

# The Death of Maritess Daroy

**Julian dela Cerna**

THEIR COMMUNITY ALONG the coastline spread out to the sea, and some of them had built their houses on stilts. Looking at the neighborhood that rose above the water, one would think that they had no need for the national highway on the opposite end of the village. But they weren't seafarers like the Bajau, who dived for pearls in the Davao Gulf. To make a living, the people in the community spent a tremendous amount of time ricocheting between working in the nearby factories and drinking Tanduay. The village was called Dose, Spanish-derived but spoken in the sharp-edged Binisaya. Surely, a no-nonsense name, for they were sitting on the twelfth kilometer of the barangay of Sasa, whose roads were notorious for the speeding container trucks eager to leave the city. By the time these trucks had trundled, grumbling, past the thick throng of marketplace stalls that spilled onto Onse, the driver would already be trembling with frustration from the wasted time and so would floor it, discarding all respect for life.

Malou's daughter happened to be in the way one day. She was rushing for downtown Davao to look for an office job. To get there, she would have to cross the street for the jeepneys coming from the other side. But she had barely left the shoulder of the road when a ten-wheeler, in its usual escape mode, ran over her, trampling on her dreams of the good life her husband had failed to give.

That was what Malou told the husband's parents on the day after the accident. The morning was cool and, in the living room, dark. She had the curtains open, but the shade of the *talisay* tree that stood outside made the interior of the house look dingy. The gray walls, with the hollow blocks exposed, and the GI roof that hovered over them, naked without a ceiling, did not help create a homelier place, especially for her guests.

Her in-laws were sitting across from her, leaving the cups of instant coffee untouched on the low table. The father was wearing a grey, collared shirt that had the unmistakable imprint of the brand with a crocodile, and the mother wore a black, satiny blouse, whose round collar partially showed a gold necklace underneath the soft fabric. Jewelry dignified a wrinkly skin, Malou thought.

"Tess was planning to leave Junar," Malou said again. "She was going to get a job downtown so that she could start over."

Junar's mother nodded. "They were fighting a lot *na bitaw*. But they had known each other since they were little."

That was true. Their marriage seven years ago had seemed inevitable. His family, as much as Malou knew, had hardly objected to it. Junar's parents had already gotten over their crushing disappointment with their youngest son way before the hapless marriage happened, back at an age where he was supposed to have earned his college diploma. As for Tess, her happiness was something she had willed herself, an act of determination from having led herself to a marriage with someone like Junar—brusque, Sasa-raised man of her dreams, their wedding consummated in a rented room in Dose, at her husband's insistence that they stay with neither of their parents. The boarding house was in the reclamation settlement of shanties, which were held together with a network of gangplanks propped up by rickety stilts jutting out of the filthy saltwater. His parents' house, two-storey and in resplendent pink, stood along the paved, narrow streets that touched the end of the *baybay* settlement, while Malou's dreary bungalow stood a few blocks away.

"We were hoping to hold the wake at our place," the father said. He looked older than Malou last remembered. She blamed the recent news. Yesterday, on the same day her daughter died, the barangay officials circulated the list of those suspected of peddling *shabu*. She could already imagine the mayor on his Sunday TV show giving the criminals their options: to leave the city either vertically or horizontally. It was the mayor's spiel, throatily spoken, and he would sound out of breath, pausing long enough for Malou to recall the difference between the two options. It would not be long before the death squad shot them one by one—the criminals, from vertical to horizontal.

“Junar wants to stay in the city for the wake,” the mother said. “But we can’t let him outside. We know you would want to hold the wake here, in your house—”

“But I have no gate. No fence,” Malou said.

“We can pay for the construction, though,” the mother said, letting the pause speak the obvious. Tess’s body was getting delivered from the morgue in a few hours.

If Malou’s husband were still alive, he would have insisted on holding the wake of their only child at their own house. But then again, had he been around seven years ago, he would have violently disagreed to the children’s marriage in the first place.

