Abstract

"The Whistle of My Father" is about a man who chose a life away from family in his desire to provide for the future he thought his children deserved—a path taken by many Filipino fathers in the 1980s and in the decades that followed. This is a story told through the eyes of a son, surely to resonate with other sons whose fathers have realized their dreams for them by working in a foreign land.

Keywords

Devoted father, family, overseas Filipino workers, son, Middle East

THE WHISTLE OF MY FATHER

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AMBROSIA WORE HER hair long, nearly as long as the *saya* that covered her skinny frame. None of the sepia photographs ever showed her smile. She was prayerful and once drove away evil spirits on a bamboo road on the way home. I gathered that she was stern from the way she spoke with me in English in her thick accent. Her husband Manuel was quiet throughout the few days of their visit sometime in the 1970s. He was short, unassuming, and settled himself with morning sips of Sioktong in a cup he wrapped with his stubby and wrinkled fingers. Though I never saw them again, my father always mentioned them in the stories of his rustic childhood, which he repeated animatedly during extended dinners when he was around—crossing rice paddies, pumping water from the well, chasing ducks. He went to school in slippers and claimed that he was *bibo* and adored by his *maestras*. Lured by the promise of Manila, he was one of those who would leave his hometown and not return.

A plot of land in a village by the valley was too irresistible to pass—a perfect place to raise a family. A bungalow was built within the standards and the mortgage he could afford and nothing more. A *quatro aguas* roof covered the living room, dining room, and kitchen on one side and the toilet and two bedrooms on the other, the translucent glass windows allowing sunshine to warm up the beds in the morning. The front door faced south; the edges of its square panels showed amid its dark stain. The eaves hung by a meter from the walls, and the wooden slats along the side of the gutter were meant for ventilation. The untouched spaces around the house were to become his field, where he could do anything that he pleased. He was named Thor, after the god of thunder, but earth was his element. He was at ease with dirt in his hands as he was a son of a farmer. He fenced the land with cassava plants, which he propagated by thrusting their cuttings into the ground. He showed me how the tubers were harvested, cleaned, boiled, and coated with brown sugar for an afternoon snack. The cassava leaves, with their soft and brittle stalks, were made by girls into toy necklaces. Their stems were straight and shaved off into swords or spears, depending on what the boys imagined themselves to be.

He grew what he wanted to eat—*kamias* for his *paksiw na isda*, *alugbati* for his *monggo*, *nangka* for his *kadios*, *malunggay* for his *tinola*, and his daily staples of *kamatis*, *kalamansi*, and *sili*. He grew *aratiles* for its shade, *duhat* for its fruit, *ilang-ilang* for its fragrance, and *niyog* for its juice, meat, and fronds. The yard became his garden, nursery, and arboretum–a rainforest to the rest of us, an overgrowth that almost engulfed the house. The banana tree was the easiest to grow and almost as versatile as its coconut counterpart—the *puso ng saging* was shredded, the *ubod* of its stem was chopped, its broad leaves were used for the traditional *kamayan*. Saliva and water rolled or slid down the slippery surface of the fan-like leaves of the *gabi* plant, which I believed were used by elves for cover when it rained. The papaya tree was the most prolific, always abundant, the unripe fruits often solicited by neighbors for their stew or *atsara*. I later learned to distinguish the male from the female papaya tree by merely looking at their blooms. The hollow stalks of its leaves easily snapped and were used as straws to blow bubbles. The *bayabas* was the sturdiest, nearly unbreakable even if one hung upside down on its branches. Picking the fruit too early, a *bubot* would be a hard chew, but picking it too late might lead to ingesting *uod* camouflaged in the fruit's pink flesh. Its leaves were boiled to cleanse *galis* on the legs.

I always saw him in loose *sando* and *puruntong* shorts, moving soil here and there, watering saplings with his improvised containers, steadying stakes, tying guy strings, pruning dried leaves, and taking out weeds with the kind of care only a man true to his craft could give. He bothered to wipe the sweat on his forehead with a *bimpo* only when it started dripping on the lenses of his *antipara*. When it was time for a break, my mother needed only to follow the traces of a melodious tune, and she would find him immersed in his world and whistling with delight in his accomplishments for the day. He whistled with his jaws set together, his mouth somewhat in a grin, air forced from the throat through his teeth, like hissing, but with wonderful music.

