

LIFE HISTORY

RECOLLECTION OF A BURGIS GIRLHOOD

Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo

As a small child, I was skinny and sickly and a bit sulky, a nervous, fussy girl, frightened of strangers, and happier among any storybooks than in the world of real people.

My father was a Civil Engineer, a cautious, reserved man, inclined to be stern, but devoted to his family. My mother had been a teacher and journalist, but had given up both occupations to become a housewife, a role which she managed with great competence and imagination.

Theirs had been a little marriage, and I think they regarded it soberly, as a serious responsibility, rather than as an exciting adventure. They were not given to irrational impulses or violent scenes. They treated each other with courtesy and consideration, and their children with firmness as well as affection. Perhaps their only failing as parents was that they overprotected us, particularly me, their oldest child.

I was hardly ever allowed out of house, except to go to church or to visit relatives. I had no little playmates. Consequently, I knew very little about the world around me. But my mind had ranged through enchanted lands, for I had my books.

As far back as I can remember, I have been surrounded by books. Long before I learned to read, glossy picture books had taken up more space on my nursery shelves than dolls or tea sets or toy cars. By the time I was seven, I had a complete library of Golden Books and Wonder Books, and Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Scuffy the Tugboat and Tootle the Train were more real to me than my own uncles and aunts. I never doubted that in our garden was a fairy kingdom, invisible to human eyes save on the magical May Day Eve; that inside every flower lived an elf and under every mushroom a wicked old troll. And every night, I went to bed resolved to wake up at the stroke of 12 to catch my dolls at their tea parties.

Lying flat on my stomach by the foot of the dining room table, I would sniff the wonderful scent of the crisp pages of my books,

and gaze raptly at each brilliant scene. And the clatter of plates and the murmur of voices around me would fade slowly away. I would turn into the little girl asleep in the hayloft overlooking the Alps, or the wooden puppet who had a cricket for a friend, or Thumbelina floating down the stream in a water lily pad.

My best friend in those days was my mother's maiden sister, who lived with us; Tita Pacita had principal charge of me, as Mama had the housework and my baby sister to attend to. She and I spent long hours with my jigsaw puzzles and paper dolls. But what I enjoyed most was simply sitting by her while she did sewing or embroidery and talking about the princes, and princesses, toy soldiers, and mermaids of my storybooks.

Tita Pacita was also a born storyteller, and to persuade me to eat the mashed *monggo* beans, which were my staple for many years, she would often tell me stories from her favorite movies. So, well before I had seen my first movie, I was familiar with *Gone With the Wind* and the plots of all the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movies.

When I started going to school, I discovered that my classmates knew very little about these worlds. It almost made up for their being much better than I at *piko* and *patintero*. In fact, it made me feel somewhat superior, which must have me quite stuck-up and insufferable, because I was not especially popular.

This pained me, but I did not know what to do about it. I consoled myself with the tale of the Dreaming Bunny.

The Dreaming Bunny loved the first rays of the sun square on his nose, and the first frost that made the world look like the dream he had of having been in a glass forest. And while all the other bunnies were bustling about their business, he hid himself in the folding leaves of a cabbage, and watched spiders spinning their webs and foolish flies flying into them and made up little songs to himself. Because of this the other bunnies called him Bunny No Good. But one day, a sly fox came sneaking across the corn fields. Everyone was too busy to notice him, save for Bunny No Good, who saved the lives of the eleven hundred other bunnies who had laughed at him.

I identified passionately with the Dreaming Bunny, and felt in my heart that someday I too would do something wonderful and be cheered by my classmates as Bunny No Good had been cheered by the eleven hundred other bunnies.

I think I was seven years old, when we moved to another part of the city, and I was put in a new school. It was a convent school and from the beginning, I found it a lovely place.

I liked its white-washed walls and marble floors, the rustle of the nuns habits and the clink of their wooden rosary beads when they walked, the grotto of the Virgin of Lourdes in the little shady garden that separated the college from the Sisters' cloister, and the old tone benches under the pine trees, where my classmates and I ate sandwiches and drank our bottles of Chocolait during recess.

I also liked the Sisters, including Sister Dominique, the tiny High School Principal, who walked about with a small bell, which she rang when she caught any of us doing anything objectionable, like whispering during flag ceremony of munching peanuts in the corridors. Beneath all their rules and regulations I sensed a great reserve of goodness and gentleness upon which I felt I could rely.