Malou wondered whether the salary of a jeepney driver could have afforded him such imposing pride.

“Bad husbands are like durian,” she had told Tess, on one of those days when her daughter complained about Junar. “They smell.” Seeing her daughter’s confusion, she continued, “That’s it: they smell. And we should stop buying them.”

Now, a husband needed to be kept indoors, like something rotten. Malou found the prospect of Junar targeted by the death squad unbearable, not so much because she wanted him alive (her only daughter was dead, anyway. Why should he be any different?), but because she dreaded seeing him return and roam the neighborhood with his bullet wound exposed, most likely in the head, like everyone’s gaping guilt.

For as long as she could remember, the vigilantes’ dead had been showing themselves around Dose like lost travelers. (Perhaps it was around the same time when the city government granted the village, in the early nineties, the land titles for what would otherwise have been an illegal settlement.) The boy Manny, for example, who had lived from across the street, was seen around the neighborhood a month after the death squad had taken him down. Malou had seen him, too. He was sitting on the bench outside a *sari-sari* store, not without his cigarette and that red mound on his temple where the bullet had entered. He seemed not to see her, but the dead only showed themselves as they pleased. There was a time when the people of Dose had fled in terror at the sight of these ghosts. But seeing the dead soon grew on them, and they began calling these dead the *saag*, lost, souls that stayed among the living for not knowing where else to go. The common response to them ranged from surprise to slight irritation, the same way the community would have grown used to the death squad, if its hovering presence weren’t so lethal, potentially taking someone they loved.

In the living room, Malou and her in-laws explored other options. The children’s rented bedroom in the baybay settlement was certainly out of the picture. The chapel was not only too small, but also too exposed, with its large windows. They could not

simply barricade the house of God. The nearest funeral home, in Panacan, would mean driving Junar in a heavily guarded vehicle—although that gave no assurance, either—from the house. They even considered splitting the wake into two: the first half done at their in-laws', and the other at hers. But that did not account for the odd number of days she wanted for the wake, which should be seven, to cover all the days of the week.

"At some point, their marriage went bad," Malou said. "Tess kept telling me she was going to leave Junar. The boy was a bad influence on her."

The couple looked at each other and seemed to agree on some inexplicable thing. She felt excluded and, briefly, alone. She wanted to be consequential.

"I'm sorry that you have to go through this, but Tess should stay here," she said. "I will pray for Junar."

After saying that, Malou was already calculating the money she could have saved if the wake was held at her in-laws'. She would have to prove herself by providing good refreshments. Regular biscuits that came in a tub, a staple in funerals, would not do. Tess would have been adamant about keeping everything grand. She had her pride. When life for her had gotten unbearable, Tess would go to a mall, bragging afterwards that she had not spent all that time window-shopping alone. Because she ate there, she would say; she actually spent money there. "Excuse me, *ha*," she would say, "I can afford."

When the morgue had delivered the body, Malou looked in the casket and saw the same air of indignation in her daughter. Tess's firmly shut eyes did not have the same passivity as those of the dead. Her pressed lips, which had the right shade of red, gave the impression that she was scowling. Unlike the dead Malou had previously seen, Tess did not look peaceful; she looked pissed. And being in her favorite dress, which Tess wore on special occasions, claimed for herself a glamorous spot in the white, cushioned world of her casket. Malou wondered whether Junar could see that. Perhaps he saw her as merely dead.

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He would have avoided the visitors, especially Malou, if she had agreed to hold the funeral at his parents' house. He sat alone in the living room. His parents were at Malou's, helping out in the wake. They had assured him that his mother-in-law remained a member of the family, no matter what. Every now and then, he peered out the windows to observe the usual noise of the streets. What were they thinking, persuading his mother-in-law to hold the wake at his parents'. The wrought-iron

fence was too low, behind which anyone could have easily stood and simply aimed his gun. Junar had to be careful not to show his face at the window.

