

Bambi L. Harper

Águeda

(FROM A NOVEL IN PROGRESS)



I was twelve by the time I left the *Hospicio de San Jose* on the *Isla de Convalecencia* in the Pasig River, having been taught whatever the nuns deemed necessary to be a good Christian woman and ready to help out in the house at least. Mother Marta, the Superior, called me to her office, announcing that I had learned everything the good nuns had to offer. Apparently, she had submitted an assessment to Señor Villaroel, my patron, in her spidery elegant handwriting with the conclusion that I had a head for figures if I put my mind to it. Reading this the master reasoned that my education could continue just as well under his supervision. Possessing the necessary books and having himself been educated in Oxford, he must have felt better equipped to teach me English, until such time as I was old enough to work in an office. I would be trained further to help 'Nyora Dolores, his sister, with household accounts and assist in keeping track of income derived from their various properties.

My best friend, Cobang, was also going home to *La Pampanga*, a province half a day by *casco* from the landing at the Bridge of Ayala. At fourteen, she was considered old enough to receive male callers with honorable intentions. It seemed

that her stepmother had even picked a potential husband for her, a young man who had studied at the *Ateneo Municipio* and intended to be a lawyer. The night before Cobang had not been able to sleep. She'd dreamed that she had walked through a forest to get home and it had begun to drizzle. For an instant, she was happy thinking she would see her Mama again. But when she arrived the servants stood silent around a closed coffin and the knowledge that her Mama was dead came back like the after taste of a bitter purgative. She awoke with a headache convinced that her dream was an ominous augury. I too slept little and poorly, listening to Cobang turning and tossing.

"Promise, promise, you'll never forget." Cobang's eyes brimmed over with unshed tears and her tender mouth trembled as she tried to hold back her fears. In the dark we held hands trying to reassure each other until the sky glowed with the dawn and we heard the stealthy breathing of the walls, the whisper of the nuns' habits as they made their way to the dark chapel to chant Matins. We embraced and kissed, searching each other's eyes for some sign of permanence we knew we would not find outside these walls. As for me, I could not imagine what awaited a girl without looks, without family or money.

"Make sure that you write to me at the address in Intramuros. We will be friends forever, Cobang. I will never forget you," I vowed.

On that hot March morning with my Lola waiting outside the parlor, I curtsied in front of each nun, bringing their right hand up to my forehead in the gesture of respect as they made the sign of the cross over me, glad to be out of their control but filled with a sadness I could not fathom. While I had not liked being cooped up behind those walls, it was also these very same walls that protected us from whatever lay beyond.

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MY NAME IS Agueda. When I was born in the servant's quarters of the Villaroel's in Intramuros, I was so small and wrinkled they did not think I would live so 'Nyora Isabel poured water on my forehead and pronounced, "I baptize you Agueda in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Who she named me after I never found out. It was probably the first female name that came to her mind. Shortly after that my mother, who was not my Lola's daughter but her son's wife, packed her clothes in a *tampipi* and was not seen again. Lola always maintained she died but I never quite believed her. Even if Lola never mentioned her, the fat maid, Rosa, would sometimes reminisce, saying she was not a whit like me, small and dark-haired but had long, light-colored hair. Only my eyes are like hers, large and slanting which was a good thing, she'd add, because otherwise I'd be too plain. Rosa said she lived across the river in a place called *San Jose de Trozo* where the houses were *giring-girings*, not grand like the Villaroel's.

“And don’t get it into your head to go there,” Rosa would warn me, “because there are many bad people, *tulisanes* and *bandidos* and *contrabandistas* and the smell is awful.”

I promised myself that when I was older I would go and look for her in case she thought I had died or had forgotten her. What did I know? I was only eight the summer before I was sent to the *Hospicio*.

Before I was born the Spanish soldiers took my father away and shot him in *Bagong Bayan* because he was a *Katipunero*. He worked as a *bodegero* with a man who was the head of this secret society and the Guardia Civil found all kinds of daggers and secret writings in his house.

When I asked Rosa if he was handsome, she laughed, shaking her head, “No, poor child. Except for your eyes and your white skin, you look like him,” meaning, I guess that he was short and scrawny.

