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The Manila-Chattanooga Express: A collection of stories (Original writing)

Peter Charles Parsons
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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**The Manila-Chattanooga Express: A collection of stories.
[Original writing]**

Parsons, Peter Charles, M.A.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1993

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THE MANILA-CHATTANOOGA EXPRESS

A Collection of Stories

by

Peter C. Parsons

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

in

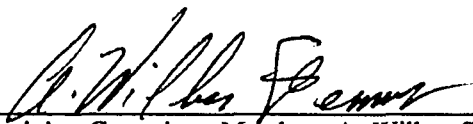
English

**Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 1992**

The Thesis of Peter C. Parsons for the degree of Master of Arts in English is approved.



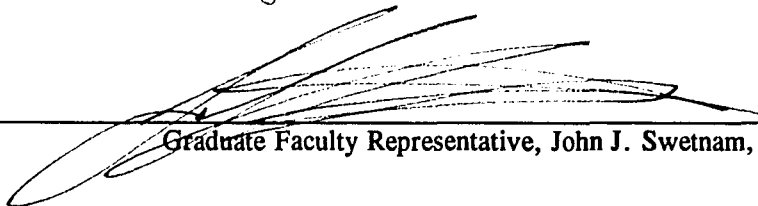
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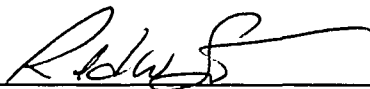
Examining Committee Member, A. Wilber Stevens, Ph.D.



Examining Committee Member, James F. Hazen, Ph.D.



Graduate Faculty Representative, John J. Swetnam, Ph.D.



Dean of the Graduate College, Ronald W. Smith, Ph.D.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 1992

ABSTRACT

This collection of eleven short stories explores relationships within an American family living in the Philippines. The father, called “Uncle Chick” throughout, is a central figure and many of the events and characters are defined by his presence or through their interactions with him. The most critical event in this family’s history is the onset of World War II. The father fought in the Philippines during the war and became a guerilla leader and decorated war hero. Although the war is seldom brought into the stories directly, with the exception of “War Stories”, it is never far from the emotional heart of the collection. As family members deal with the deaths of friends, nephews, sons, parents and grandparents the shadow of the war informs their experiences with a kind of metaphorical quality, as if life itself were a kind of war, and death an opportunity for revelation.

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THE KENNEBUNK KIDS

If you remember Kennebunk Beach at all you know about the cove on the other side of the road. It empties every twelve hours or so and becomes a huge mudflat. When the tide comes in it sparkles like a lake and you can row on it, sail, swim and fish.

Do you remember the bath house built out over the cove? With its sunning platform that rose and descended with the tides?

Remember? It was during the war, the one we fought against Germany and Japan. You ran with us those summers when we popped street bubbles, chewed road tar and blackened our teeth. We were like stray dogs. We had slingshot wars and shot each other with rose hips. During the timeouts we lined up with nickels and dimes for icecream cones at Antwhistles.

You were one of the locals. You dropped your Rs, changed them into Ahs, a thing we visitors hadn't heard before. It made you grander, as if you belonged and we didn't. You and my older brother Michael were close.

Is your name Richard? I can see you and hear you, but you remain nameless, the slightly older kid who assembled us at the seawall during an outrushing tide and pointed to a little white thing floating by.

You laughed. You pointed at it and called it a "skin." You called it a "beetle skin." Do you remember? None of us laughed. It was scary. That little thing undulating in the current. Like a jelly fish.

There were eight of us standing on the narrow cap of the seawall. We walked along, fascinated, keeping up with the skin, watching it turn this way and that, doing its silent dance.

I asked you, "What's it for?" And you turned your head so you were looking right at me when you laughed again and said,

"You don't know about skins? Jesus, what do you know?"

I didn't know anything. I didn't know beetles had skins. I had never seen a beetle that large. And I didn't know about life, or cussing, or making love, or the real war that adults talked about all the time or that we saw in newsreels. I didn't want to think about that, about the Japanese who had captured us in Manila and then let us go. They still had my grandmother, my Chinese amah and my dog.

I was interested in other things. I stayed up at night so I could watch seals swim onto the beach, and I used to sit up on the rocks during storms to watch, for hours, the waves crashing onto the shore.

Sometimes I would think about my father fighting singlehanded against the Japanese somewhere in the Pacific. Travelling around in submarines, ambushing Japs in jungles. The little V-Mail letters he sent us had lots of lines blacked out. We wanted to know what he was doing but after the censoring all he said was I'm going someplace I can't write about, I sure miss all of you, and then some boring stuff about the food.

I just stared blankly back at you until you spoke again: "Skins. Beetle skins. Rubbers. People use them when they screw."

I didn't have the slightest idea what you had told us. What you were telling us.

And neither did the others.

Except for you, Richard and Michael. You seemed to know what everything was all about. God, the way you talked. So free and easy, and brave. And Michael, my brother. I was really impressed.

"Shit. Goddam. Fuck. Piss."

I mean, you guys said it all. And we fry hung around in your eddies, your auras, in the periphery of what you knew. We learned silently and waited eagerly to be able to say those things too.

You remember that long, low-sided, pale green skiff that Richard rowed? I can close my eyes now and see him working his oars in opposite directions, spinning the boat around and around or riding the large swells outside the cove as easy as a sea bird on air currents.

"That's the real Atlantic out there," he told us.

Never mind about the real Atlantic, I thought. The skins had entered my head and nothing was the same anymore.

Like the bath house for instance. They sponsored a swimming meet at the end of summer, in August before Labor Day. The races were from the dock to a float with people on it and back again. Twenty five yards out and back.

You coached me, you and Michael: "Swim underwater all the way to the raft. Come up for air. Then underwater all the way back. You can do it."

We went through the bath house on our way to the races. It had a dank smell. Like the cove. Salty. I looked all around for skins and for people screwing.

“Swimmers, take your marks. Get set. Bang!”

I was underwater just like you told me. Holding my breath. Eyes wide-open. I was looking out for sculpins, sharks, octopuses, beetle skins, rubbers. I looked left and right, up and down, and when I got to the raft I was looking down and banged my head against it.

I came up for air and saw you laughing at me and shouting, “Don’t stop. Keep going. You’re going to win.”

I took a couple of hurried breaths and shoved off back towards the bath house, still wide-eyed and scanning for skins.

What would I have done if I had seen one? Fainted? or yelled? or drowned? I don’t know. Maybe I would’ve cussed. By the end of the summer I had said “shit” two or three times. And I had said “Goddam” once. I remember. I expected to die when I said it.

I won the swimming race. The trophy said, “First Place. Kennebunk Swimming Championships. 1945. Breaststroke.” The trophy consisted of a shiny, golden, metallic man squatting over a wooden cylinder, his arms raised behind him. He was ready to make a racing dive and go searching the ocean for rubbers.

Today as I look at the little trophy I notice that the man’s head has been knocked off and there is a rough gray spot between his tensed shoul-

ders, and his golden, muscled skin has flaked off in places. He is scabby and headless. He has not aged particularly well.

Do you recall the deep excitement that day we saw the rubbers again? I think even you were excited. The way you called to us. A little breathy.

“Look down there, look, look!”

Sure enough, a flotilla of rubbers. Alive. Swimming out to sea together. A school of skins.

“Holy shit,” you said. “Three of the little rascals.”

We looked hard at them as the tide took them by us. The three of them kept pace with each other. They bobbed and wiggled and left us standing, crowding each other, as they reached the shingle beach and continued on out the cove into the real Atlantic.

I kept looking as hard as I could, thinking I could still see them, only now they were leaping about and snorting like dolphins, free, at last, in the great ocean.

We all stared back at the bath house with new respect.

That’s when you said you were going to show us something even better. I remember just how you said it:

“You guys wanna see something better?”

What did you expect us to answer? We were ready for the wildest sin, ripe for the wickedest knowledge, anything.

We said, “Yeah. What is it?” Our hearts racing a little faster.

And that’s when you hit us with the K word: “Kotex.”

Did we fall over? Did we pass out? Did we do the St. Vitus dance? I don’t know, I can’t remember. But I remember how you pulled the long

white cloth thing out of your knapsack. You carefully unfolded the paper from around it, handling it with care as if it were something inordinately precious, mysterious, perhaps something stolen. You said only one word:

“Kotex.”

“Wow.”

“Sonofabitch.”

And you looked right at me when you said, “You know what Kotex is?”

I didn’t know anything. I swear. But I knew the word. Kotex. At least I had heard it mentioned, guardedly. Whispered. Behind closed doors usually. It was an adult thing. A secret thing. Very powerful. I knew it was a very bad thing.

The word itself was so powerful. Your tongue might fall out if you said it.

So I asked if it had something to do with skins or screwing, whatever that was.

“No, stupid. It’s what women use when they bleed.”

Those were your exact words. “... what women use when they bleed.”

I just about died right there when you said “bleed.” How did you get to know so much? I had heard enough. You kept on talking, but inside my head I was going “Lalalalala” and didn’t hear what more you said about women using Kotex when they bleed.

I had nightmares about this on into the winter. Nightmares about people bleeding and dying. And these dreams were not helped when I found

a huge, economy-sized blue box of Kotex in my mother's bathroom. I ran out quickly, my mind going "lalalala," and I prayed to God not to let my mother bleed to death. The Japs had threatened all of us with bayonets, they had taken my father off to prison. We had escaped all that, and now this.

You got Michael and Richard to call us the "Kotex Kids" after that and we didn't like it, but it was okay as long as our mothers didn't hear.

"What's that they called you?"

"Nothing. Just Kennebunk Kids."

"Well, okay, but that's not what it sounded like."

It was a pretty important summer what with the rubbers and the Kotex and winning the war with Japan. Do you know how it happened, how the war ended?

It was a homerun.

I don't know what you were doing, but I was playing on Richard's team. Hardball. I was one of six outfielders.

Michael hit the homerun well over my head and all six of us outfielders were streaking after it when the bells started ringing, church bells, and we all stopped and listened.

Then people in their cars began blowing their horns. Someone stopped and told us, "We just beat the Japs. We won. We won. The War's over."

Straight over to Antwhistle's for free ice cream. This, we knew, would never happen again.

And then to the beach for a huge bonfire, the biggest ever in Kennebunk. Everybody in the world was there. At first everyone was

laughing and shouting and we burnt every piece of wood we could find including three or four lobster pots, somebody's crutches and even a row-boat. But then later everyone got quiet and just sat around the fire and stared at it while it burnt itself down and you could hear the waves again.

Someone said we dropped a new kind of bomb on the Japs and they surrendered. Everyone was saying this bomb was only the size of a baseball. I can still see Michael's homerun, frozen there against the afternoon sky, the pealing of bells and the blaring of horns.

Damn, that was a summer. Jesus. The Kennebunk Kids. I have to laugh now, just thinking about it. How we learned what we learned and how, in the end, we won the war.

BREAKFAST WITH MY FATHER

Uncle Chick, my father, comes into the dining room with Nits, his day nurse, and sits down at the table. Soon his night nurse will come through on her way home. Before she leaves she will say how the night went.

The first thing my father says is, "Where's my lamp?"

I'm already eating breakfast. I say, "I hear them looking for it in the kitchen."

He asks, cupping his right ear and leaning forward, "What's that?"

I whisper, "Turn your hearing aid on."

Reynita and Flor, the housegirls, bring in the lamp, put it on the table next to my father's placemat, and plug it in. The wire looks like rats have chewed it in several places. It spits and sparks occasionally. Nits turns the light on. It is dazzling, 300 watts, maybe more. Uncle Chick positions the lamp to aim right at my face. Now we are both blind; he disappears into the bright glare. He is a disembodied voice across the table.

Breakfast with my father begins every morning at seven. He and his nurse push through the heavy glass door at the far end of the sala-dining room. My older brother, Michael, calls this the Family Tomb. Nothing has been touched or moved since my mother, Katsy, died two years ago. An oil painting of her hangs on the far wall. It shows her curled up on the couch. She is young, relaxed, barefoot, wearing a loose silk shirt. Her high cheek-

bones are perfect and her feline, slovak eyes watch everything in the room. It's the sort of portrait that stares back at you. There is another painting, a portrait of us four brothers posed around a Japanese Go board. The likenesses are not good and we look pretty stupid. Friends used to say we looked like four monkeys. Today they would say geeks. Over the years we have made lots of jokes about the painting and someone has even pencilled in mustaches, glasses, black teeth, a few fangs. People feel free to have their way with it, make little additions to it. Whatever. Katsy used to like the painting. It was one of her lapses.

Uncle Chick and Nits approach the table and when he makes me out sitting there he usually says, "How you doing, Endong? My, what a nice surprise seeing you here." Sometimes he calls me that; it is a name that Filipinos often use for Peter. He also calls me Peter. When he can't see me, doesn't recognize me, or simply forgets who I am he might call me Bo or Keed.

One time I entered the Family Tomb and he quickly asked Elsa, his night nurse, "Who is that guy who just came in?" I signalled her not to say, and went up and kissed him on his head, and he said, "How you doing, Keed?" I said, "You don't even know who I am," and he said, "I sure do...you're Endong; I'd know you anywhere."

He has called people Keed as long as I can remember. I think it all started when he got to know Babe Ruth who Keeded everyone. We have this photograph taken when the American League All Stars came to Manila in the thirties. My father, who arranged the visit, is in their dugout during a

game; he is standing next to Babe Ruth. Each has his left foot on the edge of the dugout. They are looking at something happening on the field. Babe Ruth is pointing, saying something, possibly shouting. Uncle Chick is looking out there, at something going on in right field. Beyond where my father is looking, beyond the bleachers, across the street is the Rizal Basketball Stadium and someone has painted a mark where Babe Ruth broke a window with a homerun. In the picture Uncle Chick is thinking, This is Babe Ruth pointing and shouting.

Every day of my stay he is surprised to see me. Since my mother died I try to visit him twice a year which entails travelling from Los Angeles to Manila. He has aged a lot since her death. He says, "Living single is not all it's cracked up to be." His hearing and his sight are dimming together, as if they are on the same rheostat, and he is not sure whether he is receding from the world or it from him.

I get up from the table, give him an abrazo, a hug, and a kiss on his head and say, "Morning, Dadu. How was your night? Did you sleep OK? How many times did you get up?" Usually I have to speak pretty loud because he hasn't turned on his hearing aid yet, and he might hear only one of my questions, which is why I ask the same question three times, only I word it differently. Sometimes I call him Dadu, a name he acquired when my youngest brother, Jose, was learning how to talk. He is also called Uncle Chick, a name that neighborhood children gave him before the war, and many people now call him Lolo. This morning he replies, "I slept real good. Got up only once to pee. Had a great night."

Then he sits down opposite me. He used to be about 5'7" and weigh a self-confessed 170 pounds, although I've seen pictures of him, bursting the coconut buttons off his Hawaiian shirt, where he must have weighed more. Sometimes when I look at those pictures I think, It's not overweight, it's enthusiasm stretching those shirts. You could see it in his intense eyes, like bullets, and in that smile.

My mother, Katsy, used to laugh about my father, because, as she pointed out, "He's shrinking." His favorite thing with us kids was to stand back-to-back with us and compare heights. At first we thought we were outgrowing him but eventually saw that, sure enough, it was true, our father was shrinking.

It happened so gradually that we all accepted it without a thought, and still do even though all of us sons are now taller than he. It's not as though he lost a foot or two. More like, maybe, two, three inches. He never became the "Great Shrinking Lolo" that Katsy would laugh about, but he always asked each of us brothers, when he hadn't seen us for some time, "Are you still growing?"

I tell him that I slept well last night too, "Pretty much like a log. Woke up twice but fell right back to sleep. Jet lag."

Elsa, the night nurse, on her way home now, comes through the room to say goodbye. I say, "Good morning, Elsa, how did Lolo sleep last night?"

"Terrible. He was up five times. He said he saw a lady in a red dress reading in your mother's bed. He was very restless."

There are no ladies in my father's life anymore, only his nurses and the secretaries at his office. He mentioned on a recent visit that he was

thinking of getting together with some woman in Florida. I asked why he would want to leave Manila. He said it wouldn't be like a marriage. "There wouldn't be any sex. She would just drive me around. We'd drive all over the States. You wouldn't have to think of her as a mother." He said that I knew her, she was a friend of Katsy's, but he couldn't remember her name.

My father hears the nurses telling on him. About the lady in my mother's bed. He is staring down at his plate. I ask him, "Uncle Chick, what's this about a lady in red?"

"I got up and saw a lady wearing a red dress lying in Ma's bed reading a book. I think it was Elsa."

Elsa says, "No, Lolo, it wasn't me...look, I'm always wearing white."

The day nurse, Nits, tells me, "I think Lolo is still annoyed with Elsa for the other night."

When I ask my father what happened the other night, he says, "Elsa wouldn't come home from the party...she just wandered off and got lost and I couldn't find her."

Of course, he hasn't been to a party in five years, but I ask him why he didn't have Teofilo and Precious, his driver and male nurse, bring him back without her?

"Then I wouldn't have anything to kick about. That's half the fun."

Sometimes it's hard to believe we are talking this earnestly about things that have never happened. We just slide right into it. We don't question it at all.

What Uncle Chick does before breakfast is a half hour of calisthenics. He has designed them himself and he does them nude. I opened his door one

morning and saw him moving his wrists and forearms while maintaining a half squat. Naked.

He said, "Morning, Endong."

The night nurse was still on duty, sitting on a sofa-bed under a window.

He does these exercises meticulously, his face still, his eyes usually closed. He controls his breathing. I suspect he is counting. Then he runs in place, barely lifting his feet off the floor. He asks me if I want to run with him. He has a rubber ball in each hand and he is squeezing them.

After the exercises he has the nurse give him an injection of something. I think he calls it Gero-Vital, some fountain of youth thing from Switzerland or Austria. He and Katsy visited the clinic in Europe several years ago. He has been shooting these goat glands or whatever they are into his rear end ever since.

I ask him why he does this. The injection looks painful. Uncle Chick says, "I can't stop now. It might be working." He has a whole closet full of the ampules.

I ask Reynita and Flor to come in from the kitchen and say a blessing for breakfast. Flor says the blessing. It is beautiful, simple and clear, but it is interminable. When she finally finishes it, I ask her if she is a Protestant. My last trip out she sang in the San Raphael Parish Choir, but now she smiles and says, "I am born again."

Reynita brings my father a mango. When he finishes it, she and Flor bring him oatmeal, toast, juice, and coffee. He drinks the coffee black and they allow him sugar in it. His appetite is ample.

"I'm trying to put on weight," he says.

"Nits, what does Lolo weigh this morning?"

"He is up one pound from yesterday. That's very good," she says.

"And his blood pressure is down today. Very quiet, 145 over 80. I think he is very happy today."

Uncle Chick asks Nits to take my pressure every morning. I enjoy the feeling of the air pumped into the wrap on my upper arm. I watch the mercury column slide down the glass tube, then start hiccuping down. I think we are somehow competing about blood pressure.

