WHEN ONE IS THE FOURTH OF TEN

What matters in life is not what happens to you but
what you remember and how you remember it.
Gabriel Garcia Marquez

It was an unusual day for an eight year old for whom nothing out of the ordinary happens unless it happens to the adults in her life and she too is touched. My father came home jubilant one day, bearing a huge box which he laid on the dining table and proceeded to open as one would a precious gift. He took out fistful after fistful of finely shredded paper, and as they fell like nests on the oil cloth with the bird design covering the table, fear that the birds would come alive and lay eggs on the paper nests blunted my excitement. I have an irrational fear of all feathered animals, a phobia my mother forgot or dismissed as nonsense when she chose the bird design over dozens of other oil cloths standing in bolts in Villalobos. The fear subsided as my excitement mounted again. One by one, with great care, my father extracted the contents which he warned us was fragile. It was fragile indeed, a white porcelain breakfast set, gleaming under the overhead lamp, complete with breakfast plates, saucers, coffee cups with dainty handles, a large coffee pot, creamer and sugar bowls, all with a purple orchid design and a fine silver trim tracing the rim of each piece. I heard my father say bone china but I did not understand what he meant. The array before me looked terribly expensive. I feared my father blew his half-month's pay on it and there was nothing left for groceries and this little girl would go hungry.

But no, the breakfast set came free, he said, bringing down my mother's eyebrows which had risen to her hairline and banishing my vision of empty cupboards. He won it

as a prize for being the nth – I do not now remember – customer at Soriente-Santos on old Escolta. He had gone to Soriente-Santos to buy a belt or was it a wallet. As soon as he came in, the store's sales people buzzed around him like bees out to sting. How were they to know that my father reacted viscerally to overly-solicitous sales persons? (I do too. I stop dead in their tracks sales persons hovering at my elbow whose rote sales pitch is "Ma'am *me sizes po yan*." Of course they should have sizes available. Or, "Ma'am *me ibang kulay po niyan*." But I precisely like this color!) When the sales persons persisted in pushing my father to a purchase, not one to hide irritation, he imperiously said "*Antay ka muna*," a retort which in our adulthood my siblings and I would mimic at joke time in family reunions. And so my father dawdled. When he finally bought his belt, or was it wallet, cheers erupted in the store. He was the nth customer on the store's nth anniversary. And that was how my father brought home a free porcelain breakfast service for ten that became a prized possession in our home, to be dusted off and used only on noche buena and media noche and when important guests came visiting. I was assigned to keeping the set polished and properly displayed in the china cabinet and each time I did this was a moment of trepidation. I would stand on a chair to reach the upper shelves and with hands and legs tremulous, pray I wouldn't fall and no piece would drop and break.

Over the years, as the family multiplied to ten children, as the porcelain set got older and lost some of its sheen with more frequent use, it had to share its special place with new acquisitions for a growing family going up in the world. Since we were an even dozen including my parents at a time when families took their meals together and absence was venal and punishment corporal, we had to supplement the service for ten with not-

quite replicas to accommodate all. This created an issue. The two who in the shuffle got the not-quite replicas (usually, I was one of the two) felt themselves less favoured (and found an excuse to skip their vegetables.) Over the years, as each child became an adult each in his own pace, as siblings left the family home one by one, built their own lives and bought their own china, pieces of the breakfast set chipped, broke or went missing but I had ceased to be accountable. When my turn to leave came, only the big coffeepot was left the rest having turned to discarded shards. I lost track of what happened to this last of the porcelain set after my mother passed away at the young age of fifty-eight and only my father who was ten years her senior, and the two youngest brothers, lost and orphaned of a mother who called all the shots were left in the house called Santiago. I always regretted not having appropriated this last piece for myself to hold memories of the tempests in the coffeepot when we were ten children plus two parents.

II

In the span of eighteen years during which we moved house thrice, through my father's changing hobbies from reading to breeding hundreds of pigeons whose squabs I could not bring myself to eat, to tending a garden bordered by San Francisco shrubs, to nurturing a grape vine which rewarded his efforts with two clusters of sour grapes, and as Makati commenced its transformation to sleek suburbia, the family grew to ten children, considered at the time before family planning, to be a normal size. My mother was hardly out of maternity clothes when oh, oh she would have to slip them on again. There was always a baby bawling or gurgling in the crib. There were always bottles to be boiled and Birdseye diapers flapping in the wind. We were step-ladder children, one or two years apart. I was the fourth child, the three eldest were two girls then a boy.