“Besides, he was too serious like it cost him to smile and there was no fun to be had in this world. That’s why I never trusted those *Katipuneros*.” Whatever did my fair-haired mother see in him then?

I grew up secure in the old Villaroel mansion in Intramuros, clinging to my Lola’s cotton-stripped *saya* when I was younger, hiding in its folds, my eyes downcast if anyone spoke to me. Later when I grew bigger and could help with the cleaning I grew unafraid even of the ghosts Rosa assured me lurked in shadowy corners. My Lola told me Intramuros was so old it was full of spirits of those who once lived here and who were lonely. There was the jealous governor who stabbed his wife centuries ago, both of them buried beside the altar of the *Recoletos*, united in death if not in life. Or the young Mexican priest who strangled his superior and was hung in the courtyard of San Agustin church, cursing God before he died. Right in front of the house a soldier slew a young servant girl who had ran away because she did not return his love. The soldier must have been very ugly or very cruel because how much of a choice does a servant have? When the wind blows and the rain comes pummeling down, the old people say you can hear the voices of despair and loneliness in the wail of the wind. Sometimes at night when all the lights were turned off I’d shut my eyes and listen closely and it seemed I could hear those voices still crying after hundreds of years.

Rosa liked to say that there were other kinds of spirits that were never human. Spirits of trees that demanded you bow and ask permission before passing by or cutting their branches otherwise they’d put a curse on you and you’d grow sickly and die. Then there was the *kapre* that lived among the gnarled and tangled vines of the *Nonoc* in the backyard. Rosa never went there alone convinced the *kapre* would drag her up the tree and no one would ever see her again. There were also spirits inside the well who waited for you to lean over to pull you to a watery grave. But the spirits I liked best were the ghosts of those who once walked these streets in

their fine gowns and powdered wigs, who sailed great ships and battled pirates. Sometimes Rosa would run out of stories and push me away with an impatient shove, “*Bata ka*, learn how to read. There are many books that will tell you all the stories you want.”

The people in the house were the only family I had ever known. There was ‘Nyora Dolores who, as the clock in the hallway struck the quarter hour before six, would suddenly appear at the kitchen door, ramrod straight, all in black, heavy gold chain with the large scapular medal of Del Carmen hanging from her neck. No one ever heard her footsteps, silent as those of the ghosts in the house.

A heavy curtain of silence would descend as her eyes darted sharply to check that we were not just lazing about and she would pass a finger over surfaces to make sure these had been dusted. Señor’s breakfast tray would quickly be thrust at Rosa by my Lola while Iniang and Nando dashed to the pantry to gather the brooms and dust cloths. ‘Nyora Dolores put the fear of God in all of us, except for my Lola who said she really had a soft heart.

Behind her came ‘Nyora Isabel, who had fair hair curling around her head like a halo, singing “*Naci en Binondo de contrabando. Naci mas negra que un carajay. Siendo mi padre un carpintero. Siendo mi madre ‘Nyora Kikay*.” It was like sunbeams sparkling. ‘Nyora Dolores would give her a sharp glance, saying “Isabelita, *por Dios*. We’re going to mass and you’re singing that dreadful song unfit for children’s ears.”

But ‘Nyora Isabel would wink at us behind her sister’s back and laughingly put her arm around ‘Nyora Dolores, “*Vamos, vamos*, Lolita. Otherwise we’ll be late.”

‘Nyora Isabel liked laces and ribbons on her clothes and always smelled of perfumed water, but even if they weren’t going to mass, she never stayed long in the kitchen. She’d look around vaguely, pat my head, and remind me to water her plants before she’d leave and continue singing or go back to her book.

There was a piano in the sala set against a wall with a worn tapestry of fat women holding lyres. Bronze statues stood on marble columns on either side and in the evenings you could hear ‘Nyora Isabel playing, not gay tunes that reminded me of sunshine, but the slow, sad melodies of moonlight. Rosa told me ‘Nyora Isabel was still waiting for the young Spanish gentleman who promised to marry her but went off to Spain in ‘98 and never returned. Once in a while a letter would arrive that put a smile on her face the whole day. So we all hoped he would come back.

