

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Mama

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Philippine Studies vol. 13, no. 1 (1965): 32–42

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Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Mama

ESTRELLA D. ALFON

THERE'S a woman in the mirror, fat, her face lined. But the lids of her eyes are artfully painted with shadow, and her lips are crimsoned with salve.

I look for a younger woman. When I was a child, I held this woman's hands in mine. Lovely hands. The fingers tapered to the nails, fleshy, soft, and fragrant. There are bananas grown in Cebu, of this shape, this dainty, and they are called *tudlo datu* — fingers of the wealthy. I always thought I flattered the fruit by comparing them with her fingers.

The younger woman that held my hand, and helped me through the little moments that afterwards mattered so much.

I am going to have a baby, I told her. We had been bothered because there wasn't much to eat. We had been quarreling because she had not liked the man I had married. But this time, with the prospect of a new human being entering the house that was already so crowded, she had not thought of the milk to buy, the hospital to pay. She could only clap her hands in delight and say, I hope it is a girl. It was.

Find me that dear woman. Who would enter my room in the cold dawn when I had just discovered the joy there was to putting words together to ease some of the hurt forever inside. She'd steal a glance at the typewriter, and then fold my blanket and hang it on my shoulders. She'd smooth my bed, and fluff up my pillow. Then steal out and steal in again, with a coffee pot steaming, fragrant, full of coffee brew.

She'd pour a cup full, set it beside me, and just as silently, glancing another timid look at the paper in my typewriter, go.

In the dawn when the music we had danced to had stopped, afraid to let the night end, trying to postpone the ending of the singing by walking home; we'd hold hands, and the young men with us would sing snatches of song, parts of the melody that we had just swayed and swung to. I could never attend a dance that she did not come with me. But what a chaperon she made. She liked to dance and the boys liked her light feet, her sense of humor, her way of making them feel they were all right, even if their shirt sleeves were too long, or their pants too loose. At the house later, there was hot chocolate she could dish up in a hurry—thick chocolate, made from my grandmother's special mix, hot on the tongue, comforting to the stomach.

We'd hold hands, these early dawns, we'd watch the coming up of the morning star. She knew the morning star, she greeted the morning star. She had named me after it. Estella Matutina.

I throw a lariat into the haze of my memories. I capture so many things with my lasso. I am an even smaller child, riding a *calesin* in the dawn. She and my father had wakened my brother and me out of a warm bed, had bundled us against the cold, and then had held one each of us in their laps and we had the unreal almost fairytale quality of a ride in the cold night air, getting down at a place, getting into a room that had a long counter and a lot of mirrors, where the men held tall glasses to their lips and smoked big cigars. But it was just a small fleeting moment, almost like a dream, then we went down again, rode to the piers, and there sat in the *calesin* until the dawn star appeared. I was awake, completely, watching the paths of light the moon and the stars made on the restless uncontained sea.

What was that night, why did she get us from our beds, and afterwards, we just went back home and were made to go back to sleep again?

I catch a memory when I was older, and we had just been driven out of an apartment by the landlord who was incensed

at us because we could not pay the rent. I had made the friendship of Lydia and Manuel Arguilla. In that dark moment, I could think of no place to go except to the house of Lydia. There we unloaded the decrepit goods that we had had to make up home and hearth, and there for two days and two nights, we camped, not having found any other place to go, nor perhaps found the money it was necessary to pay before they would let you occupy the rooms.

And I would cry, sitting in a corner, unable to forget the humiliation of being thrown out of home, and having roamed the streets with that lumbering truck. All the minutes that racked up, agonizing minutes because they would add to the length of hours we would have to pay. Until I thought of Lydia, but now there was the humiliation of being fed, and housed, by Lydia. But Lydia would say, looking at *Her*—Valiant is the word for *Primitiva*.

Primitiva. What alchemy of nature makes us lose our sense of courage, our backbone of valor? Where did you lose yours?

When Papa died? The long years had made you rant at him and scold him. Yet you could not think of a Sunday when you would not attend church, or see a movie, or have a meal out on the town, dressed up, spruced up, lipsticked, curled, shoed.

Papa died of a heart attack. He played bowling and won three games, and then asked to have her take his place because he was wet, and he felt sick to his stomach. So he leaned back, told her to call me, and closed his eyes.

And for so many years you had made him sometimes say, with your diabetes, and your excesses, and your heart attacks, and your temper, for so many of these years, he would come to me and ask me—When will she die?, but he died ahead of you. You could not forgive that.

I want to throw away the memory of those days when you lacked the spark that made life worth the breathing.