In spite of the bright light at his side and even with his thick glasses, my father can't read the paper anymore. He says, "Oh, I can see the headlines... that's one," and he runs his finger across the top of the front page, "but I can't read them."

I ask him about something that happened recently, the time he got back perfect, 20-20 vision, but only for one day.

"Oh, that was beautiful, wonderful. I couldn't believe how bright the colors were. And how pretty all the office girls. It really makes a difference to see things in focus. I had to ask Nits and Elsa if I was dreaming."

The nurses were startled by the return of his sight. They had to assure him he was really awake, alive, and not dead and gone to heaven. He read to them from the newspaper, not just headlines, but whole stories, line scores from major league baseball games, the stuff in fine print. He read, he watched TV, he sent Precious to buy him a Playboy Magazine, he went to the office to see the staff, to the Boulevard to see the trees and Imelda's new

buildings, to his favorite cemeteries to see the crosses and the monuments, and again to the Boulevard to see the sunset. They drove around town, crossed the river, saw the ships in the harbor, drove by Smoky Mountain, the huge garbage dump. When they went home he got to see the pile of garbage in the street a block away from the house. "I smell it so often I'm glad to see see what it looks like," he said.

He says, "I wanted to see everything in the world, to take it all in and hold it, to fix it in my memory. I loved just walking around the yard looking at the mango trees and Katsy's old orchid house. Do you remember when this lot was just two huge bomb craters and a squatter living in the bamboo thicket?"

I remember the squatter's little hut on stilts. His wash bowl was a G.I. helmet. I liked his cooking fire, his dog. He had a pregnant wife. I remember they had to leave.

I ask my father if he was disappointed when his perfect vision went away. If there had been any surprises.

He says, "It was too good to last. I knew it was a mistake from the start." He is quiet for a moment then he says, "I was surprised Katsy's grave was so plain."

I say Patrick has ordered a piece of marble from Italy. But Uncle Chick is right. There is nothing to show where my mother is buried. Only a slight mound.

He says, "It was beautiful the way it was. Just grass and the flowering trees, the calachuchis, shedding their flowers down on her."

When my mother died the family buried her the next day. There was no viewing, no embalming. My father's secretary picked out a dress and she saw that Katsy was made right in her casket before it was closed for good. She has told me several times since then, "What a pity not to have the viewing. She was so beautiful."

He asks Nits to read to him from the Manila Bulletin. She begins with items about tax scandals, political corruption, murders, revolutionaries, government troops, Moros...everybody killing everybody, and the usual articles congratulating President and Imelda Marcos on whatever.

My father asks Nits, "Is this yesterday's paper?"

"No, Lolo." She reads today's date from the paper.

"Well, try to find something funny or sexy," he says. "This sounds just like yesterday...or the day before..."

Nits finds an article about how Filipino men who have had vasectomies are complaining about, first: impotence, and second: their wives continue to get pregnant anyway. This last part makes my father laugh out loud.

While he is listening he spreads about an inch of honey on his toast. He takes an enormous bite and then, still holding it, he seems to forget about it. The honey slides off the toast onto the table, the placemat, his shirt and, finally, onto his lap.

As if responding to some strange and primal synchrony, his nose begins to run while the honey is dripping all over him.

Nits comes swiftly to the rescue. Without any fuss she takes a wad of tissues to his generous nose and tamps away the honey with hot water and

napkins. She makes it all disappear like magic. She is kind and gentle. Like a saint: Saint Nits. I don't think I could do what she does.

I ask her if my father has ever told her about the eagle tattooed on his chest.

"Oh, no, but I see it all the time," she says. "It is beautiful. Sometimes when he is exercising I tell him it is flying."

"You know, Uncle Chick, the only thing I want you to leave me in your will is your chest."

He asks me, "What would you do with it?"

"I'm not sure, make a lampshade out of it...maybe a placemat." The eagle's wings spread full width across him, out beyond both nipples, its talons clutching a variety of national flags. It's a bit more wrinkled now and it sags here and there where it didn't used to, but the colors are still pretty good.

Katsy, my brothers and I used to joke with my father about what we would do with him when he died. I don't remember how that got started, perhaps when I suggested bringing out a taxidermist from the States to stuff him. Patrick said if we did that we should wire him for sound and movement. I think he got that idea from watching Uncle Chick sit for hours in front of the TV set while wired to his Relax-a-cizer. He would be asleep but his body twitched and spasmed for hours as if he had been under some kind of electric shock therapy. Michael thought he would make a nice golf bag. Jose, my youngest brother, said he would like to see him dressed in a jockey suit with a ring in his hand and set up as a greeter.

I ask Uncle Chick, "When did you get that tattoo, anyway?" and he says, "I can't remember." But several years ago he told me that he got it

while drunk in his youth. Apparently he had passed out somewhere in Hong Kong and woke up with the eagle emblazoned on his very sore and inflamed chest. Sometimes it's Singapore. I don't know what to believe anymore. One time he told me he got it in Delaware.

I think he has enjoyed the mythology of it all. None of us knows very much about him, not in the kind of detail you associate with fathers. He once told me he used to watch his own father play baseball for the Chattanooga Lookouts and then after the game they would walk home together, both of them dressed in baseball uniforms. His dad was called Sox, my dad was Little Sox. Sox would always go into a bar for an hour while Little Sox waited outside on the steps. Some of the men would give him a penny or a nickel. Sometimes it was dark before they left.

He has always cautioned us against getting tattooed. He says, "If the Japs find you and see that tattoo...you're goose is cooked." He is referring to World War II when the Japanese in the Philippines offered a large reward for his capture in order to put an end to his guerilla activities. Even when he says it now, more than 40 years later, it sounds bizarre, almost plausible.

I ask him, "How come the Manila Bulletin still lists Hans Menzi as its president and publisher?"

"I don't know...surely not because he's still alive. Didn't he die about a year ago?" My father looks at Nits requesting some sort of verification, some time fix.

Nits says, "Yes, Lolo, exactly right: just one year ago."

Then he says, "You know, he died of the same cancer that took your Ma away...only his lasted three years."

I say, as gently as I can, "I think Katsy's was pancreatic cancer. Hans had prostate cancer."

"Like I said, they both had the same thing, only his lasted three years. Poor Katsy...hers was so quick, so painful. What was it, six weeks...two months, something like that? You were there, of course, I remember now, you were here for the whole time. Oh, she went through a lot of pain..." And now my father is starting to cry. Huge tears begin to run down his face and his mouth moves but no voice comes out. Nits works over his face as if he were a boxer between rounds.

Suddenly a high-pitched noise starts to come from the side of his head. His hearing-aid battery has gone haywire. It sounds as though someone's inside his ear blowing a bosun's pipe. I welcome the relief, the distraction.

I ask him, "What's that noise?"

He says, "What did you say?"

I shout my question and he smiles, taps the right side of his head and says, "My hearing aid battery is getting low."

I shout again: "Why don't you get a new battery?" And he says, "I want to get my money's worth out of this one..."

Nits says, "I don't think it works so well anymore...not since he ate the piece that goes in the ear."

I don't know about this so she tells me, "One night when he was at the Hyatt Hotel eating those little oysters he likes so much?...he noticed that the earpiece was missing. We looked everywhere, but finally decided it had fallen into his plate. It looked just like an oyster. Even the color"

The noise has stopped and my father looks up at Nits and asks her, "What's on my schedule for today?" He likes to go to his old office every day and have his secretary read him his mail and tell him what's new in mail-order catalogues. He likes the shoes best, he loves for her to read the descriptions of all the shoes and boots. Sometimes the new, young girls in the office flirt with him. There are days when Nits, Teofilo and Precious just drive him around town, and he likes that too, although he asks them repeatedly, "Where are we now? Where are we going?"

Nits tells him that he has an easy schedule today.

"This afternoon we go to see Dr. Batumbakal, your eye doctor."

My father tells me, "He's the one in the wheelchair. It's too bad, you know, his arthritis is so painful now he does all his work sitting in a wheelchair." Then he adds, "You ought to see his new wife. She's a real knockout."

He asks Nits, "Is that all we have for today?" and she says, "We come back home after the doctor; that's all for today."

"You know something?" My father is talking now for the benefit of both me and Nits. He says, "I never want to enter a hospital again. Hospitals are places to die in. If we could've gotten Katsy home, she would've lived...remember how all she wanted was to get back in her own bed? The last time I was in a hospital, they put me in the mental ward. We had to go up in an elevator rigged like a cage and when it was time to feed me they stuck food through the bars."

Nits is standing behind my father frowning, shaking her head indicating that he is off and running in uncharted territory. She says, in her strict

voice, "No, Lolo, I was always with you and we were never in a mental ward."

He tells me, "You should pay more attention to the patient than the nurse. I was there."

I say, "If they put you in a mental ward, you probably deserved it...or maybe they thought you were Michael." Sometimes people think my older brother is crazy. He once fashioned a vivid lobotomy scar on his forehead and smiled and drooled at all his visitors without saying anything. Another time he painted a brain onto his shaved head and went around telling everyone that he was the family member with all the brains.

I am trying to deter my father from thinking about hospitals or about my mother's death, but today he insists on the subject with real purpose. He says, "Katsy's doctors were all very sad when she passed away. One of them even danced with her one night...but I guess that was early-on. Were you there?"

"I was there, but I missed the dancing. I left before the funeral. I left before she died."

"We tried everything to save her, but nothing worked. We tried to get her some special medicine from Japan. And we tried to get her a special pain-killer. The medicine didn't work and the pain-killer came too late. It was awful, when she was finally in a coma, when we all finally said, No more..."

I remember the night vividly...the gathering of the family and the doctors, the specialists. It was like a board meeting, and when the doctors all left and the family was alone looking at each other, it seemed that nothing had

ever been so final as when the door closed behind the last of the doctors and we all knew Katsy was going to die.

I tell my father, "I remember." What I remember is how sadness finally invaded and took over my father that night, how suddenly he looked rumpled, like clothes that have been slept in. I remember him thanking the doctors, shaking their hands. It was all he could do. He was alone in the car when Teofilo drove him home and when they pulled away from the hospital I could see the top of his head barely sticking up over the back seat.

"You were the last one to see her conscious. The nurses told me that she came out of her coma when you said goodbye to her. They said it was a miracle."

Katsy's nurses had told me the same thing. One of them had urged me, "Oh, please do it again, whatever you did." And I remember saying something very good like, "You never do the same miracle twice." Then I left the hospital, left Manila and went back to the States, and Katsy died the day I left. Or that night. I don't know.

I say, "It wasn't much of a miracle, Uncle Chick." His face is astream with tears. It is contagious. My throat and eyes are burning, and both of us are now weeping. We have both gone silent, sitting there at the dining table with the bright light and our empty plates.

I ask him, "Uncle Chick...do you think we still need the light?" Even though I have grown used to it. I am feeling disembodied myself. It's as if we are two ghosts, together in the Family Tomb.

He is quiet for a while, not answering. Then he chuckles softly and says, "Nope, I guess we don't." Nits reaches over and turns it off, and the

room seems to grow darker as the image of my father gathers itself and returns. I am sure mine is doing the same. The wires sizzle and snap and go still. The lamp--it is a gooseneck lamp--remains perched next to my father's breakfast detritus. Reynita takes the lamp back to the kitchen. Flor is taking things off the table.

Nits has dabbed my father's face dry, wiped away all the crumbs and honey...she has tidied him up. He looks at her and asks, "Do we have any appointments?"

WAR STORIES

Seven years after the war and Uncle Chick had still not told any war stories. We were driving, now, north of Rome in a rented DeSoto. He sat in the front seat between me and the driver. I don't know how I got the window seat. I looked up at his face and saw the scar that ran from his ear along the jawbone to his chin.

I said, "Uncle Chick, this is the Appenine Way."

We drove on some more. I asked him to tell me some war stories. I said, "How did you get that scar?" And I reached up to touch it. It was rough, like old chewing gum stuck on the side of his jaw. He used an electric shaver and scratched the paint out of the S so it said Chick.

He said he didn't like to tell war stories. That it was a way of bragging. He said lots of people back home in Manila were telling war stories. "There's a lot of fiction being written," he said.

I looked at the scars on his left hand. His fingers looked like they'd been chopped up. We read newspaper and magazine articles about him in Manila. They said he was tortured in Fort Santiago at the beginning of the war. The Japanese had messed up his fingers, given him the water treatment.

I asked him if that was true.

He said it wasn't. He split his fingers in a woodchopping accident back in Tennessee when he was thirteen years old, my age now. He said, "I

was holding the log with one hand and chopping with the hatchet in the other. I just cut right into my fingers, laid them wide open. The Japs never touched them.”

I asked him about the scar on his chin. I knew it didn’t happen shaving.

“The Japs did that one,” he said. “I was scheduled to meet some guerillas in Mindanao. When the sub got to the rendezvous we saw a fire on the beach and everything looked okay. They cast me off in a rubber boat and submerged. This is what they always did. When they left you in that little boat you were alone. No matter what happened, they were gone. I paddled toward shore. On the way in I saw a launch that belonged to a friend and climbed aboard. Everyone was asleep so I shook one of the people on the stern. He woke up and started shouting in Japanese. He grabbed me and we wrestled to the side of the boat. Everyone jumped up now, maybe twenty more Jap soldiers. I felt like I’d just woke up a hornets’ nest. As the two of us went overboard I felt a cut on the side of my face. The Jap and I sank about twenty feet when finally I broke free and swam away. I didn’t know what direction I was going in. I just held my breath as long as I could. When I came up the Japs started shouting and shooting and I went back underwater, this time heading towards the fire on shore.

“I came up and took bearings again. The beach was about two hundred meters away.”

“Two hundred meters is a long way,” I said. “Weren’t you worried about sharks?”

"I sometimes think about them now, but just then I didn't think about them at all. I could see dark shapes running back and forth near the fire. I hoped they were guerillas, friends. The Japs were still firing away at me when shooting started up on shore putting me right in the middle. As I approached the beach I saw the people there were Filipinos, but they apparently thought I was a Jap from the boat and they began shooting at me too. Guerillas pretty much shot at anything they didn't recognize. Their motto was Shoot First, Talk Later. Their aim wasn't always that great. Thank God.

"By now I only had one hand to swim with as the other was holding my cut. It didn't hurt much, it was numb, but I could tell it was pretty big. I waved at the guerillas and finally they stopped shooting at me and realized I was the person they were there to pick up. The Japs on the boat decided to leave the area.

"The guerillas were glad to see me and apologized for the shooting. They brought me to an old lady who chewed up a mixture of guava leaves and something else, spat it into my cut and sewed it up with coconut twine."

He said, "You can see it's a little ragged. It healed up quickly. It stung like hell at first."

In the back seat my mother, Katsy, and younger brothers Patrick and Jose, were dozing. The mid-afternoon sun rode high over the trees lining the road. My older brother, Michael, and Jose's nanny had gone ahead by train. We were doing our own version of the Grand Tour.

I asked my father about the time he came to the Newton Academy School in Asheville, North Carolina. Katsy, Michael, Patrick and I lived in

Asheville during the war, having been prisoner-exchanged by the Japanese seven months after the war started. My father had to turn around and return to the Philippines immediately as MacArthur's guerilla coordinator. We saw him once during the war when he came home on leave, and once near the end when he appeared in less than great condition. We heard on three different occasions he had been killed.

On his second visit he was jaundiced and rather thin and he gave a talk at our school. He was dressed in his Navy uniform, three gold stripes on the sleeve cuffs. He told us this wasn't the uniform he worked in. "That was a pair of short pants, sneakers and a teeshirt. You have to think that any minute you might have to run for your life." His job was to enter the Philippines secretly, organize the bands of guerillas, who were operating independently like bandits, into fighting units of the U.S. Army. He set up coastwatcher radio stations, brought in supplies and took out refugees and escapees. He reported directly to Col. Courtney Whitney and Gen. MacArthur.

He asked the school audience if we had heard of the Leyte Invasion and the Battle of Leyte Gulf? We all raised our hands and shouted. He then said his guerilla radio stations had tracked the Japanese fleet as it steamed through the islands. He asked if we'd heard of Admiral Nishimura. Silence. Well, neither had he until Leyte. It was Nishimura's fleet that literally blew my father out of the war and sent him to recuperate in Asheville. "But it was our guerillas, with a little help from the Third and Seventh Fleets that sent the Jap Admiral and nearly all his ships to the bottom of the ocean." More applause and shouting.

He taught us how the guerillas brushed their teeth with coconut fiber brushes and salt water, bathed with coconut soap and slept on mats woven from coconut leaves. He said how important it was to stay clean and healthy even when you were living like an outlaw. Then he showed us his spy camera, a Minox, that looked like a cigarette lighter. He also had something that looked like a grey pencil. He called it a cigarette gun. "You strap this to your fingers and pretend you are surrendering and suddenly shoot your captor by bending your fingers." He held up his hands, surrendering to imaginary Japs. Then he shot the Japs and we all cheered and clapped.

Guerillas are the world's biggest sissies, he said. "They never pick a fight they can lose. They always want the odds on their side. The way they fight is to hit the enemy, who is usually bigger and stronger, but instead of waiting to get hit back, they run away. They dig holes in the roads and when Jap trucks fall into them the guerillas shoot them up and run."

A teacher asked him what kind of a gun he carried. He said he never carried a gun. "A gun would've slowed me down," he said. "Besides, they don't make guns with rearview mirrors." Some of us younger kids didn't know what that meant, but the teachers all laughed.

The intense search for my father by the Japanese eased when they captured an American with a tattoo that resembled one of my father's. They killed him and broadcast throughout the islands that my father was dead. Uncle Chick flashed his smile at the Newton Academy assembly and said, "After that I could sunbathe in public and the Japs paid no attention to me." He advised us never to get tattooed. Everyone in the audience would have gone out and gotten a tattoo right then if we'd known where to go.

He also cautioned us all to pay attention to alarms. He recalled spending some time in a friend's house in the village of Jimenez, Mindanao. His siesta was ruined every day by a gong sounded to warn of approaching Japanese. Everyone evacuated, "buckwheated", only to find out the alarms were false. One day my father stayed behind when the warning sounded. When he woke up he looked out the window and saw below him in the main street hundreds of enemy soldiers. They were already starting to break down the doors. He didn't have time to put on clothes or shoes. He tore through the back of the house, across the chicken yard and did a one-hand vault over a seven-foot barbed wire fence. "They saw me," he said, "but they were too surprised to shoot or give chase. Besides, there's no Jap can outrun a scared Tennessee boy." Everyone laughed at this. The picture of him running away from the Japs in his underwear.

During recess all the younger kids wanted to be my friend, put me on their teams, buy me stuff in the cafeteria. Michael was having equal success with the seventh and eighth graders.

But I was in the DeSoto now, somewhere north of Rome and I wanted to know how come he was so yellow and skinny when he visited us that time. It was near the end of the war.

He said he had been sent to the Navy Convalescent Hospital in Asheville because he had been picked up at sea, unconscious and without identification just after the invasion of Leyte.