I often prayed to St. Joseph for her because he is the saint for finding a good husband. St. Anthony is for finding lost things and there’s St. Jude for really desperate situations. I would beg St. Anthony to find my mama for me but he never answered. There were also masses said for the souls in purgatory to shorten their suffering but you could pay the money to the priest even before you died so someone would say mass for you for all eternity.

My Lola told me that after the old Señora Angela died and went to heaven after vomiting black blood, her eldest daughter never removed her mourning clothes or the gold medal that had been her mother's. Sometimes I imagined 'Nyora Dolores in her black dress sleeping on her bed like a corpse inside a coffin, her arms crossed over her flat bosom, chiseled features sharp even in repose. I could not perceive her wearing anything else but black even to sleep.

I never knew what the Señor did aside from smoking his water pipe and reading in his room that was full of books in Latin and foreign languages. The room had a funny, sweetish smell mixed with the odor of mildew because the wooden shutters remained closed the whole day. Shelves were stacked on every wall from floor to ceiling with volumes without apparent order, dark, cracking, redolent of leather with titles in gold and gilt-edged pages. There were no newspapers in the house; 'Nyora Dolores said they had no need for the vulgarity of the present and Señor was only interested in history, make-believe stories, and poetry.

But *Manang* Azon, the coachman's wife, remembered the many parties when Señor worked in the *Ayuntamiento*. They toiled long hours, dicing ripe fruits for preserves: crunchy guavas, pitted odiferous jackfruits, sensuous mangoes, and piquant santol. These were served as ice cream toppings that *Mang* Emong churned out of a machine, spending hours turning the wooden handle. Endless varieties of sauces rolled out of the kitchen made of chicken broth, rich drippings, coriander leaves, eggplants, and baby tomatoes depending on the season. In the summer they served cold fish with *alioli*, the rich scent of olive oil filling the whole house. When the weather cooled, pigs were roasted on a spit, their skin brown and crackling. But that was long ago when he was young and the old Señora was still alive. Then after the government had the three priests shot, Señor stopped working and stayed home and the family closed the doors and windows of the house, stepping out only to walk to mass. This was in '72, more than thirty years ago. Many friends at that time sympathized with the native clergy and they were sent away because the government thought they were going to start a revolution. It made Señor very sad but the government could not show that he had done anything wrong except that he had been a classmate and friend of one of the martyred priests. A lot of money changed hands so that Señor would not have to return to Europe where he had studied at the university in Madrid. His mother believed everyone there was a Mason who was sure to go to hell.

My Lola, on the other hand, never spoke about her past. It was as though she had never known another existence except this house and its inhabitants. And yet she must have been young once and had a husband. 'Nyora Isabel once said that as long as she could remember my Lola was living in the house and taking care of all of them, even the old Señora when she was dying. Lola was a young girl when she came to work for the house, not more than ten years old.

Manang Azon, who was younger than my Lola, said that one day my Lola's belly grew bigger and Señora Angela gave her paregoric because she thought Lola's stomach was full of gas. Lola did not complain of nausea or swelling legs, nor did she tell anyone when, in her appointed time, she gave birth. She bore the pain quietly, going about her chores until she could stand it no longer and went to her room. Manang Azon heard this terrible cry in the middle of the afternoon and opening the door saw a bluish bundle between my Lola's legs. And that was how my father was born. I don't know that he ever knew who his own father was. When father was executed my Lola stood among the crowd, holding a cloth to her mouth to smother her moans and looked away when the guns fired. She had watched the soldiers take his body away and toss it into a cart like a discarded rug. My mother, who was pregnant with me, had stayed home.

Sometimes close to sunrise Lola would open the little wooden door almost hidden among the mossy stones to wait for Ah Huang, the Chinaman, vending his fish and vegetables. Even as she grumbled about his thievery, I sensed Lola loved her early morning chats with *el Chino* Huang. He sported a long pigtail reaching almost to his hip and wore long black loose trousers and a white cotton shirt closed with whorled loops. Across his shoulders he carried two baskets hanging from a pole he'd set on the ground and Lola would proceed to lift the flaps on the heads of the fish declaring the gills black and swearing the fish had been dead for at least a week. Huang would get very excited, waving his arms about and saying it wasn't true and that Lola was only trying to cheat him of his few centavos' profit.