His devotion to his children was deep–but he was strict, and his words were seldom held back, frequently blunt, and piercing enough to be remembered. He was highly tolerant of boys and expected my occasional mischief. He never lifted a finger, except for the instance when I found myself on the receiving end of a belt. My sister and I were playing with fragments of concrete floor tiles at the backyard when my curiosity possessed me to flip a piece high up into the air. It spun along its flat side as we observed its nearly vertical trajectory until it landed on her crown. She squirmed without making a sound, then slumped to the ground. I wiped the tears from her eyes and hollered for first aid. I was punished the moment he came home. The Band Aid that covered the small cut on her head was clear evidence of my wrongdoing. I refrained from flipping floor tiles thereon, especially when my sister was around.

He never scrimped on food, vitamins, or visits to the pediatrician for the dreaded injection on the buttocks. It always bothered him when any of his children were sick. One early evening, he lifted me from my bed and carried me to the nearby house of the only known doctor in our village. I felt his heavy breathing over the blanket that covered me and saw the shadows of the lampposts hurriedly moving past us. Though we knew him to be cynical about *albularyos*, he called on one from the *ibayo* to administer *tawas* when my fever persisted. The shape formed by candlewax droppings on the bowl of water showed the culprit behind my illness. I got well the day after, but it did not matter to him if the ritual had something to do with it.

We seldom dined out, and excursions were rare, but he found ways to make our experiences extraordinary. We visited Rizal Park once, on a New Year's Day. The Luneta playground was a child's dreamland:

monkey bars, swings, seesaws, slides, and a giant shoe where you could climb the spiral steps to get to a small window, provided you could stand the stench inside. Picture-taking at the monument of our national hero and his snappy guards was mandatory, and so with the carabao statue across the road. Some Saturdays were more special than the others. He brought me to the Love Bus terminal in Cubao for my first air-conditioned bus ride. With my chin barely above the windowsill, my eyes were glued to the glass pane throughout the trip to Makati, gazing in awed silence at the moving cityscape outside. *Wild Gee*se was the first of only two movies I remember watching with him—my introduction to Roger Moore. My heart pounded when I stepped inside the dark Coronet Theater and parted the thick curtains to get to the screening area. Later that same year, we braved the standing-room-only showing of *Superman I* starring Christopher Reeve. I sat on his lap before the man beside us offered his seat to me, not an unusual gesture from a stranger in those days, though it might have been due to my exuberant commentaries that he may have found unbearable.

He was drawn to the prospects of the Middle East when land-based overseas contract work was in its fledgling years. An uncle was a seafarer who fascinated me with his vivid description of the ships and tankers he boarded, as well as the ports they docked in. He would often boast of how Filipinos could ride the rough seas side by side with the Greeks, the master sailors of the world. When my father left in the early 1980s, I knew nothing about the city of Al Khobar except that that was a land of vast deserts, and instantly, I associated it with images of Lawrence of Arabia on horseback and scenes from *The Thief of Baghdad*. A few weeks after he left, I received a postcard of an airplane. It said that the airport was huge and clean, and so were the roads, but there were too few people to see; women's faces were covered, and it was improper to look at them directly. Through the years that followed, writing letters would become our primary means of keeping in touch, which he expected to be lengthy and full of details, especially if it was about school. Only a trained eye could decipher my father's handwriting, too cursive and unmindful of the lines on the paper; his ledger would easily be mistaken as a drug prescription; his signature was a forger's nightmare.

A fellow contract worker brought the first *padala* for each of his children—a robot that spewed smoke, an oversized baby doll that walked and talked, and a multilevel dollhouse. But I was more interested in the photos in the envelope for my mother, whose glossy margins looked different from the prints I usually saw. One picture showed a group of men around a long table, where only the bottles of cola and plastic cups were recognizable among several dishes. Its caption read "The white and round on the plate is bread." Another showed him in his trademark hands-on-waist pose, in long pants and plaid wool sweater: "Hot during the day but cold at night," it said. Sand radiated the heat of the sun during the day, making the air around it hot, and retained very minimal heat, thus the cooler surroundings at night.

He was born on the 24th of December, and his youngest on the 28th. To be away from family at this time of the year was one of the many sacrifices he would eventually learn to endure. Through a favor from a neighbor, we placed a collect long-distance call and took turns speaking with him an hour before midnight. Not all children got to spend Christmas dinners with their fathers; we joined them that night. The following morning, I did not bother to check the goodies in the stockings, as I expected that there would be none knowing that Santa did not ride camels. When it was our turn to send a package to him, it included sets of undershirts, sealed food, and voice messages that we recorded on C60 tapes from a borrowed cassette player.

