

THE MAKING OF A BOOKWORM

(An excerpt from a
work-in-progress)

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I

I FIRST HEARD the word “bookworm” from my mother. She used the word to describe herself. Before her marriage, in that period referred to by Filipinos of her generation as “Pre-War,” she had been a journalist, and a writer of short stories. She had belonged to the Book-of-the-Month Club and had built up a small personal library which she was quite proud of.

Mama also had a scrapbook in which she mounted autographed pictures and notes from her favorite writers. When she particularly liked a book, she would write to its author, requesting an autographed picture. Many of them responded promptly and graciously. I recall her telling me that she had collected around seventy signatures, from, among others, Rudyard Kipling, Andre Maurois, Aldous Huxley, John Masefield, Hugh Walpole, and John Galsworthy. And Ernest Hemingway actually wrote her a short note in reply to her letter. That scrapbook was one of her most prized possessions. During the Japanese Occupation, most of her books were lost or burned. But Mama managed to save her scrapbook.

And then came the Battle for Manila. The Japanese went on a rampage, burning houses and bayoneting civilians, as they fled the approaching American troops, who, instead of waiting for a surrender, decided to head for the American concentration camp in UST. Our family (my parents, my mother's mother and sister, and a baby just a few months old —me) were among the civilians trapped in the city.

I grew up hearing the tales of that harrowing time: how the family left everything behind, and ran like frightened rats, sometimes nearly stumbling on corpses littering the city's streets; how they sought shelter behind broken pillars and crumbling walls, trying to find a corner that might offer a bit of safety for an hour or two—an abandoned school, a hospital, a church.

I no longer remember the exact details. I think my aunt—who was tormented by a crippling pain in her hip (only much later diagnosed as a rare cancer), clung to one of my father's arms; in his other arm, he carried our meager provisions. My grandmother carried me; and my mother carried my milk, my diapers, and her precious scrapbook, which she would use as a bed for me whenever it was possible to pause for a rest. During one such pause, she put down the scrapbook, and turned to one side to take me from my Lola's arms. When she turned back to the scrapbook, it was gone. The family figured that someone had appropriated Mama's precious scrapbook to use for kindling.

But, as Mama used to say, not all was lost. Her baby survived the siege of Manila. And, like her, that baby became a bookworm.

II

I was frail and sickly as a child, which may have been why I was also extremely nervous and timid. I remember being scared of practically everything, even of things which other children seemed to enjoy—like going to birthday parties or to the circus.

Dressing up in a pretty party dress was fine, but being in the company of strange children, and having to take part in noisy games from which I never emerged a winner, frightened me. And when my father was a bit late fetching me I would become a tearful wreck.

And there was that time that Papa bringing home a swing and a slide, and became seriously displeased when I, far from being excited by them like most kids would have been, was too scared to use the slide. I think I managed to climb up its ladder, step by cautious step, but once on top, I couldn't muster the courage to sit down, swing my legs over and slide down. I would freeze. My hands would grow cold and clammy. Mama lost her patience and gave up trying to persuade me. It was Tita Pacita who got the idea of having me sit down at the slide's bottom end, and

get to the top by sliding my backside upwards until I got to there, clinging to the sides all the way; and then inching down slowly, my hands still grasping the sides, and thus planting my feet on the ground again. Each day we progressed by a few inches. When I finally got to the top, and was able to let go of the slide's sides, and actually slide down, Tita Pacita actually burst into applause. It was a tremendous victory.

Mama was always busy with housework, probably because during those first years after the war, we had no household help. Her mother, my Lola Mariquita, was equally busy, helping with the cooking or the sewing and the mending. So Tita Pacita, Mama's unmarried younger sister, was in charge of me.

Tita Pacita fed me all my meals, a task that must have tested her ingenuity as severely as the business of the slide. For I had little interest in food, probably another sign of my poor health. It didn't help that my diet included what the pediatricians of the day considered essential: glasses of milk (Mama used a powdered milk called KLIM) and soft-boiled eggs, both of which I abhor to this day. I was also fed mushy stuff which was mashed *monggo* beans and beef cut up into tiny pieces and mixed with rice. Tita Pacita's strategy was to tell me a story and stop at the crucial points in the plot. And, with a full teaspoon of soft boiled egg or mush or beef and rice poised before my face, she would say to me: "And if you want to know what happened next, open your mouth quickly!" And, mesmerized, I would quickly open my mouth. In this ingenious manner I acquired, not just the nutrients I needed to survive, but an early exposure to the art of story telling. My love of stories thus antedated my going to school. For Tita Pacita, my closest companion during the first few years of my life, was a wonderful tale teller.

Some of the stories she told me were drawn from the world's great storehouse of tales. Some were fabricated by her own imagination. Long before I had learned to read, I knew about the boy whose nose grew longer a bit each time he told a lie, and the girl who was smaller than a thumb, and the princess who was locked up in a tower but had hair so long that a prince used it to climb up and rescue her. And I knew about two little fairies called Bettina and Edwina, who were Tita Pacita's friends when she was a little girl. They lived in the family garden, but sometimes came into the house when the gas lamps were lit, and played hide and seek with her, hiding behind the table lamp and the cruets and the salt and pepper shakers.