"No, no Huang, it is you who charges too much for garbage. You will poison the Señor and the 'Nyoritas and then where will you be? As for your vegetables, these are so wilted you must have gotten them for free."

This exchange would go on for quite a while until finally Huang smiled and Lola smiled back each convinced of having made the better deal, as coins changed hands.

When I was a baby, according to Lola Ipa, the Americans came and took the place of the Spaniards who had been here for hundreds of years even if not a single Spanish king had ever set foot on the islands that belonged to them. Before that there had been a revolution and the Americans had sat in their great ships on the Bay and watched the Filipinos lay siege to the city. Soon there was no food to eat. People expected the rebels to storm the walls and murder all the white people. But one day they woke up and there was silence; the rebels disappeared and the Americans walked in. Everyone was so exhausted from the rout that they had no energy left for fear despite the rumor of brutality that had preceded the Americans. They are animals, some said; they rape pregnant women and shoot children down like dogs. They bayonet old people and pillage towns, burning entire barrios. However, none of that happened in Intramuros. It was much worse, the master

said. The new rulers seduced the people and took their souls and afterwards the people wanted nothing more than to be like them.

From the grilled window of our room in the servants' quarters I could, standing on tiptoe, see the paved courtyard in the shape of a horseshoe and the stone steps ascending to the kitchen. It was still dark when my Lola made her way up those steep, worn steps every morning to prepare the heavy chocolate the Señor liked to drink. I remember shivering in the cold of the dawn that bit through my thin cotton camisole as I tagged along after her.

The courtyard outside our rooms led to an arched doorway where Señor's three horses were stabled. There used to be three carriages and more horses according to my Lola when Señor was working, but now there was only that one carriage. In the early mornings you could hear the horses neighing and stomping while waiting for Mang Emong to bring their grass. Beyond their area were huge wooden doors with a transom that opened to a narrow cobbled street lit by kerosene lamps at night. Sagging houses of stone and wood like ours were built right onto the street with weeds sometimes growing out of their tiled red roofs. High ivied walls extended along the side of the houses enclosing gardens where only the tops of a *chico* or a santol tree peeped out. With their closed *capiz* shutters it was as though they were all hiding secrets that no one remembered.

Before I was sent away to the orphanage, aside from my Lola and me in the servants' quarters, there were Mang Emong, the coachman, his wife Manang Azon and their three children in the room beside us. My very best friend as I was growing up was Nando, Mang Emong's eldest son, who is three years older than I. There was nothing about me Nando didn't know since he was there from the beginning. In a third room were the servant girls, Rosa and Iniang, who were Mang Emong's nieces. Rosa was fat and laughed a lot and liked to make up stories but her sister, Iniang, was thin and wiry with a mouth that drooped. Rosa had long straight black hair down to her knees that she washed once a week with *gugo*. I would massage the warm oil from a young coconut and ran a comb with wooden teeth through it. Her hair was soft and shiny like silk and she was very proud of it. Iniang said that Rosa took inordinate pride in her hair which was a temptation of the devil and all that primping distracted her from her work, but I didn't think so. Rosa claimed men like women with long hair and she meant to get herself a husband to improve her lot.

My Lola Ipa's lips and gums were crimson from the *bonga* she was forever chewing as she spat orange colored saliva from the side of her mouth. It was my job to mince the bonga nut for her and wrap it in the leaf of the *buyo* with a piece of *apog*. If I was very, very good she'd let me chew on it too but the taste was bitter and 'Nyora Isabel said it was a filthy habit and no handsome man would ever look at me if I had red gums.

During the day there was little time for rest. I'd help Lola with her cooking, shelling beans or picking stones from the rice in a *bilao*. The kitchen was my Lola's kingdom with a stove made up of a stone platform that had four *tunkod* with clay pots resting on them. When it was time to cook dried branches of wood were lighted under them. It was always full of ash and had to be cleaned often. Resting on containers of water for protection against ants and cockroaches and strange bugs were two wooden food cabinets in a corner of that kitchen.