"It was all very strange because I ended up on a friend's PT boat, just hitching a ride, when the whole Jap Navy came steaming up the Surigao

Straits. All our PT boats were called in to stop the Japs but it was hopeless. We saw one after another of them blown up and then ours was blown up, all hands lost except me and the captain. We were found floating in our lifejackets. I was deaf too. I couldn't remember anything. Not even who I was or what I was doing on a PT. So they sent me back to Asheville. After a month there I recovered and I was delighted that I was so near you guys. It was really just a coincidence. I guess I also had malaria and I was yellow from that. The war finally got to me. But the rumors about my death were never true."

He wouldn't tell me anymore war stories for many years. Sometimes I overheard him talking with Father Haggerty, the Jesuit priest who remained with the guerillas in Mindanao, and I picked up a few more things, but really the war was over for my father. He had already started doing business with Japanese companies, dealing with some of the people who had hunted him with such enthusiasm during the war.

Right now we were on the Appenine Way, headed north. He started talking to the driver about where we would stop for the night. He asked Katsy what we were going to eat. She said she was looking forward to having a cold chicken sandwich from room service. Uncle Chick said, "How about some spaghetti?"

We were going to Milan.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

My father wants to outlive everyone. He keeps a careful eye on world news. He flinched when Hemingway died and wondered why anyone would take his own life. They were the same age, he and Hemingway, born at the beginning of the century, “before airplanes” as he says.

“You know why I want to live forever?” he asks. “So I can see how it all turns out.”

His main competitors were his business partner whom we called Uncle Dick; his close friend, The Admiral; and all the Garamendi brothers, especially Don Emilio.

Uncle Dick obliged my father by developing something that ate away pieces of his body until he more or less disappeared. The last things to go were his ears. There he was in Manila’s best hospital, two ears resting on a pillow. My brother Michael visited Uncle Dick in the hospital. He bent down over the ears and whispered, “Look, Uncle Dick, I got a haircut.” Michael said there wasn’t enough of Uncle Dick to fill up a proper urn. He said, “They’ll probably put him in a Ball Jar and keep him with their year’s supply of pinto beans and canned bread.”

The Admiral died of kidney failure. He had waded ashore with General MacArthur at Leyte, given speeches all over the world. He even ran for public office once against Imelda Marcos, and he had that ageless look

some Filipinos achieve. My father thought the Admiral would live about two or three hundred years.

The first Garamendi brother was executed by the Japanese. The rest of them succumbed to various combinations of ill-temper, drink, tobacco and genetic malfunction. My father said, "If you got them mad enough they were lots of fun."

Don Emilio looked good right up to his final day. The last time I saw him he'd been riding horseback in a small village south of Manila, surrounded by bodyguards. He dismounted and greeted me as usual: "Conyo," he said, slapping me one of his short, chopping slaps across my cheek. He grabbed me in a hammerlock and said to his bodyguards, "Let me tell you about this one." But he didn't tell them anything, he just repeated, "Let me tell you about this one," as he rubbed a knuckle into the side of my head.

Don Emilio died about a year ago. According to Elsa, my father's nurse, Don Emilio had a violent convulsion and turned black. She said he had looked surprised and "very angry." It took two people standing on his rigid body to straighten it out so they could finally put it in onto a gurney. Elsa said, "These old men, they do not like to die."

Don Emilio's death left my father, at 87, without competitors, unless you count the old Huk rebel Luis Taruc. My father actually died a month ago and would have stayed that way except Elsa gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He said, "That was a nice way to wake up. We should practice."

He didn't mind having died. "I wanted to know what it was like," he said. But he was disappointed too. "I've been there and back and I can't tell

you anything about it.” He was glad it was so easy, so painless. He is terrified he’ll choke to death and embarrass himself. The first thing he asked Elsa when she became his nurse was, “Do you know the Hemlock Maneuver?”

When I suggest a visit to the Garamendi mansion my father wants to know why. I tell him about the Garamendi children now running the family empire, discovering primitive tribes in Mindanao, giving interviews to the BBC, hiring basketball players. The beautiful daughter, Milagros, has just returned from Costa Rica. My father’s eyes glaze over and he hides a yawn. When I mention Don Emilio’s widow, Dona Carmen, he wakes up.

He asks, “How is Carmen?”

“She is very sick, remember? You saw her not long ago in Luneta Park. She was being wheelchaired around by her nurse?” He says, “Is that right.” It doesn’t sound like a question.

Elsa tells me that when my father and Dona Carmen met in the park the widow got excited and started squeeling. As he bent down to kiss her, Dona Carmen lurched forward and banged her head against his. “It was like two coconuts hitting together,” Elsa says. It turns out she has Alzheimer’s Disease.

“What?” says my father.

“Alzheimer’s Disease,” Elsa and I say together. He calls it Oldtimers’ Disease. He is not aware this is a tired joke. He thinks that’s what it is. Like Hemlock Maneuver.

Elsa says Dona Carmen remains a most beautiful woman. My father says, “Yes, she always was a real beauty, the only nice Garamendi.”

At the Garamendi Mansion three guards stop our car and ask if we have an appointment. Elsa is quite grand. Buzzing down the window she says, "Just tell them who it is." She shuts the window on them.

I say, "Elsa, I don't think they're going to let us in."

Just then the large green gate swings open and the guards salute us as we drive through.

The mansion is very much as we remember it, surrounded by tall, old trees, mostly banyan, acacia and mango, as well as a jungle of lesser shrubs. The three-storey house is a white, Spanish-colonial edifice with a red tile roof. It looks like a resort hotel. When American soldiers took over Manila at the end of the war, they had to fight house-to-house, rooting out the Japanese. They came to the Garamendi place where the whole family was hiding in the swimming pool which was then a bomb shelter. The Americans ripped open the door and aimed their rifles into the darkness. Don Emilio shouted, "Don't shoot, goddamit. We're friends."

The first person we see is Dona Carmen's nurse standing at the far end of the front porch, grinning widely and flapping an arm at us. Andy enters the porch from the front door, and then his wife Pili emerges sweating from the jungle, rubbing her nose, saying how good it is to see us. "Promise not to wait so long before your next visit," she says. Their baby daughter climbs onto the porch from the yard, trailing a nurse who lifts her to kiss my father and then releases her to play. They call her something like "Atharaxu."

We are suddenly surrounded by a dozen maids and houseboys who are all asking, "What will you have to drink?" Everyone is speaking at the

same time, getting in each other's way, and my father is confused as to where to sit or not sit, and there is much holding of him by his elbows and counting steps for him so he won't pitch over into the yard. The tile floor is treacherous and there is no railing at the edge of the porch. My father thinks he is in a restaurant and orders a "lager lite." I order a Coke, but Pili asks, "Wouldn't you prefer a nice fruit juice?"

Dona Carmen is lying on a lounge chair, a long clear tube running from her nose to an open-topped plastic container suspended over her head. "That's a nasogastric tube," says Elsa. "It's how they feed her." There are a couple of bandages on her forehead and face.

When Andy seats us on the porch he points to Dona Carmen and says, "There's Mother over there. As you can see, she's all plugged in."

I ask how she's doing. He says, "Not good. She fell in the bathroom this morning and hit her head. We're going to buy her a football helmet." I remember how she had bumped heads with my father. This time, as he bends down to kiss her, he very carefully holds her head so she can't butt him again. Elsa has been reminding him and she looks pleased when he stands up undamaged.

Dona Carmen looks like a little mummy and I don't have the courage to get close to her. Her fists are clenched at the end of the skinny arms folded tightly across her chest. She is wearing a green and white floral print pullover and white athletic socks. A large blue, monogrammed towel covers her from the waist down.

Her nurse sits at her feet and holds them as Dona Carmen performs involuntary, eight-inch sit-ups, in the grip of constant contractions, as if she is keeping time with something.

“I imagine her stomach muscles are in great shape,” says Andy.

Dona Carmen squeals and looks around the porch. Her mouth sags. Her lower jaw is drawn under the upper one. Her eyes are large and bright, active and darting. I try holding her stare and mouthing, Hello, Carmen, but her expression never changes. I feel she’s looking at all of us with some kind of accusation, the way caged animals do.

We are seated around a glass table with an arrangement of wilting anthuriums sitting on top of it. “There were supposed to be a dozen,” Andy says, “but there are only six...I suppose they ran out. My God, it’s really an ugly thing.”

He reaches under the table. It looks like he’s trying to stick chewing gum under there but I think he has a hidden button he’s trying to hit. In half a minute we are surrounded by houseboys and maids. They are all asking, “Who rang? Did somebody ring? Can I get you something?”

Andy says, “Yes, dammit, I rang. Take away these stupid flowers.”

A maid places separate dishes of salted peanuts, crisp pork rinds and a spicy vinegar dip on the table.

Andy is dressed in shorts and a tank top. “Forgive my clothes,” he says. “I was about to go jogging.” He grabs a handful of stomach and sighs, “Christmas.”

Andy says he wants my father to meet Alex, a French artist who has been living with the Garamendis for years. Alex is walking around the yard

looking at trees and shrubs. He is thin without being gaunt, or perhaps he is gaunt without being cadaverous.

Andy says, "Alex, come up here. I want you to meet these people."

Alex is impressed that my father is a World War II hero, that he was a guerilla leader here in the Philippines, coming and going by submarine. Alex says he has read a book about my father, in French. "It was very jolly," he says. "It was called *Rendezvous par Sousmarin*."

He and Andy give us a guided tour of Alex's shack behind the mansion, nestled there under a mango tree and hidden by a banana grove.

Andy Says, "I designed it to look like what you would build if you were shipwrecked in the Philippines." He says it's his Robinson Crusoe house. The interior is covered with Alex's art work. He has painted the walls, ceilings, stove, counters, tables, light fixtures, chairs. Everything. Andy says, "Alex is an aborigine. He paints the walls of his cave." Alex has a collection of animal skeletons, gasmasks, human skulls, shark jaws.

My father is looking at the paintings. He says, "This place is a museum."

Alex says, "It is all about life and death and everything."

My father says, "I like the colors."

Alex points to a human skull encased inside a square cube of plastic. "This one will last forever, don't you think?" He says he has placed it in resin, like a bug in amber.

My father says he used to make lamps out of skulls from the boneyard near Zamboanga. "That was before the war, long before the war. The housegirls always swore the skulls belonged to their grandparents."

Alex says, "When we are dead, people will stare at this one."

My father rubs his hands over the smooth plastic. "Damn," he says.

Our little group ambles back to the porch just in time to see Milagros, Andy's older sister, arriving. I remember her as being, in 1946, the most beautiful girl in the world.

She walks, using two canes, from the carport to where we are talking. Her legs, awkwardly bowed, want to go off in different directions, neither leg able to walk straight ahead. She greets everyone, kisses my father. She tells him, "I haven't seen you in a hundred years. You look terrific." She sits down and lights a cigarette. She and Andy and Pili are puffing out smoke as they talk.

"What happened to Mother?" she asks, noticing the bandages and bruises.

Andy says, "She fell down in the loo...banged her head on the toilet."

Milagros has just returned from living in Costa Rica. My father calls her "Guapa," and asks her where she prefers to live. She says, "Oh, here, by far. I hope I never have to move."

My father says, "Me neither."

"All the Costa Ricans look like Pancho Villa," says Milagros. "My cook was a Nicaraguan and was always leaving to help the Contras. One day she stole the household money and went home. But then she came back with all the money and said there was nothing to buy there. It was so sad." She pronounces it Neeecarawa.

We make excuses to leave and they urge us to stay but my father is already asleep in his chair, still holding onto his lager.

As we walk towards the car I ask Milagros if she remembers when our families lived together after the war.

She looks off into the trees and smiles. "You remember that? Do you remember your father singing 'Rum and Coca Cola'?"

Elsa, my father and I climb into our car and slowly cruise away from the porch where everyone lines up to wave, their hands fluttering like pigeons. We wave back until we are past the row of guards saluting us.

The last thing I see is Dona Carmen's nurse grinning and waving while Carmen continues doing her sit-ups like a metronome. The fluid in her nasogastric tube has been changed to something green and viscous. Elsa says, "It's her iron."

My father says, "That Carmen sure was a beauty." And I say, "Yes, she always was...and how about Milagros?...she used to be the most beautiful girl in the world."

"The Garamendi girls, the women...they were beautiful," says my father. "The men, they all looked like rats."

I ask him if he remembers singing Rum and Coca Cola at the old house after the war.

He says, "I remember everything. The Last Time I Saw Paris. God Bless America. Paper Doll. Hut Sut Rawls Sittin on a Rail. Mairzee Dotes. Rum and Coca Cola." He begins singing, "Rum and Coca Cola..." in his old man's voice, stretching out the vowel sounds in Coca and Cola, playing air maracas. He is making us laugh.

The green gate closes behind us, and the Garamendi mansion disappears into its jungle. My father says, "Where do we go from here?"

VISITING CEMETERIES

One of the things we do is visit cemeteries. It was something we did even before my mother died, before we had any deceased of our own. The whole family went to graveyards the way people go to movies or ball games. It was like touring in another time. My father said "It's a way of keeping in touch."

Uncle Chick, when he was much younger and could still see, loved to read the inscriptions to us, translating from the Spanish. Many of them were early Manila, dating back two hundred years. Some of the lettering was so weathered he had to run his fingers lightly over it.

"Look at that," he said, "Two months old. Cholera. Another little angel." There were so many little angels, loving husbands and wives, adoring children. Death was everywhere, the dead were buried all around us. Floors of old Spanish churches were paved with memorial stones; walls of crypt rooms were lined with rows of sarcophagi; and cemeteries, like Paco Cemetery, were honeycombed with bone vaults. For several years after the war many of the crypts remained shattered and we could look in and see entire skeletons.

Today I have come from California to visit my father in Manila and we are going to look at cemeteries. Some things have changed. Uncle Chick feels my face now and says, "I know you. You look just like your mother."

The morning paper lies in front of him unopened. "I can't even read the headlines anymore," he says. Sometimes he asks Elsa, his day nurse, to read to him. "Read me something funny."

The old house has gone dark around him. My older brother Michael calls the house the Family Tomb and when he comes to visit he stays at the MacArthur Hotel. Uncle Chick says, "I don't understand why Michael won't stay here." The servants say he is afraid of the ghosts, the aswangs.

Elsa reads to my father from his old scrapbooks. I have seen her reading from pre-war news clippings about him and Quezon, Osmena, Roxas, Quirino,...Elsa fascinated by all these historical figures, and Uncle Chick dozing, snoring gently.

"Wake up, Lolo."

"Don't worry about me, Honey, I'm listening to everything you say."
He didn't open his eyes.

One of the things Elsa does is suggest outings for Uncle Chick. They drive to the Polo Club where he can hear the horses and smell the familiar smells of horse manure, saddle leather and mown grass. Or to the parks on the Boulevard where he can sense the sunsets. He likes it when they drive to the Philippine Heroes Cemetery. He puts on his best *barong tagalog* when he goes there to visit his good friend The General. Uncle Chick sits on a bench facing the bronze statue and talks with his old friend. He touches the metal, feels the rims of The General's glasses, the lapels of his jacket. He loves The General's shoes. "Our feet were the same size, you know."

The rolling hills are covered with rows of white crosses. Uncle Chick once asked Elsa who all those people were. He was pointing to the crosses. She said, "Those are the dead, Lolo."

"No, no. Those." He insisted he was seeing a host of people, a crowd marching over the hills. "They are very much alive." He was cross with her for not seeing them.

Late afternoons are a pleasant time for Uncle Chick. He enjoys the pastel blandness and the gentle breeze that is neither cool nor warm. He tells Elsa he would like to be buried here too. "How about over there?" he asks, pointing to an area fenced off for maintenance equipment. "That seems like a nice spot."

Elsa says, "You are a real hero, Lolo. You are too good for this place."

He says, "I like it here."

Elsa has suggested a trip to Cementerio del Norte. Uncle Chick seems pleased. My grandmother, my mother's mother, is buried there and sometimes Uncle Chick talks about how she came to be buried in the Martyr's Monument.

It is a hot, clear day, people are shopping, the streets and sidewalks are busy, alive with color and sound.

Uncle Chick recalls that Blanche, my grandmother, was a very stubborn woman. "She was damn near a Muslim," he said. She had lived among the Moros in Zamboanga raising her family and managing a coconut plantation. Neighbors and friends referred to her children as Blanche's little Moros.

"Do you remember her at all?" Uncle Chick asks me.

"I do, I do. I remember her as being the oldest person in the world."

She was 55 years old when she came to live with us in Manila. She tutored me on our large porch facing the bay. I also remember the American soldiers digging up her camote field in Tagaytay for fox holes. They were retreating from Manila at the outbreak of the war. She said, "Well, at least you're not the Japs." That night, during a downpour, she went out with a kerosene lantern to see if they were all right.

This was just before Christmas and we were burying our presents and waiting for Uncle Chick to arrive from Manila. The next night the soldiers had gone. We looked down at Manila in the distance and watched a huge column of flame and smoke light up the city. When my father arrived he pointed to the fire and said, "How do you like it? My Christmas present to the Japs." He had spent the last two days demolishing the port of Manila.

"Do you remember the time I got arrested?"

I don't think I remember, but as soon as he asks I see Blanche stepping away from the huddle of family and servants; I see her approaching the Japanese officer and shouting, "You can't arrest that man, he has diplomatic..." The officer slaps her and she falls back into us. I do remember, indeed: it was the day Japan declared war on my family.

"She got the last word, you know." My father gives a small chuckle.

"As the Japs were about to place me in their car, Blanche shouted after them, 'You're making a big mistake.'"

Elsa tells my father's driver, Teofilo, that he has taken a wrong turn. Teofilo takes wrong turns occasionally but my father is never in a hurry to get

anywhere and he is content to be lost. He is quite happy in the cocoon of his car. Even when Teofilo bumps fenders with a jeepney, Elsa and Uncle Chick stay inside while police and spectators gather around. He sits there wondering where he is; he asks Elsa, "Are we moving? Why are we stopped?"

When we arrive at North Cemetery Uncle Chick gets excited, forgetting, it seems, that he can't see. "There's a round building here somewhere. I'll remember it when I see it."

We drive through large, wrought-iron gates under a shady arch of acacia trees. Food vendor pushcarts line both sides of the drive. They are selling coconuts, mangos, peanuts, candy, rice cakes. There is no round building in sight.

"What's important about the round building?" I ask.

"That's where Uncle Tom and I found Blanche's bones." Uncle Tom is Blanche's youngest child, my mother's younger brother.

"I thought you found her in a common grave?"

"We did. The execution grave, a hole about six by eight. Right here in this cemetery. It was unmarked."

"Uncle Tom says it was a trench."

"Maybe it was a trench."

"How did you find it if it was unmarked?"

My father is recalling a time near the end of the war when both he and Uncle Tom were in Manila. Blanche was nowhere to be found.

"Coincidence. Luck," he says. "I was interviewing a Jap prisoner about something else, a war crimes trial. I happened to mention her name

and he remembered it. 'Madame Jurika. Yes. I was the witness at her execution.' That was the first we knew of what happened to her."

"Uncle Tom says he found the witness and the gravesite."

"That may be right. We were both working on it."

