

Charles Hayes
We Are

Cutting the Bohol-Siquijor gap, Carloi and Rosa Santiago lead their band of Sama Bajau sea gypsies through the dark choppy waters of the Philippine Sea. Dan Chan and his liaison banglo, or family boat, sail off their port side and slightly behind, using lights at night and flags by day to keep good visual contact with the tribe. It is an old system that they have long practiced and it has proved its worth many times. Off their starboard bow, far beyond the flashing navigational lights of a Bohol outlier, the fuzzy glow of Tagbilaran obscures the star sprinkled sky. From his rudder seat aft, locked on the constellations above the Western horizon and tacking for the central coast of Cebu and its Queen City of the South, Carloi considers what they must do.

A large foreign fishing trawler that lies at anchor in the Mactan Channel of Cebu has brought them North from the waters off the Northern tip of Mindanao to these crowded shipping lanes where culture and commerce are a lot different from their home seas. It is a distasteful sail for them but they must do what they can to remedy a situation that affronts the senses of all their people.

Coming aft from the small living quarters with the step and poise of a life at sea, Rosa perches on the gunwale beside Carloi and hands him half of a papaya before biting into the other half. Many are the night snacks that they have shared from this spot while following the glory of the stars.

Quietly enjoying her fruit and listening to the pleasant pops of the mainsail as the wind quarters to and fro, Rosa ties up her hair and watches Carloi as he guides, intent on his tack and the directions of the blow. As he ties off the rudder and reaches for her hand, Rosa brings up the unpleasant subject that has put them so far at sea.

"Lita said that she could see the foreign fishermen beating Rolo after they pulled him from the sea. It wasn't enough that they ran through and sank his banglo, they needed to kidnap him as well."

"Nor enough that they have sucked up all the fish of our waters," Carloi replies. "Word around the Islands is that they have Rolo in their brig and intend to take him back to their country to make an example of."

Rosa searches the stars as if there she can find a meaning for this tragedy. Finding none she turns to her husband.

"But we are going to fix that, aren't we Carloi?"

Looking at his young and beautiful wife, still almost a girl, Carloi feels his fire of indignation spread to his loins. Sliding his tongue up Rosa's thighs, his desire is further waxed by her sea-spiced scent.

"You can bet all your beauty," he says, "and my unerring response to it, Rosa. We will fix it."

Mussing Carloi's hair as she surrenders to the sensations of his touch, Rosa knows that her papaya will again bring her the pleasure of its fruit.

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Bringing his eyes up to the look of his wife's want, Carloi watches her unbutton and pull down his shorts.

Firmly greeted by the object of her desire, Rosa covers it with a sheen of spittle, drops her own shorts, and folds over the rudder arm. Watching Orion's belt flame from the sky to light the niceties of her mind, she delightfully welcomes her hunter home.

As the banglos enter the greater port area of Cebu at mid-day, a large passenger ferry slowly passes on its way to the dock. People lining the rails toss coins to the sea, watching in amusement as the gypsy children dive from their banglos, follow the tumbling glitter down and snatch it before it gets too deep. Sometimes the glitter, tossed by a good hearted patron, turns out to be something more valuable than a peso coin. It is the custom here.

Carloi watches this spectacle with mixed emotion, not begrudging the ferry passengers their enjoyment, nor the skill and enjoyment of the tribal children, but aware of the caste values that bring it all together. Mostly he just tries to let it be as he reconnoiters the area. Far into the channel, half way toward Mactan, he can see the fishing vessel that holds Rolo. That is where his real attention lies.

After getting a layout of the waters in his mind, he calls Dan Chan to and instructs him to position all the banglos slightly down the coast, ready for a night departure. Carloi and Rosa will join them after they scout the waters of the channel near the fishing vessel.

Using only the small forward jib, the couple meander into the channel and around some larger freighters to close on the trawler. Passing about 100 meters off its port side, they see a loaded launch departing from a set of metal stairs that lead directly to an open hatch on the lower deck. Having already learned enough to know that most likely this hatch leads to the deck where the brig is located, Carloi starts putting together his plans for the raid. Thinking that it would be nice to do more than free Rolo, he envisions a lasting impression of vengeance as well.

Moving quickly to the far side of an anchored freighter nearby, Carloi pops the main and starts tacking South to rendezvous with the tribe. Getting the raid set in his mind, he looks forward to Rosa who is handling the jib.

"That was perfect, Rosa. The most gorgeous fo'c'sle figurehead I've ever seen and you handled the jib as well as ever. We can do it tonight. The crew has apparently gone ashore and the welcome mat is out."

Letting the jib go according to Carloi's tack, Rosa comes aft to the rudder and sits on a nearby bench. Her face shows none of her husband's enthusiasm as she stares off to the open water.