In the mornings, I would tag behind Rosa and Iniang helping them hung the wash to dry in the *azotea* that had an *aljibe* for collecting rainwater. *Begonias* with reddish furry leaves filled glazed Chinese porcelain pots resting on the stone railings of the *azotea* where in a corner beside the stairs was a strange bush with shiny leaves in a big brown jar that was supposed to be an orange tree from Hong Kong that had never bloomed or given any fruit.

From the kitchen door, I could peep into the dining room at a forlorn massive table that could seat more than a dozen guests but looked melancholy with only the Señor and his sisters eating their simple meals of native vegetables and boiled fish, no longer the rich and fragrant cuisine of the past. The living room beyond had wooden carved arches and dark gleaming floors crowded with heavy furniture full of curlicues that were a chore to clean because the dust got into the little curves. Nando was in charge of keeping the floors shiny with a coconut husk that he'd step on and slide back and forth, back and forth every day while the maids swept after him. It was a shadowy room where the windows were opened only in the early morning when we cleaned, then closed again. Then you noticed the faded burgundy colored drapes with gold tassels that hung over the bedroom doors. The rest of the day weak sunlight filtered through the wooden *persianas* and *capiz* windows keeping the room in perpetual twilight. On mildewed walls hung paintings grown dark with age in gilded frames of grave faced men and women who looked as though they never had much fun.

The entire past of the Villaroels was in that room. The family traced its ancestry in the country to Don Fermin, a captain who made his fortune on the galleon ships that plied the route to Acapulco every year bringing the silk and porcelain and ivory and spices of the Orient. At the beginning of the century when the trade ended, the captain married a Chinese mestiza, Doña Elena, whose parents wanted to improve their social standing, tempting him with the many commercial properties they owned in Binondo, the Chinese district. Although he could have retired and lived off the rents, Don Fermin invested in opium and converted the inherited properties into dens through his wife's Chinese connections. Of their three sons, only one lived, the other two fell victims to the curse of money made at the expense of other people's sufferings. The more the victims suffered from their addiction, the wealthier the Captain grew or so the people whispered.

One of the portraits must have been of the old Captain himself, Don Fermin, with fleshy jowls and a huge moustache that curled at the ends. Dark bushy eyebrows arched over small black eyes and his thin hooked nose with flared nostrils and a half smile on his lips reminded me of a pirate sentencing a sailor to walk the plank. Beside him was a portrait not of the *mestiza Sangley* he married but a buxom foreign-looking woman sitting on a high-backed chair with a royal blue curtain draped behind it, her dark red hair in ringlets and her pudgy fingers holding a music score. No one seemed to know who she was any longer but Rosa said Manang Azon overheard some visitors say that she was an opera singer that came with an Italian troupe and was Don Fermin's true love. My Lola snorted, shaking her head, muttering that the poor woman was Don Fermin's mother. Which is true? Colorful tales or dull stories with no mystery to them?

In later years, Don Fermin decided to invest in an *hacienda* in the Bicol region beneath the shadow of the volcano Mayon, a fertile land where a river meandered through the trees. They harvested coconuts and dried the husks which they sold to American and British companies for foreign markets. The farm grew everything they needed; it had vegetables, chickens, pigs, and cows. Once a week one of the *kasama*, peons who worked the land, would bring whatever provisions the family required.

Beside the plantation of the Villaroels was the hacienda of a widowed Spaniard whose only daughter, Doña Angela, wanted to enter the convent. Her life centered on the authoritarian figures of the parish priest and her father who at best was a benevolent tyrant. Not having much of a choice, the sainted woman acceded to the parish priest's advice, her father's dictates, and Don Fermin's importuning.

On a round table beside the sofa was a large silver-framed photograph of tall and bony Doña Angela, with her hair pulled up in a bun, staring straight at the camera, her mouth set in a firm line, as though saying: "you don't fool me at all." She looked very much like 'Nyora Dolores, stern and unyielding. Beside her picture was another photograph of a slim young woman reclining on a divan in a white gown, a fan of ostrich feathers in her hand, smiling dreamily at the camera. This one looked more like 'Nyora Isabel. The dedication was faded but the name Concha was legible. It was said she was Doña Angela's sister who played with the spirit of the glass and the spirit fell in love with her and wouldn't leave her alone. In despair she killed herself by drinking rat poison. That was one of Rosa's favorite stories but sometimes she'd alter the tale and Concha became a young girl whose young man married another. Despondent, she entered the convent of the Poor Clares, cloistered nuns who spend their entire life praying and saw no one from the outside world. Rosa's stories were not always consistent but they were entertaining.