Six brothers would follow after me in quick succession. The fourth child among ten, the third and youngest girl followed by six rambunctious brothers. That is not a rung in the step-ladder devoutly to be coveted. It is not a position of privilege or favour. One had to endure endless gofer-ing, to fight to get noticed, to get a fair share and a fair shake, and take the consequences for standing for one's self. The last I learned to do, over the years, remarkably well.

III

My earliest fear was not of ghosts and dark places but of birds, chickens and all feathered animals. Throw in the feather duster, too. I know the root of this fear which years later I would learn to call by name – ornithophobia. It started with watching my mother kill a chicken. Chicken adobo, tinola or curry on the dining table invariably started with a violent act which transpired in the backyard witnessed by the spirit of the ancient mango tree, the gay papaya trees which only flowered but never fruited, a profusion of *tanglad* grass, garlic vines with lavender flowers – and me, the gofer. My view to a kill was from atop a stool far across from my mother. I would see her go through the premeditated act in stages. Calmly and cooly she would check her instruments. The lethal weapon, her sharpest kitchen knife. A saucer with a handful of rice. A wastebasket. Rock salt. A kettle of boiling water. Then she would take the chicken whose time has come from death row, its feet bound together by *lastico* or twine. She would pull both wings backwards, and step on them to prevent any attempt to escape should the bird chicken out. Then she would bend the chicken's neck backwards, give it three pats with the back of the knife, pull some feathers out to expose skin, then slit its throat catching the dripping blood in the saucer with the handful of rice. Once the death throes quiet down

and the chicken is still, it would be dropped in the kettle of boiling water so it would be easier to pluck it bald of its feathers.

Quite gruesome, but I had the safety of distance and I could mitigate the crime by placing my hand over my eyes, and watching it through the gap between my index and forefinger. Until one day a recalcitrant chicken decided to stage one last hurrah. After its neck was slit, the chicken struggled so violently the twine tying its legs came loose and the wings slipped from under my mother's slippers. It ran, dripping blood, it ran with its head still hanging by unsevered skin, it ran blindly but straight – towards me. I ran, stumbled, bruised a knee, picked myself up and ran again screaming. The chicken soon fell to the ground, spasmed and died. I did not touch the tinola at lunch.

Perhaps my mother was teaching me to face my fears for even after this trauma, she continued to ask me to buy live chicken at the wet market. Mine was not to reason why, mine was just to do and die, so I would. But on my own terms. I would bring a deep *bayong,* ask my mother's *suki* to choose the chicken for me, tie its legs securely and bury it at the bottom of the *bayong*. Then I would weigh it down with green papaya, sayote, potatoes and carrots, camouflage it with leafy greens and pray that it would survive the suffocation and arrive home alive otherwise we would both be dead meat. I never outgrew the fear. Today I hide behind the sliding doors when *mayas* flit in and out of the lanai where they have built nests in the ficus trees. I cover my eyes and cringe when birds alight on churchyard cobbled stones. To this day, I cannot touch a slimy dressed chicken, much more dismember it. I cannot touch the chicken's neck fresh or fried. For a long time I couldn't eat a drumstick.

IV

The house where I grew up till I was eight had the typical balcony enclosed by *barandillas* with the stairs at the center going down to the yard. It was shaded by a canopy of bougainvillea arching up to the roof and fecund year-round with crimson flowers. Its flooring was of mahogany planks always polished to sheen. If you made a mad dash to escape an errand, you could slide to a free fall down the stairs to packed earth. There, on the polished floor, was where we children, only seven at the time, would choose the corner on which to lie and observe the mandatory one-hour afternoon siesta. Being the most compliant, I would make the first move so I could claim my corner of choice, the open cubicle at the left side of the stairwell where the bougainvillea branches dipped so low I could reach out and touch the blossoms and delicate tendrils of fresh new leaves. We would all lie down, close our eyes and pretend to sleep. I would turn my back to everyone and play with the light and shadow which mottled my arms as sunlight filtered through gaps in the dense curtain of bougainvillea. I would daydream, imagining myself as different characters in stories of my own making.

Then I would hear my sisters giggle, or I would feel a light kick from my eldest brother and this was when trouble began. My eldest brother and I were each other's nemesis, always fighting over something or nothing like a cat and dog. That was exactly what we were called, *aso't pusa.* My mother would find out we were not asleep, threaten us with a whack from her slipper or a wooden hanger - my brother and I had a few hangers broken over our buttocks - or worse - deny us a share of the after siesta snack. Sometimes the home cooked merienda was worth the hour of feigned sleep. Sometimes, we would sneak across the street to Aling Abe and watch her very slowly, painstakingly

slice, as this was her trademark, all the ingredients that would go into bowls of mami or plates of pancit guisado. There was a time my eldest brother, feeling sorry for me after we both got the hanger treatment, fashioned for me a ring made from thin aluminium wire with a big shard from a broken blue bottle mounted on it like sapphire. I wore this ring proudly and used it to tap against Aling Abe's counter while we waited for her slow food. My brother would yank my hand away from the counter muttering *nakakahiya.* These days, I see rings like this, surely more finely crafted, in costume jewelry stores selling faddish large and chunky faux jewelry.

