


Bits of Angel's Wings

SATURNINA "BEBOT" RODIL

We referred to her at first as the son-of-a-bitch woman because every time we visited her, she would greet us with this cuss and a string more of others. She would forbid us to enter her house until we had removed our clothes and had dumped all of them in a big cauldron of boiling water, which she presumably started to heat as soon as she smelled anyone of us! coming to her house. She would then lead us to the water pump beside her house, while cussing us some more, ordering us to pour kerosene first on our hair and all over body and then leaving us alone smarting for a period of time, after which she gave us a very pungent soap and a brush while screaming, "You scrub yourself until your skin hurts, you sons-of-a-bitches, good-for-nothing scums ...!!!" If she had her way, she would have lighted us with a match after kerosene was poured on us or would have sprayed us with insecticide. All these were meant to kill the lice that had found a breeding place in our hair, in our crotch, in our armpits, and in our clothes. She usually screamed a string of curses again as she threw us fresh clothes, and this litany of heaven and hell would continue up to the time when she served us food on her table, every morsel of, which we would hungrily devour with the concentration of a person who had not seen anything but corn and yam for weeks or months. During this time, she would commence to watch us intently, seemingly taking pleasure in watching us eat while dabbing her eyes with a piece of cloth, for the sight of us eating the dinner she served moved her. And while we savored every flesh and bone of the fish she served, she would lament the pains of our mothers and how foolish we were to give up the opportunity to finish college and to lead a good and comfortable life. She would bemoan the wasted efforts of our

 SATURNINA "BEBOT" RODIL, a professor of Humanities, Department of English, College of Arts & Social Sciences at MSU-IIT, was the Cultural Center of the Philippines Playwriting Awardee 1992 for her play *Datu Matu*. The play was produced by the IPAG (Integrated Performing Arts Guild) of MSU-IIT and was shown at the Cultural Center of Philippines during the National Arts Festival. Fellow, 1st Iligan National Writers Workshop and Literature Teachers Conference; sponsored by the National Commission for Culture Center and the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology 1994. Fellow, Women Writer's Workshop, Balay Kalinaw, UP Diliman, Quezon City, WICCA 1995.

parents in taking good care that mosquitoes would not bite us only so that we could offer ourselves to this son-of-a-bitch revolution up there in the mountains, sleeping in the lice infested mats of the natives, chilling in the night with malaria fever, and maybe being killed like dogs without anybody knowing. She would shed a few tears more, moved by the images she had sketched in her mind and she would continue castigating us, until we drifted off to sleep, lulled by her voice, and the softness of the pillows, the smell of fresh blankets, feeling clean and full.

And the rest of the days we stayed in her home, she would feed us intently and with steadfast enthusiasm. She would dice the camote and bananas and put these in thick coconut milk and brown sugar. She would order her help to collect eggs from nest of hens under the house so she could whip an omelet of tomatoes and onions. She would cook a cauldron of pork floating in deep fat so that anytime we would like to eat we have something to dip our hands on, as she said. And during these times, while administering to our needs, she would observe us and would look into our eyes and would fall silent, sensing that we were carrying in our soul something far more terrible than her litany of curses, something abhorrent that weighed heavily on our person, something which good food could not drive away. And maybe in those moments she no longer saw the boys that she once could easily discern but the men that emerged from the terror, the hardship, and the misery of fighting a protracted people's war of liberation.

"Liberation, my ass! You cannot fight the evils of society. Leave it to God. You do not know anything about life yet. You are all just wasting your life and throwing it away," she wailed. "Look at you and your lice-infested hair! Your blood shot eyes and your puny guns! You move in the lowlands like scared rats, scurrying like mice when soldiers are afoot. Is this something which you want for your children? Tell me, huh? Is this what you want?"

And this was when sometimes, we pushed our plates away and drank some water, and cleared our throats so that we could explain to her fully and well about the inequalities of society, the sufferings of the poor, the need for change, and about the revolution, and about the need to fight the fascist, oppressive regime. She would give us time to say all these, biting her tongue, holding back herself. And when she could no longer do so, she would spat a globule of saliva out of the window and she would shake her head from what she said as this foolishness of serving the people by killing each other. We would be of better service if we finished our studies and be useful to our families first, she would say. And she would continue her tirade but she would also continue moving around, preparing this and that. And when it was time to leave, we had something in our

sacks that would tide us over for a week: dried fish, rice cakes, chicken cooked in deep fat.