At dusk, standing in the creeping darkness, he saw Manny walk past. The children playing in the streets fell quiet and watched the *saag*. Last month, Manny was arrogant enough to leave the house even in broad daylight. Of course, the death squad preferred executing their job at the busiest hour of the day, in the most public of places, for the spectacle of it, their hardworking lot keeping the city clean. The mayor had given the same warning on his weekly TV program as he did last weekend. "I am telling you," the mayor had said, facing the camera. "You do not fuck with me," and then followed the belated bleep that was supposed to censor him. Before Junar heard Manny's name announced, he had been an avid follower of the TV program, laughing at the refrain of *fuck, putang ina, and pisti*. He knew so well the song at the start of the program, about living well in having one's own nation and language, and the flash of the title that had undoubtedly empowered him: *From the Masses, for the Masses*.

The drugs had been as commonplace as the killings. He just needed the right motivation to start. Before Tess, he saw himself as collected and invincible, a school dropout with no prospect of a job. With her, however, his whole body, all six feet and 120 pounds of him, felt disheveled, a brown sprawl.

The room in the *babay* settlement was supposed to be a temporary home. Until they had saved enough money, he would say. It was something they could consider their own. A bed, a low table, a sink that gave a marvelous view of the sea. His father, after retiring from his overseas work in the Middle East, relentlessly told him to finish school. Instead, Junar worked in one of the factories in Sasa and quit two months later. The fumes were ruining his lungs, he told his wife. Meanwhile, Tess took odd jobs selling *binignit* and cassava cake and handled the financial matters. She was careful with the contraceptives, too, explaining that no child of hers was going to be born in *baybay*. He knew he needed to help. He had convinced her of the necessity of testing the product, for quality control.

Now, his skin crawled, as if ants were marching up and down his limbs. He lit another cigarette and sat in the dark. One boy in the neighborhood took to meth because he could not understand the school lessons, and, dropping out, continued using it because he could not understand life outside school, either. Perhaps that boy did not even understand that the putrid seawater in Dose was not for bathing. He jumped in and got caught in the tangle of trash.

Manny had told him this story, laughing.

Junar's mother-in-law had been the first to notice it. The bloodshot eyes, which darted around the room, had given him away. Malou went straight to his parents and

told them to keep their son off her daughter. They reminded her that the two were already two years married. She refused to talk to him since then, saying that her silence should be enough to convey her disappointment.

“What else did she say about me?” he had asked Tess.

“She just kept staring.”

Now, Malou did not have any reason to see him at all. Every time his parents came home from the wake, they would tell him that things were being arranged as planned. “She sends her regards,” his mother lied.

Leaving Dose was out of the question. He had also refused rehabilitation. He could not bear the thought of being away from Tess on her last days. He still hoped, however, for someone to appear at the gate and sell him even a gram. Or two. But only Tess could do that. Between the two of them, she was the doer. She made things happen for him. The only thing he could be proud of was his brief episode of bravery when, on the morning Tess died, he escaped their ramshackle house in baybay and ran home to his parents.

His skin crawled, and he wished to see Tess one last time.

To keep himself preoccupied, he took five or more sandwiches that had been prepared for the wake and ate them. He quaffed tetra packs of fruit juices. The cartons of milk did not calm his nerves. He was smoking two packs of cigarettes a day.

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The black Monobloc chairs that her in-laws had rented proved heaven-sent. The refreshments, too. At least she had her own memorial plan to use for other necessities, like renting the gilded crucifix that towered from behind the casket, the blown-up photograph of Tess in a frame, and the wreath that had a sash declaring it was from her, the mother of the deceased. For everything else, despite herself, there were the in-laws to help. As her way of showing gratitude, she told the couple an aphorism. “Tess wanted to so much more from life, but we all come to a point of just letting life be. Life,” she said, “is just accept-accept.”