Knowing that there are thoughts that need to be spoken, Carloi touches her knee and says, "Tell me, Rosa."

Bringing her eyes back to the man she loves, she does not speak at first. She seems only to surrender to this moment and their being together. As if it is a memory that must develop in her mind.

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Carloi knows his wife and simply waits for her reply, knowing what the gist of it will be already.

Clearing her throat, Rosa finally says, "Please be careful Carloi, that was not a welcome mat and they might kill you if you are caught. Or probably worse, take you off with Rolo. I think that a rescue can be done as well but if it is different tonight don't push, I need you."

Smiling, Carloi takes Rosa's hand with one of his own, and touches her cheek with the other.

"You are right dear heart. There will be no welcome and the utmost care will be taken. If you will, you will hold the banglo and Dan Chan and I will go aboard. If the risk is too great, we will abort."

Without hesitation Rosa replies, "As always, I will. That is why we are."

Taking the fleetest banglo and running without lights, Carloi, Rosa, and Dan Chan enter the Mactan Channel under a half moon in the wee hours of the morning and stay to the shadows of the larger ships anchored there. Riding the fo'c'sle for the best vision ahead, the two men scout the waters until Rosa steers them alongside the trawler launch and boarding stairs. The boarding hatch is closed but a sliver of light indicates that it is not locked. After belaying the banglo to the launch for a quick release, Dan Chan and Carloi leap over and scale the stairs to the hatch. Squeezing through the hatch, they look at each other with large eyes and adjust to the light. One passageway forward appears to lead to the sleeping quarters while the passageway aft heads toward the fantail and the probable location of the brig. Following the aft passageway on bare feet, quite as cat paws, they come to the brig, right where they had hoped it would be. Lying on a drop hinged iron rack, Rolo stares at the bulkhead until his peripheral vision picks up his two friends creeping in. Almost unable to believe his eyes, Rolo, with mouth agape, rolls to his feet, comes to the cell door and points to a secured cabin door across the way. A set of keys hang from it and snoring can be heard coming from within. Taking the keys with two hands, Carloi proffers them to Rolo. He does not accept them but points to a single key among several. Using this key, Carloi opens the cell door but the latch clangs as he does so. The snoring immediately ceases, and the three tribesmen freeze, prepared for the worst. Just when they again start to withdraw, the door where the keys had hung suddenly flies open and a huge hairless man with North Asian features appears, a large leaded nightstick in hand. Carloi and Dan Chan are on him, both stuffing chloroform soaked rags from a retired tribal medical worker to his face and in his open mouth. Rolo has his legs until, like a Pisa Tower that can lean no more, he crashes to the deck, unconscious. The noise is petrifying but they remain as calm as possible, placing their rags near his face, far enough from his air passage to do no lasting damage.

Quickly and silently they go back out the exit hatch and into the launch. Rolo and Dan Chan bounce over to Rosa and the waiting banglo while Carloi sticks a block of C4, bartered from some Moro's, to the bulkhead of the launch below the water line. Inserting a 3 minute fused cap, Carloi lights it and jumps to the banglo. Pulling the lash loose, he hops to the rudder while Dan Chan runs up the main and Rolo sets the jib. Rosa,

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excited as everybody else and wearing a number 10 Cheshire smile, scurries to the living quarters and secures a first aid kit for any unnoticed injuries.

Catching a rare night blow the banglo mates are tacking South out of the channel by the time a flash of orange followed by a loud crump travels across the water to their senses. Carloi watches through his binoculars as the trawler lights start to come on and the launch goes down bow first, pulling the metal boarding stairs with it. In the back lit hatch he can barely make out the huge turn key, arms spread to the hatch edges, like a crucified one, looking out.

In an isolated Siquijor cove facing the Mindanao Sea and the stretch of Ocean that will take them back to their native waters the Sama Bajau rest and welcome Rolo back with a feast. Several small fires dot the white sands along the azure waters of the cove, all situated more or less near one large bonfire. Spirits are high and bamboo canisters of tuba, or coconut wine, pass freely among the various groups. Children frolic and dive for tidbits of sea life to eat with the baking Katambak, a delicious white fleshed fish wrapped in banana leaves and buried in the sand under the mounting coals of the smaller fires. Rice, as always, is plentiful and fresh fruits gathered from the jungle by Rosa and Dan Chan's wife, Mary, are cleaned and ready for snacking. Luck and life are good.

Always off a little bit, whether it be from the weight of leadership or the preference for a more subdued child free relaxation, Carloi and Rosa watch Rolo and his wife, Elsie, approach with their two girls, Epi and Louella. Rosa rises and quickly places nipa mats around the small fire for their guest. Once the niceties of embracing the same fire are done Rolo, with glistening eyes, nods to his girls. Each holds a gift wrapped in batik.

