



Where We're from

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FISHERMAN'S DAUGHTER

Being surrounded by rivers that flow into Manila Bay, much of life in the formerly unified towns of Malabon and Navotas revolves around water. My mother would sometimes talk about her family's humble beginnings with the unmistakable pride typical of those who have managed to surpass such beginnings. When her parents were starting out, her father was a fisherman in a village full of fishermen while her mother, like many other wives and mothers, sold whatever her father brought home at the nearby wet market.

For someone who has never had to catch or sell anything for her own sustenance, it may seem like such a hard life. But this was in the late 1930s and people in fishing villages had yet to acquire middle class notions and aspirations and every other person simply worked for a living.

Leonardo, my mother's father, came to own a single fishing boat, which he fondly named after his children. Given that a boat can only have one name and Leonardo had five children, he would name the boat *Minerva* for a few months, then paint over the name so that the boat would bear the next child's name, *Luzviminda*, until it was time to yet again rename the boat in honor of the next child. Her father had this fundamental sense of fairness, although I've always wondered why he couldn't have just named the boat *Elisa* after his wife and saved all that paint.





POLLY POCKET

When I was growing up, while my father would take me shopping for clothes at the mall and ask me what I like, my mother would bring home clothes she bought for me from Divisoria or any of her *suking baratilyo* at the market. While my father enjoyed checking out different products at the grocery stores, she would spend her mornings haggling with the vendors at the market, which is something she is particularly good at. It's a rare talent to have a seller yield to your offer even when it's barely 60 percent of the initially stated price. She has always understood the value of money, and she has made it her mission to get all that she can squeeze out of every hard-earned centavo.

One time when I was eight years old, my father brought me with him to his office in Makati, which was just a couple of blocks away from my mother's office. We typed our names in his electric typewriter, made paper cups out of bond papers and used them for drinking water, then we played hooky and left the office early to go to Quad (before it was rebranded to Glorietta) where we killed time while waiting for my mother.

We passed by a small toy store and my eyes were immediately drawn to the window display—it was the Polly Pocket Schoolhouse. It was so beautiful and grand, especially when compared to the pink, round, child's palm-sized, Polly Pocket toy that I used as a necklace pendant then. I never wanted anything so much in my young life. It was ridiculously expensive, so my father said no, we couldn't buy it, but I could look at it. The saleslady took the toy from the display window so I could look at it up close. It had two levels. The upper level had the cafeteria and the gym, while the lower level had the classroom, the kitchen, and the toilet. The bell tower opened and inside was the music room and a bike rack. Outside was the playground with a slide and a basketball ring. When you pressed the chimney, the clock inside lit up. The doors to the toilet and the classroom swung open. My Polly Pocket necklace only had Polly Pocket in it. This one had four—Polly Pocket, Maria, Kim, and Miss Lila. It was better than all of my toys combined, and the more I saw it, the more I wanted it. But again, my father shook his head, thanked the saleslady, took my hand, and led me outside the store. I became very quiet, and I pouted and pouted as we walked away.

I don't know how long it took for my sulking to break my father's defenses. We went back to the store and my father walked out of it with a beaming child and a very expensive toy. Then I noticed that my father was looking at me and chuckling. I asked him why, and he said, "Lagot tayo sa mommy mo."

AMORSOLO'S INSPIRATION

During the days of the Spanish occupation, the three main elite industries in the town were the fishponds, the sugar refineries, and the *tabacalera*. Those who had a stake in these businesses were also the ones who owned the large, tile-roofed stone houses or *bahay na bato* that line the banks of the Malabon-Navotas River, several of which still stand to this day—the Luna-Benedicto House, the Paez House, the Lao-Luna House, the Martinez House, the Raymundo House, and the Luna House. The last house is said to have an Amorsolo painting on the ceiling. They say it is because Fernando Amorsolo paid court to one of the daughters of the house's first patriarch. But another painting of Amorsolo shows that he was captivated by something else in the place, too. He called it *Sunset over Malabon Fishponds*, and it is now housed at Adamson University in Ermita.