The neighbors came in and out. Relatives visited and scheduled those who would keep vigil with her. It was important that they keep watch of the casket all night. Otherwise, spirits would steal in and replace Tess’s body with a banana trunk. All lights were lit, and card tables were set up. Somebody had suggested placing chicks on the casket, so that they would peck at rice grains on the glass cover. Malou had viciously answered that it was only for the murdered. Even the death squad’s victims had no need for the noisy animals.

She expected to see Junar appear in the doorway. He always found a way to assert himself. And when that happened, she would not be able to assure the guests her composure. She had allowed all this mess to happen, because she had been a generous mother. It would not be selfishness to want her daughter for herself this time.

Her *balae* would sit beside her without saying anything. She still looked moneyed. Perhaps with bigger eye-bags and in less fancy clothes, but looking comfortably moneyed nonetheless. Malou could not resent her for that. The chair she sat on was paid for by this genuinely grieving lady, who insisted, time and again, that they remain a family.

Junar's parents were away when the stranger came. The neighbors, who were gathered at the tables outside, playing *tong-its*, fell quiet. Malou was in her usual spot in front of the casket, a rosary around her hand. She thought a saag had appeared. Instead, a man wearing dark sunglasses and a leather jacket walked in with sure-footedness.

"My condolences," he said without holding out a hand.

"There's juice and a sandwich," Malou said. The man did not answer. If Junar was here, would he still be killed, in front of everyone, in front of his dead wife?

He turned to the casket and looked in. A neighbor from the card table outside entered and sat beside Malou, while another, naked from the waist up, was alert in the doorway. The man made the sign of the cross and made to leave. He nodded at Malou, giving her a half-smile. As he passed by one of the tables, a woman yelled, "He's not here! Why don't you kill all of us instead?"

"*Saba diha*, Linda!" reprimanded another woman.

The man kept walking. Nobody else looked at this stranger who did not disappear into the night.

Later that evening, contrary to its practice, the death squad struck without the spectacle, and the neighborhood took some time locating the source of the gun report and finding Junar face-down halfway between his parents' house and Malou's.

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"You said you would only sell," Tess said again, her spiel on a Wednesday night. She was squatting next to a low, makeshift cabinet and took out a small box, which had a small hasp and a padlock the size of her thumb. From a ring of assorted keys and nail-cutter, she picked a small, frail key and inserted it in the lock, which gave a faint click. The money was still there. Junar did not understand the purpose of the box with a toy padlock, which could easily slip through the crack in between the

floorboards and into the sea below, but such a paltry device gave his wife security and, somehow, the authority to nag him about his disorderly life. She had also insisted on getting the weekly supply, too, because he had proven himself poor in math. After saying her spiel, she quietly stepped out of the room and signaled him to gently lock it

That night was quiet. Even the sea seemed to listen. The faint motorboat of fresh supplies hummed in the distance. A few seconds passed, and the network of wooden gangplanks outside creaked and groaned. He pressed his ear against the thin walls, which whispered back the soft, muffled sighing waves. Everything was still. Usually, approaching footsteps could be discerned from the shuddering in the walls and floorboards.

A soft tap on the door. He rushed to open it, but there was only the vast night outside, the faint hum of a motorboat in the distance. A saag playing tricks again. He closed the door and pressed an ear against it.

Tess was taking longer than ordinary. Fifteen minutes had passed. He could not distinguish the ticking wall clock from his own heartbeat. And then, from outside, the dreadful sound of people running, the sound of muted panic. The rickety house shivered. Someone was tapping at the door, delicate but persistent. Tess whispered his name.

Junar did not have the presence of mind to tell her that the door was unlocked. When he opened for her, Tess silently shut the door and bolted it. How could two small deadbolts protect them from the onslaught of a bigger force?

“Doming was there,” she said. “He saw me.”

“Doming?”

“The *kagawad* god, *uy!* He saw me.”

“What was he doing there?”

She shook her head, slipped into the bed, and curled under the thin sheet, her back turned to him. He kept asking her questions about what happened, who else was there. Did she bring anything? He must have sounded desperate. “Saba diha, Junar!” she said. He could smell fear on her: sweat and cigarette, and nothing of the stuff he had repeatedly vowed to quit.

