warrior Arjuna in a chariot. My father gestured at the life-sized paintings and told us the story of the Bhagavad Gita.

We also ate at the SDA-run Manila Sanitarium and Hospital canteen which serves vegetarian meals, with gluten, tokwa, and beans the protein choices. The place had no ambience other than the antiseptic cleanliness associated with hospitals and taken to a higher degree by the SDAs. I cannot eat at any other hospital's canteen now; they smell funny and rank because they serve meat.

My father burned incense nearly every night that he was home during the yoga years. Clove and myrrh were the scents my father used to burn, also *sampaguita* and sandalwood and patchouli.

In Hinduism, the burning of incense is used during worship as a vehicle for prayer to reach the gods. The fragrance reminds worshippers of the positive attributes of the deities that they must imitate. One of my father's Hare Krishna friends named me after the Hindu goddess of peace—Shanti Devi. I have been trying to live up to the name ever since; not succeeding all the time, but getting better at it.





DO TH THIS OFFEND YOU?

Perhaps a few months after he took me back from Bacolod, my father introduced us to a young, fair boy, nineteen years old, a college student, he said. "This is your *Kuya Jerry*," he said. "He will live with us. Now I have three children to take care of." Jerry's head swiveled. "Where? Who's the other one?" he asked. "You," answered my father .

Jerry was not very bright but he was quiet and kept to himself, perhaps because of our age gap. Most of his interactions with my sister and me were limited to vague smiles. He ate a lot. There was a time he was eating chips and he didn't offer us any. Sometimes he was funny. Sometimes his mother would call and I remember she called a bra a "bresser." She sounded fat over the phone. He had a brother named Ricky, or perhaps it was something else.

Jerry and my father shared the master bedroom, locking the door whenever they went to bed.

Once they were in the room in the middle of the afternoon. My sister and I wondered what they were doing. Didn't they have work or classes? Were they napping? Why did they nap so much? Napping was boring. It was a riddle that nagged at me. I conferred with my sister. "I have read many Nancy Drew books," I told her. "I know how to detect things and I will find out what they are doing. Follow me."

I took a chair, had my sister sit on it to keep it steady, and I put my left foot on the chair back and the right foot on the door knob, and hoisted myself by my fingertips to peek over the glassed-in transom at the top of the bedroom door.

My father and Jerry were asleep in the queen bed. They were both naked. I could not understand why, but I knew this was not something I could tell other people. I crept back down as quietly as I could and told my sister. We have not discussed this in forty years.

WHERE IS THY FATHER?

My father worked in media, as a disc jockey, newscaster, and commercial and voice-over talent. When I asked him what his job was, to answer a school questionnaire, he said, "Tell them 'freelance.'" He did not explain what that meant. Words make pictures in my mind; because this one had no meaning attached, it appeared to me as a fuzzy brown caterpillar, with no accompanying illustration. I filed it away for the future.

My father was semi-famous from having starred in a couple of Palmolive shampoo commercials—"Si Sonia, si Anna. Sa buhok nagkaiba." He recorded a spoken-word single, "Happy Birthday," set to cheesy romantic music. "My darling," he said in his golden voice, "It's your birthday, and my gift is my love . . ." etcetera.



He played an extra in several films, one of them *Anak ni Baby Ama* (he was the businessman in a tacky light blue suit who gets shot in a car the first few minutes of the movie). We do not have copies of the record nor the films nor the commercials, only memories.

My father had friends who came over from time to time, among them a couple of lesser-known actors. His friends talked and laughed in loud voices while my sister and I stayed in our bedroom. Nora Aunor gave my father a gift of a scarf printed with the sepia image of a Mexico stamp. This is why I am a Noranian from childhood; however, I recognize the talent of Vilma Santos and have a picture together with her, taken many years later.

We ate dinner once at the home of Ishmael Bernal, who had a trapdoor in his kitchen, or perhaps it was his living room. He gave me a tiny pair of decorative Japanese wooden clogs, painted with a shiny scarlet lacquer and decorated with a silk tassel, that I kept for years as a talisman.

My father took us to see the LVN and Sampaguita film studios, once to tour, another time to dub a commercial for baby shampoo—"No more tears!" There was a fake creek in the back of the studio, and I was aghast when he told me how films are usually shot on set and not at the locations I believed they were.

There was that time he took us swimming at Mount Makiling in Laguna. We had no car, so we took the bus and climbed up the mountain. My sister grew tired of walking and he carried her piggy-back. Because he couldn't cook, he packed us a picnic lunch of cottage cheese and bread.

Once at the pools, he left us to go to the deep pool where he would dive – a skill he learned in the waters of the sea off Cotabato—and gain the admiration of young men, and converse with them. Once I almost drowned in the pool where he left us. A stranger fished me out. My father never knew I was close to death that day, or on the other days I was in peril crossing the street or riding a jeepney by myself and almost got run over or thrown out into traffic.

WHITHER I GO, YE CANNOT COME

My father left for California when I was eleven and in fifth grade. He said he would go there to find work, and my sister and I would eventually follow him. Perhaps he was trying to escape the Marcos regime.

He would leave us in the care of his younger brother who would come to live with us in the apartment. He would send money for school and food, he said. We didn't quite understand why he had to leave, but as children we had learned that home is where they tell you it is.





My father found a job in Los Angeles as a claims adjuster for Mercury Insurance. Because he spoke Spanish, like his father and grandfather before him, he was tasked to serve the Latino (now they say “Hispanic”) community. He did well, got an apartment in North Hollywood, bought a blue car. He vacationed at Lake Tahoe. He wrote letters stamped with a blue seahorse. It became his logo. He signed his letters to us with his first name. He said he would soon send for us. Someone helped us get passports. An invitation came from his neighbor’s daughter inviting us to her *bat mitzvah*. But we never went to the US Embassy for a visa.

By then, Jerry was no longer living with us. We later heard he’d gone to the US, where he first stayed with my father before finally moving on.

My father lived in America for five years. He never did get my sister and me to follow him to Los Angeles, to study in North Hollywood, to eat the strawberries and oranges he said grew there in abundance.

THOUGH I BEAR RECORD OF MYSELF, YET MY RECORD IS TRUE

In a plastic box that I hope is impervious to mice, insects, and damp, I keep family pictures peeled from albums my mother compiled in the late 1960s and early ’70s. In them I am my father’s favorite, the subject of countless of his snapshots.

In my second-favorite photograph of me and my father, I am two and seated on his lap, wearing his glasses with the big black frames. He is laughing at my mother, who took the picture. We look perfect, like father-daughter models for a magazine advertisement.

In my favorite photograph of the both of us, I am two or three. I am wearing a summer outfit of coordinating top and shorts, standing barefoot on the hood of our family car. My arms are crossed over my chest, my eyes are closed and my facial expression says, “Humph.”

Beside me stands my father, a hand on my back, his white shirt slightly ruffled by a breeze I cannot see. He is a young man with an overconfident toddler who is happy and sure of herself, and in that moment we both have infinite promise and untapped potential, and we can be anything we want to be, even a family.