Perhaps nearly a century after Amorsolo labored over the painting on the ceiling, my mother found herself stepping into that very house. She had become best friends with the great-granddaughter-in-law of the woman who was pursued by one of the country's finest artists. It was a very different time, indeed, when the daughter of a fisherman and the daughter of one of the most affluent families in town end up teaching at the same local high school and become the best of lifelong friends. They must have known that their friendship was going to last them a lifetime because long before either of them got married, they bought neighboring plots of land at the Holy Cross Memorial Park in Novaliches. When I asked *ninang* Thelma about it, she just said, "Kaya nga wala akong kagana-ganang mamatay, kasi hanggang doon, katabi ko 'yang mommy mo." And we all laughed about death and funeral plans in the house that Amorsolo once frequented.

THE 1896 REVOLUTION AND LEAN ALEJANDRO

Malabon is a very old town—not ancient, but old enough to have lived through the waves of white men invading our lands. The Spaniards descended upon the town bearing the cross and the Bible, while the Americans came with guns. It is said that the latter came with artillery because they have learned from the previous colonizers of the "town people's record of defiance against colonial rule."

History books mention Malabon as a site of resistance. Nick Joaquin claims that Andres Bonifacio picked a date in August for an assembly of *katipuneros* in 1896 specifically so that it would coincide with the feast of San Bartolome de Malabon—the town's patron saint who holds the Bible in one hand while his other hand is raised, wielding a bolo. By then, the *guardia civil* were on high alert and had set up checkpoints in various places to catch members of the Katipunan. Being caught



carrying a bolo then became easily justifiable. They were simply attending the feast in Malabon, where the locally made large knives were merely symbolic, and were therefore, non-threatening even though the blades remained as sharp as ever.

Malabon is where katipuneros fought against the guardia civil, and for many of them, it was a fight to the death. They were executed at the San Bartolome Church, prompting the government then to set up a graveyard right in the church's backyard. That's one thing about the Spaniards, I suppose—they may have been animals in battle, but their religious dictum bound them to adhere to the corporal works of mercy. Hence, they buried the dead. Not much later, the government gave the order to build the cemeteries much farther away from the church and residential areas for sanitary reasons, making the San Bartolome cemetery one of the few remaining from that period.

Almost a century later, Malabon would see the birth of a more recent figure of resistance—a thin young man who wore rubber slippers everywhere and was known for keeping his hairless, slender toes strikingly clean. He was also known for his impassioned speeches and his charisma that attracted even the *colegialas* as far as Cebu. His name was Leandro Alejandro, and he went to the same school as the one Gilda Cordero Fernando, Alex Magno, and Juan Ponce Enrile had all attended years before—the Dominican-run St. James Academy, formerly called Maryknoll. While Lean Alejandro dedicated his life to exposing and fighting against the injustices of Martial Law, Juan Ponce Enrile played a major role in putting Martial Law in place. While Lean Alejandro was gunned down by unknown assailants at 27, Juan Ponce Enrile remains very much alive well into his nineties that he has become a national anomaly. It's interesting how people bred in the same place could turn out very differently.

HIGH SCHOOL THEME BOOKLET DEBACLE

My mother was raised on one principle: self-reliance. For her, this meant knowing how to fend for herself which unwittingly translated into her own version of resistance. One of the stories she told me a number of times is about the time she had a run-in with her first year high school class adviser. The teacher asked her to sell formal theme booklets to her classmates, which she did, starting from the front row and making her way toward the ones at the back. She was almost at the last row when an errant classmate from one of the front rows asked her for a booklet, and when she dismissed him by saying, "Babalikan kita, nakaraan na ako diyan," he told their teacher, "Ma'am, si Minerva, ayaw akong pagbilhan." The teacher suddenly flared and yelled at my mother, "Minerva! Hindi ba't sinabi ko sa unahan ka mag-umpisa?" To which my mother retorted, "Saan ba ako nag-umpisa? Hindi ba sa unahan nga?" The response



she got was three-fold. First, her adviser said, “Aba, Minerva, mas mataas pa ang tinig mo kaysa sa guro!” Second, the teacher never called her in class again, not even when hers was the only hand raised in class. Third, her grade in English, which her adviser taught, remained 83 throughout all four quarters of the school year. She transferred to a different school the next year, and there, she thrived on academic achievements.