The day that my mother had taken me to visit the school for the first time, we had been received by a tall, pale woman who was addressed by my mother as "*Ma Mere*" in a vast, dim room, with a great many heavy chairs and small tables with gleaming tops. This distinguished-looking lady had touched my chin with the tips of her cool fingers, and said softly but solemnly, "You are one of our girls now, my child. You must try to deserve it."

I had been awed and mystified. It was obviously a privilege to be one of *Ma Mere's* "girls".

As I settled into my new life as a convent school girl, I soon perceived that Sisters then were conscious of occupying an exalted position in society, and in the world at large, and determined to impress this same awareness on their pupils. Having begun my studies in a school where no such privilege appeared to preoccupy either teachers or students, I wondered at its source. Eventually, I decided that it was religion, what the Sisters called "Our Faith," always in capital letters.

My new school was a religious institution with a special mission, under the guidance and with the blessings of Jesus Christ, Our Lord, and His Blessed Mother. My former school, on the other hand, was a "non-sectarian school," owned and operated by mere "laymen," who could no more claim divine patronage and inspiration than the postman or the grocer.

I had not had any formal religious instruction prior to entering my new school. My parents had taken me to mass on Sundays, and taught me to say a few prayers, but that was all. My catechism classes now opened another strange new world to me.

Those of us who were being prepared for the first Communion took special classes with Sister Blanche, a cheerful, stout old nun with a funny raspy voice and a limp. These classes were held in the chapel which was the prettiest place in the school, all white and

gold, with the morning sunlight streaming in through its tall windows, the polished pews, the slender white candles in their gleaming holders, the crystal vases filled with lilies, the soft lace on the altar cloth, and the rich red glow of the vigil lamp in its niche beside the altar.

We sat on the pews before one of the side altars, under the watchful gaze of a life-sized statue of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, who, in her blue and white robes, with golden rays streaming from the back of her outstretched hands, seemed to me to be the most beautiful woman in the world.

This part of the chapel always smelled of flowers, and its windows looked out into the garden with the grotto. So those early lessons in the principles of the Catholic faith are tied up in my mind with flower-fragrance and the rustling of the breeze through the leaves of the mango trees and the gentle smile on the face of the beautiful mother of Jesus.

For the Big Day Tita Pacita made me an exquisite white gown of shirred taffetta and lace, and a long white veil, which made my aunts exclaim that I looked like a little angel.

And, for a while after my First Communion, I did in fact feel that strangely, as though I were floating on clouds, trailed by the odor of sanctity. But this phase did not last long.

Angels and saints did not really appeal to me personally. St. Bernadette, St. Therese of the Child Jesus, St. Maria Goretti, St. Joan of Arc--undoubtedly they were admirable women. But I did not fancy torture or martyrdom.

When I was in the third grade, I acquired a *real* best friend. Her name was Cynthia Pineda, but everyone called her Chicki, and she was everything I longed to be. I admired her madly, and tried to remake myself in her image., and was grateful to her, because she was the first person of my own age who had ever manifested any interest in me.

Chicki looked the way I had always wanted to look--dainty and plump and rosy, with large eyes and dimples and a sleek, smooth page-boy. She was always put in school programs, because, besides being pretty, she could sing and dance. But above all, I envied Chicki her sweet disposition, which made her one of the best-liked girls in class.

We swore undying loyalty to each other, and told each other our most secret thoughts. Chicki told me she meant to become a nurse when she grew up. And told her that I would become a writer or die.

For the first time, I had someone with whom to share my make-believe world. Despite her very real triumphs, Chicki was

quite willing to lose herself in the world of books, so I lent all of mine. By then, the children's story books had been replaced by novels--the complete works of Louisa May Alcott, *Anne of Green Gables*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, *Polyanna*, *Daddy Long Legs*, *Girl of the Limberlost*. We did not realize that they were simply variations of the old, well-loved fairy tales--Bunny No Good given human shape; Cinderellas, fatherless, motherless, or completely orphaned, pale and skinny, sulky and stubborn, mischievous, curious, sometimes capricious, but always good at heart and noble of spirit. Loved and cared for by a prim maiden aunt or a crusty bachelor uncle (the fairy godmother in disguise), she was transformed. She triumphed over adversity, to become a veritable princess, worshipped by dozens of handsome young men, and loved faithfully and truly by the best, the Prince Charming with a crooked grin and tousled brown hair.

Had our parents intended these novels as disguised instruction in morals and manners, they could not have chosen better. Presented in such a delightful form, absorbed at such an impressionable age, I believe now that they are more responsible for the kind of person I eventually became than even the good Sisters.

