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An Embarrassment of Riches (Excerpt from a novel in progress)

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An Embarrassment of Riches

(Excerpt from a novel in progress)

CHARLSON L. ONG

Prologue

OH! BUT FOR THE WASTE, THE AWFUL WASTE!

And why did I choose to be a witness to it all? Why ever give up the pleasures and comfort of enlightened Manila for the irredeemable darkness, the medieval scourge that overcame my country in a flood of vicious persecutions towards the end of the 20th century?

I might speak once more of commitment and sacrifice, of faith, hope and perseverance; of so many promises to keep and miles to go before sleep. Yet none of it can ever assuage the pain of seeing so many friends murdered, abused, cut down in their prime by the criminals who now rule our sorry nation.

Jennifer Suarez Sy, Aldoux Chang, Antonio Dalisay, J. Neil Francisco, Isabel Serrano; names that will forever haunt the memory of my people; that will speak of a time when history, it seemed, had allowed for a truly just and humane society to take root in our obscure tropical island.

It is quite fashionable, presently, to dismiss the recent events in our country as the result of another failed Utopian experiment; as the consequence of well-meaning but misguided governance. We, who had the mandate of the people, were, allegedly, too much in allure of Western and socialist ideas to be of effective service to the masses who finally fell prey to the lures of demagoguery.

True, we were young and, perhaps, incautious, but far from misguided. Every action taken by the collective leadership was the result of long and, often, tortuous, deliberation among our ranks. If anything, we had allowed our sense of fair play and political

ecumenism to get the better of us and failed to act with dispatch and finality when occasion demanded. Fact is, world leaders and sundry commentators, were cheering us not too long ago as a place where the global village may turn for "a glimpse of its post-cold war future." The same leaders who played deaf to our call for support amid reactionary terrorism; who watched nonchalantly as assassins mowed down our best people, now call us naive and self-righteous. I rather say that we have become the unbearable weight on the world's liberal democratic conscience. That our defeat was more than another setback for a perpetually defeated people of a tiny island tucked in the world's armpit, but a terrible blow for the future of the entire human race.

And now, with our people facing an uncertain destiny, those who have aided in the triumph of the criminal regime by their silence and nonchalance; continually add insult to injury by insinuating that we who were fortunate enough to survive the violent uprising had somehow betrayed our comrades; had sold them out to the enemy for the price of our lives and more.

I do not intend to glorify such baseless innuendo by enumerating facts and arguments in my defense. Those of us denied martyrdom live only, it seems, to justify our survival. Although, like all truly sentient beings, I never actively sought after martyrdom; neither did I compromise my duty and position under the direct circumstances. All I did I did for the very cause for which I had returned to my country.

I have decided to write this account, ensconced in the safety of this city which has been quite kind to me, mainly to honor the memory of fallen comrades and to tell the world the truth about the events that shook my country during those fateful months of 1991 which turned our island from being the possible vanguard of a new world order into a medieval hell. This and nothing more.

Manila: January, 1993

SO WHY DID I RETURN TO THE VICTORIANAS? There were a hundred reasons, yet, apparently, none worth the trouble I'd been through. Someone once said that you don't ever need a reason to go home, only to stay away. He must have been pathologically homesick or unemployable. I was a bit of both.

I left the island with my older cousin, Lorenzo, when I was barely seventeen and fresh out of high school, for our westerly Pacific neighbor, the Philippines. It was supposed to be the first leg of our journey to the First World. We were intending to vacation with rela-

tives in Manila to pick up some pointers, references, not to mention, idioms, before flying straightaway to California—I to med school and Lorenzo to his father's dimsum joint in San Francisco. But Lorenzo had sooner picked up gonorrhea in Ermita and an ice pick in his gut from some outraged pimp. He died within three months of our departure from the Victorianas and father promptly ordered my return to the island.

I was distraught. Visions of trying out for the UCLA Bruins—I was almost six feet, tall for people of my race, and a passable point guard—cheering Kareem Abdul Jabbar live at the Forum, and hobnobbing with Hollywood types, were at once smashed to bits like so many frosted ice droppings over my cousin's untempered member. I must admit that at that point I'd hardly looked forward to med school and the prospect of spending the next decade or so dissecting tadpoles with some redneck professor breathing down my thin neck was but the next best thing to selling canned kerosene to incorrigibly untechnological Victorianos who believed earthbound spirits were mixed into LPG tanks. It was the NBA or bust for me, though Hollywood might do with a new James Shigeta. But father was adamant. I was to return home posthaste or never again, and forfeit all claims to his million-peso petroleum products business.

My uncle Mario, father's third-degree cousin born and raised in Manila, did all he could to convince my old man to let me spend the rest of the year in Manila. He spoke, too, of the many respectable medical schools in Manila which drew students from as far as Michigan. Before the year was out father had relented and I ended up taking pre-med subjects at the University of the Philippines during mornings while selling scrap at my uncle's junk shop in the afternoons—which saved him not a few thousand bucks in hired hands.

That father agreed at all to uncle Mario's compromise arrangement may be uncharacteristic but not completely unexpected. True, having a U.S.-trained doctor for an offspring had become something of a badge of honor among many well-off Chinese-Victorianos; the moral equivalent of having a scholar-bureaucrat for an ancestor. And father longed for his only son to salvage what remained of the clan honor after my mother—a native Victoriana—eloped with our kerosene tanker driver when I was barely six and my elder sister, Jasmine, joined the underground communist movement sometime in her late teens and disappeared from our lives. But above all else, I knew father wanted me off the island "before it sunk to the bottom of the Pacific under the weight of overgrown bellies and balls of these

hopelessly lazy natives or they are at last starved into action and start tearing away at each other's thick hides."

Father was hardly a political person. Neither national issues nor those which periodically engulfed the small but fractious Chinese community concerned him and his petroleum trade. But like all displaced survivors, he had an uncanny instinct for anticipating public chaos. A person of few words, he watched, listened while feigning unconcern, divined the stars, and made his move. Above all else, he remembered. Like the blindfolded prisoner facing the death squad who is forever haunted by the stench of gunpowder and the mocking of the wind upon his face moments before the unexpected grant of clemency—an eternity of waiting, the space between two lifetimes—father knew the scent of disorder; the burnt-out, sickish sense of a gathering fury. It is the drifter who has need of history.

The same instinct that had urged him to trade his last ounce of gold for a bunker for him and his pregnant wife—who would die and be buried at sea—on the last French merchant ship out of Amoy, headed for Sulawesi, shortly before the Red army marched into Fujian; that had prompted him to sell off his lucrative rubber processing business in Jakarta for a pittance to settle in some obscure Pacific island a month before Suharto came to power in the wake of anti-communist, anti-Chinese riots; had now convinced him to send me away—to the First World, if possible, to be forever free of the unending strife among the underdeveloped—but anywhere beyond the coming madness.

It wasn't so much that father thought revolution imminent. He believed it was something that would happen in a place like the Victorianas sooner or later—the trick was always staying one step ahead of the big one. Collecting your debts, settling accounts, and packing up with some to spare—leaving the place a bit better off than when one arrived. But he feared that I might, like Jasmine, somehow become involved in a future conflict. He'd occasionally remark in my presence that the sloganeering of the Victorianas League of Students reminded him of the rhetoric of leftist students in China back in the 40's and even of the Indonesian youth during the 60's. It was always to stress his underlying theme—the search for happiness, if it should be undertaken at all, is always a personal, at most familial, rather than societal concern. People carved out spaces for themselves and their loved ones aboard the refugee raft forever tossing and turning in an alien sea of troubles. You took in as many survivors as possible but one person too many and the thing

capsizes. Father's metaphors often left an acrid taste to the tongue, but I guess he's been in enough refugee rafts to know whereof he speaks. One need not glimpse too long the broken, slightly hooked nose—a result of injury, doubtless, rather than genetics—squash seed eyes and wounded, sallow, cheeks to see the deep disdain—"I've seen and heard it all before, the same words. . . . the same anger. . . . the same tyrants riding to power on the tide of youthful blood."

There were moments when watching him ply stoically over his stack of *South China Morning Post* and Chinese-language journals from Hongkong and the mainland; trying desperately, it seemed, to give meaning to the welter of events; to find an anchor for the refugee raft of his own life, I fancied myself to have arrived at some insight regarding his generation's insistence that we continued patronizing the only Chinese language school in the island, founded by an exiled Kuomintang general thirty years ago. Our elders' frustration with our decreasing fluency in the Chinese language and increasing ignorance of most things Chinese, I surmised, had less to do with fears of our diminishing Chineseness much less any overwhelming sentiment for the mainland or Taiwan but with the possibility that some of us may have deluded ourselves into thinking that we have at last found a home.