UP “WALKOUT”

UP has its wealth of brilliant professors, but it is undeniable that there will always be the occasional crazy ones. We had one of them during junior year in UP Baguio. She handled one of the regional literature courses, and from the very beginning, she made it clear that she resented us. She would mutter things like, “*Ang yayabang ninyong mga Inglisera kayo!*” The course had a bilingual policy, as long as you used each language properly, which we did, so the root of her resentment was a mystery to us all. On one particularly nasty meeting, she was set off by a classmate who made the mistake of checking the time on her wristwatch. She went into a convoluted rant then walked out but after several minutes, she came back into the classroom. We thought she had calmed down, but apparently she only returned so she could give us an encore. She walked out again after that. I think she was expecting someone to come after her after the first time she walked out to apologize and console her, and the fact that nobody did incensed her even more.

By the next meeting, I had prepared a letter of complaint against her lack of professionalism addressed to the department chair as well as the dean. All my classmates signed it. I was not privy to what happened during her meeting with the chair and the dean, but she surprisingly became very civilized after that. By the next year, she was gone. Evidently, she wasn’t dead, but she had moved on to other institutions. A few years later, when I was working in Manila, I saw that professor at the Pedro Gil Station of the LRT. We crossed each other’s path without a word or even a glance of acknowledgment.

HILDA KORONEL

My mother was named after the Roman goddess of wisdom. But like many in this pageant-crazy country, she has always been more drawn to beauty. As she was growing up in the 1950s and the 1960s, she followed the glittering lives of celebrities. She found Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor beautiful, yes. But she followed the local showbiz scene much more closely. Up to this day, she would strongly defend her preferences—Amalia Fuentes or Susan Roces? Amalia, naturally, because Susan’s face is too round. Nora Aunor or Vilma Santos? She finds it almost sacrilegious that



there is even any comparison between the two, for Vilma's fair skin, petite and svelte figure, and noticeable poise trump whatever acting or singing skill Nora has.

When the Ultravista Cinema opened in Hulong Duhat, Malabon, she was among the first ones there, wearing the requisite Peter Pan collar dress of the past decade that managed to spill at the beginning of the next. It must have been quite an event—the star of Lino Brocka's *Insiang* was cutting the ribbon of the newest theater in an old fishing village on the northern edge of Metro Manila. With its shanties on stilts bordering the river and its small, unpaved roads, the movie might as well have been set in my mother's neighborhood which lies just across the bridge near the cinema.

In a photograph taken then, she is standing beside Hilda Koronel. Hilda Koronel, who my mother considers to be one of the most beautiful women in show business. Ever. "Napakaganda ng mukha! Tapos ang buhok niya, makapal na makapal at itim na itim. Ang mga daliri niya, hugis-kandila." You would think she is describing a Roman goddess, but looking at the photograph, I could only nod in agreement. Hilda Koronel does look very regal in that floor-length dress. Her thick, black hair is resting softly her shoulders as she smiles serenely at the camera while her adoring fan stood next to her.

It must have seemed so unlikely then that in just two decades, that cinema would close down and become abandoned, another relic of those days when people dressed their best to see the stars that descend upon their village like the goddesses of mythology. The abandoned cinema has since been turned into Wonderway, a supermarket known for selling the usual household items at a lower price. On some days, when she can be bothered with an extra twenty minutes of jeepney ride, my mother would wear her most comfortable shirt and yesterday's pair of pants and go to Wonderway for dishwashing liquid and laundry detergent.

CAMAY GIRL

My mother has never been one to indulge in vanity. She would only wear dresses on occasions that absolutely demand it, such as weddings and other formal events. On all other days, one would find her in jeans and a simple collared shirt. At home, she would putter around in a loose duster. She loathes heeled shoes, and the only traces of make up she ever wears are loose powder and a hint of lipstick in a subtle shade. Yet, she persists in her pursuit of beauty in others.

She taught high school English prior to marrying my father, and one of my first memories of her was when she told me the story of how Odysseus escaped from Polyphemus by blinding him and clinging on the underside of the cyclops' sheep as they went out of the cave. She had a wealth of literary names and characters on hand, but she chose to name me after a Camay Girl.



Camay is a beauty soap that was first made in the US in the 1920s and brought to the Philippines in the 1950s by Philippine Manufacturing Corporation (now Procter & Gamble). It apparently had enough significance in the country for its first box to be gifted to then president Elpidio Quirino. Camay soap has since been discontinued, relaunched, and sold to Unilever. The woman my mother named me after went on to marry the billionaire Iñigo Zobel and become a publisher of a lifestyle magazine. It isn't so bad, I suppose. It could have been worse. At least she didn't name me after the original Camay Girls of the 1950s. Otherwise, I could have been "Bella" after Bella Flores. Or "Rosa" after Rosa Rosal. Or "Gloria" after Gloria Romero.