The fault their authors forgave my favorite heroines: vanity, willfulness, quickness of temper, a dislike of mathematics--I forgave myself. The virtues the young heroines practised--honesty, generosity, sensitivity, courage--I strove to cultivate in myself. I followed them faithfully from sequel to sequel, their literary ambitions reinforcing my own, and their romances becoming the ideal which, I sometimes fear, I never did outgrow.

Only one thing disturbed me about these stories--the presence of the Dark Hero, the boy who was not the Prince, yet somehow seemed more interesting than him, because he was different, because he was more daring, more dangerous: the wayward Charlie in *Rose in Bloom*, the foundling Dan in *Jo's Boys*, and later, the wild, untameable Heathcliff. I wept over his tragic fate, and in my mind, often rewrote the story, giving him the girl he loved, to change him and share his life forever. But even at that early age, I think I realized that the authors were probably right. Such things were not meant to be. And for myself, I decided on a Dream Man on the mode of Anne's Gilbert or Elnora's Philip--someone both strong and gentle, with enough rebelliousness to make him exciting, but enough good sense to make him safe, and enough good looks and money to make his wife live happily ever after.

Those early novels taught me that the "real world," though less marvelous than the world of fairy tales was not much different.

The same type of people prospered, the same type of people were punished, and everything worked out for the best under the direction of a benevolent force.

This world view was reinforced by the movies which my parents took me to on some Sundays, after mass at San Beda Church and lunch at the Botica Boie on Escolta or the old Selecta on Dewey Boulevard. These were usually musicals, like *On Moonlight Bay* and *Kismet* and *Athena*, or swashbuckling adventures like *Ivanhoe* and *Rob Roy* and *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

It did not occur to me until much much later that there was anything artificial in all that prettiness; or anything strange in the idea that romantic love was the solution to all problems; or any contandication in the fact that although the authors seemed always at pains to show that money does not buy happiness, that a cultivated mind and a peaceful conscience are better than a large fortune, they nonetheless always rewarded virtue precisely with a handsome fortune. The good little ash girl always married the Prince. Certainly it did not occur to me that there was anything wrong with the idea of a *man*-prince or not--as the heroine's reward, even when she was supposed to be bright and ambitious, and sometimes even had a profession of her own.

II

At about the time that rock-and-roll swept Manila, I entered high school. My hair had grown out, and I wore it in two pigtails, or in one thick braid hanging down my back. I was still skinny, but no longer sickly or sulky; and my best friend was still Chicki, who was even prettier than before, with her hair cropped short in the style that Audrey Hepburn had made the rage--the "Italian cut".

We wore starched petticoats and balloon skirts and "cuban heels". Our bible was *Seventeen* magazine; our gurus were the disc jockeys of DZMB. We worried about pimples and split ends, worshipped Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly, who had made it fashionable to be thin, spent long afternoons in each other's houses teaching each other rock-and-roll steps, and singing all the hit songs of the day--"Rock, rock, rock everybody...Only you can make the world seem bright...A tear fell when I saw you in the arms of someone new..."

We belonged to the Glee Club and the Drama Club and the Eucharistic Crusade of the Sacred Heart. Later, we also joined the Student Catholic Action and the Sodality, and became staff members of the school paper.

Chicki no longer wanted to be a nurse. She wanted to be a business executive. I still wanted to be a writer and I adored my English teacher in Sophomore year, Miss Ofelia Maniquis.

Miss Maniquis introduced us to the "classics"--Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte and Charles Dickens and James Cooper and Sir Walter Scott--where we once again met our old friends, Cinderella, the villainous stepmother and/or stepsisters, the Fairy Godmother and Prince Charming in various guises. And my classmates and I introduced each other to the Nancy Drew, Beverly Grey and Cherry Ames books. The characters in these "mystery novels" were modern adults. This made reading them more exciting. It was like going to the movies.

For some reason, the nuns disapproved of them, as they later disapproved of Grace Livingston Hill, Emily Loring, and Denise Robbins. Naturally this disapproval made the books even more interesting. One of my classmates owned an entire collection which she lent around for a price--the solution to math homework problems, or a picture of James Dean or Elvis Presley. The thrill of passing the books around in Algebra classes carefully camouflaged in St. Paul's College covers, and reading them secretly while pretending to crochet during Vocational Ed. Class, was matched only by the delight, during recess, of talking over the passionate scenes, in which the raven-haired heroine with violet eyes, was swept into the arms of the tall, handsome, impeccably dressed hero, and "kissed hungrily."