"He says the witness took him to three wrong sites. Uncle Tom says he told the Jap, 'If the next one is not right we're going to put you in it before we cover it back up.' He says he drew his .45 caliber pistol for emphasis."

Uncle Chick laughs. "That sounds like Uncle Tom." I have kept careful track of the stories that my father and Uncle Tom tell about Blanche's execution and exhumation. So far there are sixteen differences. I used to think that there were major and minor ones. Uncle Chick says there were 21 people in the grave, that there were three women. He says he went there with a funeralista named Siojo and that they made no identifications. "It was too gruesome." Uncle Tom says there were 31 remains in the grave, "You couldn't call them bodies." He says there were six or seven women, three of them nuns. He also recalls digging up the grave with the help of a crew from the Elizalde Rope Company, spreading the remains out on their flatbed truck. Now the differences and similarities have achieved a benign equilibrium and they somehow confirm the truth, whatever it may be.

Uncle Chick looks around him, sizing up shapes, the light, the shadows, taking bearings. "Is this North Cemetery? It never used to have so many buildings. Where did Teofilo take us this time?"

Before the War, North Cemetery had been a large expanse of cogon grass on the edge of Manila. During the Japanese occupation Filipino

groundskeepers were forced to dig large common graves and fill them in after the mass executions.

Today North Cemetery looks like an exotic housing development. Family tombs are as big as houses. Plaster, granite, marble statues of angels, Biblical scenes and family members are everywhere, larger than life.

Something else is different. The laundry. Wet clothes, sheets and towels are hanging on angels and saints, draped over crypts and elaborate portals. People are washing and bathing at water spigots.

Elsa says, "Oh, my God." Whenever she says this Uncle Chick perks up. She has learned not to say it, for instance, when his blood pressure is up around 180.

Now he asks, "What's the matter, Elsa?"

"Look. People are living inside the tombs. Everywhere. I cannot believe it."

As we drive slowly past the monuments families stop their bathing and washing. Elsa waves at them. They wave back, smiling.

"Uncle Chick, you won't believe this. North Cemetery has become a barrio."

We roll down a window and smell chicken and pork and garlic cooking over charcoal fires.

"Oh my," says Uncle Chick. "When I came over here as a youngster...these were the first smells...they still make me hungry."

"Masarap," says Elsa. "Delicious."

My father tries to direct Teofilo but we get lost. Over and over again. Finally we stop and ask a resident where the Martyr's Monument is.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Blanche Jurika.”

Oh, yes, Mrs. Jurika.” As if she were a neighbor. “Just follow around to the right, 100 meters. You will find her.”

We find the place very quickly now. There is a young girl hanging laundry on the wrought-iron pickets that enclose the monument. Children’s clothing mostly with lots of reds, pinks, blues, yellows. The tomb has blossomed into a large tropical flower.

It is not at all like the old photographs which had made it seem so grand, sitting alone in a grassy area, large trees hanging over it. Now it seems barely relevant, cramped between other graves, desperately holding onto its own space. And there are cats sunning themselves on the flat parts. Six cats winking in the hot sun, licking their paws.

I ask the girl if they are her cats.

“No, sir, I do not know to them.”

When I ask where she lives she points to a Greek temple where a woman looks up from her cooking and smiles.

I ask Uncle Chick again about the round building.

“Oh, yes. There were remains of twenty, thirty people in the common grave. Only the skulls were identified. This was about seven months after they were killed. It was gruesome. I wanted to put everyone back in the hole and fill it in. But these were some of the top families...Elizalde, Ozamis, Pirovino...well, money was raised for this monument and the remains were transferred. Somehow Blanche’s were lost or misplaced, and ended up in the round building, I think it was a chapel. Uncle Tom and I found her there.”

I notice that her's is the first of the memorial squares; it shows the year of her birth as 1885. The last square, the thirtieth, is blank.

"That's in memory of the traitor who turned in everyone else. The Japs killed him last. I think his name was Cio or Santos. Reyes maybe." No one ever remembers this traitor's name. Even Uncle Tom says, "Reyes. Santos. I don't know."

I ask why Blanche was executed.

Uncle Chick shrugs. "She would've been better off in Santo Tomas."

He says she was free in Manila to work with a group of missionaries, some doctors, and they occasionally hid people from the Japanese. She ended up in Fort Santiago.

"That was not a good place to be," says my father who had spent a few months there at the beginning of the war.

People who were in Fort Santiago with Blanche have told us that she was beaten, that she often returned to the cell lame and bruised. "Mercifully, she lost her mind," one said. "She would stand in the window staring into the courtyard. She would point and say, 'Isn't that Tommy?' I think she was looking for her son right up to the end. By that time I am sure she felt no more pain."

Uncle Chick is silent for a long time, as if he is in another place. Then he says, "It was probably because of me." During the war he had been in and out of the islands by submarine, organizing guerilla forces for MacArthur. He travelled through Mindanao, Samar, Leyte, Cebu, Negros, Mindoro, Luzon. He had even entered Manila a few times, once, disguised as a priest. He had taken great care with his makeup and costume and was bravely walking down

Taft Avenue, near the La Salle College, when a friend came up to him and said, "Uncle Chick, you look terrible."

He remains silent for a few moments, then he says again, "I think they killed her because she was related to me."

Elsa takes out her handkerchief and dabs at the perspiration on my father's forehead and face. "Lolo, are you tired? You've been talking so much."

"Is it lunch time yet? I think I could eat a big lunch."

As we get back into the car a young beggar comes to the window. He rubs his hands on it. "Give me money, sir, please sir, give me money."

Elsa and Teofilo frown at him, tell him to get away. He presses his whole face against the window, flattening his nose. He looks at us with those large eyes, the accusing look of the poor. Beads of sweat stand out on his shaved head like little blisters. Elsa gives him some money.

"You know what those bastards did?" says Uncle Chick.

I have no idea where he is. He is alive again, exercised. "Those bastards put hoods on them, trucked them out to North Cemetery." His mind is kicking around in 1944.

"What hoods, Lolo?" asks Elsa.

"Blue hoods. I tried one on myself. It was horrible." He put his hand up to his neck.

"Horrible. You can see through the cloth. The prisoners were all tied to each other with a long rope. In the truck, standing up. Like cattle."

He quiets down for a few deep breaths. He frowns, focussing on what he knows, trying to get it just right. He is telling us now what he is seeing.

"They are putting the prisoners on a truck. The sentries are laughing, tying the prisoners together. They throw a couple of shovels into the truck. That's just cruel. The hole is already dug."

"You okay, Uncle Chick?"

"The prisoners are too weak to dig. The hole is already there."

I have never heard this before. I reach out and touch his hand.

"Now they are lining them up, calling out their names, one by one. They are cutting off their heads..."

"Uncle Chick?"

"...just kicking the bodies into the hole. The blood..."

Elsa wipes the perspiration from him, but she is trembling.

"They are saving Blanche for the last. 'Madame Jurika,' they call out. They lead her up to the pit. Jesus." He pauses, sweating. "After that they shoot the traitor."

Elsa says, "Lolo, we are going home now." She tells him we are having chili con carne. He stays silent for a long time. He is still holding my hand, staring out somewhere.

When we reach the Pasig River Uncle Chick comes back to us. He says, "What are we going to do this afternoon?"

"Would you like to visit Lola?" says Elsa. She refers to my mother who is buried in another cemetery.

"That sounds good. Where is that?"

“Lolo, you know. We go there many times, by South Superhighway.
The Plaza of Peace.”

“That’s a nice place,” says Uncle Chick. “Yes, let’s visit Lola. The
Plaza of Peace. That’s where I want to be buried.”

AT THE CHINA PEARL

Mr. Hashizume, the tall, handsome one, very western looking, spends most of his time on his hands and knees, crawling into corners to look at the plumbing, checking under the fermentation vats, looking at incoming and outgoing lines. "I check process," he says. He has a Cassio pocket calculator. He measures the pipes, he knocks on the sides of tanks.

"Sort of like kicking the tires," says my brother Jose.

The Japanese are here to see if they will give us financial and technical support. We are building a distillery on Cebu Island in the Philippines and we don't know what we are doing. Hashizume is the process engineer of the largest alcohol manufacturer in Japan. He is accompanied by Kawabata, the chief microbiologist, and Yamamoto, a member of the board of directors. Mr. Yamamoto's head is perfectly round.

The morning tour didn't start all that well. We began on the roof. They wanted to see the view from up there, take pictures of the location, check on the position of the sun, the prevailing breezes, proximity to the ocean. I was guiding them around the roof when I disappeared through a weak portion of sheet metal. Actually I got stuck at my armpits but nobody dared take another step to help me out.

"We haven't finished with the roof yet," Jose said.

The Japanese were pretty brave. They still wanted to climb up the water cooling tower. They asked us if it was forced draft and we explained

that the trade winds came through constantly and the tower was designed to take advantage of them. Hashizume kept flicking glances up to the surrounding coconut palms, barely twitching in the gentle wind. Then he and Kawabata leaned towards each other with their Cassios.

The word they had a hard time with was effluent. They wanted to see how we were going to discharge the effluent. This was a big thing for them, the main reason they were here in the first place. The restrictions on their own pollution in Japan had become so strict they wanted to import crude alcohol and distill that instead of molasses. This process would produce a very clean discharge.

We showed them the lagoon we would dump into. "It empties completely every twelve hours...it's a tidal basin," I said.

Kawabata said, "Your effluent will not kill everything in the basin?"

"And when it reaches there," said Jose, pointing to the deepwater channel a half mile away, "it gets dispersed in an eight knot current."

I answered Kawabata. "The government tells us the fish and crabs will easily adapt to our waste."

"What about B.O.D.? or C.O.D.?" he asked.

"I've heard about that," I said.

Yamamoto nodded his head and looked dreamily around. "So nice, so beautiful."

"A lot of the fishermen will be employed here in the plant," said Jose.

One of the women who lived on the building site brought out a pitcher of coconut water with slices of coconut floating in it. The woman

was surrounded by a flock of little puppies that ran around her feet nipping at her slippers.

Yamamoto drank a long draft with his eyes closed then wiped away a piece of coconut from his mouth. He undid his necktie. All three of the Japanese were beginning to sweat as the sun climbed above the surrounding palms into midmorning. Kawabata took off his Teddy Roosevelt glasses and wiped his eyes.

Andy Khan, our project engineer, took them to the yeast propagators. Andy looked very much like Yamamoto except he wore a Hawaiian shirt that had people surfing on purple waves against a bright red background. Kawabata and Hashizume were taking notes and talking to each other and asking questions. They wanted to know a lot about temperatures. Temperature of the water at source, at entry, at discharge. And the fermentation process. Was it to be continuous or batch? What temperature did we expect it to reach?

I said, "That's what we want you to tell us. We think it might go as high as 39 degrees celsius."

The three visitors moan and roll their eyes and suck in their breath audibly. Then they ask to see our heat exchangers, the boilers, generators, the storage tanks, the laboratory.

Hashizume says he and Kawabata want to walk around alone for a while. They walk like two penguins, dressed in shiny taupe suits, punching numbers into their calculators, looking up at the sun, the trees, feeling for the breeze, disappearing into the maze of fermentation tanks.

"The wind picks up around noon," I say to their retreating figures.

They come back with more questions. They ask about the sugar content and brix of the molasses we are going to bring in. And about carbon dioxide recovery, about scrubbers, fusel oil, thermophillic yeast. That's another difficult word for them, thermophillic. But they are very serious about it.

Kawabata, the microbiologist, says, looking earnestly into our faces, his own brow furrowed, "If you do not use thermophillic yeast in fermentation you will not make alcohol here."

Yamamoto asks what yeast we plan to use. I want to be honest with this spherical, romantic man, who loves our coconut water and our palm trees. I want to tell him that we are going to use baker's yeast, like the chinese distilleries. He deserves the truth. Instead I tell him the Philippine Agriculture Department has developed a new strain of yeast for us, a yeast that gives up its life at over 39 degrees. "A real thermophillic yeast," I say.

The Japanese want to see our water source. "Alcohol is water," says Hashizume. "Most important is water."

Kawabata says, "For temperature, is quantity of water. For taste, is quality of water. Mizu is everything."

The China Pearl Restaurant plays American country-western music and attracts a lot of Cebu cowboys. Everyone has to check his gun at the door. The food is mostly szechuan and the air smells hot and spicy and the Japanese are happy to sit down after their morning at the distillery site.

The walk to the water source broke them into real sweats. We warned them it was a kilometer away. "Water is everything," they insisted. As we walked through the coconut plantations of our neighbors along the

edges of the mangrove swamp Hashizume and Kawabata finally undid their ties. By the time we got to the lake they had taken off their jackets and hooked them onto their thumbs and carried them over their shoulders like American politicians.

We stood on the sandy shore and looked out over the still, mirror face of the lake. Floating bundles of green leaves were slowly floating towards us. They were bundles of water cress about two feet tall and three feet wide and as they bobbed closer we saw people swimming behind them, pushing them gently, swimming with delicate little frog kicks.

Yamamoto was the first to take off his shoes and wade into the water. He put his hands down into it and cupped up some to drink.

"I am falling in love," he said.

"Very beautiful. So beautiful," the other two said, with much insucking of breath as they watched a water buffalo cooling itself in our lake. They took off their clothes down to their shorts, careful to hang everything neatly on nearby branches, and then pranced into the water. They giggled and hooted and spat water into the air.

"This water is very cold, very too perfect," said Hashizume. Then he put his head down and did a Johnny Weismuller crawl out to some of the further cress bundles. He took one away from a young woman and propelled it in front of him as he returned to the beach. His flutter kick looked like a propeller as he torpedoed the cress ashore and flexed his muscles.

The lunch is going well. Jose makes sure that the San Miguel Beer is always at hand. Kawabata's collar is still undone and he is still tieless.

Yamamoto has rolled up his sleeves and Hashizume has consumed two beers before the first food arrives.

“We think you have excellent prospect for successful distillery.” It is a grave pronouncement from the smiling board member. Sometime during lunch I ask him if he is related to Admiral Yamamoto of Pearl Harbor fame.

Jose says, “Oh, God.” And Yamamoto looks at his garlic shrimp with eternal sadness.

Jose says, “Kampai!” and lifts his beer glass up above his head. Everyone is drinking, bottoms up, and calling for a toast. “I think we should have haiku,” someone says.

The Japanese respond to this with smiles and nods. Hashizume writes on his paper napkin and Yamamoto translates:

“Coconut grove swamp...

Ah, the water buffalo

In your honey house.”

I ask what does that mean, but no one hears me as they are all drinking again and saying that it’s my turn. I have been eating hot sour soup, sauteed pechay, spicy scallops, eels in octopus sauce, rice, lemon chicken, garlic shrimp, beef in hot orange peels. I write on my napkin:

“Five hundred billion

yeast things do hara-kiri

everyday for us.”

There is a long silence. Yamamoto’s fingers are working an imaginary abacus. I think he is counting syllables, perhaps puzzled by my “billion”

and “everyday”, checking to see if I have a true seventeener. Suddenly the three Japanese stand up and bow and urge loud applause.

Our project man, Andy, a Filipino-Chinese of many talents, begins to sing a love song in Japanese. He is crooning into the restaurant’s microphone and the visitors are weeping. When the song is over Andy says he is related to Genghis Khan.

Kawabata points to Andy’s surfer shirt and says “You are Japanese man, Kawabunga san.”

Andy says, “You are my brother,” and then tells him it’s his turn to do haiku.

Kawabata frowns at me and Hashizume. He says, “You have no season words.” He is standing on his chair, a Japanese tightrope walker, uncertain of his balance. He sways back and forth and chimes a knife against his glass. He looks out over the whole restaurant. We all listen as he closes his eyes and puts his hands together in front of him like a mantis:

“In Cebu no spring,
No summer, fall...no winter,
Only sake...rum.”

Hashizume steadies him as he slides back into his chair. Everyone in the place is clapping, whistling, cheering. I tell Yamamoto, “Kawabata-san is world champion. I cannot believe four season-words in one poem!”

Yamamoto tells me, “He can do it because he only use implied action.”

My brother has laid his head down on his food plate and his whole body is convulsing. It is hard to tell what he's doing, whether he is laughing or crying.

I ask Hashizume san if he is related to the world champion swimmer of the same name. He smiles and says that he is not. "I am world champion alcohol man," he says.

The Japanese have a plane to catch. They stand up and tell us that this has been a world class lunch.

"Your cook is world champion; your food is world champion; your drink, your people, your water buffalo, all of you...world champion."

Jose and Andy help guide them out to the cars, but I am called deeply, urgently to the men's room. I am so impressed and surprised by what I have wrought that I run out and summon the others.

"Hey, everybody. Come here a minute. I think we've got something here."

"How about the airplane...we don't want to miss the plane."

"Never mind the plane. This is important."

So everyone comes back into the restaurant and I lead them to the men's room. I take Jose first and show him. He gives me a huge bear hug. He gives me a big wet kiss on the side of my head and says, "I have no words for this." He begins to convulse again. I feel the side of my head where he has left bits of rice and vegetables.

The three Japanese alcohol men are next. I say, "Godzilla." They are stunned. They are wide-eyed. They shake their heads and stagger back.

Andy is speechless too. We are all outside in front of the restaurant, the China Pearl, and the cars are waiting, their doors open like beetles ready to fly. Jose gets into the first one with the Japanese. He is holding his head between his knees. I think he is trying to breathe. An outrageous, deep, painful gasping that is totally silent except when he comes up for air. He is cyanotic, one of the prettiest shades of slate blue I have ever seen.

The Japanese are huddled but they don't say a word. Their neckties are still undone. As they drive off they turn and stare out the rear window, only now they are smiling, nodding, putting their thumbs up. They are mouthing, "World champion...world champion."

MY BROTHER'S STROKE

Today it is several months after the simultaneous events of my father's heart attack and my older brother's stroke. We are on the patio at my father's house, TipTop, in Baguio, where he and Michael are convalescing together.

My father has invited a small group of family and friends to lunch. They have come up to the mountains to escape the heat in Manila. We will have lunch overlooking a ravine full of pine trees, coffee bushes, tree ferns and a dense thickness of scrub growth. The patio is washed in the shade of huge tree ferns and looks unreal, like a watercolor or a movie set. Orchids in large purple pots are clumped around the edges.

My father and I are the first onto the patio and we sit down in comfortable deck chairs. His nurse, Elsa, pulls up a chair and sits right behind him in a spot of shade.

There is a commotion inside the house and servants are bustling, opening doors and moving furniture and potted plants. Now Ruby comes in carried by her male nurse, Juanito, who is smiling and saying hello to everyone. Ruby's friend Maite is pushing Ruby's wheelchair through the house. Juanito lowers Ruby gently into the wheelchair and retires to a corner to watch her.

Ruby and Maite are beautiful young women and my father is quick to shoo away Elsa. He beams when they come over and kiss him. Ruby does

so from her wheelchair as she is paralyzed from the waist down, and Maite gives him a big, standing-up hug. They leave lipstick on his cheek but when Maite starts to wipe it off he stops her. "I don't get enough of that any-more," he says.

