

A Burial Place

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I was still a child when we came to Masiu many years ago, but even then, Masiu felt small to me. We arrived in the afternoon of 1 Aug 2003, the day when Papang passed away. Difficult days were ahead of us and Mindanao was in the middle of armed conflict.

It was the first quarter of the school year and I was enrolled in primary school at the local daycare. My older siblings were in high school. This was the part of my childhood where I had forgotten almost everything. That morning in August unfolded like the thicket of trees I watched from inside a moving vehicle – unrecognizable and passing. The only memories I remembered of my early childhood were my fourth birthday and Papang's death. That, and the week that followed it. The years that came after Papang's death were a blur.

On the first day of August, Mamang had received a phone call from our aunt in Masiu, who had informed her of Papang's passing. When she received the call, I had just awoken from sleep. I drowsily sat on the Narra chair and watched her talk over the phone. She was facing away from me. I looked around to see if any of my siblings had awakened, but our house was still quiet.

In the mornings, our house was unusually cold. We didn't have a ceiling so the gap between the roof and the walls drove the chilly morning mist inside, landing on every furniture and corner of the house. I lay on the cold wooden chair and closed my eyes. I tried to whisk away my sleepiness as the cold embraced my skin.

Between muffled words, I heard Mamang cry as she asked about how it happened. She pleaded not to begin with the burial until we arrived. From what I remembered, our aunt told her that it might be impossible to postpone the burial, as it should be done before sunset. Mamang promised that we would be in Masiu by afternoon. When I opened my eyes, she was staring at me. Her eyes had poured heavily with tears. She told me that Papang died, then immediately climbed the two-step stairs to the bedroom, waking my siblings one by one.

At seven in the morning, we had packed all our bags and squeezed ourselves in the van. While my siblings and I waited, Mamang argued with the driver and insisted on taking the faster route through Cotabato. The driver had advised on taking the Bukidnon-Cagayan route. In the early 2000s, cross-region travelers avoided the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) due to the rumored conflict in the area. But taking the route through Cotabato could save us a few hours. We had taken that route on Mamang's insistence.

We had traveled for hours on steep and rocky roads. Once, when I looked out the window, we were only a few spaces from the edge of a cliff, which fell a few feet below. The van swayed at every curve and we held tightly to our seats. Mamang held tight on to me. Ate Janine began crying in the backseat and she was comforted by our siblings. As the van gained speed up along the mountain road, Mamang told me to raise my chin up to resist dizziness. I did and shut my eyes as the world around me spun in disarray.

I remembered that a few months before Papang passed away, every weekend I watched him cut his toenails with the same nail cutter. Nobody else was allowed to use it and it was securely kept. One day, I asked Mamang if I could use it, but she only scolded me off. I did not know then that Papang had Hepatitis. It was one of the early signs of his liver cancer. When he was diagnosed, Mamang sacrificed most of her time. She was a devoted Christian who went to the Seventh-day Adventist Church regularly, but she was forced to stop. She juggled taking care of Papang and us, and working to pay for the medical expenses. Papang was in the hospital for months before he asked Mamang his dying wish – to go home to Masiu. He died the day after.

When we arrived in Masiu in the afternoon, everyone was waving and smiling. Children were playing on the side of the street, huddled among themselves. Some younger kids chased our vehicle, laughing. I thought that when we arrived in Masiu, I would see people mourning. But when I looked at them, they were surprisingly happy to see us. I thought that maybe it was uncommon for them to have visitors. But we didn't come for a visit. We were there to see Papang for the last time before he was laid to rest.

When I was a child, I had only pictured Masiu in the stories Papang told us. He said that Masiu was a close-knit community, and almost everybody was related to everyone else. They were near Lake Lanao and Papang liked fishing. He spent half of his life in Masiu, before he met Mamang. Since then he had lived in our home in Polomolok.

Papang lived in a barangay called Pangandaman Pantao. My siblings told me that everyone who lived in Pangandaman Pantao was from the same bloodline of Pangandaman, like Papang. That meant that everyone in that community was our cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. It was similar to the other barangay in Masiu that are named after Maranao people. I didn't know if it was true but it was nice to think about. I remembered feeling overwhelmed with the people on the day of our arrival. No crowd as big as that had ever been happy to see our family.

The neighborhood in Masiu where Papang grew up was small. The neighborhood houses were built closely to each other with a narrow dirt road that our van occupied entirely when we arrived. Most houses were unpainted and others were bare hollow blocks. When they extended their houses, they built wood structures adjacent to their homes. In front of Papang's childhood home was a sari-sari store, probably the only one I saw in the neighborhood. But then, it was a small community, and they usually made their food out of fishing in the lake. Since they were near Lake Lanao, the main source of livelihood of the people was fishing. They sold fresh tilapia in adjacent towns and nearby cities like Marawi and Iligan.