In my senior year, these romantic mystery novels were eclipsed by the romantic adventure novels of Zane Grey which, we were convinced, were positively wicked. Here the heroines were occasionally stripped naked, by accident or design, by some leering, bewhiskered villain, her breasts were crushed against the lean, wiry hero's pounding chest, and she was kissed with a fierceness which left her--and us--breathless.

For all this the nuns need not have wasted their censure. Behind all the fireworks the same moral and social virtues stood, solid as rocks; the same vices sank into the quagmire. And by this time, most of us had already gotten our first lessons in sex education elsewhere. Had they bothered to actually read the books they banned, however, the nuns might have been disturbed by the fact that Filipinos figured occasionally in Emily Loring's novels, but always as servants.

The year that everyone had to choose between Elvis Presley and Pat Boone, Chicki and I chose Pat Boone. Because of his clean-cut good looks, and because, according to the publicity stories, he was a graduate of Columbia University, whereas Elvis

Presley was a truck driver. But our secret was James Dean and it didn't matter what he had been, He was the boy-next-door turned rebel, the Dark Hero again.

When we were Juniors, one of our classmates, Marites Ibañez, eloped with Eddie "King" Katigbak. This event left the whole school gasping. Because "King" Katigbak was the leader of the biggest of the three rival gangs which "ruled" the suburb in which our school was located.

In those days, "gangs" meant leather jackets, boots, sideburns, pocket knives, alcohol, party crashing, chicken races, rumbles. It meant "juvenile delinquents". And in this world, Eddie Katigbak was king. The fact that he was the son of a Senator, and that his friends all belonged to prominent families made them even more dangerous. The cops were wary of them.

One couldn't totally blame Marites, we told each other. "King" Katigbak, a mestizo, looked disturbingly like James Dean.

Marites was sixteen, and therefore, older by a goof two years than most of us. But the fact that she had actually gotten *married* was as shattering as a bomb. Marriage belonged to the grown up world! Most of us were still at the stage of having schoolgirl crushes on pop singers and basketball players. The sensational elopement pushed us into the next stage of our own adolescence. Shortly after that, it seemed that everyone was getting a crush on her brother's friend or classmate, or on her own next-door neighbor.

In Chicki's case, it was her cousin, Ding's best friend, Roy. Roy was fifteen and lanky and sleepy-eyed. He played the ukelele and chewed gum and was a high school senior at La Salle. This threw Chicki's NCAA loyalties into disarray, as her younger brothers went to the Ateneo.

Such conflicts were not for me. I had a different sort of problem. Having neither brothers nor close male cousins, I despaired of ever meeting any boys at all. Moreover, even if I did, I was convinced that the chances of their being susceptible to my charms were slim, to say the least.

I would look hard into my dressing table mirror, and anger would turn to chagrin, and chagrin to anguish. There I was : pig-tailed, myopic, flat-chested. Old String Bean.

In my childhood's well-loved books, in that world of oak trees and whispering poplars and crystal books, the pale orphans became graceful, lovely young ladies with sparkling eyes and glossy hair, strong of mind and pure of heart. In the movies, Tammy caught her bachelor, Gigi got Tonton Lachaille, Gidget grew up and Moondoggie fell flat on his face at her feet.

But my squint would never become a starry gaze, nor my braids ever ripple like silk, nor my bony angles ever turn into the

soft, supple curves that drove men to distraction. And what miracle would transform my stubborn, selfish disposition into goodness and greatness of heart?

I would throw myself on my bed and lie there, staring despondently at the ceiling. Over my bedside radio, Johnny Mathis would be singing about the wildness of the wind, and something would hurt unbearably behind my eyes.

One day, Chicki came to school with the exciting announcement that Pete Dinglasan who lived three or four houses down the road from the house, had a crush on me. He had told Roy so. They were classmates.

I often saw Pete Dinglasan in church. Our parents knew each other. But he and I were not even nodding acquaintances.

"Well," Chicki grinned, "he told Roy he's had a crush on you for years! Only he's too shy to talk to you."

I couldn't believe my ears. Someone actually had a crush on me! I had a secret admirer. Perhaps I was not doomed to spinsterhood after all.

Upon closer examination of the situation, however, I decided that there was little cause for excitement. Pete Dinglasan was short and pimply, a far cry from either Prince Charming or the Dark Hero. Nonetheless, it was gratifying to have an admirer like everyone else.