In an essay I sent home for the *Partisano Victoriano* a short-lived, purportedly left-wing, journal founded by my grade school buddy Ignacio Manalo shortly after the fall of the fifteen-year-old Azurin dictatorship back in '84; I'd written: "There is perhaps a nagging suspicion among our elders that we may have found another country. A country to live in and die for . . . that offers sustenance but demands commitment and sacrifice. A focus for youthful passions luring us away from more mundane and safer concerns of commerce and clan. A country that again dangles the promise of martyrdom which only ends in betrayals—all, that is, that an exile must at least partially abandon when he abandons home. 'Never again,' he tells himself, and admonishes his children: 'This is not our war, or yours. We fought ours many seasons ago so you may live in peace.' At some point the migrant knows he must choose to live fully as a person without country if only to survive the vicissitudes of uprootedness. He bends with the wind and profits on cynicism. He says no to everything that forced him to leave home and family—war and patriotism. He dreams that his children will be citizens of the world. It is a pipe dream, of course, for one cannot love humanity without sympathizing with a neighbor brutalized by systemic oppression; because

nationalism is only the concrete expression of our humanity in a particular historic context. This he knows. He knows in his heart of exile that his children are no longer his countrymen. He knows this dream of unbelonging is the last thing he must surrender with grace to time."

There was a time when I wasn't beyond believing that my impassioned prose had something to do with the sudden flight of many Chinese families, along with their capital, from the island or that my father had chanced upon the essay shortly before bursting a brain vessel; now I'm willing to concede some embarrassment whenever reminded of such conceit—youth must after all be allowed its pretensions if not excesses. Suffice it to say that I am not altogether ungrateful that the paper's circulation never surpassed two hundred copies and that the military burned every copy of every edition it was able to track down. Distance often makes nationalists of us all. So that sipping frosted San Miguel beer one rainy night in a trendy Malate bar curiously named Penguin, discussing the relevance of novel writing in a world gone berserk with Filipino poets Ricardo Yuson and Alfred de Ungria, a thousand miles from the nearest Victoriano death squad, I had penned my opus over strips of Marlboro wrappers and proceeded to organize the Movement for a Free Victorianas.

In fact, nationalism was a major factor in my decision to spend ten years in the Philippines rather than proceed to the U.S. The dearth of funds was admittedly a practical concern, but in the long run it was the fear that too great a physical distance would quickly erode one's psychic ties to the motherland that kept me moored to the coconut trees, fresh mangoes, crimson sunsets, brown women, cock fights, basketball fanatics and political carousels of this country which reminded me so much of home.

Still, I wonder whether things would have turned out the way they did if I had never left the Victorianas or had I heeded my father and returned home after Lorenzo's death. To spend one's early adulthood in my country is to be mired in a morass of poverty, power shortages, religious fanaticism, political charlatans, and inane movies that often erode whatever pride one has in a people who have survived five hundred years of foreign dominance and fifty more of local misrule and self-abuse to emerge as the tolerant, peaceable, and instinctively democratic citizens they are. Spending a week even in a country as similar to the Victorianas as the Philippines has caused many an average Victoriano to forswear his country and never return. Perhaps I, too, would have done so if I had spent the ten turbulent

years preceeding the Tenth Republic, suffering the excesses and inanities of the Azurin regime rather than savoring the aesthetic, technological and sensual pleasures of Manila where I pined and poetized for my nation's deliverance.

I am not prone, however, to speculate excessively on foregone possibilities. What is certain is that father had little cause to fear any political involvement on my part when he sent me away at seventeen. Like most adolescents with scarcely any outlet for sexual release, I sublimated nascent horniness in an occasional socially-committed diatribe against the "semi-colonial, semi-feudal, conspiratorial regime of U.S. running dogs." But hardly ever proselytized beyond the dinner table. What convinced him that it was time for me to leave was discovering pamphlets of the Victorianas Liberation Front in my stack of soiled *Penthouse* magazines—filched from father's drawers—tucked under the bed. If I'd known that such would be my passport out of the Victorianas, I'd have jerked off all over Mao much ealier.

Halfway through my second year in the Philippines, father died of cerebral aneurism. His death caused me much sadness, yet, strangely enough, certain relief. We hadn't a relative left in the Victorianas and his business partner—a brick-faced mestizo named Echevarria whom father saved from the dumps—forthwith cremated father's remains and sent them over to me in an urn with a note explaining some new decree banning burial for "foreigners." For all I knew, he might have sold off father's memorial plan along with the rest of our property, which he assumed. He sent me documents declaring our business bankrupt and liquidating our assets to pay-off what I was certain were paper debts. "Out of the depths of his affection and gratitude" for father, the son-of-a-pig sent me a one thousand dollar cheque to tide me through until I found "new sources of income."

I couldn't contain my rage and wouldn't be dissuaded from taking the next flight back to San Ignacio to avenge my father and reclaim my birthright until I realized that, aside from the thousand dollar cheque, I hadn't a hundred pesos to my name. Uncle Mario, calm and composed, explained to me the futility of my considered undertaking. I was a minor—the age of majority being twenty-one in the Victorianas—without any legal standing in my own country. My country. Yes. I was a Victoriano, born and bred in that south-western Pacific island of twenty million, raised in the ever-loyal and Catholic capitol of San Ignacio, who sang the national anthem "Salvacion para Los Bravos" since I was five and taxed ten centavos

for every candy I bought. Yet I was not a citizen of the republic. The constitution, drawn up after occupying U.S. forces left the island forty-five years ago, allowed for nearly any creature of any race to obtain citizenship except the Chinese. In fact, it had become easier for Chinese people holding foreign passports, who had fled to the island to escape tax litigation in their home countries, to obtain Victoriano citizenship through dubious deals with corrupt immigration officials than for us local-borns to become legal entities. I realized, too, with not the least pain, that my father had never married my native-born mother—which might have saved me a fortune. The asshole Echevarria had his bases covered and I was certain he had something to do with my father's failure to marry mother. I was illegitimate. *II bastardo.*

I was now an orphan, disinherited and without a country, completely dependent upon the kindness of distant relations who had secured a temporary permit for me to reside in Manila as a transient student. The Chinese Embassy promised to look into the possibility of issuing me a passport, now that my Victoriano resident passport had been invalidated by father's death—another quirk of Victoriano law allowed resident Chinese and their dependents to be issued blue "resident's" passports which may be invalidated, however, by any number of reasons including the death of the principal resident. The thought, however, of becoming a "subject" of the People's Republic during those days, shortly before the fall of the "gang of four," did cause me a number of sleepless nights.

It is with some trepidation that I look back at this point to that moment in time when I felt cut off from my past, from everything that had heretofore defined my person; betrayed, left to float my own raft in an alien sea. Yet something in me celebrated the freedom that was at hand. I was suddenly free to map my own future without any care for family or country. It was akin to being reborn—unfettered, guiltless.

Jews of the Orient—that's what we overseas Chinese are supposed to be. People of antiquity who belong nowhere. Forever perorating about our emperors and sages, poets and phophets or building monuments and malls above other peoples' burial grounds. Yet, isn't it the homeless who must need dwell in the never-never land of ancestral glory and grandeur or in the imagined future of either borderless communism or the global multinational corporation? This was an insight I'd try to communicate to President JaySy during the short spring of democracy in our country—but I'm getting ahead a

bit. Suffice it to say that although the course of action I eventually took may make it seem unlikely to some, I had felt on that fateful day—December 2, 1975—upon being informed of my father's demise, in the very marrow of my being, that I, Jeffrey Kennedy Tantivo, born in the year of the monkey—July 4, 1956—no longer owed allegiance to any clan or country but to myself alone and the whole of humankind. It was a religious awakening, Bro. Mike Verano would someday tell me in the dimness of my cell, trying desperately to salvage what remained of my agnostic soul for heaven. But presently I was in a bureaucratic limbo, unable to obtain a usable passport for any destination on earth.

2.

Before I relate the tumultuous events that convulsed my country shortly after the more celebrated, but far less dramatic People Power revolt in the Philippines hogged headlines around the world, and my involvement in them; let me say a bit about the Victorianas.

Our island has previously quite often been dubbed "little Philippines" by Westerners who probably picked up the appellation from the early Chinese settlers—"siao fei." In fact not a few Europeans I met in Manila mistook the Victorianas for Mindoro or some other Philippine island. It is something we Victorianos take in stride and good humour. Geography is destiny and our proximity to a larger and strategically better situated neighbor has made us vulnerable to the varied social and political upheavals of the Philippines. The island has been a place of exile for Filipinos of all stripes—from revolutionaries who were shipped to San Ignacio by Spanish colonial governors back in the 19th century to criminals deemed too dangerous for anywhere save the former penal colony of Los Olvidados seventy five kilometers from the capitol. Many of these "guests" had stayed on to inter-marry with the locals, while maintaining ties with their home country, siring offsprings and influencing to a certain extent Victoriano culture and politics. Not a few ended up among the landed gentry. A Jesuit historian once described the island, half in jest, as a "shadow" Philippines. There is indeed some wisdom to his jest although I might rather describe our land as a caricature of that gentle, if similarly unfortunate, country.

The Victorianas was discovered by the West at about the same time as the Philippines and was Christened by 14th-century European cartographers after the Vittoria—the only ship in Ferdinand Magellan's fleet which completed the first circumnavigation of the

earth. Recent archaeological sites, however, prove that Chinese traders visited the island as far back as the first century A.D. The first Chinese settlement was supposedly found by an escaped eunuch of the Tang court back in the 10th century.