Michael limps onto the patio as the guests arrive. He already knows the light and shade, he knows where the sun will shine and he picks the perfect seat.

He appears during a flurry of conversation so when it stops he is there like magic, a trick, an apparition dressed in leather, and limping noticeably. He is wearing soft leather Indian moccasins, leather trousers with fringe down the sides, and a loose-fitting jacket of the softest suede with lots of fringe from elbows to cuffs. It looks like he's been wearing this outfit forever, but it is the first time any of us has ever seen it. Michael can put on a new pair of Levi's and make it look like he's been wearing them for years, chasing dogies and branding them or whatever. I used to think that stealing clothes from Michael would be more satisfying than it turned out to be. It didn't matter what, oilskin slickers, Irish knit sweaters, hats, they never looked or felt right on me.

Michael is all charm, limping over to Ruby and Maite. "Guapa," he says to Maite and gives her the faintest suggestion of a kiss on the cheek.

He is now making a pronounced effort not to limp. He goes over to Ruby, in her wheelchair. He says, "Put a, Ruby, I like your wheels."

"Put a yourself," she says. "They work better than yours. And don't touch me. I don't want to catch what you have." Michael sits in his chosen chair, beaming, happy.

Now another brother, Patrick, comes to the patio with his wife Toni and Docey, a young American woman who has been working with the local Igorot weavers.

My father, drinking a beer, leans over to me. He asks, "Who are these people?" And I remind him they are friends he has invited for Sunday lunch, and they will all leave after we eat. The excitement is fine and he loves it, but he needs to be reassured it will end and he will be able to sleep in the afternoon. In the old days he would come home for the quickest of lunches, a sunbath and shower, and hurry back to the office. Now, nearly 90, he says, "I need my siesta, you know."

When Patrick sees Michael in all his leather he says, "Natty Bumpo, where did you come from? I thought you were still in the hospital."

My father and Michael have been having a longstanding argument over a truck that Michael needs for his new business, the making of handmade paper from local fibers. These terrible discussions are as periodic as some kinds of natural phenomena, like tides and phases of the moon.

"It's not a toy, Dad. I need it to pick up raw material. When you do handmade paper your sources are found in out-of-the-way places."

"That may be, but so far the paper factory has done nothing but produce expenses. I never see any paper, any sales...nothing but costs." My father is a partner in this business, but it is unlike anything he has ever been a part of. He doesn't understand. He says, "Why didn't you stay in movies?"

"I'm building up our inventory," explained Michael. "We're establishing a learning curve."

Sometimes when they get going about this paper business Michael shouts at the window overlooking the ravine and my father shouts at the door leading to the driveway. Father and son.

Several months after the argument began my father had a heart attack and was taken to Sacred Heart Hospital. The ambulance got another call from TipTop, this time to pick up Michael who called them himself and said he was having a stroke.

That's how my father and older brother ended up one room apart, neighbors, in the hospital.

When they were released back to TipTop I had already arrived from my home in California. I accompanied them on their daily physical therapy sessions where my father spent a lot of time on various machines. The first time he got onto the treadmill it flung him off, his arms flying out to grab something solid, his eyes wide with terror and embarrassment and frailty, but Elsa grabbed him. She was always saving him from indignities. He finally got the knack of it and proudly started adding up his accumulated mileage.

"I'm halfway back to Manila," he said after a little over a month. The nurses beamed as they checked his miles, his pulse, his blood pressure. His pulse, while riding the bike, was 96, and his "batting practice," what my father called his blood pressure, was 136 over 68. "Excellent patient," Elsa said, inking another half inch on her roadmap of the Philippines.

Michael's exercises were different from my father's. One of them had him throw a tennis ball at a large paper target taped onto the wall. There was a line painted on the floor and he stood there looking like a cliché spastic, throwing the ball all over the room. Every now and then he hit the target.

Sometimes he hit my father. A couple of times he hit an old man hanging by a chin-strap in traction.

When I suggested to the doctors that Michael was faking his stroke they said, "Oh, no. Who would do a thing like that? You can't fake a stroke."

I told them how many Famas awards Michael had won during his acting career. I said, "Look at the way he throws the ball, threads the bolts. Remember, he is the Passionate Stranger, the Moro Witch Doctor, the Raider of Leyte Gulf."

They laughed. They said he was doing just what they would expect until his motor controls improved. They kept Michael in therapy long after my father was through with his.

But Patrick told me Michael had been seen walking without a limp. Patrick said, "He's beginning to forget which leg is supposed to be lame. Sometimes he limps on the left, sometimes on the right."

Michael disregards Patrick's reference to Natty Bumpo. Instead he replies to his question about where he's been. He says, "They've let me out of the hospital, but I still go back for therapy. I'm supposed to eat carefully and not overdo the exercise."

Docey wants to meet Michael because she thinks she can sell his handmade paper. "There's quite a demand for it," she says. "It's a question of letting the right people know you have it."

Michael says, "I don't talk business at lunch," as if he is sullied by the thought.

My father asks me again, "Who are these people?" He asks Docey to sit next to him and she says, "You're the famous Uncle Chick I've heard so much about. I want you to tell me about the war." She wipes the lipstick off his cheek.

He says, "You just come up and visit me anytime you want, and don't wait for an invitation." He raises his hand and wiggles it at an invisible servant who brings him another beer. His second. Elsa is counting. She knows he is being frisky. She won't let him have another.

Maite asks Michael what it felt like to have a stroke.

He says, "I had this pressure in my head. I got dizzy and passed out. When I woke up I had pain all along my right side and couldn't move my arm or leg. I thought I was going to end up like Bob Fox."

"Who's that?" asks Docey.

"He's an archaeologist who lives up here. He had a stroke and lost nearly all his speech. When he recovered, all he could say was OhBoy OhBoy and Dammit! When he gets excited he adds OhShit!" I have seen Michael's video of Bob waving his arms and saying OhBoy, OhShit.

Patrick's wife, Toni, asks Michael, "Why don't you compare notes with Ruby?"

Ruby says, "There's nothing to compare. I didn't have a stroke, remember? That idiot Mandy drove our car off the road, rolled it a few times and I woke up like this." She spreads her hands wide in front of her.

I notice for the first time how strong Ruby's arms and upper body are. She has crossed her legs, and she is wearing high heeled shoes.

"Ruby, your legs are crossed. How did you do that?" It had scared me to see her legs had somehow crossed themselves, something I knew they couldn't do. Seeing them crossed makes me aware for the first time they are truly paralyzed.

She says, "Watch," and lifts one leg off the other, with her hands, puts it down and places the other on top of it. "See? It looks more lady-like, don't you think? And how do you like the shoes? These are just some of my tricks."

"It's like half of her is alive and half is dead," says Maite.

Michael asks Ruby if she has any tingling in her toes, and she says she wished she did.

Then he says, "I knew I was going to be all right when my toes and fingers started tingling."

"That's great, Michael," says Patrick, "but you have to remember the big difference is that Ruby's paralysis is real."

Toni asks Ruby and Maite to tell about the recent visit to the faith healer in Manila. Patrick says that it must not have worked since none of us, Ruby, Maite or me, looks any better.

We had started out in two cars, Toni driving me in her car, Juanito driving Ruby and Maite in Ruby's Isuzu. We were going to a special faith healing session by Boy Villaren. I have no idea where we were but Toni's car broke down and she said for me to go on with the others who were right behind us. The last I saw of Toni that day, her car was being pushed by a swarm of young Filipino boys, all shouting and laughing, towards a service

station. Toni was steering. It looked like she was shouting too, waving her arms.

Boy was waiting for us since Ruby had made an appointment. He told us he had once been questioned for 15 hours nonstop by a group of Cardinals in the Vatican and they had certified him as a healer. The Pope had blessed him. He began to read from Matthew as he got into the prayer service. He blessed some baby oil and annointed each of us. Boy then took out his relic of St. Benedict, a bit of bone, and touched Ruby on the hips and legs with it. He touched Maite on her head, and then he touched both my eyes with it. I was hoping he would faith-heal my pterygiums away.

I watched Ruby very closely. She was concentrating intensely on Boy, on his actions as he poured out the oil into a little bowl, and on his words as he prayed and blessed us. Little beads of sweat formed on her upper lip like a moustache of seed pearls.

When the service was over I was relieved none of us had been healed.

Today in Baguio on my father's patio, the sun warming all of us, Ruby says, "Isn't that just how it is? We have so much hope, so little faith."

Maite says, "In that case let's make sure we have plenty of love, because, of the three virtues, love is the greatest."

Then she asks, "Do you think Boy is a quack?"

Ruby says, "I don't think so."

I ask Maite, "What is it you wanted to be healed of?"

She smiles a smile that comes from somewhere I have never been and she says, "That's my secret."

Michael goes from one knot of people to another limping, his right hand fumbling with things. He is playing host now and ushering people to the table where a spicy curry is laid out with condiments and chutneys and a bowl of steaming, purple rice.

My father asks me if it's time to eat and I take his arm as we head toward the food. He wants to know who these people are and whether they are staying for lunch. He says, "Make sure they know they are invited for lunch."

He says he had been in serious condition during his heart attack, "But the one we really had to worry about was that person right there," pointing to Michael. "He was in more trouble than even he realizes. Much worse shape than I was."

"Uncle Chick," I say, "I don't know. I think maybe he faked the whole thing."

He says to me, "Do you really think so? The doctors are worried about him."

"I don't know, when he dies I'm going to stick a needle in him. You know, put a mirror under his nose."

Across the patio Michael is limping slightly, serving curry; he is grinning, charming everyone with small talk, imitating an Indian accent as he puts his own meal together.

"Oh, my Gahrd," he says, "Dis cahrdee is too ghrd." And everybody laughs. Caught up in his Indian accent now he uses his right hand to sprinkle chopped peanuts onto Ruby's curry. Everyone is eating and chatting and drinking.

Michael later says he is going down to his paper factory, The Monastery.

He says to Docey, "If you want to talk about paper you can see me after lunch in The Monastery."

TRYING TO SAVE KATSY

Before I went to see Katsy in the hospital I had five breakfasts, the first one somewhere over the Pacific on the flight to Manila. The second one at 5:30 at my father's house. The guard there was asleep, but Reynita let me in and prepared a mango for me. She and the other housegirls made long faces to let me know things were not well with my mother.

I ate the third breakfast at my older brother's house. Nine days earlier Michael had called me with the news: "The doctors started to operate, took one look and sewed her back up. She's going to die." He was having a hard time telling me this.

I had said, "Should I come out now? How much time do I have?"

Michael said, "It's up to you. I don't know."

So, breakfast with Michael and his son Carlos who was just out of college. Michael said Katsy hated the hospital. "It's a zoo. No. It's more like a cocktail party with people coming and going all day long and everyone chatting like nothing's happening." I ate some red rice, bacon, and another mango.

Then the fourth breakfast at my brother Patrick's house. Patrick and Toni, his wife, wanted to know if I brought any hope from the doctors in the States.

What could I say? "They said to give her plenty of morphine. Make her comfortable." I drank a cup of tea as we sat in their patio. They smoked

and asked about chemotherapy. I had spoken for hours with doctors at UCLA and Stanford and other places, and written pages of notes. I thought I could save my mother by writing down everything they said.

My youngest brother, Jose, and his wife Maggie, were at my father's house where I returned to eat my fifth breakfast. Another mango, more coconut juice. "How's Katsy?" I asked. Maggie said it was like a circus at the hospital. "I can't believe it. Everybody's bringing food, flowers, candy, drinks."

"Mike said it was like a cocktail party."

"Exactly. Everyone talking. Katsy exhausted. Jesus, she's dying."

Then my father, Uncle Chick, joined us and gave me a strong hug. "Katsy's waiting for you at the hospital. She had a shampoo just for you." I had some pan de sal with honey. More coconut juice.

All this family. All this food. I had brought a bag of tangerines and avocados, as well as a large envelope stuffed with notes for the doctors. The fruit would make her well, the information would give the local doctors the key to her cure.

Katsy looked pretty good considering chemotherapy. It was festive in her room. She introduced me to the nurses and doctors. She'd had no reaction to the chemicals. Nothing. No hair fallout, no nausea. We made chitchat about my flight, the weather, the tangerines, and the avocados. The doctors devoured the notes.

Katsy's arm was black and blue and she was short of breath. She complained there were always too many people. When visitors came she

smiled and greeted them and chatted, but when they left she lay back on her pillows. Sometimes she would say, "Shit," and stare out the window.

When a wave of pain hit she would sweat and tremble and pant. She insisted on walking to the bathroom by herself. They were giving her Tylenol.

That first day Katsy had a major pain attack. She sweated and moaned and cried with all of us standing around staring. I looked at Uncle Chick. He was, like us, terrified. Here was a problem he could not fix. Finally he ran into the hallway and grabbed a doctor and pleaded with him. We all just stood there.

I asked the nurse called Cecille what was happening. She said, "When your mother is having chills and sweats it shows that her body is willing to fight back."

I said, "But look what it does to her."

"Yes, that too."

On my third day at the hospital the doctors decided to drain her pleural cavities. The technician used a huge needle and extracted nearly a quart of red and white liquid.

"What does that mean...the color?"

"The cancer has spread." Cecille was one of the few people willing to explain things.

Katsy slept well that night. I returned at three in the morning, sneaking past the security guards asleep in the basement and the 9th-floor station nurses sleeping at their desks, their heads resting on pillows.

I walked into Katsy's room. Elma the night nurse, said she was sleeping very comfortably. I sat down in the ante-room. It was full of large flower arrangements, the kind you see at funerals. There were also baskets of fruit, boxes of candy and tins of cookies.

When Katsy woke up she stared at me. She wanted ice water. She took a piece of ice and rubbed it over her lips. Katsy said, "Will you tell me something? Will you tell me how much time I have left?"

I stared at her and nodded my head.

"You know, nobody has even talked to me about that."

"You have pancreatic cancer."

"I know," she said. "But how much time do I have? No one will talk to me about it."

"I'm not sure. The doctors tell me it goes fast. Maybe six weeks."

"That quick." She wasn't asking a question. I looked out the window. I saw the reflection of Katsy lying in bed, holding my hand. I once saw Katsy in a rearview mirror. She was in the backseat and I was driving, only what I saw in the mirror was a skull, without skin, grinning at me. I nearly drove off the road. I never told her about that.

"At least thank God I'm here. This is where I belong." She meant she belonged in the Philippines, where she was born, but she didn't like being in the hospital.

"If the chemotherapy doesn't work, I want to go home. I want to sit in the garden in Baby Fairchild's old Bath Chair and smoke opium all day." She gave me detailed directions on where to find the old wicker chair. She imagined herself sitting amongst the orchids in her garden, dreaming opium

dreams and floating away. She liked that picture of herself with the sun filtering down to her through her plants.

When Elma gave Katsy some more ice she spat it out.

One Sunday Hans Menzi came by the hospital. He brought a huge basket of Bangkok pomelos, pink, juicy and sweet. Uncle Chick and Katsy made talk with him and they laughed and joked about all their dead old friends and about the few that remained alive. They joked about President Marcos, and Imelda's shoe collection. Menzi said, "You know that McCoy has only one pair of Nikes?" It was like the old days. They talked about the War, they gossiped. Menzi said, "Katsy, you'll walk out of here. This stuff is miraculous."

Menzi had prostate cancer, but after chemotherapy it was in remission. He looked robust. He had gone somewhere in Texas for treatment.

Katsy said, "Oh, Hans..."

In the afternoon I sat by Katsy's bed reading while she slept. I noticed a man standing in the anteroom, wearing a green and white Hawaiian shirt. He just stood there quietly, his head bowed.

I asked Cecille, "Why is that man standing there? Shouldn't we ask him to go away?"

"That's Father O'Connell. He's going to hear your mother's confession."

Father O'Connell said he had already given Katsy her Last Rites. "She's doing great in that regard," he said. "She keeps thinking up new sins to confess. Even though I tell her that's all over now she keeps dredging up stuff. She really wants to make her peace."

There were so many things I wanted to know about my mother. I wanted to hear all her sins.

I said, "These are pretty bad times."

"Oh, it breaks my heart to see Uncle Chick Jeez. He defeated the whole damn Jap army and now he can't do a thing about this cancer."

The doctors finally prescribed morphine. The nurses were giving it to Katsy every three to four hours. She was getting rest and when I visited late at night we had some good times. She asked me if I could see the dogs running around the room. I asked her how many. "Too many to count. Lots of them." She was smiling. "I was afraid I was only hallucinating. Do you see that little man sitting in the chair over there?"

I said, "Tell me about him and the dogs."

"They're all happy and frisky. The little man wants to dance with me."

Then she asked me to forgive her for the time she slapped me. I was glad she remembered that. It was the only time she ever hit me.

I said, "I was so mad I asked God to remind you about it when you died."

"I asked Father O'Connell what would happen if I remembered a whopper after my confession. He said there aren't anymore, they're all gone."

"What does he know?"

"The worst...you know what the worst is? I think about the bills that have to get paid, the plants that need water, the letters I need to write..."

"Letting go?"

"I don't want to let go," she said.

Michael, who was living in Baguio most of the time, was back in town. He read to Katsy from The New Testament and The Book of Psalms every day. He played his flute for her, eerie, haunting sounds. He showed her a video he'd made of her garden in Baguio.

Patrick and Toni brought their two children, Patrick and Maria, to say goodbye to Katsy. They were wide-eyed, solemn, very quiet as they were gently steered towards her bed. They got up on a little stool and took Katsy's hands and put them to their foreheads. She said, "I love you," to them.

That night Patrick brought tea and sandwiches up to the hospital room and he and I and Jose stayed til dawn and gossipped.

When Katsy woke up I gave her some ice and she threw it across the room. Then Patrick gave her a Coke with a straw. She bit the straw and spat it out and shook her head angrily. Then she grabbed Patrick and kissed him. Then the same to me.

She said, "I'm trying my damndest to cry, but I just don't have any tears left in me."

The bad times began. Jose and Maggie had been gone for a few days. When they came back Maggie said, "My God, what's happened?"

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"She's solid yellow."

I guess it was a gradual thing. Something we hadn't noticed as it happened day by day. And the visitors had stopped coming around. The phone was mostly silent too, except for family.

The jaundice was only the first thing. Then her abdomen swelled. "Over 36 inches," Cecille said. Her lungs kept filling with fluids. The pain was still trying to break through the morphine. There was edema. She could barely stand.

One night she had to go to the toilet and insisted on walking alone. She couldn't even get out of bed. I tried to help her and she hissed at me. She wouldn't let the nurse touch her. It took her half an hour to get to the bathroom. She was trembling and shaking and sweating.

When she asked for help getting back to bed I said for her to get there by herself.

Elma said, "You will never make a good nurse."

That was the last time Katsy got out of bed. The next day she was given a catheter. She barely had enough strength to scratch her nose.

They put a tube into her abdomen and left it there. They removed about three pounds of fluids...from her bladder, lungs, abdomen. Tubes and bags were everywhere now, and a little oxygen mask was attached to her face.