This was Nanay, as we eventually came to address her: this portly, old woman with gray-streaked hair, and large sunken eyes, and a mouth that can spew fulmination like the rat-tat-tat of a machine gun. Mang Sario, who was her tenant in the farm, and who was among our first contacts in the barrio, brought us to her quite nervously because he didn't know exactly what to do with these rebels who came to his house and to the other farmers in the vicinity, who promised a better world but were asking at the same time food and shelter and other things besides. Nanay took a good look at us: lice-infested hair, toes peeking out from worn out muddy sneakers, jackets which had not been washed for months. She knew we needed a bath, a good meal, a clean bed.

We confessed to her that life was not easy as soldiers of the people, that the mountains that might have looked so picture pretty from afar was really cruel and arduous, that the realities of guerilla warfare were far more tortuous, agonizing and painful than what we had thought it to be especially for some of us who knew next to nothing about living in the mountains. We confessed that we had come to realize that indeed, revolution was not a picnic and that a lot of the ideas in our heads of what it should be were nothing but ideas. But we told her, our eyes still blazing with the ardor of our commitment, that we were learning our lessons, maturing, growing in strength, and were still fully committed to the struggle, committed to fight and win so that political power would be given to the masses and a just society could develop.

"Fools!" she told us. "Plain innocent fools you all are! You are all dreaming! There will always be inequality! Wake up!" she screamed at us. "And better still, wake up to the glory of God!"

Mang Sario said that Nanay was really a religious person, and deeply devoted to the Virgin Mother, even if you sometimes saw her quarreling with the priest who visited their chapel every now and then and even if her mouth could spew a hot sinful stream of curses. He said that Nanay used to work before in the church in the town as a clerk but left to live in the farm since her husband died. She was visited now and then by a daughter, named Fidela, who was married and lived in the city and by a son, named Danilo, who was just maybe a little older than us, and who was said to be still looking for his place in the sun.

And indeed after a number of visits to her place, we got to discover Nanay's piety and religiosity. The string of curses that would usually meet us would now be replaced by a string of mumbled prayers for our safety when it was

time to leave. She would forbid us from leaving her house before she could finish her prayers in front of her altar which was adorned with the picture of the suffering Christ, and the Virgin Mother, and a wooden statue of an unknown angel, which she said was carried to her doorstep by the great flood many years ago, when the river got swollen, for the first time, in a proportion never seen before. We usually kidded her about her praying to this unknown entity and told her that it might had been a diwata from a native's altar or perhaps a fallen angel.

We feared that she would no longer feed us once when we told her that religion was the opium of the people. She ignored this affront to her convictions and continued to pray asking Christ to forgive these sons-of-a-bitches who were blinded by the teachings of the communists. She then would touch the statue of the unknown angel fervently, all one foot of its dark frame, the impression of a face, the roughness of what was supposed to be the cloth and the expanded corrugation of wings which on one side was broken, gathering her hands in a scoop in front of her chest and after a few moments pouring, whatever it was in her hands into her heart. She then would touch my forehead and chest praying that may my heart and mind be one with God. And once I answered her, "And would also my stomach." She then gave me a sharp look but said anyway that I was a good son for I waited for her to finish her ritual of prayers before leaving.

And that was maybe why I was singled out to be given goat's milk and some sweet bars of candies or chocolate—if she had been to town—in my pack which I would discover later as we trudged back to the hills. She would usually stand at the gateway of her farm to see us walk away from her and I felt like I was sent off to school with breakfast in my stomach and *baon* in my bag, only that it was not school that we were going to and what we were bringing were not pencils, and that it was not morning but one of those dark nights that could conceal our movements through the farms and hills. Later in the mountains, I would wait for days or a week where I could be alone, and I would take out the sweet bar that had been wrapped carefully in plastic so that the ants would not get to it before me, and I would sit on a rock, or a promontory where I had the best view of an expanse of the hills, place my knapsack and gun on the ground, and would then munch the candy bar so slowly savoring the sweetness as if it was the last one in the world while hearing the *kalaws* make a ruckus of themselves in the edges of the forest. I thought then, that if I would survive to see the revolution win and see our leaders inhabit the halls of Malacañang, I would remember this old woman who was kind to us and would work for her to be rewarded and recognized by the whole nation, the contemporary Tandang Sora.