Native Victorianos are traditionally classified as "malays," but such ethnic categories have of late been vigorously questioned by contemporary anthropologists. Suffice it to say that they are generally of medium built—five feet and six inches—possess a complexion halfway between caucasian and negroid, round faces, black hair and eyes midway between Chinese slit and Nordic round. Their pre-conquest language, Sadagat, belong to the Mayo-Polynesian family and bears much similarity to Bahasa and to the Tagalog language of many Filipinos. The language survives today in an amalgamated form known as "Victoriano," which contains elements of Spanish, Portuguese, English and Chinese. Victoriano along with English and Spanish are the three official languages of the country even though the latter has fallen into general disuse. The Chinese who comprise eight percent of the population speak the Xiamen dialect of southeastern China so that many Chinese terms as regards to trading and cuisine have become part of the lingua franca.

Spain never showed much interest in our island except for the Malapatay—a variety of coconut whose juices were believed to be aphrodisiac. I've never touched the stuff myself, suspecting all along that it was some 16th-century marketing ploy of Chinese traders who found little to sell from the island. The Spanish governor-general in Manila—who had nominal jurisdiction over the Victorianas—often saw the island as little more than a place of exile for rabble-rousing Filipinos or an occasional source of slave labor and conscripts, Victoriano laborers, however, often proved even more indolent than Filipinos when working for slave wages, and twice when Victoriano men were conscripted to put down revolts in the Philippines, more than half the army deserted so that both practices were eventually abandoned.

The colonial government treated the island with benign neglect and hardly Spanish official ever set foot in the Victorianas except when obligated to collect revenues at pain of death. Only the Jesuits deemed the Victorianos fit for evangelizaiton and sent friars to the island following their brief expulsion from the Philippines during the 17th century. Even so, the religious order never attained the kind of temporal power that the Catholic Church held in the Philippines. Thus, while we Victorianos are not less prone to metaphysical speculation than our Christian neighbors, the voices of Cardinals often ring

less vigorously in our mind's ears than the tolling of cash registers. While such a distinction may seem facile to those unaware of our histories, to my mind, it is the basic reason why, despite claims to the contrary, the Philippines and the Victorianas are quite separate nations.

For nearly five hundred years Spain left the natives, Chinese, mestizos and few hundred white colonists to their own devices. Although Victorianos can prove to be as militant and committed to political ideals to the point of a death as any other people, they found little to revolt for and nearly no one to revolt against under Spanish rule. The token Spanish garrison in the island could hardly have sustained a ten-minute battle with a serious invader at any time during the colonial period and more often than not surrendered without a fight. While Victoriano Catholics observe a number of religious feasts commemorating the "bloodless invasion" of several foreign navies and pirates due to the intercession of this or that patron saint, there are hardly any celebrated victories. The British came and went, the Portuguese stayed a few years—long enough to sire clans of Nascimientos and Olaviejas—the Italians built an opera house and pressured the Pope to declare them as the island's rightful owners. Still, in the end, the financial burden of maintaining a southwestern Pacific outpost that offered nothing more than aphrodisiac coconuts and served as a gateway to nowhere overcame religious and political posturings. The conquerors invariably sailed away without much fanfare and the Spanish flag was raised once more.

I have often contended, to the chagrin of some politically committed friends, that the apparent good sense of our various invaders—their concern for the "bottom line" as it were—as much as the neglect by Spain and the contained influence of the Catholic monastic orders made for our people's resiliency and level-headedness. We can be as bombastic and strident with our rhetoric as anyone while well aware and truly convinced of our real capacities. "Never drink more malapatay than your glass can fill," is an age old Victoriano saying. Neither God, country or freedom ever made us tear up the balance sheet. For as long as we could peddle our wares and live off the land, few Victorianos cared less whose flag was flying against our tropical skies or who had been given Papal permit to rule over us. There had always been just enough poverty and general abjectness around to make you sick at heart but little of the foreign master to convince you that chasing him away would amount to a whole lot. Say it is a weak sense of nationhood. Say even that it is a lack of racial pride. I say it is a way of surviving gracefully.

What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. True, but it can also maim you forever. I believed we had reached the threshold of our maturity as a people rather unmaimed and healthy; that we had saved the best parts of ourselves and our energies for the task of nation-building. I was convinced that despite the physical ills, there were few psychic sores that deeply pained our people; that despite the number of laughable administrations that came to power at the wake of independence, a time had arrived for creating a truly progressive social order in our country without blood and bluster. Events have since forced me to temper this expectation, but have not dampened my resolve.

Doubtless, some will contend that I speak from a certain privileged position. That I am looking at things from the perspective of a relatively well-off person who knows not the lower depths of Victoriano society. I can only respond that the Victorianas are different places to different people and that I can only give you my side of it. I do not say that my people, as a whole, never had cause or will to throw off the foreign yoke, only that the weakness of colonial presence may have unwittingly delayed the emergence of collective resolve. Victorianos seethed and ranted but never to boiling point and Spain merely awaited the chance to sell off the island to the U.S. along with the Philippines and Cuba in a neat package.

I should concede too that what I have deemed level-headedness might, in some ways, be considered an apathy borne of a sense of powerlessness. It might also be said that this passivity and, generally, non-hostile attitude among the natives made it all that much easier for the Chinese to settle and profit from the state of affairs prevailing in the island.

The Americans came at the turn of the century and built some roads—including the George Washington Avenue which remains as the major thoroughfare in San Ignacio—schools, theaters, soda fountains and a post office. But the island was of little strategic value to the U.S. in its bid to open up China for Virginia tobacco. After the first eager waves of engineers, architects, and Thomasites, the number of Americans in the island dwindled to less than five hundred shortly before the outbreak of WW II.

In keeping with its famed tradition, the Victorianas Island militia refused to obey the U.S. military governor's order to resist the invading Japanese flotilla and simply surrendered. Fearing a ploy, the Japanese executed the handful of American officials, left behind a

battalion of raw recruits, and sailed on. World War II was a non-event in the Victorianas.

It took Victorianos almost a month to find out that the war had ended. Nearly half of the stationed Japanese, including the commanding officer, deserted and remained in the island, the rest surrendered to Omay Policarpio—the highest ranking native Victoriano in the colonial government before the war. Policarpio was Special Counsel to the governor, a largely honorary position he retained through the war as “liaison” to the Japanese commander. The Japanese, left mostly to fend for themselves, didn’t know much what to make of our island or to do with it. When they surrendered, it was Policarpio’s turn to figure out a way of feeding and keeping peaceable five hundred bored, sex-starved, panicky soldiers who refused to give up anything but Lt. Col. Kajiwara’s ceremonial samurai. Our people had to play daily soccer matches, volleyball games, and sack races with a defeated enemy taunting us ever so often with loaded rifles. When an off-course U.S. submarine came by to pick up the prisoners nearly two months after the war, there were only about a hundred of them left—the rest of the men and arms had mysteriously disappeared only to reemerge months later as members of Policarpio’s “Home Defense Unit.”

Independence was never officially granted to the island. After the war, the Americans simply forgot about the Victorianas. Upon discovering the war’s end, Policarpio immediately sought advise from Washington but to no avail. After firing off about a dozen wires, he gave up. Four months later, he received a cryptic reply: CARRY ON.

Policarpio forthwith called for a gathering at the Plaza de San Ignacio to declare the establishment of the Republic of the Victorianas on November 30, 1945. His announcement was greeted with mostly wry cynicism by hungry Victorianos, deprived of Quaker Oats, boxed cereals, and Babe Ruth chocolate bars for the past five years, and increasingly impatient for the promised aid package from the U.S. still to arrive. Only Andronico Kawa contested Policarpio’s designation of himself as interim governor pending the convening of a committee to formulate the constitution.

Finally, Kawa agreed to accept the position of vice-governor and both men proceeded to convene the constitutional committee which consisted of Kawa’s son, Manolo, a Harvard-trained lawyer; his nephew, Fr. Lisandro Kawa, a Jesuit agronomist; John Henry Policarpio, Omay’s adopted son; and Francis Macloud, an American

trader who spent the best years of his life in our island and opted for Victoriano citizenship.

The committee took five months to come up with a draft constitution which was overwhelmingly ratified by Victorianos who raised their right hands to signify approval of the document as well as desire for food packets being handed out by election officials. Policarpio immediately called for island-wide polls within a month to elect the President, Vice-President and fourteen executive council members. Kawa declared his intention to run against Policarpio and started on about how his rival had enriched himself by playing lackey to colonial officials. But when apprised of Policarpio's cache of Japanese rifles and stragglers, he finally agreed to "sacrifice personal ambitions for national unity" and become the interim governor's running mate. The tandem and their ticket run unopposed and on Jan. 1, 1946 the Republic of the Victorianas had its first duly elected government. "Free at last," Policarpio had orated in his Sadagat-accented English, "thank God in Heaven we are free at last," he continued until someone in his staff reminded him that it was the same speech he had delivered for the Independence Day rites. For his part, Kawa paraphrased a former Philippine statesman and screamed at the top of his voice that he preferred a government run like hell by Victorianos to one run like heaven by foreigners, which completely stunned the lean crowd and effectively ended the inaugural rites for the first Victoriano President.