Later, there were my storybooks. My parents surrounded me with Golden Books and Wonder Books. Scuffy the Tugboat, Tootle the Train, Bambi, Bluebeard, Alice in Wonderland, and the Princess and the Pea were my familiars. I believed that inside every flower in our garden lived an elf, and under every mushroom a wicked old troll;

and that at the stroke of midnight each night, my dolls held tea parties and danced to fairy music.

I have written about this elsewhere. “There was trouble and strife in those storybooks. Two innocent pigs who foolishly built houses of straw and twigs had their houses blown away by a wolf who then ate them. A naïve wooden puppet who had been suddenly allowed to move and talk told a lie and watched with horror as his nose grew to enormous proportions. A wicked stepmother left her little stepchildren in the forest where they were kidnapped by a witch. A little girl in a red riding hood strayed into the woods with a basket of goodies for her grandmother, and was spotted by a wolf who decided to eat both her and her grandmother. But somehow, things righted themselves in the end; order was restored; life went on.

“This is what fascinated me—those books described and explained the great world to me, reassured me that it was a calm and orderly place, for all that it seemed initially dark and threatening. And even much later, when I had grown up and my books themselves told me that the world was neither calm nor orderly, that it was perhaps indeed dark and dangerous, it comforted me to learn of it in this manner, captured in words whose patterns I understood and found beautiful.”

III

My personal world expanded when I entered Elementary School. No longer was I confined to the airy little room beside our *sala*, which served me as a kind of play room in that dim, slightly dilapidated, old house in San Juan, where our family moved to, after the War was finally over. Or to our backyard with its patches of cracked cement bordered by *siniguelas*, *bayabas*, and *santol trees*.

One page of the “Baby Book,” which my mother kept faithfully for me, has the words “My First Day in School” printed in pink and blue letters on top of one page. And under them, in my mother’s hand, is the name of my first school, St. John’s Academy, and “Kindergarten Class – Enrolled July 1949.” I was almost five years old. I never thought to ask my mother why I was enrolled in July rather than in June, which is when the first semester used to open in Manila. My parents may have hesitated about having me start school given my poor health, but not wanting for me to fall behind my contemporaries, must have made a belated decision to enroll me after all.

Taped to this same page is a piece of lined paper with the letter “A” written many times over, in pencil, with an unsteady childish hand. Below this are apples of different sizes covered with red crayon smudges, and a single apple covered with a green crayon smudge. There is a number written in black pencil at the very center of

the page—"80." I assume that someone must have explained to me what the number meant: 80 percent. Not terribly impressive, but good enough.

Being the timid child that I was, I couldn't have enjoyed those early days in school. I have a memory of peering out of the window of our kindergarten classroom to make sure that my Lola was still there. Now and then, I would run out to her to have a drink of water. From her capacious hand bag, she would produce a collapsible plastic glass and hand it to me. I would fill this with water from a nearby tap. I would do this several times during the school day. And I don't think it was because I was thirsty. I think the little ritual simply comforted me.

The school was walking distance from our house, so Lola must have accompanied me to school, and sat there until classes were dismissed for the day. waiting for classes to be over. I'm not sure how long this went on. Did it take me days, or weeks, or months to finally be left on my own? Were there other mothers or *yayas* waiting there with her? Memory fails me.

(Years later, when it was time for my own Larisa to start school, her father and I decided to invest in a Montessori education, which we had read up on and found suitably progressive. It was to Iluminada Gomez' Philippine Montessori Center, a little school inside the White Plains Subdivision in Quezon City, that we decided to take her. Miss Gomez received each child at the gate, took her or his hand from the anxious parent, and gently but firmly shut the gate. The choice of this school for Lara was one of the best decisions in our life. But that is another story.)

My poor health meant that I had to skip school often. I have written of this in the story "Patricyang Payatot" (which is part of one of my short story collections, *Catch a Falling Star*) and of how some of my classmates despised me intensely because our table never won a silver or a gold star—which were given out for near-perfect, or perfect attendance—due to my frequent absences. I remember Mrs. Peralta, my kindergarten teacher, as a kindly woman, so I have to figure that she simply did not realize the cruel effects of this practice on someone like me, or she might have altered it a bit.

Most children want simply to be like everybody else. Unfortunately, I seemed doomed to be different. For not only was I the pupil with the most absences, I was also the tallest girl in my class. In one of my photo albums, there is a picture of me standing in line with five other girls during some school program. We are all wearing party dresses—organdie trimmed with lace or ruffles, with puff sleeves and satin sashes, and ribbons in our hair. I can identify three of the girls with me: Maria Teresa Barretto, Maria Lourdes Arellano, and Lillian Gomez. I am standing at the end of the line, to the right, the tallest in the group. At least I'm not the person dressed in a

Santa Claus outfit, sitting on a chair to one side of the stage. It must have been truly awful to have been singled out to be Santa Claus. Under the picture, in my mother's hand is the caption: "December 1949, Xmas Program."

Beside this picture is another one of me in what looks like the costume of a shepherdess, complete with apron and lacy "pantalettes" showing under a long, flower-printed skirt. There is a coronet of flowers in my hair. I am standing in front of a microphone. One of my hands is holding my skirt; the other is raised to my forehead, to shade my eyes perhaps. I think I am reciting something, probably the nursery rhyme "Little Bo Peep." I have vague memories of Tita Pacita practicing me in the recitation of this little verse, and teaching me the appropriate gestures to go with the words. I know that my costume was made by her, and it even included a shepherd's cane. This picture is captioned "Graduation picture, March 1950." It would seem that Tita Pacita's patience had, once again, paid off, and I had actually acquired enough self-confidence to perform in public.