CABIN CREW

When I was twenty-one, I ended my not-very-conscientious-college-student life with a 1.77 average, the Outstanding Thesis award, and a degree in Language and Literature. My mother told me I did well and suggested that I apply to different airlines to be a flight attendant.

I did drop off resumes at Qatar Airways and Asiana Airlines. The former said they cannot process my application until I gained at least 10 kilos (yes, *kilograms*) because I was "very much underweight," while the latter called me up again and again until I reached the final interview. The final interview was quite an experience. We were sent inside a conference room in groups of ten and each of us had a number pinned on our tops. On one side of the room was a long table where eight of the company's executives were seated while in the middle of the room was a small table which had a fishbowl with folded pieces of paper inside.

The first part of the interview required us to stand at the back of the room and once our number is called, we had to walk towards the fishbowl, draw a piece of paper, read out the question written in it, give a clear answer, then make our way to the back of the room.

For the second part of the interview, we had to stand straight and tall in front of the panel like we were going to be shot by a firing squad and answer all the questions directed at us—"Number 25, how old are you? Number 32, have you worked at another airline?" I was "Number 28" and I was asked many things. The last of which was, "Why aren't you wearing makeup?" To which I replied, "I was wearing makeup earlier, but it must have worn off on my way here." They gave me a follow up question, "What will you do, then, when you have a fourteen-hour flight? You always need to be in makeup." I retorted, "Then I suppose I'll just get a better brand of makeup." Obviously, I did not get a call back after that.

By then, I had already started contributing short features to a travel magazine,





so my mother and I agreed on a *modus vivendi*—I would apply as ground staff to Philippine Airlines. That way, I would stay put in the country and work as a freelance writer, while she would still have a daughter working at an airline and get all the travel benefits and whatever boasting rights that come with it. For a few months, I lived this double life—wearing heels and pantyhose while memorizing all the codes of the complex airline check-in system and dealing with passengers all day, then reverting to jeans and flat shoes while taking short trips and interviewing resort managers and tourism officers the rest of the time.

On the day I signed my contract with Philippine Airlines, I had lunch with my mother at one of the restaurants in Robinson's Place Ermita. The mall is right next to the PAL Learning Center. I asked her, "Babayaran mo naman 'yung bond kapag naramdaman kong ayoko talaga dito, di ba?" She told me, "Oo. Basta subukan mo lang." Several months later, my father helped me draft my very first resignation letter, then drove me from Malabon all the way to Centennial Terminal 2 to turn it in.

Soon after, I was offered the editorship to the magazine I was contributing to and my mother finally saw how I could still get places, not by serving peanuts on the plane or by putting passengers in the right flights, but by writing about them.

IMELDA MARCOS

During the Marcos years, then-Metro Manila Governor and Human Settlements Minister Imelda Marcos had the government buy all the fishponds in Dagat-Dagatan. Accounts say that the families were promised the full assessed value of their fishponds, but ended up with only 10 percent of that. It was the height of Martial Law. Nobody complained. The government covered up all the fishponds with soil and rocks. They called it "Dagat-Dagatan Reclamation Project," and it was supposed to be a site for low-cost housing. Like so many of the grand plans of the time, the project failed. The place became a magnet for informal settlers who were then promised that they would own the finished houses once Marcos is reelected. The entire area now has the largest population of informal settlers the town has ever seen. And judging by the number of children spilling out from there, it is growing by the day. This failed pet project of Imelda Marcos has also caused the floods in Malabon to worsen exponentially. The low land, terrible drainage, and vast reclaimed lands combined to make Malabon the poster town for nonexistent urban planning.

Over a decade ago, one caption on a newspaper's front page read: "poor man's Venice." It was a picture of a man standing on a makeshift raft, maneuvering his way through the chest-deep flood, complete with floating clumps of garbage. A short distance behind him stood the run-down shanties whose stilts are submerged in



water. Sometimes the flood rises so high, it becomes hard to tell where the road ends and the river begins. “Poor man’s Venice.” That is a romantic way of putting it, although one would be hard-pressed to find romance in traversing the streets flooded with sewage water, complete with floating bits of plastic, human and animal excrement, and the occasional animal carcass. The stubborn romantic may consider it to be a “poor man’s Venice.” For the rest of us, it may be just the perfect setting for a Brillante Mendoza film—the kind that exploits poverty and celebrates all the grimy aspects of a place.