Three months after their inaugural, Policarpio and Kawa were at each other's throats and factions of the Victorianas army, which was expanded from Policarpio's home defense unit, supporting either camps battled each other across San Ignacio.

The fighting lasted four months—our island's first experience of large-scale violence—until Lt. Col. Kajiwara, who had by then become Kawa's chief security adviser, defeated the pro-Policarpio faction led by Francis Macloud's nephew, Chris, a U.S. army deserter. Kawa assumed the presidency, promoted Kajiwara to full-general—the first in our country's history—and ruled under emergency decree for the next two years until he was assassinated by a close aide. By then, Gen. Kajiwara had already been executed for treason.

Needless to say, Kawa's successors would meet with a similar fate. The next two decades would witness a succession of short-lived civilian-military governments until Gen. Artemio Azurin, an illegitimate grandchild of Policarpio, wiped out all his rivals and declared himself President for Life in 1974.

With Azurin, Martial Law was officially declared for the first time in the Victorianas despite decades of intermittent pitch battles, illegal detentions and house arrests. If anything, he had returned the rule of law. The Chinese were at first silently supportive of a ruler who could restore order and prevent radical elements from burning Chinese homes and businesses. If extra-legal means was a feature of Victoriano society, it was at least easier, and safer, to have to deal with one dictator rather than a slew of rival warlords. But Azurin soon started executing suspected Chinese smugglers and drug traffickers in a bid to placate racist elements and consolidate power. The Chinese panicked and Azurin promptly closed down the airport to keep them from fleeing. Two days later, father joined a delegation of twelve community elders who visited the Presidential palace to meet with our supreme leader and discuss ways for the Chinese to help in achieving the "just society." Two million US dollars was reportedly turned over. The arrests ceased and five months later, with the death squads now trained at leftist workers and students, I was on DC-10 bound for Manila.

Azurin was determined to drag the Victorianas into the 20th century. He brought in engineers and architects and borrowed heavily from foreign banks to build power plants, dams, and resort hotels. By his fourth year in power—he was by then already the longest ruling politician—tens of thousands of tourists were flocking into our tropical resort of an island every month. GNP was growing at 5 percent annually, per capita income had reached a respectable \$350—an eight-fold increase since he assumed power—and a sizable middle-class of entrepreneurs and urban professionals had emerged.

The Chinese never had it so good. After the 1974 meeting at the palace, Azurin had realized how effective a partner our community could become for realizing his schemes. He granted the Chinese every privilege short of full-fledged citizenship, which at most times amounted to little more than voting in endless rounds of referenda to approve Azurin decrees. Chinese store owners and restaurateurs became importers of steel products, cement and hardware required for the construction boom. Others exported processed malapatay and tuna. My father diversified into tourism; plunking down half a million dollars in a resort hotel owned by an Azurin crony with the hellhound Echavarria as front man.

Progress had by all indications taken root in our island. Tourist brochures distributed in Manila were festooned with grinning, half-

naked Victorianos with full dentures frolicking beneath malapatay trees admiring sleek skyscrapers in the background. I must admit to an occasional urge to return home whenever glimpsing some white-sand-blue-water poster of the Victorianas on the glass window of some Ermita travel agency. But as most self-exiles are wont to, we Victorianas in Manila—there were never more than ten of us who admitted our birthright (or in my case, official residency)—cared more for reports of atrocities committed by Azurin's "green shirts" against political opponents and the "gem warfare" among his five mistresses reported in the Western media than official press releases.

Drinking beer with an assortment of journalists, poets, and sundry jobless groupies who knew me vaguely as a "political exile" provided a slight sense of glamour that would immediately vanish once the truth about my gonorrhoea-aborted flight to the U.S. was leaked. It was a secret periodically protected by tearful poetry about my "sad and perpetually ravished infant of a country," which earned me not a few sympathetic sniffles from the gang of teen-aged Erica Jongs. In fact, I had earned some repute as an expert in surviving political persecution among Penguin habitues who never failed to apprise me of Azurin's burgeoning Swiss bank accounts and latest California real estate acquisition.

It was shortly before father's untimely death when I wrote him a terse, heartfelt letter—written, as well, from my favorite corner table at the *Penguin*—asking him how he could continue doing business and profiting from a country run by a brutal tyrant enriching himself from the suffering of underpaid laborers and child prostitutes. Father never replied; he never wrote me anything. But for two months I had to do without the two-thousand-dollar money order from San Ignacio that allowed me to drink beer by my favorite corner table and contemplate my nation's bleak future. I never again attempted to mix politics with family.

For ten years Azurin reigned unchallenged. Tourists and World Bank dollars poured into the Victorianas and were siphoned off to Azurin's network of paper companies and bank accounts worldwide. He was always politic enough, however, to leave enough for his cronies in the military and business and things did look up for some time. But the oil crises and the global debt crunch began to squeeze the pipeline of funds entering the country and trouble was soon brewing in paradise.

The roof fell on his "thousand year just society" when a killer shark ripped in half a female German tourist five miles off our blue

water coast. The flood of tourists was reduced to a trickle. The coast guard scoured our waters for months to no avail and the economy collapsed. In consternation, Azurin issued a decree banning all sharks from our territorial waters insisting that the woman had actually committed suicide. For a brief period, he even prohibited the showing of all Hollywood movies in the island, convinced that it was the movie, *JAWS*, which precipitated the panic over sharks.

Finally, the coast guard bought a Taiwanese-made mechanical shark and staged a capture which convinced no one. At last, when it appeared that the more adventurous foreigners were slowly returning, a slew of micro-organisms turned much of our seas reddish with toxin. By then, the economic strides of the Azurin years had been wiped out. The resort hotels had turned into insect haunts, we were back to peddling malapatay to aging journeymen, beggars littered the streets of San Ignacio and many were asking for the blood of Chinese merchants who were inflating prices.

Things came to a head in early '84. Azurin's generals hinted at a possible coup de etat, in interviews with foreign media, if the situation worsened. On February 5, the President was found naked and dead in the presidential bathtub. It remains uncertain whether he had died by his own hand—traces of semen were discovered in the bath water and his right hand was reportedly still holding on to his penis in rigor mortis—or was the victim of foul play. What was certain was that no one was claiming responsibility for the supreme leader's death or for running the government.

Azurin's death was finally announced to the public by his press secretary, Octavio Luz, a week later along with the holding of a state funeral which never occurred. Azurin had ruled by decree and it was uncertain which office or person had final say over disposition of the corpse, neither did it appear that public funds had been allocated for such an eventuality. Since none of his mistresses and children laid claim to his remains, our late supreme leader was taken out to sea by a loyal coast guard captain and his, possibly poisoned, corpus fed to the unfeeling creature that brought about his undoing.

The generals were all refusing to assume power leaving it up to Cardinal Edmigdio Gan to organize a new government. The cardinal appointed an interim government composed of two generals, two priests and three businesspeople which forthwith announced the holding of national elections for our country's tenth republic since independence.

It was at this historic juncture that my ties with my country were fully restored. Although occasionally sending articles to the *Partisano Victoriano* and other non-establishment journals, I had little contact with the anti-Azurin underground and assumed that they, too, were oblivious of our movement to "free the Victorianas by every means possible," including hexing by sympathetic Filipino psychics.

It was, therefore, with some surprise, and suspicion, that I first read Jennifer Suarez Sy's letter to me dated February 14, 1984; commending me for my unflinching effort in organizing exiles and "keeping the flame of democracy alive in their hearts." My dear childhood friend intimated to me her desire to run for the presidency of the Tenth Republic and solicited my assistance in her campaign. She expressed confidence that my invaluable experience in political persuasion gained from years of propaganda work in Manila for the cause of Victoriano democracy would immensely contribute to her eventual triumph and to the fulfillment of those ideals that we, enlightened Victorianos of our generation, have long cherished.

I will not deny experiencing that moment of hesitation that often unnerves the best of us when faced with a decision so vital to ourselves and those we deem to serve; when we realize that everything that had gone on before were but meant to prepare us for the forthcoming enterprise. I am not taken to overstatement and cringe at the mention of such words as "greatness," "sacrifice," and "faith" that often bring tears to the most world-weary amongst us. But I would only be truthful in admitting that while holding Jennifer's letter in my hand, my eyes had begun to wet, sensing ever so keenly that I had received my "appointment with destiny."

I immediately set down to write her back a letter indicating my acceptance and conveying in detail the surfeit of emotions that had overwhelmed me. But my hands were understeady and my mind had taken flight. Certain of the impotence of words for the moment, I rushed to the nearest wire service and sent my reply: I SHALL RETURN.

3.

I arrived at the Azurin International Airport on April 20, 1988; fourteen years and two months to the day I left for Manila. The tourist brochures had not been exaggerated. What had been a ten-kilometer airstrip bordered by cogon grass with occasional grazing sheep when I left was now a passenger tubed, five hectare affair comparable to Manila's. I was met by Ignacio Manalo, now media consultant to

Jennifer, whom the press had started calling JaySy, and his lovely wife, Kate.