We stopped outside of a house where Kuya Patu, Papang's older son from his first marriage, emerged to greet us. He was evidently happy to see us after months of being separated. He hugged us one by one and pulled me up to his arms. Being the youngest, I usually received the most affection. Kuya Patu said something to Mamang and we were ushered inside the house.

Papang's dead body lay on a wooden bed inside the nearest room from the door. There were several men and women inside when we entered, and they politely ushered themselves out to give us privacy to grieve. The bed was too small for Papang. He was a tall man and the knuckles of his feet stuck out. Mamang sat down on the floor and cried uncontrollably on Papang's body. My older sisters, Aleah, Noralyn, and Janine cried with her. Kuya Nonoy remained standing with tears on his face. Kuya Boboy, however, distanced himself from Papang's body and did not shed a tear. Even when he was younger, he took pride in being unaffected. Mamang called me to her, pointing to Papang, like she was telling me to go closer. I did not comprehend the idea of "death" back then. It was my first time seeing a dead body and as a child, I felt scared. The sound of their cries was so much for me, that I stepped back to the open door. Back then, I did not know how to deal with loss and death. It was the first time I saw what it could be like. In that first instance, my immediate reaction was to step away. Kuya Patu saw me standing at the door and picked me up, thinking of any way to comfort me. He told me that he would buy me any candy I wanted from the store. Outside the house, the cries of my family were a faint murmur.

Some kids were playing outside, and whenever they looked at me, they smiled. I wasn't a sociable kid and even back in Polomolok, I didn't have playmates. After choosing which food I wanted, we went back inside the house. Kuya Patu and I sat on the wooden chair. It was then that I managed to get a closer look of the house. There were two to three rooms in the house and a kitchen on the farther side. The rooms, aside from which Papang was laid, were where my aunts, uncles, and cousins slept. The sala was spacious with minimal furniture. There was an old television placed a few feet above the floor, supported by a plywood attached to the wall.

Kuya Patu pointed out to the kids playing in the middle of the sala and said they were my cousins. We hadn't met any of our cousins from Papang's side of the family, so it was my first time meeting them. They were scrawny, their skins darkened by the sun, which may have been from morning trips to the lake. They wore hand-me-down clothes that hung loosely on their torsos. The boys' heads were shaved to the scalp, like how Papang and Kuya Patu wore their hairs. Kuya Patu introduced me to them and they gathered closer around us. He told them something in Arabic and I didn't understand. One of the boys opened his palm to Kuya Patu. I understood it as a sign of asking for money. He told them that he didn't have money, that it was all used up when I bought candies at the store. I wanted to give them some of my food, but I was too shy to offer. I told Kuya Patu that I was full, so he gave some of the food to the kids. I looked at the boy as he took the food, and he looked back at me. I hoped back then that he knew I wanted to be their friend.

For the entire week my family stayed in Masiu, we stayed in Papang's bedroom. We bought and made our own food, and helped whatever we could in the household. When our aunts cooked a lot of food, we ate together. They were helpful in whatever we needed and introduced us to people whom

Papang knew when he was living there. In the Muslim tradition, it was customary for the community to provide food for the family of the deceased on the first few days of the mourning period. But we knew food was scarce and it took days before the sari-sari store restocked. We had a lot of tilapia, which they caught from the lake. The neighborhood was just small, but the surrounding wooded area was wide. Mamang strictly told me and my sisters to stay inside the house, but my two brothers went with Kuya Patu on trips around the community.

One of Papang's cousins who lived in the next town grew fond of me and Ate Janine ever since she met us on our arrival. She and her family lived in Butig, which was separated from Masiu by a bridge. She went to the neighborhood a lot and as I remembered, she grew up there, too. She only moved to Butig when she married her husband.

One day she gave us a plateful of puto cheese as part of the tradition to provide food to the mourning family. She knocked on the window of our bedroom and in her crooked Sugbuanong Binisaya said that it was for us. Mamang thanked her and she smiled back. She took the handkerchief off the top of the pile of puto cheese and tried to squeeze it in between two window boards. When we realized the plate wouldn't fit, she passed some of the puto cheese that were on top, just enough so the remaining load could fit. I realized that she didn't want anyone to know that she was giving us all that food. Maybe it was just for us and there weren't any more left. It was the first time we received that much food on our stay. We all thanked her afterward for the puto cheese and she accepted it with a friendly smile.