I had no problems reciting nursery rhymes because I had learned a lot of them by heart long before I started going to school. One of my favorite toys was a box of cardboard dolls who were Mother Goose characters, dressed in elaborate costumes— Little Miss Muffet who sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey. . . Mary, Mary Quite Contrary in whose garden grew silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row. . . Little Boy Blue who left his sheep and fell asleep under the haystack ... If you laid them on their side, you could open them up like a book, and you could read the verses printed inside. Or you could make them stand by setting them upright and open the bottom slightly to form a kind of tent, so they looked like they were getting ready to march in a parade. Since I couldn't read yet, Tita Pacita would read the words out to me, and I would repeat them after her, until soon, I had them all memorized. Along with my Tita Pacita's tales and my childhood story books, these stand-up cardboard dolls were my introduction to literature.

IV

I called them my "grown-up books" because they looked like the books in Mama's bookcases. They were much thicker than my old storybooks. They were not full of drawings, though some of them did have a few illustrations. And they had dust covers. But, actually, they were just more grown up versions of my picture-book fairy tales.

One of the prettiest was the *Rose Fairy Book*, collected and edited by Andrew Lang, and illustrated by Vera Bocks. The book's first edition was published in 1948. My copy is from the second printing in 1949. I loved its pink and grey dust cover, which depicted an elegant damsel with downcast eyes, wearing a long gown and a

cape. . . a lithe young man wearing tights and plumes and brandishing a sword. . . and a languid toad with a crown on its head, and a pink fan in one of its paws. . . amidst curling vines, rose-buds and full-blown roses. But the stories in this book were not familiar to me.

I knew there were other “books of many colors,” green and yellow and crimson and lilac and olive. Some of my classmates, like me, owned one book. A few others had two. Only one girl in class had all ten. . . or was it twelve? Her name was Olga. Her father was a doctor, and she lived in a big house behind a high stone wall. I knew this because I had been invited to her house for one of her birthday parties, and I remember thinking that her house looked like those castles that figured in our story books, except that it didn’t have a tower or a moat. All of us envied Olga her ten or twelve “fairy books” of many colors, and tried to borrow them, but she would only lend them to those of us whom she considered her friends.

I was one of the lucky few. I borrowed the *Blue Fairy Book*, and was thrilled to encounter so many of my old friends within its fragrant pages—Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin, Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp, Jack the Giant Killer, Goldilocks, Blue Beard, Hansel and Gretel. . . but told in what seemed to me to be a more grown-up fashion.

I must have borrowed some of the other books, but the blue one was my favorite.

My copy of *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* is a Grosset & Dunlap edition, translated by Mrs. E. V. Lucas and Mrs. H. B. Paull, but without the famous illustrations of Arthur Szyk. Its dust cover—which was violet, if memory serves me—is gone, and it has no publication date. (A Google search sets the publication date at 1945.) The book was a birthday gift from Tita Pacita when I turned eleven. Her dedication on the fly leaf reads: “To darling Jing on her birthday, hoping she will grow as delightful as one of her princesses of Fairyland. Love, Tita. August 21, 1953.”

Devoid of pictures, the tales seemed much too long. And though I recognized more old friends among its characters—the ugly duckling, the steadfast tin soldier, the shepherdess and the sweep, I did not enjoy this book all that much, and put it away, and returned to it only many years later.

King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (from Sir Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*) edited by Sydney Lanier, the Grosset & Dunlap edition, published in 1950, a Christmas gift from Papa in when I was ten, suffered the same fate, even if it did have some fine illustrations—both in black and white and in full color—by Florian. I did not know this legend and had problems with the language. Passages like this one seemed impossibly awkward: “So when all the Masses were done, all the lords went for to behold the stone and the sword. And when they saw the scripture, some

assayed, such as would have been king. But none might stir the sword nor move it.”

A year later, I was taken by my Lola and Tita Pacita to watch MGM’s production of *Knights of the Round Table* in cinemascope and Technicolor, at the Ideal (pronounced ee-de-al) Theater on Avenida Rizal. I was won over. Here was a world more fascinating than the world of my fairy tales. Here were Ava Gardner and Robert Taylor, as ravishing and as dashing as one imagined fairy tale queens and their champion knights to be. But I was much disturbed by the idea of a woman married to one man and in love with another. And the ending was even more disturbing: Camelot was shattered, and everyone—both evil and good—were no more. The nobility of the vision of the Round Table, the insidious power of true villainy, and the fierceness of the passion that locked the doomed lovers to each other were quite simply beyond the comprehension of the child that I was.

The book that held me in thrall was actually *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie. I have lost that copy (also a gift from Tita Pacita), so I am unable to write down the edition, and the date when it was given to me, and other such details. But I see it clearly in my mind’s eye. And I vividly recall that from the moment that Peter Pan slipped through that open window into the Darling children’s lives, I fell in love. I became Wendy, in both my dreams and my waking hours.

Peter Pan was a wild, untamed creature, a boy who would never grow up. But I was Wendy, and he would choose me over the Indian princess held captive by the pirates, and the temperamental Tinker Bell, who was only a tiny fairy after all. And we would leave the mundane world, and sail out of the window to the land beyond the clouds.