Ignacio, whom I remembered calling Iggy—Aygee—as a child, had grown a full beard and a half belly. He pumped my hand so vigorously I thought for a second that my shoulders were unhinged. “Jeffrey, como esta? Look at you . . . thin as a bamboo. Must be all that corn-rice in Manila, huh? Its okay, man, you’re home now. We’re okay, now. The worst is over.”

Ignacio’s appraisal of my looks caused me some anxious moments—the last time I looked my mirror revealed a nascent beer belly unperturbed by two months of weight training—but, knowing Iggy, the guy had probably prepared his greeting days in advance. No harm too, I figured, in maintaining my role as suffering-exile-finally-returned. “Yes,” I whispered, clasping his hand, jerking off a tear as I turned to watch some workmen remove a huge sequined portrait of our late supreme leader hanging over the arrival area. “Yes, it must be over,” I said.

The drive down a lengthened George Washington Avenue was nothing short of amazing. Skyscrapers and luxury hotels had indeed sprouted over grasslands and garbage dumps; for a while I felt as if I were back in Manila, and a wave of joy seemed to pass over me. “Things have changed,” I said a mite jovially and caught the slight smirk in Iggy’s thick lips as he ran light. For a moment, there seemed an awkward silence inside the car and I was wondering whether to return to our previous theme about the worst being over when Kate started identifying each of the magnificent buildings we passed.

Kate was a Nascimiento, a fourth-generation Portuguese mestiza who had studied at Berkeley and Stanford where she headed the Victorianas League—an anti-Azurin front. They’d known each other for nearly two years and had been married for less than one. Her easy, often self-deprecating, banter seemed to weigh heavy on Iggy’s ever-cringing forehead. The guy was exuding a gravity that I never remembered him having. I decided to clam up to keep Kate from further commentaries as we sped towards JaySy’s campaign headquarters.

“It’s the mother of all malls,” I shouted in jest as we neared the 150-hectare MEGALOMALLIA, borrowing metaphor from a controversial late 20th-century Arab leader, hoping to draw some humour from Iggy, who remained poker-faced, as if he was taking me to slaughter. “Grandmother,” Kate quipped.

From the outside it indeed looked massive. Sky tubes linked four 25-hectare annexes to the central 50-hectare mall which, according

to Kate, housed over two hundred stores, restaurants, cinemas, and offices. The annexes contained chapels, nurseries, two morgues, an emergency clinic for shoppers who suffer sudden heart attacks or have to delivery babies and a hi-tech crematorium cum crypt. It was truly a city within a city; a cradle-to-grave emporium larger than anything I'd seen in Manila.

Never in my wildest imaginings did I picture anything of the sort to ever rise over our snake pit marshes. Completed towards the end of the Azurin regime, it was the brain child of Jennifer's father—textile and retail trade tycoon, Alfredo Labares Sy—who died shortly before its inaugural. Despite the economic collapse, Megallomallia had remained largely viable—providing goods, services and jobs to a good many Victorianos and serving as well as a symbol of hope for better times. Kate was quite convinced that Jennifer's judicious husbanding of resources, including her family's reputed foreign assets, had much to do with the enterprise's continued viability.

"Is there anything at all going on outside this place?" I asked the couple good-humouredly as Ignacio manuevered niftily through the labyrinth of sky-tube-topped alleys that had earned for the sprawling complex the monicker—the Pentagon. Not exactly expecting an answer, I was taken aback as Iggy turned briefly to me—the gravity in his face a foil to my good humour—and whispered: "You'll see."

We finally came upon a steel door which Iggy opened by remote. "Open Sesame," Kate said, and I knew then the two of us would hit it off well together. The hidden elevator brought our car up the main building's six floors and deposited us in a lighted alley which led to the heliport atop the building. Seeing my beloved San Ignacio sprawling beneath us with her new-fangled skyscrapers and ageless mountain ranges in the distance, I felt a sharp pain nip the small of my back and asked Iggy to slow down as we cruised towards the dark-windowed penthouse at the far end of the heliport.

Ignacio inserted a plastic card in the glass door jamb which lighted a red bulb and opened the door. We entered into an antechamber where two armed guards perused us from behind a glass window. Iggy said something over the microphone. The guards nodded and set off more switches which opened another steel door that led us to an elevator. We rode down some two floors before the elevator doors opened into Jennifer's office.

The room was something straight out of sci-fi. A jigsaw of hi-definition video screens monitored various sections of the mall. Three maroon uniformed ladies sat in black cushioned swivel chairs, facing a

panel of controls which they operated continually to transform the images on screen. A few meters behind them, on a platform, were a dozen more swivels which I presumed were occupied by board members during executive meetings, and behind them was a crescent-shaped leathered desk which fenched in a white swivel which I guessed was occupied by the corporate president. For a moment I thought myself aboard the command module of some spacecraft and remembered at once that Jennifer was in fact the founder and lifetime president of the Victorianas Trekkies, whose initial meeting first brought us together nearly twenty years ago.

The monochrome of this area contrasted with the fiery backdrop: a huge painting of a Chinese-looking woman garbed as a Maoist Red Guard, stepping on the head of a pied-colored dragon and waving a blue book. The book, I was soon to discover, was Jennifer's *Blue Revolution: The Final Frontier*. I immediately recognized the hand of Ibarra Wang, a sometime Social Realist artist who spent years in China, now a New Age guru. The contrast disconcerted me slightly and I was briefly reminded of Flash Gordon stepping into the lair of the evil Ming before another door opened and we were led into Jennifer's inner sanctum.

She was magnificent in her sky blue, gold-laced silk choengsam. The slender frailness of younger years had filled out into a fuller, confident womanhood, she seemed to have done something to her eyes which I remembered loving for their smallness. Almost forty now, her skin remained fair, fresh and faultless. She glowed in the afternoon light sneaking through the large tinted window panes. Beautiful, oh so beautiful!

"*Sio puy*," she nearly shouted approaching us as I cringed from being reminded suddenly of my boyhood pet name—little fatso—no one had called me that in over a decade. "*Ni hao?*" She buzzed my cheeks, and her smoothness and fragrance unleashed the flood of nostalgic tears that had been welling up inside me ever since the 747 touched down on Victorianas soil. "Look at you," she whispered "haven't changed a bit." I turned briefly to Iggy whose face remained hard as a brick wall.

"You're pretty as ever, Jenny."

"You've really done us all proud, Jeffrey. I know you've been through quite a bit, but I think we do have a shot at changing things, now. I'm really glad you're with us."

What had spawned tears in my eyes back in Manila suddenly brought a keen sense of embarrassment. I felt the insides of my face

heating up. The thought of deceiving this woman in any manner was unconscionable. I was tempted to make a clean breast of things right there and then. "NO!" I wanted to scream, "I was living off my father's money, guzzling beer in trendy bars where I organized revolutionary cells among drunken poetasters while exchanging notes on Third World revolution with wandering academics and bodily fluids with lovely Pinays. I'm here because my father's dead, I haven't got a cent to my name and I want the neck of that bastard who stole my fortune!"

But why rock the raft even before one has fully gone on board? Why destroy the myths that could help spawn epochal transformations even before they inspired devotion? If I were to be of any use to anyone in my country I would have to inspire the confidence that only a returned exile, a propagandist par excellence, an experienced revolutionary could command. Fact is, we all lie in degrees. I must say that my reputation wasn't entirely baseless. I must have done something in my years in Manila to have earned such adulation and sympathy. It was at this moment that I came upon a vital insight that would serve me in good stead, if not too flatteringly, during my twenty eight months back in the Victorianas: there is a qualitative moral difference between deliberately distorting facts and allowing embellishments of those same facts to persist in the service of a higher purpose.

I immediately tempered my emotions and responded in the most plaintive, heartfelt tone I could muster: "All those years, Jenny. . . very often, it was only the memory of that bleak morning in February, seeing you wave goodbye beside that crippled shepherd boy and his poor flock as we taxied along the runway to an uncertain fate, that kept me going." It was indeed my dear friend, back then, who drove me to the airport as father wouldn't be dragged away from his weekly marathon mahjong game with cronies. And I could sense how deeply the memory of it touched her. She smiled ever so warmly, touching my face: "Jeffrey."

The light blue and aqua art deco of Jenny's inner sanctum was a cool contrast to the turgid eclecticism of the executive boardroom. This, I felt at once, was more in keeping with the Jennifer I knew. A 4 x 5 framed calligraphy of the Chinese character for patience—REN—occupied the blank wall which faced the window panes overlooking east San Ignacio. I felt the tension which had been building up inside me since the car ride slipping through my fingers. My knees buckled slightly and a soothing tiredness swept over me. I was home.

Jenny and Kate filled me in on the latest Victorianas developments while I kept them abreast of goings-on in the Philippines. I told Jenny that Megallomallia was truly mind-boggling and grander than anything I'd seen in Manila. The tandem was about to lead me on a walking tour of the premises when Ignacio, impatience spilling out of his nostrils, finally spoke: "Jeffrey did not travel all the way home to be shown boutiques and crematoriums. There is work to do."