Yet my mother’s mother never really complained of the constant flooding, and neither did my mother. Malabon has come to be the ultimate female town. The tides are controlled by the cycle of the moon, and the people of Malabon have learned to live with that. In fact, our calendars not only bear the days, months, feast days, and special holidays, but also tiny numbers beside each date that indicate the time for both high tide and low tide, as well as how high those tides are in meters. People have learned to mark the high tide that will coincide with their commute to work or with their errands, and they made the necessary adjustments to accomplish their tasks on time.

My mother’s mother would watch the water seep and rise from the gaps in her kitchen floor. Then she would get her special *panlimas* tool made of a motor oil container cut at the top then attached to a flat piece of wood that serves as a handle, then start scooping the water and emptying it outside the back door. This used to drive my mother crazy. She would tell her mother, “Bababa rin ‘yan! Huwag mong intindihin. Pinapagod mo lang ang sarili mo.”

Sometimes, my grandmother would relent and allow the water to fill her kitchen floor. Once, when the floodwater was more river-and-pond water than sewage water, she caught a live *bangus* by hand right from her flooded kitchen. The young ones including myself were quite repulsed by the idea of having floodwater fish for dinner, even if it was a live one. But the older ones told us, “Bakit? Diyan naman talaga nanggagaling lahat ng kinakain ninyo!”

If anyone has made peace with the cycle of flooding, it’s my mother. The water will rise, and it will fall. That’s just how it is in Malabon. Oftentimes, the flood brings garbage; sometimes, it brings live fish. She didn’t even get mad at Imelda Marcos for it. But then, there are so many more things to get enraged at the Marcoses for than just the constant flooding.

COMPROMISES

Beyond the constant flooding, Malabon is not the kind of place that gets people talking. It goes about its way in the same manner as many old people—trying to go





along with the dictates of the times, getting by haphazardly but still pretty much stuck in its own ways. For all its hip new cafes and mini malls, it remains a fishing village at heart. This would somehow explain the uncomfortable compromises that can be found in Malabon. The best example of this would be road use. While today's daily frenetic state doesn't give much room for old practices that worsen the already unbearable traffic situation, Malabon still couldn't do away with its multitudes of *prusisyons* and *sagalahans* and so this year, the town implemented a new rule: the shorter processions can only take up half the road. What you now get is a narrow road filled on one side with slow-moving, candle-wielding, Hail-May-uttering rows of the religious and a faster-moving, steering-wheel-gripping, curse-muttering line of impatient motorists on the other.

Another example would be the numerous dining spots that have sprouted all over town. While the erection of a Catholic Church served as a marker for a town's civilization in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, in the past three decades, it is the opening of a Jollibee branch that says that a town has truly arrived. The first of four Jollibee branches in Malabon opened in the mid90s right in the heart of the town. But it wasn't until a few years ago when the people of Malabon started acting upon their dreams of gentrification. They opened cafes that serve real brewed coffee on Illy machines. They opened shops that serve milk tea and frappe. They opened restaurants that offer Mexican or Japanese cuisine. They opened stalls that sell churros with dip. But one cannot truly betray his gut, can he? Much like the Filipino who has lived and worked in the US for decades but still resorts to all possible tricks to get his hand on some *patis*, a native of Malabon can eat all the sushi and nachos and churros he wants, but he still has to satisfy his gut and what his gut truly desires is *pancit* and real *kanin-at-ulam* meals. Hence, you get panciterias-cum-milk tea shops and cafes that serve *silog* meals.

My mother somehow exercises similar compromises. It started after she retired from her office work in Makati. She used to go only every Saturday afternoon, but after her retirement, she started going every day. It initially seemed odd considering that she hasn't been particularly religious, but I suppose going to mass every day is a good hobby as any for any retiree, especially since she lives within walking distance of the town's two main Catholic churches.