Every time she went to Masiu, she made it a habit to pass by our house and ask how we were. One day, she invited me and Ate Janine to come with her and see her house. We didn't have anything else to do that day and the only thing we needed was Mamang's permission. When Mamang consented, we were more than happy to come with her and explore the area. We walked for a few kilometers before we arrived at the bridge that connected Masiu and Butig. I was beginning to complain about the distance that we had to walk, but she always assured me that we were nearing our destination. When we arrived at the bridge, Ate Janine and I expressed our fear on crossing it. The bridge was flimsy and made of wood. Some of the wooden decks were missing, and I had short legs for crossing it. She assured us that it was safe, since she had been crossing the bridge almost everyday. But she told us to be careful. Out of fear, we asked her to go first. Every deck of the bridge, she tapped on before passing. This assured us of our safety. I came in second and Ate Janine followed. When she was on land, she cheered on me and Ate Janine. When we made it safely to the other side, she cheered us on, telling us that it wasn't so bad. Even when we made it safely, while I was on the bridge, it was hard not to think of falling down.

Years later, I found out that the town of Butig was the center of power of the Mindanao Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Lanao del Sur. They had been entrenched in the area for decades and most of the faction's members were from the towns of Butig and Masiu. The former Vice Chairman of the MILF was also from Masiu. For these reasons, there was military presence in the area, dating back to as far as the MILF's foundation in 1984.

From the bridge, we walked for a bit more and eventually arrived in the neighborhood where Papang's cousin lived. They were near the bridge and so it was common for people to visit Masiu from time to time. It was almost similar to our neighborhood in Masiu, but I noticed that she had better living conditions than our relatives. If Papang's childhood home was spacious and minimal, her house was more decorated and had just enough space for people to comfortably move inside, without feeling too spacious. She had a cover for her television set and pieces of cloth underneath porcelains on her wall cabinet.

She made us sit on the bamboo chairs that faced the television as she prepared food for us to eat. I couldn't remember exactly what the food was but I thought it was *kakanin*. After spending a few hours, we thought it best to go back before nightfall had met us on our way home. Before leaving, she packed us some *kakanin* to bring home to Mamang.

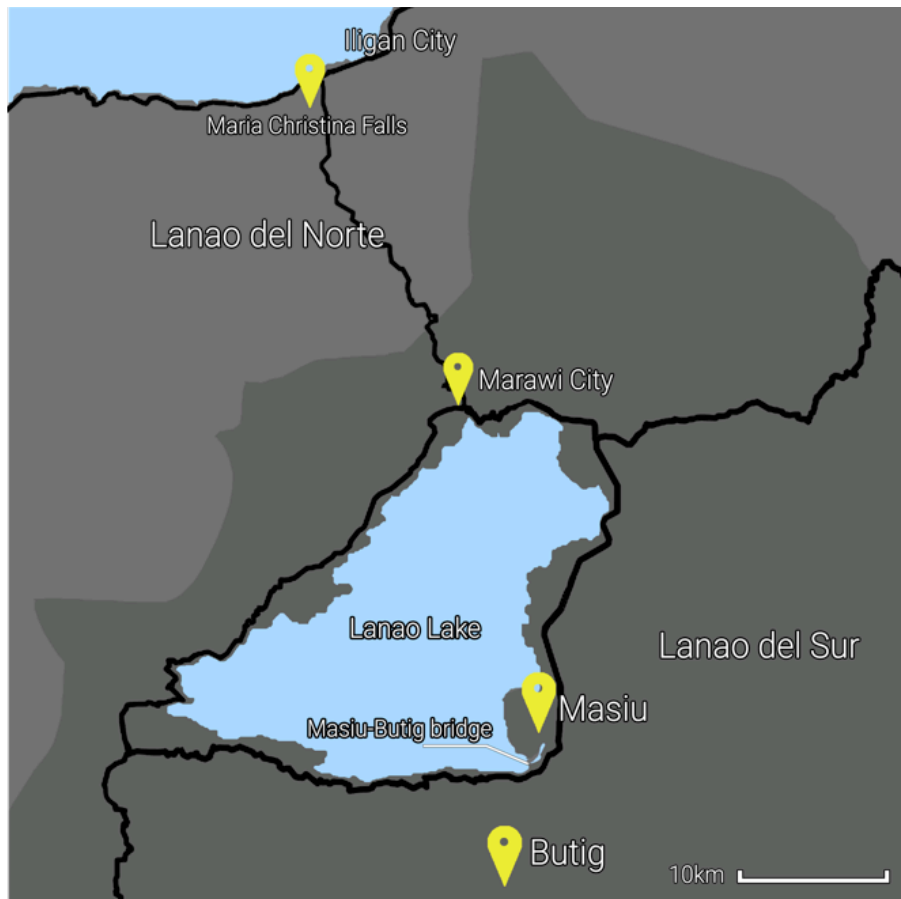
In the days that followed, I couldn't recall any other interactions that we had with her. Maybe my memories got lost in the other events that happened in our one-week stay in Masiu. What I only remembered was that I looked for her in the crowd when we left Masiu a few days later. I didn't find her then and had never seen her again.