"Lighten up, will you," Kate blurted. But after a moment's silence, Jennifer nodded and touched my arm, "He's right, Jeff. The tour can wait awhile."

Iggy pulled the covers off a white board beside Jenny's desk. On it was drawn a huge pie, half of which was divided into slices of red, yellow, blue and orange and the other half left blank. "This," he said in as a deep a baritone as he could muster, "is our best assessment of the present political disposition." I looked to Kate and Jenny for some clues to Iggy's own tight-ass disposition, but both of them seemed to have assumed a similar seriousness. Iggy went on to explain how half the electorate, as represented in the illustration, remained undecided regarding their choice for president in the forthcoming July 4 general elections. He showed how the other half could possibly have their loyalties split among the various contenders which, aside from Jenny, included: Octavio Luz, Azurin's former spokesperson; Gelacio Kawa, a grandson of Andronico whose family used to own two thirds of the arable land in our island, lately fallen into moderate destitution; Anthony Serrano, a popular general and half-brother to poet and our sometime sweetheart. Isabela; and Agnes de Jesus, singer-songwriter, daughter of the late labor leader and left-wing martyr Aurelio "Fidel" Cuadra.

Ignacio admitted that among the candidates, Jenny would seem to have the least definable constituency. Like most Chinese families, hers had kept away from partisan politics except for the brief period during Azurin's "democratic restoration" when the dictator had appointed a number of prominent citizens, including Jenny's late father, Alfredo, to an interim parliament which met every other week for six months and succeeded in ratifying Azurin's appointment as President for Life. Attendance gradually dipped until the parliament building was finally converted into a restaurant. To his credit, Alfredo Labares Sy had the least number of absences among the parliamentarians—a total of 25.

Jennifer herself had never held public office or been at the helm of any large organization other than the Victorianas Trekkies and the

Doña Consolacion Alaras-Sy Foundation which granted scholarships to indigent students, ran two orphanages, and awarded annual prizes for outstanding literary and cultural achievements. Such activities, as well as her personal affiliations, doubtless won her extensive support among the island's intellectuals, whose influence among the political honchos and the general populace had always been minimal. Jenny's able management of the family resources since her father's passing had, however, earned her the admiration of many ordinary Victorianos. Megallomallia and its network of satellite enterprise employed nearly 35,000 people and helped keep the economy afloat, providing a continuous flow of goods and services.

Ignacio described Jennifer's campaign as one of "pure potentiality." Whereas the other aspirants had locked-in to particular constituencies, Iggy felt we could package Jenny to as wide an audience as possible and win over most of the undecided voters come election day. He stressed that Jenny's would be a "high-level campaign" focusing on vital issues and her proven ability to manage resources. Iggy presented a concise master plan that would have Jenny stump every nook and cranny of the island for the next twenty weeks while maximizing media coverage. He pointed out that my main task would be to write Jenny's major speeches in my patented manner but clarified that as we were more than paid professionals but "committed crusaders of change" there should be no splitting of hairs between exact definitions of respective duties and responsibilities.

Jenny and Kate had remained quiet and composed throughout Iggy's presentation, which I was certain they knew by heart, and the solemnity of it all was starting to upset my stomach. "So who do you have in my mind for front act?" I asked half in jest to break Iggy's monotone and still my own nerves. My query drew a sudden, disturbed, silence and I realized even then that my comrades had possibly even less sense than I of what we were getting into. "I beg your pardon?" Ignacio said.

"The front act?" I repeated to no avail. "Listen, I'm all for focusing on issues and objectives. But when Jenny goes down to the barrios someone has to first bring in the crowd. Many of these guys might never have been to Megallomallia. They may not have the least idea who Jenny is?"

"You think that would be a major drawback?" Kate asked.

"I'm saying it will do a whole lot of good for her to be associated with some popular figure . . . someone most people, especially in the countryside, can readily identify with."

"Rambo, for instance? Or Cynthia Luster?" Ignacio butted in, and I knew I'd finally gotten his goat.

"Look, the thing is we've got to get our message across to as many people as possible, so before anything else, we have to get them to listen."

Ignacio was now biting on a black pipe that he would have lit had not Jennifer cast a quick glance his way. "Perhaps you didn't hear me well enough, Jeffrey . . ."

"Oh, I heard you pretty well, Iggy."

"Please refrain from using that pejorative."

"Alright, the thing is, Ignacio, these are popular elections. And like all such elections the world over, there will be some amount of show business involved. We can't run an effective campaign assuming otherwise. We can't win."

So, this is the profound insight we have awaited from our exile in Manila?"

"Right," I said staring into his dark, mediterranean eyes. I figured if I was ever going to stand up to this overbearing zealot I had to do so soon enough.

"And we win at all costs?"

"I didn't fly two thousand miles to debate you, Ignacio. I'm here because Jenny asked me; because I believe she can become president and do a whole lot to change things in this country. I will work for her and stay for as long as she deems it wise."

I turned to Jennifer and the sudden glint in her eyes told me Iggy's days as her prime campaign adviser were numbered.

"So the end always justifies the means?" The asshole was still at it.

"They do so in this case. You know that, Ignacio."

"My old friend stared back at me with the collected malice of every defrocked Jesuit in his polyglot ancestry. The slight twitch at the end of his mouth reminded me at once of the irrational violence he was capable of as when he once nearly battered to death a neophyte proofreader of our campus journal who misspelled a word in Iggy's editorial.

"Jennifer," he quipped, "I believe there is a policy issue here that has to be made clear to Tantivo." I felt at once that his referring to me by my surname was less an attempt to intimidate than a sign of desperation. For a moment we all seemed trapped inside a contracting bubble fast running out of oxygen then Jenny spoke: "Please excuse us awhile, Ignacio, Kate. I want to have a word alone with

Jeffrey." I thought I saw a chip knocked off Ignacio's brick face. Kate took him by the arm and stirred him out of the room.

I should note that at this point, although I had yet to hear Jenny's words to me in private, I had felt assuredly that my influence with her would be of paramount significance in the coming months. Jennifer walked towards the huge window panes and looked out at the expanse of earth and sky. "Still a beautiful country, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Yes," I said, seeing how the afternoon sun had defined her profile.

"I could have left a long time ago, you know."

"I'm sure," I said.

"So many times I'd thought I would leave for good and yet I always came back, couldn't stay away for more than a month. My father had wanted me to set up shop elsewhere, but, somehow, I just couldn't get myself to do so. I guess there are those of us who are born to stay put and those who are meant to drift," she turned to me. "You're a drifter, Jeff."

"My father wanted me to leave."

"I know you won't hang around forever, but I'm glad you're here. Thanks for coming home, Jeffrey."

"I'm quite happy to be home. I never imagined you guys would care much for me after all these years."

"You remember the first time we met, Jeff? At the founding convention of the Trekkies?"

"I was ten years old and it was the biggest thing in my life. It was like being in the United Nations. You even talked of bringing over Capt. Kirk."

Jenny smiled and touched my face. "And when it didn't happen, many of the guys decided to form a splinter group," she said and we both burst into laughter reminiscing our days of juvenile political squabbles. "You were one of the few people who stood by me," she whispered. "A roly-poly moptopped kid standing atop the table, shouting down those bigger boys." I was truly heartened by Jenny's recollection of my boyhood chivalry. It was, I believe, a moment of genuine moral courage that I have, sadly, been unable to replicate since. "It was crazy," I said.

"You were principled," she retorted and I felt pinpricks all over my body. "You understood loyalty. I knew even then you'd amount to much someday. You've always had a way with words."

"It's one of the few things I'm good at," I quipped, fighting back those

tears of glory that have clogged my windpipe ever since reading Jenny's letter to me back in Manila, trying not to seem too flattered. "I guess you can see by now why I needed to have you back here," she went on.

"Ignacio seems to have a lock on things," I said.

"Ignacio had seemed to be the sort of person I needed when this all began. He's a good organizer and quite committed. But he's beginning to take himself too seriously. He's starting to think himself indispensable."

I could see then that my old buddy had in fact lost the lock on most things. "Still, he can be fiercely loyal," I said. Jenny fell silent and considered my words briefly. "I need to be around people with some sense of humor, people with . . ." she searched the air for the right word: "panache . . . with real imagination," she stressed. And then in vintage Vulcan fashion that would do Mr. Spock proud, Jennifer Suarez Sy squeezed my right shoulder blade and flashed the confident, conspiratorial look that I have not seen in ages: "I need a Trekkie." Her sudden shift to a mode playful yet vaguely foreboding left me half stunned. Yet just as quickly, Jennifer turned serious. "Now, my friend, I must ask you to excuse me, as urgent matters await my attention."

"Sure," I blurted, trying to make whole the varied sides of the woman just revealed to me. I quickly turned and headed for the door until it struck me that a matter of vital concern had been inadvertently left out in our discussion. "Just one more thing Jenny . . ."

"Yes?"

"Not that it is a matter of urgency, but, you see, I have been unjustly dispossessed of our family fortune ever since father died many years ago and at the moment I have no means of maintaining myself . . ."

This time it was Jennifer who looked truly stunned as she silenced me with a stiff palm. "Jeffrey? What are you saying," she asked, approaching me, and I felt my sinews turn cold for an instant. "Jeffrey?"