At noon she died, but the nurse restarted her. Lucidity, recognition, speech were gone except for brief moments. Her face had shrunk, the skin drawn tight down against the bones, her mouth gaping like a nightmare figure. Her skin became nearly translucent and occasionally broke open and

wept. Every now and then she tried to scratch her arms, but her fingers just scratched in the air, like a dog dreaming.

Cecille said, "The morphine makes her itch."

I noticed orderlies, floor nurses, interns coming and standing near Katsy's bed, then leaving.

"They are saying goodbye." Cecille pointed out that soon there would be no one coming into the room.

And then as if by magic, the flowers were gone and the room was bare, and the small mountain of cards and letters had been removed.

When we, the family, were all in there together we were mostly silent now. We moved carefully so as not to bump each other. We reached out and touched each other. We let each other stand or sit, taking turns, by Katsy's bed in private. I hated the collector bags with their red, brown and yellow liquids. I wanted the flowers back, the tins of cookies.

Father O'Connell occasionally came and sat with us. We sent out for beer and sandwiches. Uncle Chick went to sit for hours in the chapel at the end of the hall. There was Mass every afternoon at four.

Then it became a question of waiting. I often spent the night in Katsy's hospital room. The nurses had requested an extra blanket. Michael, Jose and Patrick joined me. Toni and Maggie brought food in at three in the morning and stayed and talked. Michael's son, Carlos, drifted in and out at odd times all day long. He had a crush on Cecille, the day nurse. Then there was Dr. Ronquillo. We met him through Andy Khan, the manager of my father's company. We had to rendezvous away from the hospital because he was not quite a mainstream doctor.

He was a small man, unassuming and modest. He greeted me, Jose, and Maggie with expressions of sorrow. He was wearing a short-sleeved barong tagalog over a white teeshirt.

Andy said that Dr. Ronquillo had had a similar experience.

“Yes, my wife also had pancreatic cancer, but I was able to cure it.”

Maggie asked him how long the cure lasted. He said he had cured her five years ago and that she was living a fully normal life.

He said, “The basis of my cure is Keycell therapy. It is a combination of certain vitamins and a secret ingredient. I have tried this on numerous cases of cancer and it has definitely been proven successful.”

“If that’s so, then why don’t the doctors use it?”

His answer was something we were all ready to hear, that doctors had a tremendous investment in cancer, not in its cure.

Jose and I looked at each other. “What the hell.” Maggie pointed out that there was nothing to lose. Dr. Ronquillo gave us a bunch of his Keycell pills. They were in a bottle that still had its old Vitamin C label: Sunshine Vitamins.

“Give them after meals.”

We said Katsy wasn’t eating.

“Then give them any time,” he said.

We were being so successful in these later days. Weeks of working through the British Embassy had finally produced a bottle of Brompton Cocktail, a blend of drugs and painkillers reputed to send patients off to death thinking happy thoughts and feeling good. And now a sure-cure pill that would defeat cancer and restore youth.

We waited for Katsy to wake up and explained both the cocktail and the Keycell cure. She didn't say anything. She just sat there in bed scratching where the tubes went in.

Cecille poured a spoonfull of Brompton Cocktail and held it to Katsy's mouth. It reminded me of feeding a baby, or giving cough syrup. Cecille tickled Katsy's lower lip and Katsy opened her mouth. The cocktail was a pale blue color. Katsy swallowed it and then made a horrible face. She tried to gag it out and pushed Cecille's hand away.

When Cecille gave her the Keycell pill she tried to swallow it but it caught in her throat. When we tried to give her some water, Katsy coughed and the pill shot across the room.

Katsy was plenty angry by then. She signalled for all of us to get out and leave her alone, shaking her head and pointing at the door.

Maggie, Jose and I took the Keycell pills ourselves.

Katsy's four doctors called a family meeting one night. They summarized her condition. They commended Cecille for bringing Katsy back to life, but recommended no more heroic efforts be made on Katsy's behalf. They said the end was to be expected at any moment. They said, "She will probably die of liver failure, maybe even heart failure."

Uncle Chick's face sagged and his shoulders slumped. Even his clothing looked tired and defeated. He was twelve years older than Katsy. "I was supposed to go first," he said. And still he smiled at the doctors. He said, "We want you to know how much we appreciate all you've done..." but he didn't finish.

Patrick looked very grim. He wanted to tear them apart. I was still angry at them about the Tylenol. Jose had his hands in his pockets, his legs stretched out in front of him. He was looking at his shoes. Michael had refused to attend.

There were the doctors sitting in chairs drawn into a half-circle. It was like a board meeting. They told us what their findings were, how they had treated the cancer. They said they were sorry, and then they stood up, shook our hands and filed out.

When they left they took all the air in the room with them.

Uncle Chick went home. Patrick, Jose and I went up to Katsy's room. Room 909. We dug a few San Miguels out of the refrigerator and drank and talked. There was no fear of waking Katsy who was already in a deep coma.

We went to her bed and held her hand. Tubes were dripping blood and glucose into her, and bags were attached to her like swollen ticks, collecting urine, blood and other fluids. The nurses were still weighing intake and output. Patrick looked at her chart, like a doctor, frowning and holding his chin.

Cecille said Katsy's blood pressure was 102 over 40. Her pulse was 93, but this indicated her pressure was dropping. "First the diastolic, then the systolic. The pulse rises to compensate, but it is not strong. It flutters."

We tried to remember stories about Katsy. How she had met Uncle Chick in Zamboanga by wrecking his sailboat in a squall, how she had her appendectomy without anaesthesia, how she and her friends used to pose nude for artists...

Patrick went home. Jose and I had one more beer. He said, "You know, she was really mean sometimes."

I went up to Katsy and took her left hand. I leaned over and spoke into her left ear. I said, "Katsy." Silence. I said, "I have to leave. Goodbye Katsy, I love you."

She lunged forward. She grabbed my hand with both of hers with real strength. Her eyes, wide open, stared straight into mine. The green oxygen mask covered her mouth. We just looked at each other, holding on tight. Then she collapsed back into her pillows.

Cecille said, "I went cold when she did that."

The thing about leaving Manila, about not waiting for Katsy to die, not staying for the funeral...what I remember about the day I left was that the nurses called from the hospital to see if I had changed my mind about leaving. And I remember too the detritus of my last meal with Uncle Chick, the crusts and crumbs, the rumpled napkins, and the water glasses sweating onto the table. And Uncle Chick and I looking older and older by the minute, aging as we sat at the table looking out into Katsy's collection of orchids, ferns and palms, occasionally dabbing at our eyes.

"It's a dirty trick," he said. "She wasn't supposed to go first."

"I feel a couple of hundred years old today," I said.

Reynita said I had to go to the airport. The car was waiting.

I picked her up and swung her around. "Reynita, I want you to take my father dancing. Take him to a disco. And make sure he gets some of those avocados. They'll make him strong."

Then I was in the 747 waiting to take off, looking out the windows at the roiling cumulus clouds, pale mallow above the shark-gray thunderheads building up for a classic sunset, an impressive time to be leaving.

I was trying not to think about Katsy and when the plane heaved into the sky I knew she was dying at that very moment and I cried hopelessly until Luzon was many miles behind and the night had already swallowed us up and the dinner trays had been stowed.

LOOKING FOR CARLOS

I think back to all the times I was ever depressed or sad, and this, what I am going through now, this is the worst. I have thought of hiring someone to kill me. This is the Philippines. Five years ago I asked Luke Cabrera what he would charge to get rid of someone. He said, just like that, "Ten thousand pesos. Five hundred greenbacks."

I mentioned it to my brother Patrick. "Well, why not?" he said. "At those prices we should make up a list, go wholesale."

So we made up a long one, drank more than a few beers, and later when we looked at the list it included our mother and father, as well as our brothers, Michael and Peter, all our uncles, aunts and cousins, and nearly everyone else we knew.

But life, everything, looks different now since the death of my nephew Carlos, Michael's son.

Everyone is being so gentle with me, so understanding. They say, "What could you do? It was an accident. Accidents happen." They give me food and drink and try to make sure I sleep. They take me by the hand and I follow them around. What happened was simple. There are two basic rules of SCUBA: you have to keep breathing, and you always keep your buddy within reach. I violated the second one, I let Carlos leave me, let him out of sight while we were diving and I never saw him again.

We were down at 120 feet for a few minutes on an easy dive without strain or excitement. We ascended to 90 feet into a school of silver jacks who weren't afraid of us at all and surrounded us like a shimmering cloud. Carlos shot and hit a large one, maybe a ten or fifteen pounder. He was waving his arms and smiling so hard I thought his mouthpiece would fly out.

We looked at each other's air gauges. Carlos had about 350 pounds. He pointed up and indicated he was going ahead. I was still reeling in my own spear, getting a little tangled in it. Then I started up too. I was so happy for Carlos. His big first big fish. We would lie down in the dive boat, out of the wind, warming ourselves in the sun, and eat sandwiches, drink Cokes and beer. Alex and Junior, the boat boys, would motor us back to Dumaguete.

At 40 feet I noticed I wasn't going up anymore. I kicked harder, inflated my bouyancy vest, but even my bubbles were struggling to rise. I had never felt this before. It was like a hand pushing me down. My air gauge showed 150 pounds making me sweat and suck too much air. When I got to ten feet I looked up just as my tank went dry, the mirrored glaze of the surface undulating just out of reach. I fumbled for the emergency air release but lost valuable ground. Kicking frantically and pulling with my arms I finally broke through to the surface, exhausted and terrified.

I could see the boat not 50 meters away. I yelled and looked around for Carlos bobbing on the surface. The boys on the boat saw me and came over.

"Where's Carlos?" I shouted.

"He has not come up yet."

They began helping me into the boat.

“He has to be up...he came up before me.”

We started driving in circles, all of us squinting, looking for anything that resembled a person. Everything that wasn't ocean looked human. A tree branch. A coconut. Seaweed. We shouted. We listened.

We returned to our dive spot and I went back in with another tank, spiralling down, jerking my head here and there, thinking every shadow was Carlos. I twisted and turned and lurched. I kept saying Carlos, Carlos, over and over.

I reconstructed our ascents trying to predict where the current might have pushed him. I swam there and looked around, then tried something else. Each new hope ended in renewed panic. I wanted to search every inch of the ocean, to stay down until I found Carlos or some sign of him, his spear gun, a fin. Anything.

When I got back to the boat I threw up. Alex and Junior wanted to cruise the beach of the tiny island nearby, Apo Island, but again there was nothing, only logs, coconuts, branches, piles of driftwood, rocks, and seaweed. When we called out, the cliffs sent back echoes: Carlos, Carlos.

The boys looked at me. They had already stalled the outboard twice, so I said, “OK, Dumaguete.” They pointed the boat northwest and had us back in town before sunset.

I was still going on adrenalin. That's how I got the phone calls started. I called Andy Khan, the company's manager and he got the airplane ready. He was to notify fishermen, local divers, boat owners, friends. My

brother Patrick, in Manila, began contacting the U.S. Navy, the Philippine Navy, merchant shipping and family, but it was I who had to call Michael.

Sometimes I know things before they happen. Like the time the plate of spaghetti was going to leap off the table into my father's lap. I knew it and I sat there watching, waiting for everyone to start laughing when my father jumped up with this red mess all over the crotch of his sharkskin pants.

I knew how the phone call to Michael would go. I would say, "Mike?" And he would read terrible things into my voice. He would say, "Jose? What's the matter? What's happened to Carlos?" He would hear me catch my breath and would barely hear me say, "I don't know. We were diving together. He went up ahead of me. And now we can't find him."

Carlos was Michael's son, but he was a son to me too. We spent lots of time together living, working here on Negros in the family's distillery. I introduced him to sugar mill people, hacenderos, the local poker game. God, people enjoyed taking money from him. They would say, "He is so sweet," then lift fifty pesos from him. Sometimes we would sit on my porch in the late afternoon puffing cigars together, sipping rum-Cokes and not saying much. I think Carlos trusted me to show him something about business and about life. He was twenty three, straight out of college. He didn't call me Uncle Joe anymore.

So I talked with Michael and it turned out just as I had imagined it.

"What's the matter, Jose, what's happened to Carlos?"

Michael was in Baguio. He went strangely silent. The silence terrified me. I felt Michael knew for sure what we were all denying. We all knew if we sent out enough divers, boats and planes we'd find Carlos.

I had foreseen our conversation but not that silence. And then Mike said in a soft, breathy voice, that he was staying in Baguio. "Just let me know what's happening," he said.

Before sunrise the next day things were happening. Everyone in the world was in Dumaguete. Boats were at the dive site, divers were in the water where I lost Carlos. There were dozens of them. They dived all day.

Someone had beached a World War II landing craft on Apo. After three dives I went over to it. It belonged to Ramon, a friend I hadn't seen in a year.

Ramon had been diving and raised a hand in greeting. He said, "You look like shit."

His barge had an awning over the cargo area. He had set up cots, tables, chairs and ice chests. For Ramon this was like war.

When I asked him for rum he shook his head. "Later," he said. "If we drink now we'll both get bent."

Other divers came in. They walked aboard from the beach where the ramp had been lowered like a whale's jaw. Ramon uses his barge for various enterprises. Sometimes he transports coal, sometimes copra or cattle. What he would really like to carry is a load of Marines or a tank.

We sat in the shade under his awning. I ate a piece of chicken and drank a True Orange and listened to the hiss and pop of air tanks being refilled.

I did three more dives in the afternoon. Someone said to Ramon, "He's trying to kill himself."

The divers mostly stayed away from me, except for some of my friends or Carlos's friends who came up and touched my arm. Before the day was over I began to perceive the world around me as a black and white photograph, something apart from me, something I could look at or not look at. The world drew further away and I was increasingly outside looking in. I began to think, Who are these people? What are they doing?

Maggie, my wife, had come back from California and was at the hotel in Dumaguete waiting. We were having problems and living apart, but she had come back for this.

She wanted to support me. We hugged and I ended up sobbing dry, wretched sobs. She said, "What can I do?"

People gathered to tell me what had been going on. Everyone in the world had been looking for Carlos, everyone calling everyone else. Someone called and said he had seen a body fitting Carlos's description on some rocks about twenty kilometers south of Dumaguete.

The informant was very specific. "He is dark haired, about 5'8", wearing white overalls." He also said, "Sir, I believe him to be quite dead. He has been shot."

So this news, that Carlos had been found, shot dead, was sent out to all the family, but when Andy went to the beach he discovered the corpse was not Carlos. And when he brought the body to the vehicle he learned it was still alive.

Andy said, "I was helping carry him up the beach. Then he coughed blood on my shirt, scared me so much I dropped him. We raced him to the hospital as fast as we could, and I think we saved his life."

I asked him how long it took to cancel the first news.

“About five hours,” he says. “Those in the States still don’t know. We’ll try again around midnight.”

All this had happened while I was diving and eating Ramon’s chicken. I was thinking now of how Carlos’s mother, sister, stepfather and my brother Peter and his family...how all the family in the States were still thinking Carlos had been shot to death.

Maggie said how the people in Bacolod, on the other side of the island, were taking it. Several of her friends went to their card reader whom they call The Seer. As soon as they walked into her house The Seer screamed out, “Oh, no. Why did he do it? I warned him.”

She had taken one look at Carlos’s cards, a year ago, and warned him not to go diving. “Swimming along the beach, OK, but not diving. It will kill you.”

Now she was telling Maggie’s friends that she was seeing Carlos’s death. She said, “He is trying very hard to reach the surface. He is confused. Oh, he is looking all around. He is getting cramps, running out of air. He is saying Oh my god.” The Seer was crying. She said, “You will never find him.”

Maggie and I went to bed early. We heard crying in the outer room, and she asked me if we had a visitor.

The crying went on a long time, but when I looked I found no one there.

Maggie said, “It’s Carlos. It’s Carlos, isn’t it?”

Even though Maggie and I had been away from each other for several months we didn't make love. When we weren't sleeping we stared at the ceiling. I reminded her about the time I taught Carlos how to drive on a deserted airstrip. He kept pumping the gas pedal and the Jeep lurched down the runway until it went into a ditch. Then we walked home and I gave him his first beer.

In the morning I called Michael. I told him all the busy stuff. If I could stay busy for ever, hunting for Carlos, I would never have to say he's dead.

Michael was pissed off that the office had told him Carlos had been found, that he had been shot. And that it took all day to call him back to say it hadn't been Carlos. The whole story.

"Tell them not to do that again," he said. "Tell them it wasn't funny."

I didn't tell him about The Seer. I only said how many people were out searching.

Then he said, "You're not going to find him."

I said we were all still looking.

He said, just before hanging up, "Joe, don't kill yourself."

I didn't know what to do with the rest of the day except to keep looking for Carlos. What I wanted to do was go out with the company plane and crisscross the entire Philippine archipelago, all 7,000 islands.

When I suggested this to the pilot he said, "Yes, sir."

I am always surprised at the beauty of this island, Negros, especially the quiet, rural east coast. I had a moment's peace as we lifted off over the coconut palms and the untroubled nipa houses with wisps of cooking smoke

blue above them. I saw pots of orchids hanging in their windows, and laundry, chickens, pigs, small children. No one looked up at the plane.

In a few minutes we were over the dive site and waggled our wings at the divers. Ramon's landing craft was still beached. The northerly wind had not blown in yet, and the sea was calm, the visibility good.

We veered south flying at 500 feet. We had binoculars and could see clearly in all directions. Our plan was to fly south 75 miles, move west three miles and then fly north. We would repeat the pattern until we had covered the whole channel.

The water gets deep there, our charts showing over 400 fathoms in several spots. The currents are variable. I've seen them running as fast as ten knots, curling and licking back upon themselves and merging with others, but generally they set to the south at four or five knots.

This was about 48 hours after losing Carlos and he could be two or three hundred miles away. However, if he were being carried along at, say, two knots, then he could be a lot closer. But where? Where? Sooner or later he must be driven ashore. The currents split up and go east and west, some even back north. He could be anywhere, everywhere.

I remembered The Seer's words, You will not find him, and Michael's haunting echo of them, and I had a vision of Carlos hanging in a black silence, suspended forever somewhere in the Mindanao Trench, not far from here. It is seven miles deep, an inverted Mt. Everest.

Andy met me at the shack where we house the plane. I looked around at the heat glistening on the runway, the pale green cogon grass hissing in the breeze. Everything stopped for a moment and I felt I was in

Africa somewhere and I had just come back from spotting lions for a safari. I felt I was in a movie and I would never have to know all the things I was soon going to know.

Andy said no one had seen a thing of Carlos. "They haven't even found his spear gun."

"It has a big fish attached to it. They should look for that." Then I asked how the fisherman was doing.

He said, "What fisherman?"

"The one who coughed blood on you."

What I wanted to do was visit him and see how he was, see what he looked like, this almost-Carlos. Andy drove me to the hospital, a simple building, in the pre-war style, elevated on stilts, with capiz shell windows and a tin roof painted red. The paint was flaking. The nurses were very kind to us. They knew about Carlos and our search and they huddled at their desk trying not to stare.