My Lola Ipa finally said that Rosa had filled my head with romantic nonsense and maybe Señor was right and I should be sent to school at the *Hospicio* to

straighten out my mind. Often enough as I grew older, I'd hear Señor tell my Lola she had to send me to the nuns in the *Hospicio* to study or else I'd grow up to be a maid like her and never amount to anything.

"Is that so bad?" she'd retort, "Where would you be if I weren't here to cook and help your sisters?" Lola was the only one who talked back to Señor because she had been with the family so long

But Señor didn't give up. "Times are changing, Felipa. Who knows what these Americans will bring? If the girl learns to read and write and speak in English she will be able to find work easily."

Farther down our street, Cabildo, next to the cathedral was the square called the *Plaza de Armas*. When the sun was barely risen over the horizon in the bay you could hear the bugle call and see the Gringos march like wooden soldiers, their sergeant going, "Hip, one, two, three. About face!" in a very stern voice. The soldiers did not look like us at all. Nando and I would sometimes see them when we'd buy sugar cane strips from the Chinese vendor squatting in the shade of the acacia in the plaza across the Cathedral. They were brawny and tall; some had hair the color of unhusked *palay* and pale eyes like a cat's. There was even one with hair the color of *Nyora Isabel's* red roses and pale spots all over his face and arms. Once, a soldier with a pockmarked face gave Nando and I brightly colored lollipops, hard as rock that I licked for what seemed like hours without reducing its size. The soldier smelled of sweat and clothes that had not dried properly and neither Nando nor I could understand a word he said. But it was not often that we ventured that far from the house.

In the afternoons of my childhood, when the sun was suffocatingly hot everything shut down and a deathly silence descended. It was as if the whole world had gone to sleep like that kingdom in the fairy tale. Occasionally you'd hear the clip-clop of horses' hoofs or the wild laughter of the mad beggar woman or the howling of a dog. After my Lola, Rosa, and Iniang were done with their darning or ironing we'd all have our siesta and even the horses ceased their snorting. But sometimes when everyone had dozed off, Nando and I would escape to roam the somnolent streets of Intramuros when it was so silent you felt a magic spell hovered over the city. We'd climb up crumbling stone battlements that enclosed us like a womb encircling the Fort and the convents and churches of the Friar orders and the old houses. There was once a moat that ringed the walls to keep enemies away but the Gringos said it did nothing but breed mosquitoes that made people sick. The soldiers drained the water and they found cannon balls and rusty Spanish swords at the bottom. Now there's nothing but mud.

Nando and I would run around the terraces and battlements pretending to duel with tree branches for swords. Nando was always the brave revolutionary

fighting the evil Spaniards and since I was younger, I was inevitably cast as a bad Guardia Civil who always lost.

"I'm tired of this game," I'd end up whining. "Why do I always have to be the loser?"

"Cause you're a girl, that's why and besides, I'm older," Nando would state with a superior air. "Whoever heard of a hero in a camisole?"

"Well, I don't want to play this stupid game anymore," I'd declare eventually after losing for the nth time, throwing away my make-believe sword.

"You're a rotten sport like all girls."

"I am not so," I'd stomp my feet in frustration, wishing I were at least as old as Nando so I could beat him up. "You're just a bully."

With that I'd start to sniff which even at the age of seven I knew had an unusual effect on Nando either because he thought my Lola would smack him for making me cry or because he really couldn't stand girls crying.

"Stop your babbling. Look at that snout on your face," he'd say, abashed.

Confident I'd won the fray I'd change the subject. "Let's peep into people's houses and you can tell me stories instead," I'd say.

This was another favorite game of mine, looking at the old houses, some with patched up windows, others with roofs askew. I would wonder what fine ladies had once lived in them and how they must have danced in the great halls in their shiny satin gowns gleaming with diamonds around their necks.