"I have no money," I wanted to scream but simply turned away. I was truly shamed.

"Jeff, need I say that your services will be justly rewarded?"

"I'm very sorry," I whispered as she continued to eye me questioningly. I could almost read the mute query in her eyes: "Are you suspicious of any of this?" But simply shook my head like some kid caught looking up the teacher's skirt: "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she smiled and I relaxed. "I understand perfectly," she said. "You'll be staying at the Hilton. You'll have full signing rights to all goods and services provided by A. Sy Enterprises. I'll have a vehicle and driver assigned to you for starters until you've finalized your personnel requirements. You'll have your own expense account, I won't put limits to it as long as you deliver."

I was quite overwhelmed by Jenny's magnanimity and the thought of a free-spending spree after the relative deprivation of my later years in Manila did melt away whatever iota of regret I had for returning to my dear motherland. Still, the embarrassment of having to bring up such trivial matters among friends in the face of the great tasks lying ahead did cause me to squirm inside my designer suit. "You're very generous, Jenny, but it really is too much."

"But I do mean to be generous, Jeffrey," she retorted flashing once more her Vulcan countenance. "And I do mean to be president," she whispered, waving me away with a strange smile.

"Tantivo!" I heard the blunt call from behind my back as I left the executive boardroom and entered the neon-lit skyway leading to the main mall. I spun around to see Ignacio marching towards me with his face as a battering ram. "Iggy . . ." I forced a smile, but he brushed away my good humour with a quick wave of his hand—a gesture that I would later learn to associate with fear.

"What do you think you're up to Tantivo?"

"I was being candid. I can't do anyone any good without being honest, Ignacio. You know I'm right."

"Then let me be candid, too. I never wanted you back, it was Jennifer's idea. I know all about you, Tantivo . . . you and your whoring friends in Manila. Don't think you're fooling anyone. Don't think you can drop back in when the going's good and cash in on what we've risked our lives for. I'm not going to let you or any of your kind ruin things."

Ignacio brought a fresh bottle of soda water to his mouth and plucked off the crown with his teeth—a gesture that never ceases to send worms up my spine no matter how many times I see it done by street urchins in Manila. I thought I saw him spit out something reddish from his mouth. Ignacio glared at me once more and turned away. He stopped on his tracks as if struck by a sudden thought, then bent over to pick up the discarded crown. He turned once more to me: "No more littering."

4.

My afternoon walk through the air-conditioned length and breadth of Megalomallia was truly rewarding despite recurring echoes of Ignacio's ominous words ringing in my mind's ears now and then. It allowed me, too, to familiarize myself anew with our native Sadagat as I overheard snatches of conversations among shoppers and myself exchanged a few words with salespeople. I was checking out the glass and brass crypt in annex B—where the ashes of corpses roasted in the adjoining crematorium were deposited in brass paneled glass containers flanked by small video machines which visitors could operate to watch specially produced video disc biographies of their dear departed—when the woman in silky black blazer stepped up to introduce herself as my driver, Maria Elena Berwani, and inform me that a vehicle was now at my disposal.

Her dark almond eyes, lush brows, rich lashes, full lips, strong nose, and olive skin recalled a friend in Manila originally from New Delhi, and I would in fact soon find out that my driver was descended from a prominent north Indian family on her father's side. My vehicle turned out to be a late model BMW with automatic transmission which Ms. Berwani handled with much proficiency and I decided, while being driven down George Washington Avenue towards the Hilton, that I would spend the greater portion of my first few weeks back home cruising through the old as well as new by-ways of San Ignacio.

The Victorianas Hilton was an eclectic blend of continental, oriental, and native Sadagat architectures and I wasn't all that surprised, too, to find out the Jennifer's family held the local franchise. Ms. Berwani introduced me to the manager, Anastacio Sy, an amiable, thirtyish executive type and the duo guided me to the 12th floor penthouse overlooking the bay of San Ignacio. It was a soul-stirring sight, our gentle bay, where I used to go sailing with my father as a child, even in the early evening. Anastacio Sy deftly demonstrated the workings of the state-of-the-art equipment from the seventy-cable-channeled hi-definition television to the bedside control panel which could connect to vital offices of the hotel in an emergency and, most importantly, my personal hotline to Jennifer enclosed in a glass case.

The manager wished me a fruitful stay and excused himself. I was all primed for a hot bubble bath in my silver-tiled tub before slumping down in the king-sized bed except that Ms. Berwani continued

to stand poised in her corner eyeing me ceaselessly, though not in any manner threatening or suspicious. Still, this strange behavior unsettled me somewhat.

"Ms. Berwani, I am quite grateful for your assistance and I'm quite certain we shall spend some very interesting times together. But I did have a long day, and if you'll excuse me, I'd like to retire."

"Certainly, sir, she replied in her sing-song English but failed to budge an inch. "Ms. Berwani?" I repeated with a smile while making a gesture for her to proceed towards the door. "You may do as you wish, sir, and be assured that your person is being secured every second," she stressed.

"That's wonderful, Ms. Berwani. But I think you might also do with some rest."

"My orders are to keep a constant, unerring, watch over you, sir . . ."

"You're a bodyguard?" The thought of being protected by this petite, soft mannered, if well-drilled, woman did seem outlandish at the moment and I'd thought it, at first, among Jenny's well-placed jokes, but fatigue was overcoming good humour. And Ms. Berwani remained unmoving save for her pair of almond eyes. "All right, then," I smiled, "but I'm going to bed, now."

"Yes, sir, and I shall be watching over you, sir."

"But I'm going to sleep."

"I heard you perfectly, sir."

"You're going to watch over me while I sleep?"

"Yes, sir, those are my orders."

"This is crazy! I'm not a prisoner!"

"Those are my orders, sir. You'll have to talk to Ms. Jennifer if you find any of this objectionable."

I was almost certain, now, Jenny was pulling my leg. Still, I was faced with a stubborn bodyguard who must have some Gurkha in her bloodline, and the idea that Ignacio might have put her up to this suddenly unnerved me.

"How about you? When do you sleep?"

"My family is descended from the great mystic yogi Sri Ananda kumartis Berwani. I have been trained in the mystic arts since childhood. I have total control over my body functions. I do not require the manner of sleep most people need."

I thought of trying out my hotline and calling up Jenny to straighten things out with Ms. Berwani. But I figured that Jenny might be testing my composure and good sense and using the hotline

for such trivial matter may show me to be a mite impatient, if not panicky. I decided to find out just what Ms. Berwani meant by not needing to sleep as normal people do and to clear up the whole thing with Jenny the following morning.

Ms. Berwani agreed to turn her back as I bubble-bathed; although, I wasn't exactly unused to being watched by women while bathing. In fact I've found it rather rejuvenating to be bathed occasionally by lovely ladies in one of Manila's classier massage parlors. As I jumped into bed, she sat lotus-position by the bedroom door facing me. I turned off the lights and just to see how good Ms. Berwani really was, I'd turn on the table lamp every few minutes to see her sitting unmoving as a stone with her eyes half-closed.

After thirty minutes of this, I threw a pillow against the window. It barely made a sound, but in the wink of an eye Ms. Berwani had thrown herself on top of me and I grabbed on to her instinctively. Her perfume cut through my brain and I felt my heart stop. We were both quite embarrassed as I flicked on the light and she apologized profusely.

I was overcome with guilt for my prank while Ms. Berwani returned to her position, and I resolved to fall asleep without further ado. But now my heart was clubbing against the rib cage, and my swollen member was demanding release. I knew there was no way I could jerk off in bed without Ms. Berwani noticing and it was too much trouble at this point to have to do my thing in the john with her standing guard nearby. It also violated a personal sense of propriety on my part to have to resort to self-gratification while sharing a bedroom with a female of such desirable qualities. Still, my member would not be assuaged and I pined briefly for simpler nights of dozing off after watching my Marylyn Chambers video for the umpteenth time with only my pet hamster, Ali, to watch over. Jet-lag and fatigue finally overcame me, however, and my first moral crisis since returning home was resolved without further embarrassment or compromise.

5.

Jennifer was rather amused with my discomfort over Ms. Berwani's unrelenting watch. "It seems female attention is one thing you didn't have a dearth of in Manila, my boy," she taunted me over coffee at the Top of the Hilton cafe. I could see she was in better spirits than the previous day.

"I can't have anyone watching me every second of the day, Jenny. It's absurd."

"Come, come, the woman's a professional, she does things by the book. I'll talk to her."

We finally agreed that Ms. Berwani would watch over me only while I performed my "official functions" but that she would stay in the guest room while I slept to allow her to respond immediately to any emergency.

"Aren't you being a bit paranoid about my safety, Jenny? I mean who on earth, would have cause to harm me?"

Jenny's good cheer vanished almost instantly as she eyed me gravely. "You work for me now, Jeffrey. Everyone, and I assure you there are many of them, who considers me an enemy now sees you in similar light." Jenny's fears were infectious. I soon found myself checking the bottom of coffee cups for cyanide traces. But where the woman had grown enamored to danger, having grown up with bodyguards and security blankets, I was beginning to doubt whether I could function well inside a cauldron of intrigues and assassins.