Louella, the oldest at ten, stands and carries her gift around the fire to Carloi. Placing it in his lap she says, "For bringing our father home and giving us a banglo to live in please accept this from us to always keep your home safe."

Her part done with grace, Louella quickly bows, scurries back around the fire, and drops to her seat as eight year old Epi stands, carries her gift to Rosa, and places it in her lap. Looking to her mother, whose nod unlocks her memory, Epi turns to Rosa and says, "For bringing papa back to where he loves to be please accept this from us to keep you strong." Forgetting to bow but delighted to have gotten through it, Epi bolts back to her seat, her giggle like the sweet chimes of a monk's wind instrument.

Smiles and warmth crisscross the fire, its yellow flickering flames casting wet diamonds in eyes all around.

After a pause for composure, Carloi nods to Rosa.

"You first."

Lifting the flaps of batik one at a time, Rosa exposes a hand weaved bamboo platter, its four corners afire with varnished over bougainvillea blooms. It holds a Crystal covered dish of choice cuts of glistening brown lechon, or roasted pig. Clearly moved, Rosa looks to her friends.

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"Thank you, dear people. The rudder will move like a feather because of this. Such a nice gift."

Rolo, rubbing his face first, as if in aggravation, says, "You are welcome, as much as a life is worth, and beyond."

All eyes turn to Carloi.

Smiling and nodding to those across the fire, Carloi unwraps the gift delicately. It is lighter and of more irregular proportions than the other. Lifting the last fold of cloth, Carloi reveals a beautiful hard carved Santo Niño, an ornate statue of the baby Jesus. The fine red velvet of the cape and the semi-precious stones of the crown dazzle Carloi and Rosa's eyes with reflected fire light. They seem to become solemnly transfixed by the magnificence of this religious icon. One of the few tribes of the Sama Bajau that are Catholic, its leaders consider this a truly blessed gift.

Stung with awe by the spirit, Carloi and Rosa travel light years in moments, captured by the smiling face of Baby Jesus.

Rolo and Elsie, knowing that their gifts are truly loved, silently stand, gather their girls, and fade back to their fire.

Carloi and Rosa, somewhere beyond, cry.

Having sailed South into the Sulu Archipelago, the Sama Bagau return to the waters that they originally came from. The fishing grounds here are still good and interference and disrespect by foreign trawlers is minimal. Here the repercussions of such is much more severe, given a more decentralized power structure. Here blood would be spilled, not just the wasting of a trawler launch.

It has been a long journey back to these waters. While most of the tribe rest and restock at Jolo, Carloi and Rosa take some of the remaining stocks and sail on to one of the smaller islands that dot this part of the Southwest Philippines. It is time they rest as well and let Dan Chan handle things until they can refurbish their spirit.

Finding an island with fresh water not far, they pull their banglo to the sands of a pretty lagoon and tie it off to a coconut palm. While Carloi tunes the shortwave to the news from Guadalcanal, Rosa collects driftwood for a fire. After making a landside kitchen to go with their banglo berth they cook up some steamed rice, dried fish and stir fried ampalaya, or bitter melon. As is often the case, once the food goes down the spirits go up. Listening to the sounds of a soprano backed by the melodic twangs of a pipa they decide to test the pure waters of the lagoon.

Playing like otters among the colorful coral, their brown bodies kiss and dive, finally to wrap and drift to the sand. Play turned to passion, they rock in the rising tide as it gently abets their union.

Clean and complete, with the top of the banglo pulled back, Carloi admires the body of his wife while Rosa studies the glory of the star scattered sky. Such repose has been so long in coming

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but now it is here. And as fresh as ever. Dragging his finger, as if it were a feather, along Rosa's body, Carloi brings Rosa back.

"You are my all, babe. To have you here like this is so beautiful. I am filled. Does it scare you, Rosa?"

Dark eyes of wonder come to Carloi, as if he need only wish it so.

"Sometimes, baby," Rosa replies. "It is wonderful but it is a lot. Maybe it is too much."

Knowing what Rosa means, Carloi surrenders to her with a trust that is reserved for only one.

"We have led well because we are strong but I am getting older and the ways of the world are heavy as it grows smaller. Too heavy for any man... or woman."

With a humanity that few possess, Rosa takes Carloi's face and pulls it to her breast.....and lets him know that, after all, it is as it should be.

"That is certain my love. But it is also certain that we have our God. God is strongest. And God is good. And because of that we have now."

Turning to his back and pulling Rosa closer, Carloi listens to the sea. A shower of stars streak through the constellations, burning bright and gone. So fast they are.

"You are right, Rosa. You are always right."