There were three of us, that came regularly to Nanay's place looking forward to pandesal with sweetened langka jam, to a bottle of coke—which she discovered most of us hankered for—to a few days of being fussed over. Never mind that these were laced with a steady stream of cussing and sonorous prayers. Mario, Steve and I, had found all these comforting and a great balm to our tired, weary selves. The three of us had been part of the seven man group that first came to the nearby mountains, to open it up, so to speak, for the revolution. This was a full year before and we knew nothing much then about surviving in the forest nor about the betel-chewing natives that lived on them. In the first months, our packs and our feet kept getting entangled with the undergrowth. We tumbled down along ascending paths and gullies and sometimes, when we went behind a big tree or rock to relieve ourselves, we came out on another side, lost and bewildered in the strange landscape. We had two *Paltik* guns to start the revolution, and a sack load of political beliefs. When we staged our first ambush, we quivered with fear, wet our pants, and ran like mad, after the first shot. But it was our experience with hunger that may have changed us for life, hunger so intense that nothing seemed to matter but its satisfaction. To walk for days in the forest without food is a kind of madness that will make an unripe papaya heaven sent, a dried fish full of cockroaches a feast, a carcass of a wild pig in a stage of decay a banquet

And so when malaria hit us, it did not really matter as much that we could have died. It raged for days in our brain and when medicine at last came and we recovered, one of us heard a constant ringing in his temple, like a stringent sounding doorbell that could not be turned off, while the rest of us walked dazed and empty. For a time we could not think of the revolution as we thought about it. It was lost in the thick mountain mist. And when the haze lifted there was no other sense to the suffering we went through but in the context of the struggle and the vision of society that must come.

When we met Nanay we had already come a long way: the boys that ran off from their college campuses to the mountains when Martial Law was declared were now carrying bigger responsibilities for the revolution, and there was no question of turning our backs to it. Whatever doubts and fears we had were hidden in the dark nights when we trembled alone. Our teeth chattered from the cold and our bodies shivered from unexpressed fears but each one of us had somehow learned how to personally survive the hardships through our own various initiatives. In the severe landscape, Nanay's house served as one of the places that offered gentle refuge and we looked forward to visiting, which we did so in various pretexts and reasons. In her presence our armors melted and what was

laid bare and disclosed were frightened, desperate, hungry boys that were nostalgic of the scent of soap and comforts of a household.

"What will I put in your tombstones you idiots, if I don't know your real names? Who will I inform that you have taken twenty bullets in your body and I have bits and pieces of you to bury? Wouldn't you like to have someone cry over you? Wouldn't you, at least, like to be buried decently, instead of being left exposed for the animals and maggots to feast on?" In this kind of consistent tough bombardment we grew comfortable with Nanay. It made us, on a given opportunity, to tell her of our innermost longing for a brand of cigarette, for a movie, for ice cream, and in some rare moments made us unburden ourselves our deeds that were not so terrible to disclose.

"I killed a monkey," said Mario.

"So," Nanay answered without looking up from her needlework of patching one of our torn shirts. "You killed it because you were hungry and you ate it."

"Yes," was the answer.

"So, tell me. Why are you still thinking of that poor monkey that went through your stomach and had long been turned into shit and dropped to a hole in the ground if you, at least, had dug a hole. Forget it," she said still doing the patchwork. "Natives do it. You are one of them now."

"It was a monkey with a child," Mario spoke after a pause. "I hit it in the thighs and the first thing that she did was to hug her child before she gave it to another monkey and then waited for us to take her. I did not know monkeys felt things like that. We ate it anyway, we were hungry."

Among the three of us, it was Mario who often got sick, whose teeth got swollen every now and then, whose boils would be more in number or required more days to heal, and who would often come down with fever. We thought that he would overcome all these and grew to accustom himself in the rigors of our work. But when we met Nanay the frequency of his ailments increased and he became her regular patient. He became the recipient of her numerous balms and ointments but when these failed she put under his bed a mixture of herbs and lit these to smoke out whatever she said was ailing him. And when this failed once and the infection seemed to have raged beyond her she brought him to the clinic in town and declared him as her son. When she brought him back she gave him a lengthy sermon of not touching the food offered by the natives to a tree or the river. Nanay called him in many words, an idiot of a person by doing so. She promised him, however, that she will roast a pig for him once he would be on his feet. She also placed the statue of the angel on the top of his bed as she prayed

for the spirit of the river to stop tormenting him. After this, we could not make fun of Nanay's character or criticize her in front of Mario. He had become her devotee and staunch defender, not to count her perennial visitor.

Nanay's son, Danilo came to visit during these times and discovered what Nanay had been busy with and what she had been keeping in her house, "Are you crazy to harbor these kind of people in our home? What would happen if we would be found out?" And Nanay answered, "You keep your mouth shut. What would you want me to do if you were the one who were sick —throw you to the river and be done with you.?"