Unless her errands bring her to Bayan, which is where the 405-year-old San Bartolome Church is, she always goes to the smaller church or *visita* in Concepcion. She makes it a point to attend the novena for the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception before the mass, although I suspect that her choice of parish has more to do with comfort than devotion. The San Bartolome Church is typical of all old





churches—poorly lit and not well ventilated, even though these conditions have significantly improved from two decades ago when bats made a home out of the church’s cavernous ceiling and freely defecated over the bowed heads of the pious. There is a third church, located between the house and the Concepcion Church, also dedicated to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception – La Purisima Concepcion. It is actually where she got married, but she has never heard mass there after her wedding, save for my first baptism and a few funerals of her husband’s relatives. She may have married into one of the oldest Aglipayan families in Malabon, but she still went about her Catholic ways.

Her daily masses made her a familiar face in church, and since in this particular aspect, Malabon is still extremely parochial and everybody still knows everybody else’s business, the ladies of the church invited her to join them in the Catholic Women’s League. When I asked her, “Pumayag ka?” She answered, “Ayoko nga. Alam mo ba ang totoong ibig sabihin ng CWL? Chismisang Walang Lagot. Ayoko ngang sumali doon.” One would expect her belated religiosity to temper her judgmental nature and address her impatience, and perhaps it has. These days, whenever a stressful situation comes up, my mother just takes a lot of deep breaths and mutters a new mantra that she found in a word puzzle: “The moment you learn to ignore is the moment you find peace.”

CHURCH WARS

Trying to avoid religious activities of different kinds, given the location of our house on General Luna Street in Malabon, is practically impossible. Almost directly across the house is the Methodist Church, which doesn’t even have a patio so it is a mystery why they have a loud speaker that broadcasts their service to those outside the church. Oftentimes, we don’t mind it. But on some Sundays, it gets particularly loud, especially after they started using electric guitars and drums in their service. My mother would call their church office to request them to either lower the volume of the speaker, or direct it elsewhere. She is always polite in these requests, and they always obliged.

By virtue of our proximity, we have also come to learn just how interactive and interminable the service at the Methodist Church can be. Once, while my mother was on the phone, they began singing the activity song, “Ang mga ibon na lumilipad ay gawa ng Diyos, ‘di kumukupas . . .” She took a deep breath and carried on with her phone conversation, thinking that the song will end soon enough, just one more verse to go. “*Ang mga isda na lumalangoy ay gawa ng Diyos, ‘di kumukupas . . .*” As she was saying, “*Hay salamat, patapos na!*” they started singing a new verse, “*Ang mga aso*





na tumatahol ay gawa ng Diyos, 'di kumukupas . . ." She stopped talking on the phone for a second to ask me, "Ilang hayop pa ba ang meron sa kantang 'yan?"

But the Catholics do get their vengeance. There is always a prusisyon or a parade that holds that entire side of Malabon hostage by taking over the entire street, and the longer ones could last three to four hours, not counting the horrendous traffic that always follows. I don't know if my mother sees this Catholic domination of the streets as payback for the Methodist Church's weekly invasion of her aural space, but I do know that she enjoys watching all the processions from the terrace and even delights at the *musiko* [marching band] when it passes by.

EPISODES

My seventy-seven-year-old grandfather was in charge of picking me up from nursery school when I was four. Being a septuagenarian, he was wont to take afternoon naps and was prone to oversleeping. I got used to seeing each of my classmates get picked up by their mothers one by one until I was the only one left on the playground while the surly gardener tended the hedges. One afternoon, I got tired of waiting and decided I would just go home by myself. It wasn't that far. All I had to do was cross the street, walk down two blocks, turn left at the second alley, cross another street, and go straight until I see the familiar brown gate.

So I grabbed my red bag with the rabbit cartoon print, went out the gate, looked to the left and to the right and made sure that the jeepneys and tricycles were not coming too fast, and crossed the street. Before I reached the first alley, someone called my name, held me by the shoulders, and asked me why I was out all by myself. It was Nana Cora. She used to take care of me when I was younger, but she had since left to care for another baby. She walked me home, reminding me again and again never to be out on the street by myself without telling me why. My grandfather was just leaving the house when we got there.

I was five years old and in kindergarten when the 1990 Luzon earthquake struck. The elementary school bell had just gone off. Most of the students were making their way to the church patio where the school service jeeps were parked. Suddenly, the ground started shaking. I remember looking up and seeing parts of the church's outdoor ceiling break off. Cracks started snaking up and down like vines on its centuries-old columns. Then someone grabbed my hand. He was one of the older kids I shared the school service with. He said we needed to move. We ran away from the columns and toward the shaking jeep.