V

I used to say I majored in marketing for six years under the tutelage of my mother. Our parents' first house was in the poblacion of Makati. (We later moved to our new house within the burgeoning new Makati, across the Hospital Espanol de Santiago where my father worked. Several years later, the American School which later became the International School or IS, would be built right across our house. Old Makati had a small market so major marketing was done at Quinta market in Quiapo, where everything was available, from meats and produce to china and glassware to fabrics and flowers and herbs for dubious intent. I was my mother's marketing assistant. I carried the mandatory bayong, preferable to a basket as it was deep and narrow, holding more while occupying less space. We would take the bus. Traffic was light day or night. The ride took only half an hour. I knew the bus ride was coming to an end once we went down the bridge and turned right on Echague and were greeted by the Feati University sign which admonished "Look up young, man. Look up." Looking up, I would see nothing but criss-crossing electric wires, and think, whatever it was, it was only for young men to see.

Depending on what time we hit Quiapo, we would take a snack before or after doing our marketing. There was a long corridor at the *delentera* of Quiapo market which was lined with food stalls There were a dozen of these food stalls, nothing more than meter-long, 2-layer glass shelves where food was displayed. These shelves rested on wooden tables, pushed back to allow a foot and a half wide eating space for customers. Seats were wooden benches polished to a sheen by the buttocks of a succession of customers. The restaurant barkers, women all, engaged in a friendly game of tug o' war pulling customers by the arm (*dito na kayo, dito na kayo*…) to their respective food stalls. The tug o' war was terrifying to a little girl but my mother was unperturbed and like a horse with blinders, went straight to her s*uki* Aling Ligaya whose food stall was the star of Quiapo market.

I contained my excitement like a coiled spring every time we were at Aling Ligaya's, afraid my mother might change her mind at the last minute and go straight to marketing. I salivated at the sight of arroz caldo goto or chicken paired with tokwa't baboy, pancit palabok or pancit luglog, sotanghon, dinuguan at puto, lumpiang sariwa, lumpiang frito and ukoy .And the desserts – golden yellow saba banana in thick syrup served with milk over crushed ice, sago gulaman and of course halo-halo. Rich, creamy halo-halo with leche flan, ube jaleya, macapuno, beans, garbanzos, kaong, langka and red mongo tenderly cooked in syrup forming a pattern of vivid colors in the glass. Regular halo-halo meant all these ingredients topped with crushed ice and a generous dollop of evaporated milk from cans punched with two big holes. Special halo-halo came in a taller glass to make room for the huge scoop of ice cream to top all the ingredients, the coup de grace to a dessert that made a young girl's heart skip several beats.

Times when my father took the family downtown, we piled into his service Willys station wagon with Isabelo, the driver, regaling us with jokes and stories from Makati to Quiapo. We would eat, not in the market, but at Ambos Mundos or at Panciteria Moderna near Escolta. At Ambos Mundos, our usual was sinigang na hipon paired with chicken and pork adobo. If we felt like it, we could also order pork asado with thin slices of crunchy pickled papaya. Unlike my mother, my father was a soft touch and we could order anything we wanted. At Moderna, our usual was nido soup, lumpiang shanghai fried to crisp perfection, dipped in reddish sweet and sour sauce, pancit canton, fried rice and my father's favorite hototay which none of us siblings ate and whose name we made fun of. While waiting, we would prepare the dip of soy sauce and calamansi in mini saucers. I thought then that Ambos Mundos and Moderna were the height of culinary heaven.

Without fail, our last stop was at Philippine Ham Store and at Progressive Grocery on Echague where we bought piping hot hopiang mongo and peanuts, lohua and giant cookies with sesame feeds whose name escapes me now. If our trip coincided with payday, there would be a kilo or two of real Chinese ham sliced from a whole leg and some delicious apples. On the way home, I could hardly wait for the hot pan de sal lathered thick with Brun butter topped with a generous slice of Chinese ham. Its delicious smell while being fried would waft in the air from the kitchen, though the sala to the bougainvillea-shaded balcony where we were pretending to be asleep to comply with the mandatory siesta. It wasn't so bad feigning sleep for an hour after a joy-filled shopping sojourn through the streets of Quiapo redolent with scents that make remembering a visual feast and gustatory pleasure.