But of course such things never are. Not even for the real Wendy in the book. Even the Lost Boys must abandon their chief and return to the safety of a home and a family. And Wendy must wave good bye to her beloved Peter, standing at her window and watching him soar up, and disappear among the stars.

But I think the magic of this tale is the secret that Wendy, a wife and mother at the novel’s end, understands only too well: that anyone who has ever known Peter Pan and flown with him to Never Never Land, will keep him in her heart forever.

That same year, I was taken to another movie theater to watch the Walt Disney animated film version of this story—they were called “cartoons” in my time. But that was just a bonus. The book had worked its spell.

V

I don’t remember how old I was when I was introduced to the Classics Illustrated comic books. All I recall is that I was still in elementary school.

Every Sunday, after mass at San Beda Church or San Sebastian Church, Papa would drive us to Stop and Shop in Sta. Mesa, or to Acme Supermarket somewhere near what was then called Dewey Boulevard for Mama to get her groceries. And while she did her shopping, Papa would treat me and my younger sister and brother to strawberry ice cream sodas, and one comic book each. Soon I had built up a neat little collection of Classics Illustrated comic books. They brightened my Sunday—indeed, my whole week, since I could return to each new comic book again and again during the week; as well as reread the old ones. And here was the bonus: a couple of them—my favorites, as it happened—were made into movies by MGM. One of them was *The Prisoner of Zenda*, directed by Richard Thorpe, with Stewart Granger playing Rudolf Rassendyl and Deborah Kerr playing the Princess Flavia. James Mason playing Rupert of Hentzau, and Jane Greer playing Antoinette de Mauban. I remember crying as the credits came on, *and* demanding to know why Princess Flavia couldn't just run away with Rudolf, since she knew it was he that she loved, not the King. Tita Pacita explained that princesses couldn't do that—it was their duty to marry kings and become queens, which, to me, seemed a cruel fate.

Some two years later, I watched another MGM film with a similar plot, the musical *The Student Prince*, also directed by Richard Thorpe, and starring Ann Blyth and Edmund Purdom (with the singing voice of Mario Lanza). I found this film even more enchanting than the first, perhaps because of the lovely music by Sigmund Romberg, or perhaps because I was older, and had developed a real taste for romantic musicals. Moreover, by then, I was an old hand, and did not really expect the prince to marry Kathie the barmaid. This did not prevent me from weeping when the prince said goodbye to the woman he called “his only love,” and boarded the train that would take him to his royal bride.

My other favorite Classic comic book which was made into a film was *Ivanhoe*, directed yet again by Richard Thorpe, with Robert Taylor, Joan Fontaine and Elizabeth Taylor playing Wilfred of Ivanhoe, Lady Rowena, and Rebecca the Jewess, respectively. When I first read the comic book version, I was unequivocally on the side of the Lady Rowena in the rivalry between her and Rebecca for the knight Ivanhoe. And I thought Rebecca a silly fool for thinking she stood a chance against the fair Saxon lady. I wonder now why I was so certain about this. Was it because in my limited experience of the movies, the blonde and the blue-eyed, be they court ladies or cowboys, always won out in the end? Ivanhoe is also attracted to Rebecca, who is obviously more interesting (because more complex) than the Lady Rowena. This allows Rebecca to hope that perhaps he will disregard her race and religion and choose her.

The novel is full of the stock-in-trade of medieval romances—chivalry toward the lady love, fealty to the liege lord, the Crusades, the Knights Templar, the return of the prodigal son, Robin of Locksley and his band of Merry Men, the storming of the castle. . . It was only much later, when i read Sir Walter Scott’s novel, that I realized that the novel’s most fascinating—and most romantic—element is not the love between Ivanhoe and the Lady Rowena, nor the return of King Richard to claim back his throne from the Black Prince John, nor the reconciliation between Sir Cedric and his son, but the tragic subplot of the Knight Templar, Sir Brian de Bois-Guilbert’s hopeless love for Rebecca. Rebecca, in her obsession with Ivanhoe, spurns Bois-Guilbert, but she witnesses their duel to the death—which is a blatantly unequal fight since Ivanhoe, Rebecca’s champion, has not recovered from his wounds. And as she sees the Templar lose deliberately, forfeiting his life that she might live, she finally realizes. too late, that his was indeed the truer love.

I didn’t know it then, but they would serve me well—the Classic Comics (and the movies, as well). I was to encounter those stories again in high school and even in college. And never did it occur to me to be daunted or bored by them, as some of my classmates were. Ivanhoe and Rip Van Winkle, Silas Marner and Sherlock Holmes, Hawkeye and Hiawatha, Athos, Porthos, Aramis and D’Artagnan, the Count of Monte Cristo, Gulliver and Captain Ahab and the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, Catherine and the dark, doomed Heathcliff—they were my old friends; as interesting and as familiar in their own ways as *Little Lulu*, or *Superman* or *Archie* or *Katy Keene*.