Sometime in senior year, the nuns relaxed its rules about not allowing males into the school campus, and the boys from the nearby boys schools came in droves whenever the old iron gates swung open--for bazaars, Glee Club concerts, etc. Those among us whose parents still objected to dances had figured a way to outwit them. We had "hen parties" on weekends. These got underway at two in the afternoon, and ended at about six. The boys would "happen by" between then. And if a father arrived a bit too early to fetch his daughter, and wanted to know who those boys were and what they were doing there, he was told they were just friends of the hostess' brother, cramming for an exam. For the luckier ones with more enlightened parents, there were "barn dances". This meant putting on blue jeans and checkered shirts and straw hats, and scattering what passed for hay on the dance floor. Dinner--usually consisting of barbecued pork and macaroni salad or *pansit luglug* -- would be served at seven. At around nine, the chairs would be backed up against two walls to clear the floor. We girls would sit on them, amidst giggles and whispers. The boys would crowd in tight little groups on the opposite side of the room. The first record would be put on, and the hostess would open the dance with her brother, or, if she was bold enough, with her favorite

sutor. For two or three more pieces, the hostess would be hard pressed, trying to coax the boys to ask some of the girls to dance. The brother and his friends would be appealed to. And then, suddenly, as though at a signal, the whole pack would come charging across the floor. When the couples had sorted themselves out of the floor, a few girls would be left in their chairs, pretending to be occupied with their hankies or their fans. These were marked as wall flowers for the entire night.

III

Towards the end of the first semester, Mother Superior called me into her office to inform me that I had been selected to represent our school in a national scholarship contest. The first prize winner would receive a four-year scholarship to the college or university of his choice. The second-prize winner would receive a two-year scholarship.

I felt like someone about to embark on a journey. The day-to-day world receded from my consciousness. I was keyed up, but at the same time, strangely subdued. I did not ever think I would actually win, to have been chosen to represent my school seemed to me honor enough. But I *did* want to make it to the final round, in order not to let anybody down. Never having had the opportunity to measure myself against students from other schools, I was not even sure whether this was a realistic goal.

The regional eliminations took a couple of months. There were interviews, tests, more interviews, more tests. I passed them all. I was to represent Manila in the finals. Mother Superior announced it to the whole school during convocation. I had beaten even the boys from Ateneo and La Salle. As I rose, flushed with triumph, to receive the applause, I thought to myself, "Well, Bunny-No-Good, you made it, didn't you?"

The other finalists were flown in from the provinces--seven boys and two other girls. To my surprise, they all seemed to regard me as the one to be wary of, in view of the fact that I was representing the capital city.

But as far as I was concerned, there was, from the very beginning, only Carlos. Carlos, the brightest and the handsomest, representative of the southernmost region, the Jesuit college in the city of flowers and the corals and legends. Carlos, the long-awaited hero of the dreams.

Through the series of interviews and test that we were again put through, I watched him in awed silence, as he impressed the judges with his brilliance and his wit. At the parties given in our

honor. I listened raptly, hands clasped around my knees, eyes vague and dreamy, while he talked of his lovely hometown by the sea, the game he had played as a boy, the battles he would win as a man, the new world he would build.

It seemed absolutely right, to him and me, that I should lose to him.

I tied for second place with Sisenando Macasaet, a 23 year-old working student from a public school in Naga, but not only my parents, the nuns, and I also knew this. The Board of Judges informed us that they had decided to award the prize to Sisenando because he needed it more. It crossed my mind briefly that this was not quite fair. The scholarship money was not so important to me, but the honor was. And it would have been the biggest thrill of my life to stand on stage beside Carlos. But, remembering Sister Lucia, I quickly thrust the thought aside. Besides, my disappointment was overshadowed by my feelings for Carlos.

One afternoon, I invited the whole group to my school, to introduce them to the nuns. They were formally received in the school's front "parlor," and served cookies and cokes by a few lucky senior girls.

Carlos talked easily and respectfully with the nuns, dazzled my classmates, made everyone laugh at his impersonations of the judges. I watched humbly as he performed for his audience, and waited for the moments when he would catch my eye across the polished table top, and give me a conspiratorial wink.

My friends agreed with me: Carlos was far more interesting than any scholarship. I did not realize then that something important was happening to me, I did not realize that an important pattern was being set.

Carlos had told the organizers of the contest that he was going to the Ateneo in Manila after high school graduation, and I had smiled radiantly, thinking that this would mean he would be just a heartbeat away.

But the evening before he left Manila to return to his home, he told me, a bit guiltily, that he would actually use the scholarship for the Jesuit seminary. He had decided, long ago, that he wanted to be a priest.

When he was gone, I wept a little over it, with Chicki sniffing sympathetically beside me. But the years with the nuns had taught us that it was only right that God should have the best and the brightest.

And then there was commencement. And soon, the image of Carlos has receded into a pale, if still luminous, shadow.