"Why did you give my T-shirts to them?" Danilo asked, "I still need them."

"They have been there for years, smelling of mothballs," answered Nanay. "I should have given them to people who can make use of them long ago."

For all Nanay's apparent maternal skill and devotion, it seemed these did not produce in Danilo a better character. We had a suspicion that all was not well between them, especially when Nanay fell into long silences, which had been really rare occasions/times, after Danilo ended his visit. We got to know these visits were timed during the selling of the copra when Danilo came to collect what he said was his share. We were told that once he pelted the house with stone after Nanay refused to give him anything. Mario made a mistake of telling Nanay that we should get Danilo to join us so that he would be reformed. Nanay breathed out a big *litse*. "A son is a son and no son of mine will be fed into this son-of-a-bitch revolution!"

Danilo showed little interest in our political discussions and he never did express sympathy and was critical of our lack of resources. He commented that our guns, too, were puny compared to what the military had and he proposed that if we could get hold of an amount he could purchase some guns for us.

We knew very well the power of the gun. We had even come to know how to use its own power as a coercive tool in bringing the people to our side. This was the language that we put to use in our work for in the revolution, there was no middle way. We had learned from bitter lessons that one false move may mean grave danger to our lives. We had made clear to the natives and to the people we had come into contact with that we could not afford to put anyone in jail if he committed a heavy crime against the revolution. There was only one way to protect the gains of the struggle and that was through execution. A lesson for everyone to easily understand even to the recalcitrant individuals. All these we did not talk in the presence of Nanay to shield her from the brutal realities of our life,

though eventually she was dragged in to face some of the consequences of our actions.

Maybe, this was our mistake, that we had grown complacent in the house of Nanay and we did not communicate the hard rules of our work that might have led for some people surrounding her to doubt our resolve. In Nanay's place we also tended to shed off our usual seriousness and toughness and thus might have led for some people, especially to Danilo, to think that we were weak and powerless. We did not give him opportunities to air his doubts in order for us to clarify them. Most of all, we did not really mind him so much because when we went to Nanay we were looking for rest and comfort and not the usual work that we did. And so when an incident occurred and we needed more than what Nanay was giving to us, Mang Sario was assailed with doubts and Danilo with resistance.

It was Steve, one night, that we had carried to her bleeding profusely from the multiple wounds he received from a native who was about to be executed for his crime but got loose. Nanay asked Mang Sario to fetch a doctor from the town. Mang Sario came back with a nurse but then there was nothing much that she could do either for Steve died while Nanay was stroking his hair, murmuring words of encouragement for him to live, promising him of nice cup of coffee, a piece of cake, and carabao meat cooked in coconut milk.

The natives were a different lot, I told her. They had swings of behavior that sometimes we could not predict though we always saw to it that we were firm and consistent in our dealings with them. The incident actually started when a group of natives bet in a gambling game—though we discouraged them in doing these activities they persisted—and what usually happen, happened, and some lost and another won. One of them thought of getting back what he lost and waited in the grove of bamboos and gave the man who won a conk on the head. He said later he did not mean to kill him but the man died and the family of the dead man wanted to believe that the New People's Army could administer justice. A life for a life. The criminal was caught and brought to a site and a grave was dug. It was already dusk and darkness was fast seeping through the mountains. The criminal told the diggers of his grave not to make it so deep for it was already dark and they had to return to the village. Steve was touched that a dying man should think of the welfare of his executioners and he hesitated and waited and trusted and that gave the desperate man a chance to grab a knife and attack him before he could move to defend himself.

"Tell me his real name so I can put it on his tombstone," asked Nanay.

"It is better that you don't know," I answered.

We told Nanay we would bring back the body to the hills where we would bury him but she insisted that she would take care of everything herself, that she would contact a funeral parlor. She insisted on a wake and a nine-day prayer. She said sternly to me, that if she could not do anything with the souls of the like of us who were still living, then she could at least do something with the soul of the dead. I tried to convince her that it was not a good idea for she might attract attention but she said she could take care of her own security. She said she would own him as a relative, if not, her *saop* and she would tell anybody who would ask that the man was gorged by a mad carabao because indeed that was what she told the nurse whether she believed her or not. Nanay was removing the bloody clothes of Steve while speaking and soon started to clean him. She stopped by his feet and examined his toes and said, "He does not have the ginger toes of the farmers."

Danilo, called to come home after hearing that a relative of his died was angry to discover what Nanay was doing. He had reasons to be and more so to be afraid. He was more vocal with his criticisms of our so-called weaknesses and of our inadequacy. But when we were about to leave he took me aside, put his hand around me and told me he was on our side. I should have been more discerning knowing how termites were attracted to fallen trees.