Jenny furnished me a copy of a map of San Ignacio divided into sections colored red, yellow and blue. The red areas she described as "friendly" sectors where we—people identified with Jennifer and her family—could roam freely with minimum danger, the "yellow" areas may contain "hostile" elements and were not to be frequented, while the "blue" parts were considered "enemy" territory to be avoided except during emergencies. Jenny further provided me with lists of "safe" and "unsafe" diners, parks, theaters and other public places. The thought that I could actually be abducted or shot while gobbling noodles in old Chinatown where I grew up sniping hookers with my blow dart was quite disturbing, but I figured people like Jenny always tended to exaggerate their security risks. The fact, too, that the red areas constituted less than 30 percent of San Ignacio made me decide there and then to disregard Jenny's warnings.

Jenny announced that she was orienting me to my new responsibilities by showing me a place quite "close" to my heart. "I know the past has brought you back, Jeff. But today I want you to glimpse the future. Liberation is what it's all about."

We rode on her six-door, bullet-proof black limousine flanked by two escort vehicles and a phalanx of motorcycle-riding armed guards. We soon left the city limits and sped across the suburbs now dotted with housing developments and agro-business concerns. Jenny told me A. Sy enterprises had also gone into building low-cost homes for

their employees and setting up fruit-processing ventures. The idea of riding inside a limo with someone who controlled such massive resources and held the destinies of so many in her hands did send some insects scrambling down my spine but before long we'd arrived at Liberation.

From the outside, it appeared like a refurbished ranch and I almost started whistling the theme from *Bonanza* when the twenty-foot-tall church tower with a black stone raven triggered distant memories of bivouacs and mud fights. I turned to Jenny and caught the glimmer in her eyes. Yes, this was the fabulous retreat of youthful days where we Victorianas Trekkies held our annual summer Enterprise Camp. For a week, we'd set up in tents to argue over the philosophical implications of Capt. Kirk's encounter with his anti-matter doppelganger and Spock's pure reason. Critiques and suggestions for forthcoming episodes were typed up and sent to the producers in Hollywood, who never failed to reply enthusiastically, although it remained an issue for debate whether any of our inputs made it to the tube.

Jenny squeezed my hand as we rounded the tower and came to a halt. We were greeted by a number of blue-vested nuns who nearly mobbed Jenny. "Sisters!" the oldest of them shouted, gesturing to the others who grew abruptly silent and orderly. "The Liberation greeting, sisters," she said, smiling.

The women launched into a rendition of what sounded like "O Come, All Ye Faithful!" replacing the *him* with *her* and ending with: "O come let us adore her, the light of our lives!"

I couldn't believe my ears. It was nowhere near Christmas and Jenny was beaming as never before. She pulled out a light blue scarf, veiled her head, clasped her hands together by her breasts, and started nodding slightly to each of about a dozen nuns who reciprocated the gesture.

"Sisters," she announced, after the greetings, "a significant moment is this when a brother has returned from years of exile. Jeffrey Kennedy Tantivo, a writer of international renown, who has brought fame to our nation, has kept the fires of freedom burning in the hearts of our exiled compatriots during the darkest days of tyranny, is once more among us. He has returned to help rebuild our lives!"

The gathering burst into applause as I squirmed, my face roasting under the noon sun. I'm sure few, if any of them, had heard about my designation as "Poet of the Year" some years ago by the *World Poetry Review*—a San Diego, California-based magazine which

included me in its definitive roster of International Poets for \$250 and sent me a gold-plated plaque. But Jenny's word seemed unassailable in this realm. She could have told them that I'd dropped in from Pluto and they would have applauded.

The elder nun brought out a blue scarf and draped it over my shoulder. I greeted each of them as Jenny had. Jenny led us on a tour of the premises. We saw air-conditioned audio-visual rooms built out of abandoned former army barracks, where children watched video clips of the latest Columbia space shuttle missions between reruns of twenty-year-old Star Trek episodes; denimed youths teaching tykes solar painting using magnifying lenses on scrap wood out in bamboo forests; multi-colored classrooms with some twenty children each listening to animated discussions on Isaac Newton, Pablo Picasso, Confucius, mathematics, and the life and times of our mestizo national hero, Dr. Carlos Remedios who was killed by the English in 1866.

I saw the glow in Jenny's face and felt a stirring within me. She had long talked about setting up her dream school where the orphans and abandoned children of our island would be raised and educated away from the poverty and ignorance of the rural folk as well as the greed and corruption of the city. The prejudices and mystifications of the aged aristocracy, inane politicians, as well as our own Catholic school mentors were to be blotted out of our children's minds. I must admit to having scoffed at her grandiose schemes and to criticizing her occasionally for giving in to flights of fancy rather than concocting feasible projects. But now she'd done it, or at least planted the seeds.

I was told that there were some five hundred children aged three to nine at Liberation and everywhere were buildings being erected and refurbished. I noticed, though, that all the children were wearing blue neckerchieves while the teachers and elders donned either blue veils, for the women, and scarves, for the men. My mute query about this fashion was soon answered, however, when we chanced upon an ethics class in session.

The teacher appeared to be discussing something from Jenny's *blue book* and all the children had copies of it atop their desks. In another minute they were chanting quotations from the book in unison. It sounded like a hodgepodge of Og Mandino inspirationalisms and I turned at once to Jenny, who quickly raised a finger to her lips, gesturing for me to keep silent. I couldn't stand the glow on Jenny's face and must admit to a sense of resentment for the first

time since my return. And then she strode inside the room where the teacher raised two fingers and her wards started singing "You Light Up My Life!"—a pop ditty I remembered from my days running about San Ignacio's beer joints.

I thought the worst was over as the class soprano hit the high note and took her bow, but Jenny soon introduced me to the kids and the teacher was saying something like ". . . now, let us listen to some words from an outstanding individual." I wasn't quite sure who she was referring to and wanted to get out of the place more than anything else, but Jenny was never more glowing as she gestured for me to move up the platform.

I tried mouthing a few aphorisms to get it over with but my tongue was stone. I was confused and suddenly nauseated looking at the crowd of wide-eyed, smiling faces with nary a blemish on them or hint of malice. Nostalgia mixed oddly with distaste for the scene I'd just witnessed, and I could hear my gastric juices boil. "Tell them about the Enterprise Camp, Jeff," Jennifer said, "tell them how it was like, back then. Tell them about how you stood up for me against those bullies!"

I opened my mouth but my voice was lost and all at once my knees were weak and tears were streaming down my face as the room swirled around me and Jenny and the teacher were holding on to me. "It's okay, it's okay, Jeff," I heard Jenny say. I looked up to find myself sitting on the teacher's table with Jenny tapping my face gently and the children milling about, curious.

"Its alright, Jeff," Jenny said, "you're just tired, these past days have been rather hectic. You need some rest."

Our lunch of organically raised vegetables and lean chops did much to restore my equilibrium. I found out more about the place from Jenny and the nuns. There were some three hundred teaching and administrative personnel running Liberation and Jenny said many of them were volunteers. They were all devotees of Jennifer's *blue revolution* whose mishmash of New Age, free enterprise and neo-socialism left me dumbfounded most of the time. I wasn't sure whether the Liberation people had a clearer idea of Jennifer's S.O.A.R.—Sustainable, Organic, Accelerated, Rational—development philosophy; but they appeared quite enamored of her and fascinated by her every word. Still, seeing how so many bright and devoted people found faith with Jenny's vision warmed my heart and vanished whatever uneasiness the morning had produced.

We were about ready to leave when Jenny's attention was caught by a medium-sized cypress whose branches were trimmed to resemble her profile. It was a magnificent sight. We all walked towards the tree with everyone talking about how the gardener, Rosales, worked for days on end to finish his magnum opus. Jenny stood under the tree, awed by its sculpted beauty and asked to see Rosales.

He was a clean-cut fortyish mestizo whose unmarked pallor seemed to betray years of laboring inside poorly ventilated and ill-lighted cells rather than under scorching sunlight while being nipped by earthworms. He kept his head slightly bowed as Jenny shook his hand and glimpsed her from the corner of his eyes as though he suffered from some spinal defect. I was trying to figure out the tattoo he had on his right forearm when suddenly, the man raised his grass clipper and thrust it at Jenny. I instinctively shoved her away and kicked at the gardener, sending the glass clipper flying. There was screaming in the air as Jenny sprawled on the ground when a bodyguard drew his pistol at Rosales.

"No!" I screamed, "Don't shoot." But in a moment he had opened fire, pumping six bullets into the defenseless gardener. Rosales lay disfigured in a huge pool of blood.

"What the hell did you do that for?" I railed at the leather-jacketed bodyguard who shoved his .45 calibre an inch from my face. I froze.

"Gardo!" Jennifer shouted, struggling to her feet, visibly shaken. Gardo pocketed his weapon, still staring at me and went over to check the fresh corpse. I turned to Jenny, now being attended to by a couple of nuns as her other escorts cordoned off the rest of the crowd. Our eyes met and I realized then how little I knew of the place I'd come home to.