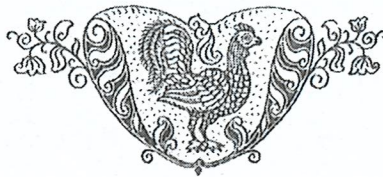




Cecilia Manguerra Brainard

Vigan



When I was ten, a year after my father died, my mother decided to return to Vigan, back to her grandmother who had raised her after her parents died. We left Manila for the sleepy town with crumbling stone houses, cobbled streets, watchtowers, and other vestiges of colonial days. Vigan boasted of having been founded in the sixteenth century by Juan Salcedo, the Spanish conquistador who conquered Manila. In its heyday, it was the port of entry of the Spanish galleons coming from China and headed for the Walled City of Intramuros. The ships sailed up the river and moored at the edge of Old Town, near the cathedral and Archbishop's Palace. The merchants' houses and warehouses clustered near the river. Here, traders exchanged items such as indigo, cotton, silk, pearls, tobacco, porcelain, and hemp, for silver

and gold.

Our family house sat in the middle of a row of ancient merchant houses, crumbling relics of limestone blocks and wood. Our house had massive wooden double doors fronting the street, which my great-grandmother said allowed carriages in and out of the family compound during Spanish times. The lower portion of our house had a shed with two pigs, four chickens, and one mean-spirited goat. A section in the back served as the servants' quarters, but since my great-grandmother had only one servant who slept upstairs, this section was unoccupied and was in total disarray. An elaborate staircase led to the second floor, which had the kitchen, dining room, living room or sala, the music room, library, a verandah, and bedrooms. There were four bedrooms, but huge, with high ceilings that allowed the air to circulate thus cutting the oppressive tropical heat. Except for the room occupied by my great-grandmother, the other bedrooms had several four-poster beds, lined up dormitory-style, and covered by yellowing crocheted bedspreads.

I'd only heard about this house from my mother. We had never visited it when Papa was alive. So even though I was unhappy about our move, I was impressed by the surprises the house offered. The walls of the rooms, for instance, had hand-painted murals: musical instruments were painted all around the music room, the dining room had a border of grapes on a vine with a hunting scene on the wall nearest the dining table, and the bedroom my mother and I shared had a picture of Cupid sitting on a cloud and shooting his arrow

at a young woman in a forest. Although the paintings were flaking and faded, my great-grandmother, whom my mother and I called Lola, was very proud of them.

What interested me most was the coffin at the foot of the stairs. An old sheet covered it and on top were all sorts of junk: newspapers, empty glass jars, and a huge vase with dusty fake flowers. I had mistaken the coffin for a table until Lola removed the sheet to reveal a bronze casket with gold decorations. She struck the metal with her fingernail and declared it was our family coffin. Apparently, old families in the area kept family coffins, which were used only for the wake. For the actual burial, the corpse was wrapped in an Ilocano woven blanket and buried directly in the family vault. The coffin was cleaned, then stored, in this case at the foot of the stairs, ready for its next temporary occupant.

The idea sent me into hysterics, considering my own father was buried in his own bronze casket—cost had been no object as far as his parents were concerned. He had been their only child.

I asked my great-grandmother what happened when two family members died, like my mother's parents for instance. She said they lay side by side.

"But what if more than two die?" I persisted.

"It's never happened," she said. By that time, she was clearly annoyed with me, and so I kept quiet. Lola had not liked my father and his family, and I suspected that dislike extended to me. People said I looked a lot like my father. He was tall and thin and had a lot of Chinese blood in him, unlike

my mother's family, which had a lot of Spanish blood.

Even though Lola spoke enthusiastically of the house (this remnant of our family's glorious past), I found it depressing. There were cobwebs everywhere, and at night, I dreaded going to the bathroom because I usually ran into the sticky strands. There was dust all over the old furniture. Ceiling plaster was peeling, the wooden floors creaked, and there was one section near the kitchen with wood rot. I could peer through the holes and look down at the animals. Sometimes I would spit on the goat that had butted me once.

Before we came, Lola's solitary companion was another old woman named Manang Gloria. I was never sure who took care of whom because half the time, my grandmother was the one in the kitchen cooking bitter ampalaya to strengthen Manang Gloria's blood. There were men workers who came during the day to take care of the animals and yard, but by late afternoon, they were gone.