The one that led us down the corridor had a name tag that said LILLY and wore a white nursing cap that made her look like a nun. She put a finger to her lips for quiet and pulled back the curtain to let us into a dormitory. I counted fifteen people, men and boys, sleeping on cots and straw mats. Their mosquito nets were folded for the day and we smelled the straw of the mats as well as the medicines and disinfectant. Through the windows I could see a huge mango tree shading half the building. There were also papaya trees, a small vegetable garden and a handful of chickens pecking in the dirt. I thought this was the nicest room, the cleanest, most restful room in the world. For a moment I wanted to stay and live there the rest of my life.

Lilly pointed to a man sleeping on his back. He was bandaged from waist to armpits. There were a couple of blood spots on the whiteness. Lilly said his name was Salvador. Doy for short. "We do not know his full name, only Doy. He will be OK now." She told us he was shot twice. "I do not know how is is still alive."

"He doesn't look like Carlos," I said.

Lilly and Felix looked at me.

As we left the hospital I shook my head. "Not even close."

Although I ate lunch at the hotel with Maggie I was barely there. The shrimp tasted like rubber. The beer seemed flat, and when I looked at Maggie it was as if she wasn't there either. I saw right through her to the wall. She said I should get some rest. Soon she would be going back to California, to her life there.

I asked her how she ever quit smoking.

"It was a hypnosis guru in Tiburon. One of those 48 hour things."

I smoke too much. Drink too much. I'm overweight. I laugh too loud. Sometimes I don't flush the toilet. My shoelaces are untied. I don't know what's going on.

There was still time for a couple of afternoon dives. I desperately didn't want to go diving. But when I entered the water I found I wasn't so frantic anymore. Instead of chasing every shadow I glided smoothly around the coral branches and rocks. I slowly looked over everything. I noticed how terribly beautiful it all was, how quiet except for the purring of the bubbles as I exhaled. I wondered if this was what meditation was like, and I

found solace in the water flowing around me and in the wash of brilliant crimsons, purples and yellows that faded to gray as I went deeper.

I had not asked anyone to dive with me but several came along and I could see them shadowing me, joining me in a silent ballet.

At a hundred feet I remembered what Maggie said at lunch. She said she was going back to Bacolod to wait for me there. And then she said my fly was open.

I love this woman so much and we are living 10,000 miles apart.

There had been no sign of Carlos anywhere. I could hear the helicopters coming back from searching the channel between Cebu and Negros. Then, when their pop-popping stopped, the silence of loneliness and death settled in. And then darkness.

The next day everyone would quit searching and go home and talk about it for years, but I didn't plan to be alive to hear them.

I had thought of all the different ways I could kill myself: knives, guns, ropes, fast cars. Drugs. I decided on cutting my wrists in a hot bath.

I asked Ding, the hotel boy, to buy me some razor blades. I ordered rum and beer. Cokes too. And sandwiches.

"What kind, sir?"

"I don't know. Bread. Whatever."

So he brought up beer, rum, Cokes, chicken sandwiches. Later he came back with a little brown bag of razor blades.

I gave him all the money I had. I emptied my wallet, pulled out all my pockets. I pushed wads of paper and handfuls of useless coins onto Ding. It came to one hundred, two hundred pesos. Maybe a month's wages for him.

He looked terrified. He said, "For me, sir?" He was shaking.

I started sobbing. Huge, coughing sobs. I hugged him. His arms straight down by his sides. He felt like a stick, a bamboo shoot. He wiggled to get out. He was Carlos struggling to get free, wanting to leave the money in the room as I stuffed it into his shirt.

"You guard my door, OK? Do not let anyone in."

He said, "I will be the one, sir," and I started weeping tears, the first tears since I lost Carlos. I could feel them making snail tracks down my face, getting caught in my beard and itching.

Then I looked inside the bathroom. No tub. I hadn't noticed that before. But there was a shower, a sink and a toilet. The window looked out over the harbor where an inter-island ship was taking on passengers and cargo. Carabaos on the forward deck were mooing into the magenta twilight and there were pigs and chickens. I could see people opening up their bedrolls and food baskets.

In my room I ate and drank everything Ding had brought. After I finished all the Cokes and beer I started on the rum. It was all like nothing. The sandwiches. The chewing and swallowing. It was just motion. I could feel the chicken and bread and lettuce, the tomato. I could tell the part that was crust. There was a chicken bone in one of the sandwiches. I thought, Good, I will choke on a chicken bone, like a dog. But I just chewed right through the bone and swallowed it.

I kept on eating and drinking and looking out the bedroom window. I saw the rusty air conditioner, wheezing to keep the room cool, barely stirring the air. Just outside there was a large tree with showy pink flowers.

Beyond it were jeepneys, cars, tricycle cabs, horse-drawn calesas and people walking along the waterfront. A cock crowed. I felt sad that I was going to die, and I felt I didn't want to die and I remembered Michael saying, Don't kill yourself. I was confused about guilt and pain and about living and dying.

I stared at my empty dishes and pressed a thumb into the crumbs. I licked my fingers. I stared at the bathroom door.

Then I took my clothes off and folded them neatly on the bed. I never do that. I always leave them where they come off, on the floor, bed, bathroom, wherever. People would know this was special and thought-out, and they would understand.

I took the bottle of rum into the shower and turned on the water, full blast. It was supposed to come roaring out, heat me up and run my blood up to the skin. I could already see the blood pouring down my hands and legs, staining the water, and then I saw myself falling down on the shower floor. I tilted my head back and poured rum down my throat, standing there in the shower, drinking and waiting for the hot water. But the water didn't roar out, and it wasn't hot, and I went to sleep sitting in the shower, and when I woke up the water was still running, only a little cooler, like rain.

The razor blades were still inside the paper bag. I looked at the blades, a neat little package of plastic things that slip into a handle. They were for shaving, not for cutting wrists. I sucked a few drops out of the empty bottle and went back to sleep in the shower, the water still running. I brought my knees up to my chest and got comfortable, using the bottle like a pillow under my head.

When I wake up on the morning of the fourth day after Carlos, there is no water coming from the shower head. I pull myself out of the shower and stagger around the bathroom. The sink faucets give a sigh and a little gurgle but no water and there is one flush left in the toilet.

The hotel manager lets himself into the room and asks me to please leave. He says, "Every guest has complained to me about the water. You also terrified my room boy and kept him up all night."

I say, "There was no hot water."

He says, "I have never seen anything like it."

Everyone in the search who has not left is leaving. Ramon has gone back to Cebu and Andy has driven to Bacolod.

I am flying back this afternoon. I walk around town first, alone, and then down to the harbor where the pier sticks out into the ocean. They call it a pantalan. It is built on clusters of wood pilings. The water is so clear I can see bottom and jellyfish, like large gray mushrooms. They are called bukia. And when I climb onto a crate, addressed to someone in Zamboanga, I can see Apo Island so clearly I can count the coconut trees.

The pilot has the plane ready and just before we take off I have an African vision again. I see a movie of myself fly-ing over a vast plain, stirring up herds of giraffes, elephants, all kinds of beautiful animals. Lions.

I will call Michael tonight. I know what we are going to talk about, the exact words we will say to each other. Everything.

THE MANILA-CHATTANOOGA EXPRESS

Suddenly Uncle Chick stopped recognizing people. He didn't know us, his sons, nor anyone else for that matter, not even his Nurse, Elsa, who was with him every day.

My older brother, Michael, called me in California to tell me about this change. "His health is good and he's eating well, but he doesn't know who we are or where he is." He said Uncle Chick thought he was in Guam, that he kept asking about shipping schedules. He thought it was 1935 and he was running Luzon Stevedoring again. Uncle Chick had walked into his own house and said, "Hey, whose house is this? This is a rich man's house. I don't belong here."

"It's not so bad," Michael said. "You can be anywhere anytime with him. You never know." Uncle Chick was no longer the war hero, the business man, the worried parent. "He's not always thinking his sons are screwing up everything."

Uncle Chick says his eyesight is now at "ten per cent," and his hearing at fifty. He says, "I can see light and dark pretty good, and large shapes, like Elsa,"--he looks over at Elsa and she is frowning--"But I can't see details anymore. I can't read the big headlines..." He also says that he doesn't see much color now, unless it's particularly bright.

"Color is what I miss the most," he says, "especially after that day of seeing everything." He is talking about the time he regained perfect vision for

a whole day. "It was wonderful to look at all the pretty women in the office, to be able to read again, but by the end of the day these things seemed such a waste." He had stood silently in his office for a long time looking out at Manila Bay. "What I loved were the colors. The sunset, the clouds, the ocean. Everything was so vivid. Just like before the war. It's like you hear all the time, everything was better before the war."

He is describing his steady retreat into a grey and silent world, like a descent into the Mindanao Deep. He says it's like being in a submarine. "The deeper you go the darker and quieter everything gets." He remembers his experiences during the war when he entered the Philippines and made contact with guerilla forces for General MacArthur. Once, in the submarine Narwhal, he sat on the bottom somewhere off Mindanao and withstood the longest depth charge attack in history. "Thirty hours. Imagine sitting in a leaky closet for that long. Jesus. I think the darkness was the worst. Eventually even the fear goes away. I remember the cook was pissed off the cake he was making came out lopsided. He was Italian."

He often sits alone in the large, stuffed armchair in his house in Manila, looking out across the coffee table at the old television set unplugged because of the short-circuit that causes it to spark, hiss and smoke. These two old warriors, in extremis, just stare silently at each other, their power off. Nothing in the house gets repaired anymore.

I went home on a recent visit to the Philippines, tiptoed over to where my father was sitting, and plunked down on the arm of his chair. I said, "Hi, Uncle Chick, I bet you don't know who I am."

He didn't hesitate. He said, "I sure do. I'd know you anywhere.

You're the man with the railroad."

"The railroad?"

"Yes, you're the man who owns the railroad."

This was new territory for us. We have been in some strange and allegorical places since my father entered this twilight phase. Like the time we drove from Baguio to Manila and he thought we were in Mexico. All the way down the zigzag he kept asking if we were going to the pyramids.

"What pyramids?"

"Damn. You know, the ones where we had those enchiladas."

I asked him now, "What railroad?"

"The Philippine National Railroad."

One thing about my father's stories and interrogations is that no matter how little sense they seemed to make, they always possessed a grammar of their own. I felt this railroad thing might be one of his personal metaphors. As long as I didn't mess with it too much.

I said, "Have you had a chance to ride on it?"

"Enjoyed it very much," he said. He took his billfold out of his pocket ten times during dinner. He pulled out all the money and counted the bills. He asked Elsa, his nurse, if there was enough for a train ticket. He argued and fought with her for an hour. Finally he said, crossly, "Well, if there's not enough money we won't go."

This train ride was becoming very important. He asked me, "How's the railroad doing these days?"

I told him, "We've come through the worst. Things look pretty good."

"How many employees do you have now?"

"I'd say about ten thousand."

"Boy, you sure have done a great job. You know, it used to have about three hundred."

This kind of detail came straight out of his pioneer days in the Philippines when he travelled around the islands as secretary to Governor General Leonard Wood. When I asked him how he got that job he said, "Because I could take his dictation faster than anyone else. He hated repeaters. And also because I could do his signature better than he could. He used to let me type and sign the letters and send them off. Saved him reading them. He and his wife used to tell me they loved me like a son." He said he thought about marrying their daughter. "We went horseback riding a lot." He said, "The Governor's two favorite people were me and the horse groom, Heisenstein I think his name was."

Before the war Uncle Chick worked for the tobacco company and the telephone company. He ran a lumber plantation, a stevedoring firm, a distillery. He had managed professional boxers and wrestlers. Lefty O'Doul was his friend, and he brought both Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig to Manila to play exhibition baseball. I grew up knowing my father, not Magellan, discovered the Philippines.

He had great material to draw from. I said, "I know, Uncle Chick, but we've spent millions on new track, new equipment..." I fumbled for the right words..."rolling stock...computers...switches. You can take a train to

anywhere in the islands now. We have a beautiful system of inter-island railbridges and sea-train ferries. I mean, you can go from Cebu to Zamboanga by train." I was lying, staying on track, I hoped.

"Well, knock me in the head, that sure is wonderful," he said. When he was impressed he returned to his Tennessee boyhood in Shelbyville, Knoxville and Chattanooga. It was easy for him to fall back into his southern accent when he talked about his father playing left field for the Chattanooga Lookouts or cutting meat for Harry Frank in the winter. He once told me his father had married at the age of seventeen. "That severely limited how much of his life he could devote to baseball. He couldn't afford to play fulltime for the Senators."

Uncle Chick asked me about lumber. "In the old days their main problem was lumber."

"We grow our own. We have enough to service our old tracks, build new ones and burn excess wood in our steam engines."

Sharp as a needle, in his own construct, he asked, "What's your main fuel?"

I was ready. "We use different kinds of fuel depending on where we are. We can use lumber, bagasse, coal or bunker. Do you know we can even burn rice hulls? All our water is pre-heated in solar chambers."

I knew I had him. He was always suggesting ways the Philippines could become self-sufficient in terms of agriculture and power, before power became known as energy.

He said he had been the first to install a solar hot water system in Manila. I remembered what I had seen that very morning, Uncle Chick in his

shower complaining to Elsa that the water was cold. She misheard him and said, "That's right. You hold on tight so you won't fall."

"No, the water's cold, cold," he moaned.

I asked Reynita and Flor, the housegirls, about the cold water.

Reynita said the solar system wasn't working and they had run out of gas for the backup.

My father liked warm water, but cool air. Just before the war broke out he had been the first person in Manila to install air conditioning in a residence. The Carrier Company ran a magazine ad showing me and Michael asleep in beds without mosquito nets. It said, "No noise to keep them awake, just cool air to let them sleep." When the Japanese took him off to prison, to Santo Tomas, he smuggled out letters to my mother asking how the air conditioning was running.

In one of his longest letters to her, they were handwritten on whatever paper was available, he told her not to worry about the electric bill. Katsy had written him a note saying she had shut off the air conditioner. He wrote back, "Believe you should continue using it, specially during the hot season." He had even figured out the bill. "You will find that with the comfort of air conditioning your bill will be around 75 pesos, and without it, between 50 and 60." He rested his case. He wrote, "A cool night is the best insurance for health that I know of." He put these notes in the laundry the Japanese allowed him to send home.

I began to feel there was a gaping hole in our discussion, something missing. I felt we had an opportunity to talk about some of the dark lumps in

our family history, things we never talked about when everyone was still alive, and now my father was sheltered from all that by his goofiness.

I wanted him to tell me about his own parents and what it was like when they sent him to live with his uncles in Manila. From Chattanooga to Manila at the age of eight, only they changed his birth certificate to make it look like he was six. Why had he never told this to anyone before, not even Katsy? He said once, "Imagine how I felt."

Now that I was brave enough to open the world up with my father, to ask him the good questions, to share my own life, he was immune to all that, beyond it. We were trapped in chatter and fabrication. I remembered Uncle Chick's sad eyes and slumped shoulders when he told me the story of his father leaving him on the doorstep of a bar after baseball games. He said he used to wait a couple of hours for his father while darkness settled in. People leaving the bar gave him coins.

My bravery got the better of me, I think. I suddenly said, "You remember the time I said I was glad you were having a heart attack? When I said I hoped you would die?"

He nodded his head. Elsa moved over to the arm of his chair and held his hand. She petted his head as if he were a nice dog.

I said, "Well, I don't wish you were dead. I wish you never had a heart attack. I wish you would live forever."

Elsa left and came back with a huge supply of tissues.

In the old days we would have been watching TV. After a while Uncle Chick began on the train thing again. He wanted to know how much it would cost for a ride, and I asked him where he wanted to go.

"Baguio." He was very precise.

"That's expensive because you have to ride the zigzag up the mountains, through tunnels. You have to transfer onto a funicular tram built at an angle. It looks like it's leaning forward. Just like the Peak Tram in Hong Kong." More lies. We were back to lying, I thought, but Uncle Chick was telling me something.

"How expensive?" He was persistent.

"If you're over 65 you go for half price. If you're under five you go free."

"I'm in there somewhere," he said. He reached down into his pants and struggled with the wallet stuck like a clam at the bottom of his deep pockets. He pulled it up and began working at the wide rubber band holding it shut.

"In the old days we used to import lumber for the railroad. We used to bring in Tennessee cedar. Whenever it was available." He kept working at his wallet.

"Tennessee cedar? Where did you get that from?"

He looked at me askance and opened his eyes wide, his fingers, like independent agents, working on that rubber band. "From Tennessee. That's where it came from."

"Why Tennessee cedar?"

"It had some special property. I don't know what. I suppose it lasted longer than anything else."

"How did you get it over here?"

He looked at me again, with tired patience. "By rail, of course."

He fished out all his money, three hundred pesos, about \$15, U.S.

"I used to have more. I think I used to be rich," he said. "Here, take it all and get me a ticket to somewhere nice."

"You want a roundtrip, don't you? You want to come back here, back home?"

He was still rumpling orange-and-green bills, wrinkling them in his strong, insistent fingers. Elsa was trying to get him to put them away before he started arguing with her again.

"I'm not so sure I know where home is," he said. And then, as if inspired, he added, "Make that two tickets...I want Elsa to come with me."

Uncle Chick died several months after we last spoke about the Philippine National Railroad. The day he died, he seemed in great shape. He went to his office and talked with everyone. He recognized all the girls and somehow remembered when each of the pregnant ones was going to give birth. He got hugs and kisses, went home to his favorite lunch, chili con carne, which his doctors allowed him now and then, took a siesta, sneezed twice and died in his sleep.

On the way home from the office, Elsa says, he looked up into the sky and pointed. "Look," he said, "There's my ticket home."

Elsa looked. She said, "Oh, Lolo, I don't see anything. Anyway, we'll be home in just a minute."

"No, I mean that ticket has my name on it and it says, Chattanooga, Express."

Elsa asked him what kind of ticket.

He gave her that look he gives when he is being patient. "Elsa, it's a train ticket."

FUNERALS

I hadn't stayed for Katsy's funeral. I left even before she died and flew home to California, but by the time I got there she was already buried. The International Dateline lying between us confused me. I lived the day twice, arriving in California a few hours before I left the Philippines. It was like she died after I took off, and then again a few hours after I landed.

That's what I told Michael when he called to say it was all over. He said, "She did die twice." He was in her hospital room when the vital signs monitor flatlined. She came back to life by herself, before the nurses got to the room, and then died for good a few hours later. I figured she must have died when my flight was taking off from Manila, heading east into the night.

Since her death, Katsy has visited me on the front porch of my home in California, like a hologram, a little smaller than lifesize. She looked puzzled, perhaps wondering why I hadn't gone to her funeral. When she appeared to my brother Jose she talked out loud, loud enough for people in other rooms to hear her voice and run out of the house.

Later, when I would tell about leaving the islands before Katsy's funeral, I began to change the words. First I changed leaving to fleeing. Then I added weeping and sunsets and darkness.