Did I enjoy the Classics more than the Archie and the Katy Keene? Probably not. I was an avid Katy Keene fan at one time. I obsessed not just about Katy Keene comic books, but about Katy Keene paper dolls. I would make up story plots in my head as I slipped her costumes on and off her, sitting barefooted on the floor under our large living room windows, which let in the afternoon sun and the occasional stray breeze. Katy Keene was a fashion model; she was a movie star, altogether in a different league from Archie and Betty and Veronica and Jughead, let alone Little Lulu or Blondie and Dagwood, or Bugs Bunny and Woody Woodpecker. She was my first contact with glamour.

But, enthralling as they were, these comic books lost out to what I called my “grown-up books.” Did I like these books more than the classic comics in spite of their not being illustrated, or precisely *because* they weren’t illustrated? I believe it may have been the latter. Though I did enjoy looking at the pictures, I much preferred imagining the scenes in my head.

VI

Today, they are referred to—not very accurately, I think—as “YA (young adult) novels.” I referred to them as my “grown-up books.” It was in them that I found the models I required. For even then, I had already decided that when I grew up, I would be a writer.

All of those girlhood heroines of mine—led by Jo March of *Little Women*—dreamt of becoming writers someday, and all of them kept diaries. So from age eight, I, too, kept a diary.

My first diary was a handsome, little, gilt-edged, red book, with a tiny lock and key—a birthday gift from Mama. The first entry, written in my wobbly eight-year-old hand, but with a real fountain pen—ball pens existed, but they didn’t seem to be in use—is dated September 26, 1952: “Since my birthday I like writing in this diary.”

Succeeding entries mention moving to a prettier house, built by Papa (who was a civil engineer); transferring to a new school run by nuns, the Sisters of St. Paul (my Lola Mariquita’s younger sister had been a St. Paul sister); taking piano lessons; playing in the tiny pool in our backyard under the trees; struggling through sewing projects for a subject called “Industrial Work;” rejoicing at being named “monitor” for the day (which meant being asked to “distribute papers” and getting “sent many places”); receiving Papa’s gift of “eight pencils of many colors, two of them with their erasers of the same colors as the pencils.” They record my being “very happy” because five papers of mine were “pressed on the bulletin board” (for getting a grade of 100 percent), and being “not happy” when I am “apsend” because of a cold. Obviously I was turning into a teacher’s pet, or a nerd, or both.

And then there’s an intriguing entry about not being “so happy when night comes & somebody is not at home.” That time, it seems, it was my grandmother and Tita Pacita who were missing, as they had gone to the “teather.” Elsewhere, I write that “My auntie went to confession with my Lola and I was left alone with my Mother, my sister, & my brother. I was afraid.” Here, again, is that strange timorousness. I suspect that it is the same fear that had reduced me to tears when Papa was late fetching me from a party, and which had paralyzed me when I was confronted with the challenge of the ordinary kiddie slide. I hadn’t shaken it off. I was still a scaredy cat.

As an adult, I’ve often wondered about the possible source of this fearfulness. And only lately, when I dug up my old “baby book” and my old journals (in, preparation for the writing of this memoir), did the possibility occur to me that its roots might lie in the trauma of the war, in particular, those horrific days of the siege of Manila. I was

conceived before the actual “liberation” of the city, but it is not difficult to imagine the stress and insecurity that must have been part of Mama’s days as she tried to adjust to her new life as wife and mother-to-be, in the little Paco *entresuelo*, which was my parents’ first home. And I recall reading her own account in her journal of the nightmare of those final days of the actual siege, with me sometimes carried by my father and sometimes by my grandmother and sometimes in her own arms. If babies can sense fear and sorrow from the safety of the womb, how much sharper must be their awareness of the terror of people all around them, dodging bombs and bullets, as they desperately try to flee a city in flames.

The older volumes among the books I referred to as my “grown-up books” weren’t all entirely devoid of illustrations. In fact, looking at those illustrations now, I realize how good some of them were.

Many of those old books are gone now, though. And the few that are left are much the worse for wear. Most have lost their dust covers, some have broken spines or missing pages. It’s not just that they were passed on by me to my oldest daughter, Lara; and by Lara to her younger sister, Anna; and by Anna to the youngest of my girls, Carmen. For, like me, they cared for the books and treated them gently. No, it was the many times that they were packed, and shipped, and unpacked, and packed again, and sometimes stored in rooms ill suited to books. Friends have suggested that I take them to one of those little shops in the UP Shopping Center that rebinds books. But I am afraid that giving them over to another stranger’s hands will do more harm than good. Never mind. They look like the veterans that they are.

Most of them were gifts, and so have inscriptions on the first page. Those that don’t were most likely from Papa. He never bothered with such things. Some books have little book plates, with my name and the date when I received the book, and sometimes, the name of the giver. I did this myself when I was older.

One of the two oldest books in the small collection are *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* by Margaret Sidney, illustrated by Roberta Paflin and published by the Whitman Publishing Co. (Racine, Wisconsin) in 1951. Most of the first page has been torn off, so there is no inscription or date to refer to. But I remember receiving it at the same time as *Christmas Stories* by Charles Dickens, also illustrated by Roberta Paflin and published by Whitman in 1951 as part of their Classic Books line. This book includes “A Christmas Carol In Prose: Being a Ghost Story of Christmas,” “The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells That Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In,” and “The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home.” The Dickens book has a book plate with my name and the date 1952 on it.

In 1952, I was eight years old. I am guessing that the first book was a gift from Mama, and the second, from Papa. It's most likely that Mama bought both books since Papa never had time to go shopping for gifts himself. But it's also quite likely that he told her to get me something a little more "serious" than the usual fairy tales.