By six in the evening, the only sounds you heard were the two old women rattling around in the kitchen, some lonely crickets outside, and my mother sighing by the window. Times like that, I would ache for my father and my old life.



My mother had never worked in her entire life. After college, she married Papa and moved into his house. In Vigan, she spent many nights crying, cursing my father for dying, and wondering how she could support the two of us. We had left Manila in the first place because she and my father's

parents did not get along. They disliked her from the start, accusing her of being pretentious. It was true that my mother carried with her an arrogance that old families from Vigan had, even if their ceilings had caved in and their floors rotted. My mother, likewise, scorned my father's family, calling them "new rich" and accusing them of having no culture. While my father was alive, he kept the two warring parties apart, but after he died, nothing stood between his parents and my mother. Like cats and dogs they went after each other; of course my mother was always on the losing end. After a year of strained silences, sharp words, doors slamming, and countless tears, my mother grew weary of the quarreling, took whatever she could, and we left.

It was Lola who suggested that she open an antique shop downstairs. "Manang Gloria knows some carpenters who can make replicas," Lola said. "Have them copy our antique furniture. Price them low. City people will buy them." She was right. Antique dealers traveled far to buy Mama's bentwood chairs and love seats, drop-leaf tables, armoires, chairs, and wooden statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus on the cross. The most popular item was the plantation chair, an enormous lounging chair made of mahogany and rattan, that harked back to days of sitting around the verandah, a leg resting on one arm of the chair and a drink in one's hand.



I hated school. I did not fit. I was used to the stimulating environment of my school in Manila. The school in Vigan was dull and provincial. I spent most of my time in Mama's antique

shop, doing my homework on the table, reading old books from the library, rearranging the display in the showroom, or bothering the workers who were carving the reproductions in the back. "Look at that," I would say, "antiques made-to-order."

I was there the afternoon Ramon arrived. He was an antique dealer from Manila. I overheard him ordering a lot of furniture and so I was not surprised when Mama invited him for dinner. Mama's clients usually lived in one of the four hotels in town, none of which served decent food. When Mama invited clients to dinner, Manang Gloria would come to life and prepare local recipes, crispy mouth-watering bagnet, steamed prawns, fried fish, and that bitter vegetable stew that local folk loved so much.

Ramon praised Manang Gloria's food, and she giggled like an idiot. She was really quite fresh, behaving more like a peer than our servant. When I tried to put her in her place, Lola always defended her, saying she was the fourth generation to work in our house.

Lola ate and left the dining table early. When she was gone, the conversation between Mama and Ramon livened up. It seemed they had mutual friends in Manila, and they discussed them one by one, Mama gushing over the good fortune of some of them, and clucking at the misfortune of others. Later (they must have forgotten I was there) Ramon talked about his wife. He had married his college sweetheart, a journalist who had gotten involved in the anti-Marcos movement. She had written many daring exposés of the

oppressive dictatorship. She even wrote articles about the "disappeareds" until one night she herself disappeared. Ramon spent years looking for her until his family convinced him she had been "salvaged" so not a single trace of her body could be found. Ramon had gone into seclusion until Cory Aquino came into power. He said that after the EDSA Revolution, he discovered he was still alive after all. "I found out," he said, "that I could laugh again."

My mother grew teary at Ramon's story, then told Ramon about Papa. She described how Papa started dropping things, that we thought he'd had a stroke, but that it turned out he had brain cancer. The doctors had said he had six months to live, and that they had been right almost to the date. She did not tell Ramon of her quarrel with my paternal grandparents. When he pressed her about why we left Manila, she said Lola needed her.

It was a conversation, nothing more, but I was disturbed by it. I hated how she shared a piece of our lives with him. I hated being reminded of Papa and our old life, and I hated how happy Mama seemed with Ramon.



Ramon would come around every two weeks. He would talk to Mama at great length—"business" they called it. He would dine with us; and sometimes he and Mama would ride off some place. I would interrogate Mama as to where exactly they went, and reluctantly she would confess they visited the old church and rectory in Santa Maria, or the beach of Vigan, or the Luna Museum in Ilocos Sur, or the open market to buy Ilocano blankets. She said this blithely, as if I should not care.