When I was nine, I developed a fascination for cats and so my mother picked up a random kitten lurking around the market she visited one morning and brought it home. The kitten was pure white with light blue eyes, and I named it Milky. She was the first animal allowed inside the home, and she showed me how grateful she was by developing the habit of climbing onto my lap and sleeping there. But we knew nothing about litter training, which meant that Milky peed and pooped wherever she pleased and we just had to follow the smell and clean up the area. I don't remember how long we had Milky, but at some point, my father said he couldn't take the mess and the smell anymore, so I had to give up the cat. I remember it was my mother who talked to me about it, but I no longer remember how the conversation went. All I know is that one day, my mother put Milky in her *bayong* and took her back to the market where she was banished to live the feral life once again.

I got drunk for the first and only time in my life when I was twenty-seven, at a high school reunion. The shot glass of vodka kept making rounds on the table, and the conversation was good because reminiscing about high school is always good. And before I knew it, the room was spinning. I excused myself and started puking in the bathroom. I felt better after throwing up, and a friend dropped me off at my house. It was past one in the morning, and my father was waiting up for me. I kissed him goodnight and went to my room. Thank god vodka doesn't have that alcohol smell. I waited until I heard him go into his room then I went to the kitchen to get a few Ziploc bags and a large bottle of water. I spent the next couple of hours in my room vomiting in Ziploc bags, sealing them, and drinking water. In the morning, while everyone stayed in their rooms or was out for errands, I took my bags of vomit to the bathroom, emptied the contents into the toilet and flushed, poured toilet cleanser into the bowl and scrubbed the sides before flushing again, rinsed the bags of vomit residue then threw them in the trash.

I am collapsing entire walls of memory, trying to distill them so they would yield some meaning. I am still unsure if I found any. Perhaps these are just random, disparate moments, which are what much of our lives are made of. It has been almost four years since I left home to set up my own house. We have pretty much made it into a home—our books cram the many shelves, our photos are displayed in various areas, our five cats have comfortably settled in, but I still feel a vague detachment from this





place. It's as if I have left the entirety of my past in Malabon, and that past is merged with the life my mother lived and both of them are fused with the town's history. Whenever I think of my hometown, I see my grandfather's boat and my mother talking back to her teacher, and my four-year-old self in my kindergarten uniform with the sailor collar crossing the street, and the cracks on the church's centuries-old pillars, and the katipuneros wielding their bolos, and Imelda Marcos's failed projects, and Amorsolo's sunset.

NOTES

- 1 Polly Pocket is a brand of children's toy by Mattel that came out in the early 1990s. Its main feature is its size—all the dolls are tiny and are housed in compact cases that fit in the pocket.
2. Quoted from Francisco A. Magno's essay "Politics, Elites, and Transformation in Malabon," *Philippine Studies* 41, no. 2 (1993): 204-06.
3. For more details on this story, read "The Eve of St. Bartholomew" in Nick Joaquin, *A Question of Heroes* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2005), 77-85.
4. Magno, "Politics, Elites, and Transformation in Malabon," 204-06.
5. See Patricio N. Abinales's Rappler article on Lean Alejandro published on August 15, 2015, "Lean Alejandro's Tsinelas Revolution." <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/102621-lean-alejandro-tsinelas-activist>.
6. Read Gilda Cordero Fernando's brief account of her stay in Malabon during the war in her autobiography *The Last Full Moon: Lessons on My Life* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2005), 47-49.
7. Read Juan Ponce Enrile's account of his life in Malabon and his years at St. James Academy in his autobiography *Juan Ponce Enrile: A Memoir* (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Publishing Inc., 2012), 78-90.
8. Although the parish priest did improve the church's lighting and ventilation, he "renovated" the old church instead of restoring it. The result is quite gaudy, which appealed to some parishioners, but several also expressed lament at such desecration of heritage. In a 2007 blog entry, heritage and tourism advocate Ivan Henares had this to say: "From a simple but elegant centuries-old church, Fr. Torrefiel has managed to turn it into a cheap, gaudy, tasteless, kitsch, cabaret-like interior ..." The rest of the entry may be found in this link: <http://www.ivanhenares.com/2007/10/malabonmetro-manilas-hidden-gem.html>.