In the nights we spent in Masiu, it was mostly quiet. After dinner, we children were tucked in bed. The noise in the house was subdued, with a faint murmur of adults talking among themselves. The people in Masiu had a nightly habit: locking the doors before dark and blocking it with a chair or anything that was heavy enough to obstruct any attempt to enter. Mamang asked one of my uncles why they did that. He said that there were nights when the streets were unsafe. There was an ongoing conflict outside and nobody could tell which night it would be happening. It could have been on any night. There were *violent people* outside hiding in the dark, who either kill or get killed in combat. To guarantee the safety of their family, they made sure to be inside the house before dark and locked all entrances to the house. If you were a civilian and you were outside by nightfall, your life could be at risk.

One night, when everyone had finished their meal, the entire household decided to watch television. I sat on the floor with the other kids. Playing on the television was the Taiwanese series *Meteor Garden*, which became popular when it aired in the Philippines in 2003. My siblings and I were fond of it, and our aunt said that they, too, closely followed the series. I was surprised to see it aired at night, remembering that I used to watch in late afternoons. One of them said that it had always been like that. Mamang asked about it, too. After minutes of going back and forth, they said that it was probably due to delayed connection. Their television schedule in Masiu was different from what we had in Polomolok. Masiu was only receiving secondhand signal from the network satellite, causing the delay in transmission. *Meteor Garden* aired at night because all the television shows were delayed by a few hours. The town was not directly connected to the network satellite.

As we watched television, we suddenly heard gunshots outside. It did not sound like the gunshots I heard in movies. In movies it sounded concrete, while the gunshots we heard were harsher. The sound reverberated all around me and in my ears, like the echoing sound of steel hitting steel. Somehow, the gunshots sounded naked. Our relatives calmed us down, convincing us it was nothing. They said that wherever the bullet was fired, it was far from the neighborhood. They encouraged us to continue watching television, but it was hard to focus on something when I felt we were in imminent danger. They told us that *gunshots were normal* in Masiu, and in the many nights they've heard bullets fired, their home had never been hit. And that was enough to guarantee them safety.

A few years later, in an attempt to visit a childhood memory, I searched for Masiu on the internet. I found out that it had a land area of 170km² and inhabited by 29,000 people, according to the 2015 census. It was a fifth income municipal class with thirty-five barangays all named after Maranao people. The presence of the MILF in the area also meant military presence. The armed conflict in the early 2000s was heavy, especially when Joseph Estrada sat on the highest position in the Philippine government and began a series of peace talks with the faction. When it proved futile, he decided to throw away the peace negotiations and declared an all-out war with the MILF. The conflict



continued without a ceasefire. But in the middle of all that chaos were communities in the small towns in Lanao del Sur. These communities were caught in the middle of the war, without a way to escape it.

I realized that I was too young and naive back then to make a larger sense of Masiu and its people. The memories I had were of a small community and Papang's death, not knowing that it was more than that. I was unknowing of the true state of things outside my tiny bubble. I was as naive as that moment I stood at the door of Papang's bedroom, unaware of my loss. I spent the day watching other things around me when Papang lay inside, where I could have seen him for the last time.

In the late afternoon of the first day we stayed in Masiu, the people gathered outside the house. Men went inside Papang's bedroom and Mamang cried at his body for the last time. In the Islamic burial ritual, Papang's body needed to be washed, which in Muslim tradition meant physically cleansing the deceased. Papang's older male cousins had already washed his body in the morning, as it had to be traditionally done as soon as after his passing. Before we set out to the burial site, they covered him with multiple *malong*, the traditional Maranao blanket. It was supposed to be a clean white cloth, however, none was available. This cloth signified the respect and dignity of the deceased. Then several men lifted him from his bed, one of whom was Kuya Patu. Then we marched to his burial site.

It was a small clearing surrounded by trees. The woods weren't dense enough so light permeated. I found no marks anywhere on the ground that might signify somebody else had been buried there. But our aunt said it was where they buried their dead. In Maranao customs, lavish

tombstones weren't used to mark graves. Instead, they placed wreaths on top of the soil that wore out weeks after the burial. As everybody encircled the area, the men lay Papang beside the freshly dug hole. An elder in the community preceded among all of us and said prayers for Papang. These prayers were said to ask forgiveness for him and to remind him of his profession of death.