Candles burned for Steve for nine days and people from the barrio came to pay their respects to a relative of Nanay who came from nowhere to visit her only to be gorged by a mad carabao. On the day he was lowered to his grave we, in the mountains sang songs of the revolution, raised our fists and fired shots in the air. In the grave of the native who killed Steve were arranged stones of various sizes, sticks and a pot. Mario snorted that it felt like dragonflies were laid to rest after the end of the day of a children's play.

We did not see Nanay for a time as we had forbidden ourselves to make use of her place following Steve's death. After two months, however, we received a word from her to come and visit her for she had something very important to give us. We had a chance when we had a meeting with some contacts in a neighboring barrio. We arrived one evening while she was on her knees in front of her altar finishing her evening prayers, looking wan and weary with her thin white hair let down. She embraced us, slapped our shoulders, squeezed our hands while crying a little, and laughing a little, and cussing too, telling us she missed us and Steve. On the same breath she told us not to mourn for Steve anymore for he had gone to his Maker and had been forgiven for his sins. That evening she had arozcaldos cooked for us, the soft chicken meat floating in the fragrance of newly

harvested rice. She gave us each a cup of cocoa drink and *suman* which she said she has been preparing always in the hope that we would come. Danilo, who was there, did not seem to mind our presence and was even helping Nanay serve us food. He gave us some packs of cigarettes telling us he was keeping it for us. Mang Sario told me later that Danilo had been staying in the farm but showed little interest in the work.

“My mother is old and I think I should stay around and help her,” was what Danilo told me and Mario.

The important thing that Nanay was to give us turned out to be tiny cloth pouches where bits of the unknown angel's wing were placed. Nanay told us she had been keeping these bits of wings that broke off from the wooden angel from her altar. She thought that even if she was praying everyday for us still we needed something to protect us from harm. The tiny cloth pouch was attached to a string and she helped tied it around ourselves. Mario was smiling throughout the solemn atmosphere of which she conducted it but I noticed he kept it while I removed mine as soon as Nanay was out sight.

The ultimate care Nanay gave me that evening was when she went down on her knees while administering to the blisters on my feet that seemed always to be incapable of developing a permanent callous enough to withstand the infinite walks. She immersed my feet in warm water and applied various concoctions. And that was how she came to convince me and Mario not to go back to the mountains that night. Danilo joined in to say it was better for us to go back the following evening so he could get the box of medicines he himself solicited for us from a friend.

We never got to the mountains the following evening or days after for when set to leave the barrio, we were ambushed and Mario was killed together with two farmers who were with us. I was saved by the fact that the enemy did not take time to finish us all but left the area in haste. We were able to go back to retrieve the bodies of our dead comrades and bring them up to the mountains. Before we lowered Mario to his grave, I removed his shoes so our new recruits could use them and also the pouch of the bits of the wooden angel's wing from his body. Days later, I collected same things after Danilo was executed for giving information to the enemy that led to our ambush and the killing of Mario and two other comrade farmers.

There was a time I told Nanay that there were beautiful moments in the forest, like the lifting of the fog, the total silence pierced with a single bird call, the fireflies lighting up a tree in a dark night, the *Kalaw* birds coming to roast in

groups high on the trees. There were moments of reveries, too, when one gazed at the heaving and falling breasts of the native women as they moved their arms to pound on the rice, or when one witnessed the sun's rays seeping through the canopy of trees to light up the forest floor, or when one found oneself in front of a sweet, sparkling mountain spring. I told her that maybe someday I could show it to her when the war was over and the excursion to the mountain would be more like a hiking excursion to see the beauty of nature and not its cruelty.

Nanay did come to the forest, but for a different reason and that was to attend the trial of Danilo. When she came she was clutching the wooden angel to her breast looking pale and dazed. Outside of her household, the environment wherein I always saw her, she looked different. The trial ended at the time when the red-bill *Kalaw* birds came to roost, rousing up the forest floor with the flapping of their wings. In the ruckus that the birds made Nanay was silent and was trembling and the only words that came out from her was to implore me to take her instead of her son when the sentence was given. The birds went screaming again when the shots rang out to punish the enemy of the revolution. As darkness fell, all went back to silence and nothing was heard, except for a mother's sobbing for his son.

It would have been a lot better if she cursed me but she did not and I was left alone beside the river to throw into it what I gathered from the dead. From there, I started my own descent as I felt a slow caving in inside me that no revolutionary ideals could hold up much longer.