The dates for his vacation were determined based on our birthdays or occasions when he wanted to be present. The house glowed the moment we knew he was coming home; curtains were changed, tile stains were scrubbed, and furniture was rearranged. Everyone in the household waited for his arrival. *Nilagang baboy*, *piniritong liempo*, and slices of mangoes were often served. I would rush to finish my meal for the highlight of the evening—the opening of the *balikbayan* box, its scent rejuvenating the room like freshly cut grass, intoxicating to a ten-year-old. He would let me explore the contents and take out the *pasalubong* one by one—chocolates, seedless red globe grapes, pears, a large can of orange juice powder, a large jar of instant coffee, large toothpaste tubes, and cans of corned beef with neat openers on its sides—items he knew we seldom got to buy. The jackets and clothes were usually stacked underneath. He never brought liquor as he did not drink, but he always managed to grab a ream of blue-seal cigarettes from the duty-free shop to give away to neighbors.

I developed a liking for the airport, understood it to be a gateway to other worlds, and yearned for my own chance to pass through its portals someday. But more than producing the captivating sounds and views of airplanes leaving the runway, it ushered in the discovery of feelings I never knew existed beyond the episodes of *Gulong ng Palad* and *Flordeluna*—beloved early-evening soap operas. No two faces in a sea of well-wishers looked the same. All held back tears as they embraced one another one last time. The kiss spoke most intimately in the absence of words—a reminder to always write and call, an assurance to always take care of oneself, or a promise to return. Seeing someone leave was like watching the sunset: one salvaged whatever one could of the passing moment until the light, warmth, and colors were completely taken away by the evening. There was always silence on the drive back home, but the melancholy waned as acceptance set in. One took comfort in knowing that the parting of ways was momentary and that soon enough, those who left, just like the soothing and bright rays of the sun, would return.

We became accustomed to his leaving, coming, and going. Somehow, we learned to live with our situation both ways and understood early its benefits and consequences. The stakes were clear to him from the very beginning: in exchange for the normalcy of family life, a job in a faraway land would allow for the exposure, and not the excesses, he felt his children deserved. A colored remote-controlled model replaced the cabinet-type black-and-white Toshiba television set in the sala, where he caught me many times sneaking to watch PBA (Philippine Basketball Association) games on school nights, especially when Francis Arnaiz was playing. Recording our voices became more convenient with our own mini component system, where I listened to the songs of Perry Como, Matt Monro, Nat King Cole, and Andy Williams from the dozens of tapes he bought on sale. The Betamax player allowed me to watch *Back to the Future* and *Electric Dreams* at my discretion. I learned to operate both the film and Polaroid cameras. The wooden fence was converted into solid blocks with metal gates, where a mailbox and a doorbell were installed. A portion of the front yard was cemented with washed-out pebbles, where a white garden set was placed. He felt rewarded with school report cards, the marks of which his children made sure did not disappoint.

Impressions of endless deserts were replaced by his anecdotes of modern buildings, beautiful mosques, state-of-the-art hospitals, elegant shopping malls, the King's palace, luxurious cars, and well-paved highways. He preoccupied himself with cooking, watching videotapes, and tending the potted plants that he lined up outside the doors of his quarters. He watched us grow only through the pictures he hung by the walls of his bed, which he mounted on illustration boards and covered with plastic. He was not known to be pious, but he relied on his faith and believed that his family was protected on his behalf. He was selective in his conversations, and when he engaged in them, he spoke affectionately of his children as if nothing else interested him. It was not surprising to encounter a few of his coworkers who seemed very familiar with our family. He moved where work took him—Dammam, Dhahran, Jeddah, and Riyadh—and he was in one those cities when the Gulf War broke out in the early 1990s. It was the only instance when we felt he was in danger, as he recalled accounts of the night sky being lit up by Patriot and Scud missiles.

After twelve years, he was able to see all his children through high school. He could not be prouder to see me go to the university he dreamed for me. But he was not finished. He would be spending another twelve years in Saudi Arabia until a liver cyst was found in a routine ultrasound. Though later ruled to be benign, this forced him to give up work abroad. The blessings of grandchildren brought newfound joy as he embraced the life of a *lolo.* He carried each one of them in his arms when they were babies and tirelessly watched them as toddlers—the way they held their spoons, scribbled with their crayons and pencils, stacked their blocks, read their numbers and letters, and sang nursery rhymes. He would squat down and look them in the eye, searching for glints or early signs of their interest that he could ignite in his vintage Nonoy way.

He found himself away from family again when his children left home to raise families of their own. Distance made it less convenient for us to narrow the gap, which years of being away from one another widened. But as chance would have it, an opportunity was presented to me one December evening, albeit an undesirable one. He admitted himself to a nearby hospital as he was getting chills caused by a fever. His visits to the hospital were not unusual to us, as he found care and comfort in the cold white walls of clinics and in the reassuring voices of doctors and nurses. His high temperature would come and go in the next two days, and so would the occasional involuntary shaking, prodding us to transfer him to another medical facility. While the ride in the ambulance was quick, it took a few hours before a private room was freed up and until all those hoses were placed on him.