VI

I experienced Escolta with my mother and sisters. I knew Escolta was the hub of premium stores, which were small shops really, only as big as a Seven Eleven today. I was a disinterested bystander while my mother and two elder sisters did all the shopping. I only looked forward to ice cream, or perhaps lunch at the end of the shopping trip unmindful of the plethora of merchandise that had my sisters oohing and chirping. But if I saw my sisters buying something really beautiful, I would dream of the day I would be big enough to wear the hand-me-down. I remember the time my mother bought for sister number two a set of white blouse with orange and green flower and leaf appliques at the neckline repeated at the slits of the black toreador pants. I gasped at how lovely it was and thought only someone as beautiful as my sister deserved to wear it and I never would. I never did get to wear it. It was never handed down. My sister loved it so much she wore it until the fabric thinned and tore at seat and the appliques frayed and faded.

I remember Berg and Assandas which sold dry goods – clothes, intimate wear, and what were called notions. It was at Berg where my mother bought her Ponds Cold Cream which she used to lather her face, arms and legs, where she bought her customary attire, finely hand- embroidered blouses and electric pleated skirts in subdued colors. And her silk stockings which she would expertly put on, rolling the stockings down to the ankles, slipping her feet in, then unrolling them up to her thighs, making sure the seams were perfectly straight along the back of her slim legs, then hitching them in place with a garter belt. As she bore more sons one after another, she had less and less time for herself and for the Ponds ritual. One son contracted polio at age two and she visited him every single day at San Lazaro Hospital at a time she was pregnant. She lost the baby

whom we called Luz. She would have been the fourth girl. My mother got pregnant again and Luz was promptly replaced by another boy. She stopped using her Ponds cream and seemed to spend all her time in the kitchen. She got more irritable, her fuse ready to blow at the slightest provocation. Some of us got the brunt of what I know now was a seething anger, an inner rage, others were spared. Quarrels between her and my father became more frequent and loud. We had become too many for comfort. I sought refuge in books. I spent hours perched where the huge trunk of the kalachuchi tree split into a Y and read till sundown came and the words on the page became a blur.

VII

I remember going places on a whim with my father. He had developed a nervous condition after a storm-buffeted interisland crossing and little sorties quieted his nerves. He either brought me or my eldest brother on these therapeutic trips. We would cross the Pasig river by banca to Barangka where a friend owned a poultry and an orchard, or buy wooden shoes in Pasig or watch the pagoda fluvial parade in Pateros. I ate boiled cassava in syrup for the first time in a roadside store in Montalban. I loved it. I was scraping the syrup clean from the saucer with a last piece of cassava when my father gently told me to mind my manners. Sometimes he would take me shopping downtown, usually after I quarrelled with my sisters and got a severe scolding from my mother who always took their side. On three separate trips to Valleson's in Carriedo, he bought me a pair of leather shoes, a 42-piece toy tea set, and a doll. Yellow was my favorite color then and it didn't matter that the only doll with a yellow dress was defective (the cry mechanism didn't work), I wanted it. Maybe that's precisely why I wanted it – it didn't cry.

My father and I would drop in at Freixas, a high end store on Carriedo owned by a Spanish senora who sold Spanish fans, veils, mantons. We never bought anything. My father simply enjoyed bantering in Spanish with the middle-age, fully made-up, slightly overweight senora. The enjoyment seemed mutual. I would fight boredom by whipping open and close a Spanish fan relishing the distinct rippling sound only a genuine Spanish fan made. The senora would steal horrified glances, afraid I would ruin the fan, while she flirted with my father who looked quite dashing at the time - chin shaved clean with Gillette and Barbasol, hair well-groomed, every lock held in place by Brillantine, his trubenized shirt and the seams of his pants well pressed and his shoes buffed to a mirror shine.

The best gift my father ever gave me was a gold ID bracelet. He gave it to me when I graduated from the elementary grades. He wrote my speech and coached my delivery. He was good that way when I was growing up and fighting from my rung in the ladder of birth. Always there to assuage the hurts, but not to prevent them. To take me away after the fights were over, but not to defend me. Once I asked him why do you allow it and I don't remember his answer or if he did at all.