The Sidney book was a success. I was delighted by the Pepper family and their cheerful, disorderly household, probably because it seemed so different from mine. But Dickens was a not quite a good idea. Marley, who "was as dead as a doornail, and Ebenezer Scrooge and his "countinghouse" did not interest me; and I kept running into words that I did not understand, like "unhallowed hands" and "extremity" and "residuary legatee." So I developed a mild prejudice against Charles Dickens, put the book aside, and did not return to it again until I had read *A Tale of Two Cities*, which was much, much later.

My lack of enthusiasm over Dickens must have been why the family grown-ups decided to revert to fairy tales. Tita Pacita gave me the *Andersen's Fairy Tales* (which I mentioned in the previous Note) in March, 1953.

I think it was also around about this time that I received a copy of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (as a "girl's novel," not as a child's storybook). Unfortunately, that book is one of those that have vanished. All I have now are copies of the cheap paperback editions of both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, part of the International Pocket Library, so battered that they're literally falling apart. Strangely, both do not contain the date of publication. The first book does contain forty-two of the famous illustrations by John Tenniel, which, if I'm not mistaken, were part of the lost book. And the second book contains fifty Tenniel illustrations. I bought these pocketbook editions myself in 1964.

To say that I loved *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* would be an absurd understatement. The book blew me away, as *Peter Pan* did, only it blew me in a different direction. For, first, Alice was a real person, not a faerie creature. And second, she was a girl, a little girl, like me.

I don't think I was aware of it then, but now I see that Alice was the girl I had always wanted to be, but knew I could never be. Confronted with a rabbit pulling a watch out of its waistcoat pocket, Alice burned with curiosity. And when he hurried away, she did not hesitate to chase after it, and follow it right into the rabbit hole, "without once considering how in the world she was to get out again."

I would have burned with curiosity too, but would immediately have worried about what Mama would say if I were to suddenly disappear from our backyard. And if I had somehow found the courage to follow the rabbit, I would certainly have been too timid to plunge in after him into that hole. I would have been seized by

apprehensions and anxieties. I might have even prayed to my Guardian Angel for guidance. And thus would I have forever lost any chance of having the marvelous adventures that would transfix generations to come.

Alice was unfazed by the depth of the hole into which she found herself falling. Instead of going into a panic, she began to curiously examine the walls around her, to enjoy the sights, so to speak. She kept her cool in the face of the extraordinary characters she encountered, the mysterious things they did, and the incomprehensible things they said. She was courteous, eager to learn and understand, sympathetic, even compassionate. But she held her own, would not put up with nonsense, was resourceful, creative, determined. She was also intelligent and liked to show off the knowledge she had picked up in the schoolroom, and puzzled—but not discouraged—by what appeared to be great memory lapses on her part. If she had somehow become someone else by some magic or miracle, then the thing to do was find out as quickly as possible who she now was.

I think this was her great attraction for me: she was different from all those heroines in the old fairy tales, who, though they might be beautiful and good and gentle and brave, were basically passive creatures. When bad things happened to them, they pretty much accepted their fates, and waited to be rescued by a fairy godmother, or a wizened old man or a genie, or elves, or, of course, a prince. Moreover, Alice was funny. And she saw the comic in the things that kept happening to her. I didn't know fairy tales could be funny. Even more unusual, the story didn't seem to have a "moral lesson" to impart. It was merely opening a door into a different world—a wonderfully imagined world.

Strong-minded, independent-spirited Alice was hardly the sort of heroine one would have expected to come from the pen of a Victorian gentleman, an Oxford don, a mathematician and scientist, and at the same time an ordained deacon of the Church of England. The book was first released in 1863, and children's literature was never the same again. Neither was adult literature.

Of course I knew nothing about any of that when I first read the book. All I felt was that I had found a book that seemed to have been written for someone like me; or at least that I was among the readers that the book seemed to have been written for. Paradoxically, Alice was in some ways enough *like* me that I could identify with her.

In a special edition on Lewis Carroll published by the British Council as part of the centenary of the writer's death, Marina Warner wrote: "His heroine is outspoken, frank, impatient, quick-witted, adventurous, passionate in her responses, curious, petulant, frequently impertinent, and cross."

There are at least a few qualities in that list that I could definitely relate too. Alice was the precursor of the heroines of the girls' novels that would soon become my most precious possessions, and a source of abiding joy these many years later—Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Anne of Green Gables, Elnora Comstock (the girl of the Limberlost), Jerusha Abbott (the orphan girl in *Daddy Long Legs*), Rose Campbell (of *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*), Pollyanna, and, inevitably, *Little Women*.

VII

I used to think that the biggest influence in my life as a bookworm was my mother. In hindsight though, it seems more likely that it was Tita Pacita whose taste I accepted unquestioningly. I am quite sure that it was she who hinted to Ninang Sally (my Confirmation godmother, a second cousin of mine, much older than me, so more like a young aunt), or maybe told her outright, that the best gift for me would be a book. So for my tenth birthday, she gave me Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins*, and its sequel *Rose in Bloom*, the 1927 Grosset & Dunlap hard cover editions. My copy of the first book no longer has its dust cover. But I remember that it showed a young girl against a background of lavender or lilac. The girl had long hair, tied back with a ribbon. There was also black ribbon tied around the white collar of her long-sleeved, long-skirted brown dress. She was seated beside a small round table, covered with dark green cloth. On top of the table was a glass lamp, and beside it a closed book. On the wall behind her were several small framed paintings. The expression on the girl's face was pensive, or dreamy, or maybe she was waiting for something to happen.