"See that house across from us that's all boarded up? They called that 'The Fortress' and old Don Jaimito used to live there all by himself with his nurses. Señor said it got its name because its thick doors and walls had resisted the attacks of the English soldiers during the British Occupation, survived earthquakes and floods and typhoons. It's even listed in the *Guía de Forasteros* as the oldest house in the city. But most of the rooms were unused except for the *entresuelo* where Don Jaimito lived with his two nurses.

"The house used to be the grandest in the city and there were fancy parties on New Year's Eve and a gathering of all the important people after the yearly procession of *La Naval* in October. It was so grand that there was an orchestra in the courtyard to greet the guests and another in the ballroom just for the dancing."

I glanced at the imposing façade of carved stone and the crumbling great entrance that revealed the ravages of time and neglect and felt a strange sadness.

"Don Jaimito was what people call slow in the head. It was said he was born on the night of the full moon and the fairies took a liking to him weaving a spell so that he would never grow up."

I may not have understood everything Nando said but I didn't mind. I liked stories.

"How'd you know all these, Nando?"

"You want a story or you want to question me?"

"No, no. I was just thinking it's too bad I never saw him."

"Well, it was before your time. Anyway, the fairies also gave Don Jaimito a heart of gold and he always kept candy in the pockets of his baggy suits that hang on him as though there was no one inside. Whenever he saw the children at mass—for this was the only time it seemed he would leave the house—he would call to us in his loud honking voice that sounded like a goose calling and stretch out his hand with a piece of candy in it. Most of the other children were frightened and wouldn't even look his way but I would always take some because I used to go with Señor to visit him."

"Oh. Señor knew him?"

"Sure he did. The Villaroels know all the other rich people. The Señor used to go over there and visit once a week. They would sit in the courtyard that had a fountain with gold fish only the water was murky because no one cleaned it anymore. Señor sat in this large wicker chair fanning himself while Don Jaimito tossed fistfuls of rice at the hens pecking about with neither man saying a word. Then Señor would bring out a book and read aloud whatever he thought interesting it didn't seem to matter. I don't think Don Jaimito understood anyway.

"Don Jaimito had two dozen beautiful tin soldiers enameled in blue and red with gold epaulets and silver swords that he arranged in opposite rows according to color on the ground. Often when we arrived he would be sitting on a stool holding a soldier in blue, for that was his favorite color and he would go, "Pow! Pow! Pow!" pointing at his nurse who acted as the general for the other army in red. As soon as he saw us he would stand and order his attendant in garbled words to put his toys away. He seemed to know that Señor was there to read him a story.

"When it was over he would gurgle and honk and point and soon one of the nurses would appear with some lemonade and cookies that he would distribute to each of us. In all the time we visited him before his death, we never saw a single member of his family or any other friend visit him."

"Why didn't any of them stay with him, Nando? I'd stay with you even if you were an idiot."

Nando pushed me away roughly. "You don't belong to a great family. That's the way they are. They were ashamed of him, I guess. Besides he didn't know how to behave as befits an heir to a great fortune. When the family moved to their new house somewhere near the new governor's palace a young servant girl was left

behind to tend to the cleaning, but Don Jaimito began to imagine that she was an enchanted princess disguised as a maid. He would ply her with candies and pull at her arm so she would join in the games of tag and since he had no sense of day and night, this could be at midnight. All the lights would suddenly go on and everyone nearby could hear honking sounds of delight. It was becoming quite a scandal and it was only a question of time before the family was told something out of the ordinary was going on.

“Old ballroom dresses of taffeta and lace were rescued from armoires and pinned on her to fit and at merienda time there was this strange tableau in the courtyard with Don Jaimito wearing an admiral’s hat that must have belonged to some ancestor long dead and a young servant girl in her mistress’s finery slurping tea. He would chase her around the fountain until she allowed him to catch her and they would tumble to the ground in a flurry of lace petticoats and satin skirts.