VIII

Every day for thirty-one days in May the young men and women in Makati were dizzy with excitement over the *Flores de Mayo*, the daily floral parade and offering to the Virgin Mary. Thirty-one households usually with one or more pretty daughters, were assigned a day each to sponsor an *alay* or offering. Every year, we were assigned a day because of my two elder sisters who had grown up to be town beauties. There was unspoken competition as to who had the longest parade and the most beautiful flowers. Flowers were bought in Villalobos, except for the *caballero* and *kalachuchi* which were

required in great abundance to trace the letters which spell Ave Maria on wooden frames to be borne like placards, and to skewer with sticks of walis tingting for the baskets to be carried by pairs who were either sweethearts or a-courting. Kalachuchi flowers in old Makati were plucked from trees that grew along the streets, in the front yards and back yards of neighbors who knew each other, and from the dozens of white-flowering trees at the postcard-pretty English Cemetery, scene of many a lovers' tryst. When it was our turn to host the *Flores*, I would help out with the flowers and come up with rather pretty baskets, then proudly bear one of the letters spelling out Ave Maria.

My older sisters were in the full bloom of young maidenhood. They went about in full balloon skirts waists cinched by wide cummerbunds. They went for dates at Brown Derby on Taft Avenue, and I imagine, nibbled coyly at the house specialty – the footlong hotdog sandwich. It was the age of innocence, and sisters and dates were probably young and disingenuous to even entertain phallic thoughts of the footlong. I never stepped inside Brown Derby. I took for granted I was not old enough to see or savor the 12-inch wonder. What I was old enough to do was go fetch as my sisters dressed up for church, jam sessions, barn dances or some such theme party in some neighbor's house, or to watch a combo concert at the plaza or go with friends to Dairy Queen on Buendia for vanilla ice cream with a twirl on top served in glass-shaped mini cones. Many, many years later when I moved my small family south to Alabang, I saw a bank building near the corner of Sucat road whose twirled white roof made it look like a giant ice cream cone. It summoned memories of Dairy Queen. I told my kids it was the Dairy Queen Bank and they asked if we could go get some ice cream. It has since been torn down and replaced by a less whimsical structure.

IX

By the time I was in high school, the transformation of Makati was going full-blast. Hospital Espanol de Santiago had closed down with the construction of Makati Medical Center where the patients of the Spanish companies now went. All the contents of the hospital had to be sold or disposed of and my father, after having the whole place disinfected, sanitized and cleaned, rented out our own house across the street and moved us all into the beautiful main building so he could inventory the goods and closely supervise the transactions. We enjoyed many years in this huge enclave. But the onslaught of modern Makati continued. Structures had to be demolished. This is when the heartbreak began.

First to go was the storeys-high water tank which had become rusty and when full, leaked like torrential rainfall during a storm. The part of the hospital grounds facing Makati Avenue had to be cleared of existing structure when it was leased out as commercial space for a Shell station and a supermart. A beautiful Moroccan mosaic fountain at the center of the garden where my eldest sister got married was bulldozed from the ground. The buildings housing the boys' dormitories, the nurses' home, the kitchen and the pantry and the suite of offices running along the General Luna street side of the property (where our own house also stood across the hospital) were demolished, the land also leased. For many years, the main building and the hectares planted to mango trees behind it were spared. We, elder children, had all gone our separate ways by this time. Then my parents died, we sold the house on General Luna, the Spanish people cut a deal for the hospital property though it look a long, long time before it became what it is now.

And for a long, long time, I couldn't drive along Makati Avenue without a lump in my throat, wishing I was older and wiser when all these were happening.

X

The ten are down to eight, two having passed away, lives interrupted by illness in their sixties. Two are ten thousand miles away. One, like a bottle bobbing in the sea, surfaces once in a while, comes in with the tide then is carried away again by waves and wind, when he will make shore only he knows. Now I am the undeclared matriarch of a brotherhood of five, add my own brood of five so that again makes ten, trying hard to keep strongly knotted the fragile ties that bind. I am the self-appointed chronicler of shared memories but I am clueless about how they really feel about what we commonly remember, what else they remember and do not share, what they choose not to remember, what they would rather forget. As they are clueless of mine, too. Images of time past once banished rise to consciousness again, unbidden. The child is father of the man or woman. We are the sum of our past. The sunshine and the dark shadows of it. The first are like refreshing drops of rain sparkling in the sun which we catch with outstretched arms and upturned faces. The dark shadows loom over us at night until mercifully sleep comes. But the time comes when we have to summon the courage to stare them down, accept them for the scars they inflicted, come to terms. Then will they stop to haunt us and we can forgive everyone including ourselves, time and circumstance, like our place in the ladder of birth. The dark shadows take different forms in life's stages. The dark shadows of childhood are one thing, little tempests in a well-remembered coffeepot. The shadows of latter years, of dire memories after innocence is lost, that's another story to be told when one is ready to tell.#