He went back to listen by the door. The quiet had resumed. He fought the urge to step out and see the sort of disorder tonight’s incident had wrought. “I’m leaving you tomorrow,” Tess said. She still had her back turned to him.

Somehow, although he had heard her say that countless times before, what she said at that moment sounded final. He had treated the threat as her way of showing how much she loved him. Such high had its limits, too.



He woke up the next morning to the sound of her working at the sink. The house was awash in light, and he could not look straight at her in the glare. She had the two windows open, as though daring the world to see her as she embarked on a new life.

She was already dressed in jeans and a collared shirt, her hair still wet. She had put on pearl earrings, which he did not know she had. "The box is where it should be," she said. "Here's the key. All yours now."

"What happened last night, Tess? Why was a kagawad at the pier?"

"I'm going away. I will stay at a friend's house, until things cool down," she said. "Don't call me anymore. Don't look for me. You won't know my new cell phone number, anyway."

"What will I tell Nanay Malou?"

"Leave Nanay out of this. She should not know anything. From what I saw last night, I'm sure Doming is going to leave her alone." She repeated: "Leave Nanay out of this."

"Tess, eat your breakfast *sa*," he said. When she did not answer, he said, "You know what, I'll go back to my parents, ask money from them. Maybe I can finish a practical course. I'll find work. It'll take some time, but I can be back on my feet in no time. Or let's go to Tagum or Digos. We have relatives in Bukidnon, too. The most important thing is that we're together, *di ba*?"

She was putting on her shoes. She turned to him and smiled. "Ay, Junar, *makakilig unta*. What's the second most important thing?"

He forced a laugh, but before he could get up for an embrace, she was already out the door.

Tess, however, did not get to leave Dose. Halfway between the baybay settlement and the Sasa road, she noticed the guttural noise of a motorcycle coming from one of the narrow streets. Two men in varsity jackets, baseball caps, and dark sunglasses were on the bike. Tess did not scream, did not stand stupidly on the spot to wait for her end. Because she always knew what to do, she ran toward the road without looking from side to side. They shot once, at her back, before the speeding truck finally ran over her.

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The in-laws sent Malou their regrets. They could not join the procession. It was unlucky, they said, to attend two funerals at the same time. She told them that they were misinformed. *Sukob* only applied to weddings, which had to be cancelled or pushed the next year if a close kin happened to die. The belief was one that entailed

decision. Death, as far as she knew, could not be decided on. "I'll visit Junar after the burial," she told herself.

The neighbors showed up to help. Her own relatives lifted the casket and instructed her to walk under it. They broke a plate as the hearse inched its way out of the narrow streets of Dose and onto the Sasa road, which met them with roaring trucks, whose mighty horns constantly interrupted her grief. These trucks, after announcing their displeasure, would overtake the slow procession.

Her ears were still ringing when they got to the cemetery, and the priest spoke so softly, in an affect that was a close approximation to mourning, that she could not resort to her hysterical weeping, keen on listening to the sermons. At the end of the ceremony, she could barely recall what the priest had said. Later, she would proudly tell everyone how she did not throw herself into the grave as Tess's body was being lowered.

While the cemetery workers spaded dirt back into the grave, the neighbors gathered dried leaves for tinder and piled fresh grass on top of the fire to create thick smoke. Forming a line, they jumped over the rolling smoke, one by one, to whisk away the soul that might follow them back home. Malou could almost feel their relief as they stepped over the *lina*, their skin prickling from the flitting heat and their feet landing on the reassuring earth.

Nobody noticed that Malou stayed seated the whole time. The guests invited her to jump over the smoke, telling her that she would not want a ghost or any demon to cling on to her person, but she refused, saying, "Later." She would do it later, she assured them. When everyone seemed to have left, she went straight to a jeepney rented by Junar's parents, eager for Tess to follow her back home.