I turned to the first page of chapter one, and something did indeed happen almost immediately. The little girl heard singing, which at first she took for a bird, but discovered to be Phoebe. Phoebe was her aunt's maid, who would later become her best friend.

Rose Campbell was the first in a long line of orphan-girl heroines I was to meet. And though I was not an orphan, I could readily identify with a girl kept indoors by "bad weather and a cold," who spent most of her time in the library where her father's books were stored. Here she read a great deal, cried a little, and dreamed many of the innocent bright dreams in which imaginative children find such comfort and delight."

I was one such imaginative child, I said to myself. Why shouldn't I one day discover that I had an eccentric uncle, who would prescribe plenty of sunshine and fresh air and cold water to make me strong and healthy; and seven jolly and attractive

boy cousins, who would fuss over me, and tease me, and treat me like a little princess? And might not some mysterious relative leave his or her fortune to me, thus turning me into an heiress?

In the sequel, the cousins are all grown up. My copy of this book still has its dust cover, though it's in a lamentable state. A young woman is again seated by a little round table on which stands a vase filled with roses. Her hair is done in corkscrew curls, with a rose tucked behind one ear. She is wearing a rose-colored dress with a neat little Peter Pan collar, and it is trimmed with a black ribbon, and a row of little black buttons. Her hands are clasped on her lap, and she is gazing up at a young man—Charlie, perhaps, who was called “Prince” by his cousins, because of his dashing good looks, or Mac, who was called “Bookworm” or “Worm” for short, for obvious reasons.

Rose has become, not just a beautiful woman, but, thanks to her Uncle Alec's guidance, a strong and independent one, determined to use her fortune to help the needy, rather than to shine in high society, and then marry one of her cousins to keep the fortune in the family. Ironically, by the book's end, Rose has decided to marry one of her cousins after all, but not the one who seemed destined for her till chapter fifteen. My big disappointment was that Rose ended up with the quiet, serious Mac, not the glamorous, debonair Charlie. For it's one thing to *be* a bookworm oneself, and quite another thing to marry one. True, there was something dangerous and wayward about Charlie, so that even if he had lived, Rose had become wary of tying her fate to his. But wasn't it a woman's role to save men like that from themselves? It did not bother me that Rose was content with being the poet's inspiration, rather than be the poet herself, or that Phoebe should give up her promising career as a singer, to marry another Campbell cousin, because “birds sing sweetest in their own nests. . .” All was well in the world.

Women of my generation will recall that as schoolgirls we all had “autograph books,” with pages to be filled by our friends, noting down their “favorite color,” “favorite flower” and the like. I blush to remember that under “ambition” I actually wrote: “to be a real woman—pure, noble, good, and true,” the models for which were Rose Campbell and her best friend Phoebe.

That Christmas, Tita Pacita's gift to me was *Pollyanna* by Eleanor H. Porter, the 1946 Grosset & Dunlap edition, with a child's face on the pale aqua cover, short-haired, freckled, and smiling cheerfully.

After reading each new book, I always looked forward to talking about it with Tita Pacita. And, after finishing this one, I think I said something to my aunt about its being quite surprising for an orphan to be so glad about so many things. Tita

replied that it was a kind of gift: some people had it and some didn't. It occurred to me then that Tita Pacita herself was a bit like that. She was a cheerful person—even, perhaps, a happy one—despite the many things that had gone badly in her life. Like the trouble with her leg, which doctors had not been able to diagnose, let alone cure, and which was so painful that she walked with a pronounced limp.

And how the Japanese had killed her fiancé (and his father, their neighbors, and servants) during the war and she her never found someone good enough to replace him.

I told Tita Pacita that she reminded me a little of Pollyanna, and asked her if she too played the “glad game.” This made her laugh, and she said, no, she wasn't a Pollyanna, though she thought that wasn't such a bad thing to be. “Why not try playing the game now and then yourself?” she said to me with a smile. And for a little while I actually did try. But I wasn't any good at it.

The books that I received in the years following that Christmas were a real source of gladness though. Their plots followed the same pattern. A young girl—either a complete orphan or half a one—poor but bright, is adopted by an aunt, or by two aunts, or by an uncle, or even by total strangers. She must take a long trip to get to her new home. And upon her arrival, she finds that she is not quite welcome. (Rose Campbell is the exception, being an heiress and surrounded by loving relatives from the start.) She is skinny and plain, and too talkative, too excitable, too daring, too vain, too impertinent, too. . . different! (In the case of Anne Shirley, she is not only all that, but she's also *not* a boy, which is what Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert asked the orphanage to send.) But the place itself is of extraordinary charm. The heroine derives solace from it. She might be lonely, but she is surrounded by the natural beauty of the countryside, and the villagers or townspeople she gets to meet and know, are simple, warm, kind-hearted people, though of course there is no lack of sly, petty, gossipy ones among them.