When the men lifted Papang from the ground, Mamang interrupted and asked if they were sure that Papang's height would fit in the hole. They said yes, they had taken Papang's measurements right after his death. Muslims follow the tradition of burying their deceased with the head facing toward *Mecca*, which was significantly identical to how they built their Mosques – their place of worship. It was their way of alluding to their holy place. The men counted in synchronize, then lowered Papang to the ground. Then they picked up their shovels and covered him with soil. At that point, nobody had cried anymore, not even Mamang. They stepped on the soil to level and compress its underneath. Then people began to leave, and we did, too, slowly. I hadn't known then that I wouldn't visit that place again. On our way home, I only remembered how the sun's rays felt warm and golden on my skin. Despite many plans years later to visit Papang's remains in Masiu, we had considered the time and money it would take for us to go back. We comforted ourselves with believing that Papang's remains weren't the ultimate testament of his life. The ultimate testament was the memory we had of him in our home.

In one of the lunches we had in Papang's bedroom in Masiu, they were teasing about who had the ugliest face when crying. Kuya Boboy said that for sure, it was Ate Janine. She responded by saying that Kuya Boboy hid whenever he cried because he preserved his “manly” behavior. The conversation turned to me. They teased me for not crying and for only eating candies in the sala. They all laughed. I didn't know the reason why I didn't cry, either. Maybe because before, I couldn't comprehend the idea of a parent being gone. Losing Papang had hit me at that moment, but it took me years to fathom its full impact on our family's life. When everyone was done eating, Kuya Patu promised to bring us to Lake Lanao.

Lanao Lake was wide and calm when we got there. Kuya Patu excitedly led Kuya Boboy and Kuya Nonoy to the shore. He taught them how to catch *tilapia* and the three of them went swimming. My sisters would not let me join so I ended up watching my brothers with them. The lake had trees surrounding its shore and one actually had to look past the trees to get a better view of the lake. Kuya Patu seemed happier when he was in Masiu. He didn't act the same during the times he stayed in Polomolok. Now that I think of it, he treated that place a home as much as Papang did. Maybe it's that feeling of belonging to the place you were born. However, a few years after Papang's death, Kuya Patu also left Masiu. He later told us that it was because there were no prospects for him there. It reminded me of the reason Papang left Masiu in the first place. He needed to find a way to survive by himself because everybody in Masiu had to fight for their own.

On the seventh day of Papang's death, Mamang decided that it was time to go home. Despite our relatives' concerns about us leaving too early after the death, Mamang still insisted. She still had things to take care of in Polomolok and we had to go back to school. Our aunts believed that if we left Masiu without completing the fifteen-day period of mourning for Maranao, another tragedy would happen to our family. They suggested we stay another week, but Mamang wasn't really superstitious. We left Masiu that day. My last memory of that place was everyone waving us goodbye as we looked ahead of going home.

As soon as we arrived in Polomolok, Mamang fixed all of Papang's clothes, folded them, and put them in a box. We placed some of the Maranao relics he owned in a corner of the house. We threw away the nail cutter that only he used. We took his Maranao *kris* sword that he always kept among his

clothes and hung it beside the television set. In times of danger, we could use it to protect ourselves. His *kris* sword was what reminded me of Papang as I grew up. It stayed right where we placed it.

In May 2017, fourteen years after Papang's death, the city of Marawi was under siege while whole nation watched. The television screens showed the armed conflict between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and groups affiliated with the ISIS. For five months the city suffered destruction, bombing, and gunfights, while civilians ran to take refuge in every possible hideout. As the television screen showed the map of Marawi, I saw that the city was right beside Masiu, and both these places belonged to the province of Lanao del Sur.

I had forgotten about the people I met in Masiu, but the memory of our one-week visit was still vivid. I did not know why those memories didn't fade like the rest of my childhood. Perhaps because it was Papang's death, or maybe because after all these years, I am still bothered. I didn't know how the sound of a gunshot haunted me from a place that I only knew from memory – and the kids, the trip to Butig, the afternoon in Lanao Lake, and Papang's burial in the woods – all these were reminiscent of a place I would not visit again. I had only thought about how a gunshot would impact me, and if I could remember something that happened when I was four years old, I couldn't imagine what the children in Masiu felt every night. I thought of Papang on the night before his death and if he heard the same gunshots. I wondered if he found peace. I wondered if in his rest, the violence wouldn't find him anymore.

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