Uncle Chick died five years later and I flew to Manila for the funeral. Andy Khan, the manager of family's distillery, called about the death and how it happened during siesta. He said he was sorry to be the one to tell me, but

all my brothers were away. I nodded at the phone. He said Patrick was on his sailboat in the south Pacific. Jose and Michael were arriving soon from wherever they were.

Twenty hours later Andy met me at the airport. It was dawn in Manila, misty and smoky with smells of outdoor cooking, and it was already hot. "Everyone is sad about your father," he said. I was not thinking about death, but remembering Andy sitting in the Tatami Bar with a group of Japanese alcohol buyers. He was singing Filipino love songs into a cordless microphone, a blue spotlight focused on his face. It was late and the Japanese were all asleep.

We drove to my father's house and Andy went on to the office. Reynita, the head of house, greeted me with hugs, and burst into tears. She escorted me to the dining room and brought me a mango, coconut juice and pan de sal. I asked her to tell me everything about Uncle Chick's death. I knew that Elsa, his nurse, took him to the hospital in a pedicab because the car wouldn't start.

Reynita said, "They were screaming at people to move out of the road and the driver was beeping his little horn. Lolo's legs were hanging out the side. He kept wanting to fall out but Elsa was holding him across her lap, giving him mouth-to-mouth." Elsa had saved him this way once before. That time, when Uncle Chick revived he looked in the mirror and saw all the lipstick on his face. There was no saving him this time.

When they got to the hospital, a few blocks away, Uncle Chick was dead. "Dead on arrival," Reynita said, as if she were on a TV show. "The

doctor began to beat his chest. Like this,” and she began to pound on me. “Then they put a large needle straight inside his heart.” Elsa had related everything to the housegirls. The doctors also used defibrillators which made his body leap off the table, and scorched the eagle tattooed on his chest. Elsa pleaded with them to stop and leave him alone, but they kept at it for another hour.

Reynita said, “It got worse.”

Reynita had to take Uncle Chick’s body to the mortuary. The arrangements had been made by Patrick’s wife, Toni, who chose the same funeral people the family had always used. She didn’t know there had been a change in ownership and style. When Reynita and my father’s body arrived at Siojo’s Funeraria, the first thing she noticed was a shop next door selling blood sausage. She said there were prostitutes walking up and down the street. Here she raised her eyebrows, opened her eyes wide and said the mortuary drained everything into open gutters. “You can see everything they take out, right there in the street. Jesus.”

Reynita is a tiny woman, maybe five feet tall, maybe ninety pounds. She buys her clothing in children’s departments.

“I opened the door of the funeraria and went inside. I saw a family playing cards...they were playing pequa,” she said, “passing the cards right over the body of a dead woman.” Reynita paused and caught her breath. “They were drinking White Horse, Pepsi Cola and Manila Rum. They were smoking and gambling.” She described the room strung with multi-colored blinking lights and disco music pulsing from hidden speakers.

A man wearing a tee shirt, baggy shorts and slippers took my father's body into a back room and asked Reynita to wait. He offered her scotch, rum or Pepsi. She asked for rum, took a deep draught and then went to sleep in a wooden chair, the blinking lights playing over the dead and the living.

"Poor Lolo," she said. When they brought him back they put him on a table next to a wall. Reynita was still asleep. As soon as she woke up she saw his body, naked, lying on its back. "Someone put a pair of tennis shoes under his head, like a pillow," she said. The man in slippers showed Reynita the coffin they picked out for my father, a highly polished wooden one with tiny winking lights inset along the edges. "It looked like a jeepney. It was a disco coffin." Reynita drank another glass of rum and smoked a cigarette. She waited in her chair for an hour or so, somewhat drunk. Suddenly she saw Uncle Chick's shoulders begin to lift until he was doing a full sit up. Reynita screamed for the man in the shorts. She shouted, "Putangina, you fix him." She drank another glass of rum, collapsed in her chair and waited for Toni to come save her. "I think I was supposed to be crying," she said, "but I believe I was really laughing." She had now drunk her first three glasses of rum, smoked her first cigarette and uttered her first cuss word.

My father's secretary, Ampí, came to visit while Reynita was telling her story. Ampí was dabbing at her face with a handkerchief. She too had been at the hospital and told me more about how the doctors worked on Uncle Chick's body.

"I think they even broke some bones," she said. "I heard something crack, maybe some ribs. We could hear the doctors through the curtain.

They were talking to each other, like Give me this or that, and Now you do it." She said she and Elsa begged them to stop. "What was the use?"

Ampi had been to Katsy's funeral and I asked her to tell me something about it. Reynita brought her a cup of coffee. Ampi's face brightened thinking about that funeral. She smiled and I noticed her makeup had broken apart into little spider webs under her eyes. She held her coffee cup in both hands. A few years ago she would've lit a cigarette.

She said, "Your mother was the most beautiful dead person I ever saw."

Katsy had not been embalmed and there was none of the customary viewing, the long hours of vigil. Uncle Chick wanted her buried as quickly as possible. Ampi and Toni picked one of Katsy's sexiest silk dresses and arranged for someone to give her a shampoo and perm and make up her face, erasing the pain and tension of her last days.

Ampi said, "Patrick would not allow anyone to look in the coffin. I didn't understand that. She was so beautiful. Before it was shut I took Father O'Connell and we looked inside. One last look."

After Mass the hearse with Katsy's coffin led a procession to the cemetery. Katsy's driver, Benjy, followed in her car, the old green Lincoln with its windows stuck closed and the airconditioning not working. Benjy, sweating in the empty car, was terrified when he looked in the rearview mirror and saw my mother in the back seat, fanning herself.

Ampi was laughing. "He crashed into the back of the hearse. He broke both headlights."

Toni came in while Reynita and Flor were taking out the breakfast litter. Her face looked like low tide. She had been up all night rescuing Reynita and Uncle Chick's body. She found a mortuary to pick it up and repair the damage. The new mortuary told her only the head had been embalmed at Siojo's.

Toni confirmed Reynita's story. "Blood sausage, prostitutes, sewers with guts, people dancing around dead bodies, gambling. Poor Lolo." She tried to explain how it was no longer the same old Siojo Mortuary that had taken care of former family deaths. "New owners, and those crazy sons," she said. She was angry and she was crying.

Toni said, "Reynita should get one of Lolo's medals."

"You too," I said.

She said a ham operator had contacted Patrick on his boat and he was on his way back.

Michael and Jose, who had already viewed Uncle Chick at the church, came to the house shortly before noon and we went to the Manila Club for lunch. The manager came over and said, "I'm sorry about your dad."

We ate curry and drank San Miguels and talked about the disco coffin. Mike said Uncle Chick looked like a chipmunk and then he tried to make himself look like that, putting air into his cheeks, lowering his chin to his chest, bugging his eyes out.

Jose took me to the church and said, "Don't expect him to look like a living person. He looks awful. Like what Michael did at lunch."

Uncle Chick's coffin was in a side chapel. The pews were filled with people, mostly office staff and household help. Reynita was there as were the

cook and lavandera, the gardener and one of the guards. Andy Khan was sitting next to Reynita. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Just see him the way you remember him."

I could see the casket through the jungle of flowers. The top part of the coffin was open for viewing. Uncle Chick's World War II medals were displayed on the closed part.

When I got my first look at my dead father it was Michael at lunch doing his impersonation, only worse. The new mortuary hadn't been able to undo the havoc. Uncle Chick was a monster-movie greenish gray, bloated, looking like he was holding his breath, more frog perhaps than chipmunk. I looked for something human. His hands, thank God, his hands were perfect, folded across his stomach and holding a rosary. Ampy told me at breakfast, about the rosary, how it had to be broken or else it was bad luck, and that it had been blessed by the Pope. She was good about the details of death.

I was alone with my father's body and I could think of nothing to say or do. I looked at the honor guard chewing gum, noticed some wilting roses and a misspelling on a wreath. A Mass began in the main part of the church, the priest already digging into his homily.

Patrick arrived before noon the next day and he looked tall and fit walking into the house. I said, "You look like you've been sailing for a week." We hugged, an awkward brother-hug. Patrick said he wanted to put one of those black-bordered memorial ads in the Manila Bulletin. We talked about how to word it for over an hour and when he called the paper they told him it was too late.

“Who am I talking to?” he asked. He wanted to challenge him to a duel. He was cussing but the person at the paper hung up.

All I could think of was dead people. And when I thought of live people I thought of them as dead. We were sitting in the living room of the Family Tomb. The TV didn’t work. The airconditioning was out. Michael, Patrick and Jose and I were about to eat a lunch of fried fish, rice, vegetables and beer. I thought of us four brothers as dead also. No wonder Michael called it the Family Tomb and stayed at a hotel. We ate at the dining table but no one sat in Uncle Chick’s chair, or in Katsy’s.

As we picked at our food we talked about formal things like getting our funeral shirts made and selecting the music and getting the Honor Guards from the U.S. and Philippine Navies.

Michael asked, “Do you think maybe the only body parts left in the coffin are the head and hands?”

Patrick said, “Why didn’t we just cremate him and sprinkle the ashes over all the islands?”

That afternoon I called up my parents’ oldest friend, my godmother. When she was younger she reminded me of Harpo Marx with her big eyes and the funny things she did. She is over ninety now. She answered the phone herself and recognized my voice right away. She said, “He’s lucky, you know. All my friends are dead, except Lucille, and we keep losing each other’s address. I ask God every day why doesn’t He let me die and He just laughs. I feel like a stranger in a foreign country.”

I said, “You are in a foreign country.”

She said, "No, Senor, I've lived here fifty years now." She said something in Spanish and I said she sounded young, like sixty. She said, "Call me again, soon."

Reynita had taken up residence in the vigil chapel. She pulled on my arm and introduced me to a small Filipino using a crutch. He was wearing khaki shorts, a teeshirt with a faded commercial message for Sony products, and thongs.

He reached out both hands to me. "My name is Pepe Susada. I loved your father very much."

He put my hands on his chest, pressing them there. He said, "I saw him make the first submarine landing in Luzon. I saw him paddle his rubber boat to our beach and I knew we were saved."

His hands were cool, like water. I asked, "Where did you come from?"

"I come from the province. I catch a bus."

"That's a long way to come."

"No problem," he said. "I am out of work."

I asked about his limp. He lifted the crutch and tapped his right leg. "My souvenir of those times. I have a Japanese bullet in there."

He had been a guerilla cook. "Your father talked to me. He gave me Hershey bars and a copy of Life Magazine. He also gave me this." He reached down into a pocket and pulled out a card. One side was printed with an American flag, the other, with a picture of MacArthur and "I Shall Return" under it.

Pepe's feet were gray with dust up over his ankles. He had put on new, neon pink flip-flops for the trip to the city. I could still feel the coolness of his hands.

I looked for Michael at the MacArthur Hotel but he wasn't there and they didn't know when he'd return. I walked back to the church, a few blocks away. The food vendors near the church had begun their fires, and smells of grilled pork and chicken were rising into the dusk. On the corner, waiting for a jeepney, was Magdalena, my parents' masseuse.

She said, "I saw you inside the church."

"Why didn't you greet me?"

She said she didn't want to bother me. I asked her if she would give me a massage.

"Tonight?"

"Right now."

On the way home she said, "Lolo looks terrible. When I die I want to look wonderful."

Magdalena is old and wrinkled, but strong. I said, "You are too strong to die. You still have your own teeth."

"I want them to take away all my wrinkles and make me skinny again. I want them to make me young."

Soon I was lying on my father's bed, a hospital bed, a good massage table, and Magdalena was kneading me with hot oil. She said, "How sad. First your mother, then Carlos, and now Lolo."

"Who do you think will be next?"

"Maybe Michael. Maybe Jose."

"Why Michael? Can you tell the future?"

"Sometimes."

I didn't know that about her. I knew she once wanted to go to the States and start a massage business. She wanted to save a lot of dollars and send back for her children.

She was rubbing my shoulders, neck, and scalp, tugging gently at my hair. I said, "Magdalena? If I fall asleep, you keep massaging, OK?"

I kept dozing off and waking up. When I closed my eyes I saw Uncle Chick and Katsy in their coffins. They were sitting up, smiling and chatting with friends, not at all like dead people, and they were young again. Katsy, wearing her slinky, purple funeral dress, was smoking and sipping at a dry martini with two olives in it. Uncle Chick was talking with a priest. He and the priest were laughing and drinking beer.

I said to Magdalena, "If I was a cat I would make this noise." And I started purring. Then I said, "Magdalena, did you ever masturbate my father?"

She slapped me on my leg and said, "Shame on you."

I walked over to Patrick and Toni's house on Sunday. The neighborhood garbage pile, located on the side of the street and generating an acrid, suffocating smell, was growing. It was over my head now and the rats were getting bold enough to stare at you.

Patrick and Toni were up and we sat in the patio and had a mango and some tea. Their pet gibbon, Rambo, came out of the santol tree and sat

on me. Toni went to the kitchen and Rambo ate all the leaves and flowers on one of her orchids and started howling.

Andy Khan came in with the Mass announcements, the funeral barongs and the death certificate. He told us the hospital had extorted money for it. "Criminals," he called them.

Patrick asked him if he would have breakfast, or coffee, but he excused himself and said he needed to arrange the police escort to get us to the cemetery after the service.

When Andy left, Patrick said, "He's related to Genghis Khan, you know."

That afternoon I sat in the vigil chapel sat next to Reynita and we ate tuna sandwiches and drank True Oranges. It was fun, eating in church. Reynita said, "Go on now. They will close the coffin tonight. This is your last chance."

I couldn't remember if his eyes were open or closed. I asked Reynita, but she couldn't remember. I went up, one last time to see Uncle Chick, to see if his eyes were open. There he was, still holding his breath, maybe even more than two days ago, a little off color, not quite fitting his uniform. It was like he held his breath so he would fill up the uniform better. Still it sagged in places, and I felt something sagging inside me too. I almost forgot to check his eyes, but I saw them, closed. One of the eyelids had crept up about an eighth of an inch exposing what looked like a ping pong ball. They had glued the lids shut, but his left one seemed to be trying to lift. They hadn't put his teeth in his mouth, so his lips weren't quite right.

Two women came and stood next to me. As they were looking into the coffin and whispering their prayers, Uncle Chick's lips puckered slightly, something he did a lot when he was alive, and he let loose enough gas to fog the glass over his face. The two women screamed. I looked closer, putting my face down on the glass, but Uncle Chick's lips were together again. Several people helped the two women, dragging them to a pew.

I sat back down next to Reynita and she looked at me for an explanation. I said, "He just let out a deep breath and it fogged up the glass. He looks much better now, more relaxed."

"And his eyes?"

"Closed. Like he's sleeping."

"Good," she said. "Now he can rest."

I had another question for Reynita. I asked her where Uncle Chick's teeth were.

"Oh my God," she said. "They are in his dressing room."

Monday. The funeral. It was a relief finally to be happening.

The casket had been moved to the center of the church, in front of the altar, directly under the dome. Birds were fluttering around up there, chirping. The casket was closed and Uncle Chick's old Navy cap, rumpled and gray, was on top of it. One Filipino sailor stood guard. The U.S. Navy sent an honor guard of five men. They were in dress whites, pressed to knife-sharpness. They sat in a pew, took off their caps, and got up and down when everyone else did.

The celebrant, Father O'Connell, told a story about Uncle Chick during the war when he was nearly caught by the Japanese and escaped by

disguising himself as a priest. "There we were, staring down these soldiers, eyeball to eyeball, and I'm praying just to stop sweating and that man lying there in that box, he never even blinked."

Afterwards we were wheeling the coffin down the aisle towards the door, to the hearse. People reached out to touch the coffin, to touch us as we walked by. The hands brushing along our arms made a rustling sound. It seemed that I was seeing everyone I had ever known, like my life was going by.

The last person to touch me before I entered the car behind the hearse was the little guerilla cook with the crutch, Pepe Susada. He gave me a thumbs up.

A siren squirted off a few sharp blasts just in front of us.

Patrick said, "Let's go."

Michael was seated at the left window. He said, "Uncle Chick's last ride."

Someone said, "It's the end of something."

We were being awkward, saying dumb things. Patrick was still angry at the hospital. As we drove by he gave it the finger.

He didn't say anything for a moment, then he added, "Fuckers."

We were following the hearse down Roxas Boulevard with two motorcycle policemen slicing our way through traffic. Jose pointed out we were going south. "Going South. I don't believe it." Then he said, "Did anybody know Uncle Chick?"

The rest of us looked at him and saw he was being serious.

The sun was high, nearly overhead, and very bright. People were sweating and fanning themselves. There was a blue and white striped tent over the grave, a neat rectangular space carved into the cool earth. Someone had spread a plastic turf carpet over the grass, greener and more perfect than the grass.

The coffin was placed on rollers and lowering straps. Father O'Connell led the mourners in a rosary. He didn't have any beads and he soon lost count of the decades and went on and on until he stopped to sprinkle holy water on the coffin. The American sailors held the flag over the coffin as it was lowered. One of them played Taps. Taps, the flag, the noise of lowering, the creaking...all the sounds. The sailors weren't sweating and their creased uniforms remained sharp.

When the casket hit the cement liner, Reynita gave a bark and fell into the grave onto the coffin. Mourners were already tossing in orchids and sampaguitas, a snow of pinks and whites. Another woman slipped and fell in. Patrick said, "Jesus Christ."

The Philippine Navy's Honor Platoon still had not arrived.

Michael said, "They probably went to another cemetery."

Patrick said, "They were supposed to be here an hour ago."

Then we heard them, the whole platoon, trotting in step through the cemetery, lost, but getting closer.

When they arrived the leader stopped them and we could hear the silence of the heat and the sunlight and the sailors panting. The leader shouted and they raised their rifles. They fired off a twenty-one-gun salute

into the trees. Branches, leaves and flowers rained down on the mourners. It sounded like a small war. People were ducking, running under the awning. And then the sailors trotted off.

Nearly everyone had left except family. Ampí joined us in throwing a few handfuls of dirt onto the coffin. A few feet away was Katsy's grave, its outline obvious where the grass refused to knit.

Ampí visits this grave a lot. "When the family has a crisis the grave rises up...it makes a mound," she said.

Today there was only a slight mounding. The queen palms and the calachuchi had grown so well they provided a fragrant shade and nearly blocked the view of the large white angel guarding the neighbor's tomb.

The open house lunch at home was our last funeral event. Always, it seemed, there was more food. Everyone told us to eat more. "It's good to eat at these times." Ampí said it was like eating your sorrow, making it part of your body, sharing it with others. "Then you will be strong and ready for the part you have to do by yourself."

That night I entered Uncle Chick's dressing room which was lit by the weak moonlight coming through the window and giving the furniture and walls a ghostly look. There was a pad of paper on the dresser with a few notes in Uncle Chick's handwriting: a day of the week, a time of day. He was asking Ampí, just last week, to send flowers to somebody, but the name wasn't written in. His false teeth sat on the dresser in a small dish.

I stood still in the room, listening, feeling for Uncle Chick's presence, but the room remained strangely neutral. There was no one to talk to, nothing to say.

I thought, Maybe later he will come to me like Katsy, as a hologram,
or even as a dream, and we will say things to each other.