What bitter enemies we were! Suddenly the body that had been valiant, suddenly the mind had been quick, and

young; all at once the heart that had been at least quick to anger—became a little child's querulous heart, mind, body. I'd steal away the candies she would hide under her pillow. I'd have to put a watch over her comings and goings, knowing she was stealing the eating of uncounted meals at the counters in the market, gorging on starches and sweets and other fullsome things.

We forgot the songs we used to sing together. We shouted. We did not talk. We shouted, and oh the words we flung at each other.

She had been a friend. Her mind had been able to leap the crags and the torrents that also made up my life, and she had been a friend. But now she was an enemy. Angry with me. Scornful of my own mistakes. Was she afraid that I might say, after all, are they not mistakes you made yourself?

But find her. There are many things I must tell her. I want to tell her, I understand. But what can she understand I understand?

Myself quarreling with my own children? Yet telling her not to add her voice to mine, because I was force enough, and could not understand why there had to be so much of us. Did you ever understand?

I must speak to her. I must remind her that I used to watch her bending over a tub making my dresses clean, and then ironing them before they dried so that they had a special sheen. And tell her that I knew the pride she had when I would wear those dresses, and had the campus saying I was graceful, I was sprite. She liked that. She liked having the boys crowd our porch, and make their own coffee, and cowering when Papa arrived, he with his booming voice, and his deep dark eyes, and actually he was so nice, but how could they know that?

He never pinched me, or spanked me, or even gave me a harsh word. You did. You said, I hope you will always be unhappy—that time you knew I had married that boy you didn't

like anyhow. And I answered, I hope I will always be indeed, so I can blame you for it.

And you wiped my tears away and said, Never mind, but Papa said, You can stand it, and let me cry.

There's a woman in the mirror. In the glass, I see the day I myself stood in a room and held a woman in my arms. For ten days doctors had pricked her with needles, placed tubes in her nose, and more tubes in her arms. She couldn't speak, she couldn't move, she couldn't do anything except make the faintest ripple on her forehead when I asked her if I could wet her lips or turn her over to the other side.

Mirror, crack your glass. I can throw a stone into your depths and perhaps draw the blood with the splinters you could drive into my flesh.

Then I can not see the time when everytime your pulse stopped, the doctors or the nurses would come and put another needle into your veins, and with a start, a jerk, the heart would make its slow unwilling rhythm again. But no more the eyes flashing their anger, nor the fingers slapping at my face in temper unheld. No more the tongue lashing at me, wishing that she were dead.

Then on the tenth day, I said, Mother, let us pray. But she could still shake her head. And then my son came, and I said, Mama, the boy will pray with you. The merest flicker on her eyelids, and the merest raising of a reluctant finger, and the boy held her hand, and together thus, holding hands, they intoned the prayers that we have recited from way back. That she had no longer intoned. But my son said them aloud now, and although she could not speak, there was a peace on her face as though she liked him saying the simple words.

Later, alone, what did I tell her? Mama, there are things we would like to do, but sometimes, neither time nor circumstance can let us do them. I would like to have taken you traveling. Seeing sights your eyes would always look at in wonder. Mama, I would have liked to have given you diamond rings. But I could not afford them yet, but I will, I will, give me only the time.

Twelve o'clock, and the pulse stopped again. And I had watched you for ten days glimmer, little glow worm, glimmer, glimmer, and now I did not call the doctor nor the nurse. I had made the priests anoint you days before. I had made my children say their prayers with you, hours before. I had spoken my dreams, and my hopes, and had voiced the terrible fear that you were unfair, you were not giving me the time to give you all the things I had wished.

Twelve o'clock. After a while, the nurse on duty made her rounds. You were in my arms. In my arms I held all the things I could not realize for you. I held all the things you did not realize for me. The nurse gently drew away the tube from your nose, the tubes from arms, shut off the oxygen, covered you with a blanket, and then there were forms to fill and other people to talk to.

In my house, late at night, sitting alone, sewing a dress I must finish for a daughter to wear the morrow, I pause. I think I might hear a footstep. I might hear a sound. I might hear a sigh. I'd like to have you say you're happy. But what is happiness, Mother?

You left me nothing. No jewels. No house. Nothing but these memories, and that question.

I see a woman in the mirror. Fat. Her face lipsticked, her eyes shadowed. It is not my mother. It is not Mama.

Mama, I held you in my arms, and I looked at you, very long, and I know every line of your face and every drop of your mouth, every sag of your figure. Mama, there's a woman in the mirror.

You know who she is?

Stella Matutina. You called her Estrella. I do not see anyone in the mirror but myself.