Acceptance and affection have to be worked for. And in the beginning the going is rough. But the girl has a good brain, a brave heart, a wonderful imagination, a sense of humor, and a natural goodness that win her some allies—someone else in the family, or a maid, or a neighbor, or a school teacher, and, most important, another young girl who becomes her best friend. There is also the boy—or young man—the prince-in-waiting, who from the beginning sees, not the ugly duckling, but the swan to be, and proves the staunchest ally of all. Eventually even the most grim and most dour guardians relent, and find that they cannot do without Rebecca, or Anne, or Elnora or Betsy or Jerusha. And as the curtain falls, the heroine stands, slender and lovely, and ready for the next phase in her life, which now seems to promise wonderful things.

I once asked Tita Pacita why she and Mama had chosen to give me these books in particular and Tita Pacita said that it was because they had loved the books too when they were girls. I accepted that answer and thought no more about it.

Revisiting those books now, I asked myself: but why *did* Mama and Tita Pacita love them? And I think I know the answer. Mama and Tita knew what it was like to be orphaned and uprooted. When Mama was only seven, and Tita Pacita was five, they lost their father. They remember their father as a tall, strikingly handsome man, with fair skin and wavy hair. He was Governor of Bataan and was shot in his own office by a political enemy. Their mother then took them to Bataan, to live with her father-in-law, who was also her uncle. Their mother, my Lola Mariquita, was retracing a journey made by her own mother, my Great Grandmother Socorro. Socorro's husband was a violinist, playing with an orchestra in Manila, who had married a *zarzuela* star (Socorro), formed a theatre company of his own, and transplanted them all, including his wife and children, to Nueva Caceres. But he also joined the Katipunan, and was arrested, along with fourteen other men, by the Guardia Civil, tortured, brought back to Manila in chains, and shot in Bagumbayan, thus becoming the Quince Martires de Naga. Great Grandmother Socorro, whose house and belongings had been confiscated by the Guardia Civil, brought her daughters to Bataan and entrusted them to the care of her brother-in-law in Bataan, while she herself returned to Manila, to try to earn a living again in the theater. She brought with her only a little boy, her only son.

But that is another story.

(These excerpts from a work-in-progress. They were first posted in sections, as Notes on Facebook. It occurred to me then why this account of my early readings does not seem to include any Philippine material. I remember putting the question to my mother when I had myself become a mother and a teacher. Her answer was a simple one: she actually had never found any. At least not in the places where she bought my books.

She was referring mainly to the Catholic Trade, and the Philippine Education Co., or PECO, which is where I used to go myself when I was old enough to choose my own books.

Did Mama, perhaps, not look hard enough?

I think that the truth of the matter is that my mother, though she had herself been a writer of short stories, and a journalist, was not really aware of literature in any of the Philippine languages, including Tagalog. Nor was my father. Mama went to a public school (what later became Mapa High School), one of the top public schools set up by the Americans during the Commonwealth Period, and then to UP to take up English, though she did not complete her course. Papa went to De La Salle, and then to the UP

College of Engineering. In their time, Tagalog was not even being taught as a subject in school.

A few years ago, when I was doing some research for an essay I was writing on modern tales written by Filipino women who write in English, I found some information, which I included in the paper (eventually published as “New Tales for Old” in my book, *Fabulists and Chroniclers* [UP, 2008]).

According to Reinerio Alba, the first efforts to introduce schoolchildren to Philippine folk material in literature in English are contained in the *Philippine Readers Series* prepared by Camilo Osias in the 1930s. In the '50s, writers like Lydia Arguilla, Maximo Ramos, and I. V. Mallari tried their hand at retelling folktales. And in the '60s, PAMANA published five books for young adults, some of which were inspired by folk tales, among them *Makisig* by Gemma Cruz Araneta (“Nurturing Children’s Literature in the Philippines, July 23, 2003. Gilda Cordero Fernando’s *Hogle and the King’s Soup*, a fairy tale, was also published by PAMANA in 1963.

But I recalled that Nick Joaquin’s “*May Day Eve*,” a literary tale for adults was published in 1947; his other tales followed soon after. And Gilda Cordero Fernando’s early tales were published before 1962. So fantasy (in English) in the Philippines seems to have taken a different route from the route it took in Europe, making its appearance at about the same time in literature for children and literature for adults.

Shortly after writing that essay, I looked up the *Philippine Readers Series* and learned that the series consisted of six volumes, published by Ginn and Co. in Boston in 1932, and adopted as official textbooks for the Philippine elementary schools. They contained myths, folktales and biographies of heroes, and were illustrated by Pablo and Fernando Amorsolo. They must have been out of print by the time I entered elementary school because I never saw a single one. Or maybe the private schools chose not to use them.

About children’s literature in Filipino, my knowledge is limited to recent developments. I know that Adarna House, the pioneer and leading publisher of children’s literature, founded by National Artist for Literature Virgilio Almarino, began publishing children’s storybooks in the mid-’70s. It now also publishes children’s literature in English, offers a broad range of educational products, and has even established its own laboratory school, *Raya*.

Tahanan Books, another publisher of children’s books, was founded in 1991. *Lampara Books* was founded in 1997, as a sister company of *Precious Pages Corporation*, established by Segundo Matias Jr. and Richard Reynante.

But all this happened long after the period covered by this excerpt. My discovery of Philippine literature in English in this memoir happens in the chapters covering that period of my life when I was first introduced to it. In short, when I was in high school.)