“One summer morning so hot that you sweated while sitting still, we saw this black carriage drive up and a somber man with a goatee flecked with grey, slim as a bamboo in a heavy dark suit, wiping his forehead constantly with a white handkerchief entered the house. He reappeared moments later, servant girl in tow with all her belongings in a knapsack and drove off in his imposing carriage. We were all astounded at hearing the howls that bellowed from the house. This went on for hours until finally someone called the parish priest to exorcise his demons.”

“Why would there be any demons?”

“I guess they thought he was possessed but Señor said, ‘Pobre Jaimito, he was only lonely and meant no harm.’ Even Rosa said he died of a broken heart.”

“What happened to the servant girl?” It seemed to me that she too must have been sad.

“That’s not important. Servants don’t count. You should have seen the flowers at his funeral. There were so many wreaths the florists must have run out of supply. All the servants in the neighborhood got to see him the following morning and some came from other streets out of curiosity. We all went and I looked at him in this great big bronze coffin and there he was like a mannequin, all gray and silent. Only his nails were purplish-red and it looked like someone had colored his lips so he wouldn’t look so dead.

“Nyora Dolores and Nyora Isabel opened the camphor chests looking for black lace *mantillas* and black lace fans and they looked like grand ladies that day. Señor even had this funny top hat on and a coat with a tail.”

“Isn’t that what the men wear at weddings?”

“Well, they wear the same things at weddings and at funerals. You never know with the rich.”

"Maybe it's easier to be poor since you won't have to think about what to wear."

"Don't be silly. There's nothing worse than being poor," Nando said, very seriously. "And everyone gave their condolences to this lady with a hooked nose like Don Jaimito only she had yellow hair piled on top of her head and she talked funny through her nose. As we were leaving, she turned to the man beside her who had a protruding stomach and a pencil-slim moustache and no hair on his shiny head and said, 'I didn't think Jaimito had so many admirers.' But he just laughed and lit his cigar like the one that I once tried of Señor's and answered, 'I have to hand it to your Tío Jaime. He was still getting his jollies.'"

"So what happened then?"

"Nothing. I guess they buried him in the family crypt at *Cementerio del Norte* and the house has been closed ever since."

"That wasn't a nice story, Nando. Nothing happened."

"Would you prefer the one about Doña Ines, the governor's wife? And over here in these ruins lived her lover. This is where the governor pierced his heart with a sword," intoned Nando solemnly, jabbing at the air with his branch.

"What's a lover, Nando?"

"You don't know anything," Nando retorted in disgust.

Other times we would creep around the church of San Agustin and mess with the lock on a little wooden door by old Padre Blanco's orchard until it opened with a squeak of its rusty hinges. We'd look around and run off again. But on one particular afternoon, Nando was at his imaginative best and we crept farther into the stone corridors alongside an inner courtyard.

"All the evil friars are asleep," Nando whispered, "for they've drunk the blood of the maidens who they keep prisoners in their tower rooms and are sated. If we're not careful they'll catch us and no one will ever see you again."

A dreadful fear took hold of me and I yelped, "I want to go home," suddenly anxious for the warmth of my Lola's arms. The fat priests with protruding stomachs under their white cassocks and wispy hair barely covering their bald heads were not as frightening as Padre Medina with his full black beard and bushy eyebrows under which a pair of piercing black eyes glared at you. He'd say the five o'clock mass for the servants and when he climbed the pulpit to deliver his sermon you could feel everyone straighten their backs and hang their heads in shame.

"God will reward the humble and honest. But you who steal from your *amo*, who do not confess your sins, and do not return what is not yours will be struck down by God's judgment," he'd thunder with a piercing stare that penetrated to the depths of your being where all secret thoughts are hidden.

“I want to go home, please,” I pleaded, tugging at Nando’s arm, imagining this black presence holding a whip ready to strike me.

“Hush,” warned Nando, for striding towards us was none other than the demon of my worst nightmares, Padre Medina. I bolted for the little door as fast as my thin legs would carry me. That evening Nando got a tongue lashing from Mang Emong after Padre Medina dragged him home by the ear. Since I was so scrawny my Lola seldom spanked me but this time she pinched me hard enough on the inside of my arm to bring tears to my eyes, pursing her lips and muttering about bad blood. And that was how I got to the *Hospicio* that year after *Nyora* Isabel’s wedding.