I let midnight pass without waking him up. The faint popping of fireworks could be heard from inside the room. I drew open the blinds to watch the spectacle of colors spread behind the trees. He abhorred firecrackers, not for their noises but for the danger they posed. Despite this, he would still buy a pack of *rebentador* for me, and he would burn old newspapers in a metal can where I could throw them one by one to avoid having to light them on my own. My sisters would hold *luces* in their hands while I jumped around with the crackling of the *watusi*. The *trompilyo* and the fountain were lit, as a finale, and as the old year gave way to the new.

Five days passed—the longest I had ever spent in a hospital and the longest I had ever spent time with him alone—and there was no clear diagnosis yet of his condition. The frequent knocks on the door and the checking of his vital signs were becoming a meaningless routine when a lady doctor observed the unusual inflammation of his left eye. She suspected an infection, and to make sure, a fluid sample needed to be taken immediately to the lab. Without the benefit of anesthesia, the syringe needle pierced the pale part of his eye. He squeezed my hand and cried out my name in a way I had never heard before. Fathers toughened up their sons to prepare them for situations they would ultimately face on their own–but at that moment, the most a son could do to share in the pain of his father was to not turn his head and look away. I kept myself together and paid attention to the impromptu procedure that left him exhausted, but I was relieved when the abscess was removed. Subsequently, he underwent a four-hour operation to cleanse the eyeball and completely rid his body of infection, but it meant that he might not be able to see anymore with the affected eye. After another five days, we were discharged from the hospital and cleared to go home.

A housekeeper stayed with him as he regained his strength. He would recognize light pulses in his left eye, but its ability to see was completely lost. He remained busy and sought a small space he could rent for a barbershop. He sourced the barber's chairs, mirrors, air-conditioning unit, and other essential paraphernalia and hired the barber himself. It accommodated two customers at a time and drew a decent number of patrons, from young boys to old men his age. It earned him some profit, especially during school openings, graduation months, and fiestas. But even if it did not, it was a suitable pastime for a septuagenarian whose mind was still full of ideas and whose heart still overflowed with energy. Most importantly, it was his own, a late-life pursuit that he treasured dearly, and made him look forward to getting up from bed each day. Enthusiasm filled him once again, as he shared with us his conversations with those who frequented his shop. He was liberal in sharing his thoughts and advice to anyone who was willing to listen. He earned the loyalty of his barber who treated him like his own father.

We knew we could not make up for all that he missed—the *noche buenas*, *media noches*, movies, out-of-town trips, and Sunday Masses—but we tried. We learned to celebrate with a bottle of beer and a glass of wine; we learned to hug. It became my turn to tell him about my work, people I met, projects that kept me busy, and places I visited. He reminded me to always be fair—*huwag manlamang sa kapwa*. He framed pictures of his six grandchildren and displayed them by his bedside lamp, where a blood pressure monitor was a fixture. He connected with them through his own Facebook account and often posted comments that the kids always found amusing. His hair thinned, his grip softened, but his bearing, gait, and deep voice were unchanged. Age caught up with him and slowed him down with the medical conditions that come to a man in his eighties—hypertension, diabetes, and prostatitis. Despite this, he did not deprive himself of the pleasures of eating crispy *pata*, *kare-kare*, ice cream, and cakes. He rode jeepneys and tricycles to move around, rejecting our offers to get him a cane. He was stubborn to those who did not know him, but to those who did, he was a persistent man—one who believed in himself and made others believe in themselves as well.

The main door of the house has been revarnished but cannot hide the marks of the chest-high floodwaters that rushed in one weekend when the Marikina River succumbed to the downpour and overflowed. The lantern made of seashells that hung by the front eaves has lost its luster to dust. The spacious yard on the side of the house has been reduced by a covered carport, while a kitchen extension and storage occupy the back. The mighty Pico mango tree still stands, with clusters of its fruit swaying with the wind. Ornamental plants are scattered in patches on the ground, their branches reaching for the sky and their leaves shining in the sun; the soil cradling them is moist and cleared of little rocks as butterflies flutter around. The *walis tingting* rests in a corner while the garden hose sleeps neatly coiled under the faucet. The dogs lay in their makeshift wooden cages, unconcerned by the loud chirping of African lovebirds competing with the crowing of roosters. I can still imagine him strutting around with a hand towel on his shoulder, whistling, though its tune can no longer be heard. None of his children ever knew if it was a love song or a lullaby. All they know is that it was beautiful, and that it meant he was satisfied with what he had done.