

*Charles Hayes*  
**It's All Gravy**

**L**ike glittering raindrops falling on a burnished palm frond, the peso coins dance and spin atop the dark wooden casket before dropping into the small net attached to its edges. Tossed by the many people lining the path up the last rise of Mantalongon, a few coins miss their mark and fall to the earth. They are gathered by the children in the long following procession of mourners. On an adjoining hill, a couple of low humped bulls lift their heads from the grass and stare. The Philippine Sea and the Island of Bohol fill the horizon to the east. To the west, the jungle tree tops dip down to the Visayan Sea and the Tanon Strait. The hazy image of Negros rises beyond. Atop this mountainous backbone of Cebu Joe Benedict will be buried. It was the only final resting place that ever occurred to him. And one he took pains with to title and protect.

Dressed in leather sandals, dark trousers, and white shirts, grey with sweat, the six casket bearers rest the coffin at the lip of the open grave. It is cooler up here where the winds from two seas mix and swirl. Alone and unadorned, except for a little iron grill fence, and a small flat stone, its high polish brightly reflecting the overhead sun, Joe commands the view in all directions. A few metal chairs to one side of the fence serve to rescue the carriers and their tired feet.

As the procession arrives and gathers, and the sun drops a bit to the west, a young priest emerges from the crowd and stands at the head of the grave. On his right side and a step behind, a salt and pepper haired woman in black nods for him to begin.

Swinging an incense burner to and fro and throwing sprinkles of holy water over the casket, the priest consecrates the site and blesses it with a short prayer. The bearers lower the casket, letting the hemp ropes follow it down. Stepping forward, the woman drops a handful of earth onto the casket and follows the priest outside the fence. Several others who can get close enough add their own handfuls of dirt. This ritual done, the thumping cadence of spaded earth dropping ever more silently on a wooden box ushers the crowd out over the hilltop. Spreading their nipa mats on the same ground that much of their food comes from, they eat and sing until the sun drops close to the rising mountains of Negros. Many, over time, and one in particular, will return to this grave, burn a candle or two in the still of the night, and say a prayer for Joe's soul. The American was one of them and they loved him.

\*\*\* TEN YEARS EARLIER \*\*\*

From a hard scabble patch of land in the foothills of the Virginia Appalachians Joe Benedict watches the sheriff's small motorcade make its way across the valley. He knows they are coming to deliver the papers that will confiscate his rough cut home for unpaid taxes. And he knows that there is nothing he can do to stop it. At least nothing that he is willing to do. The same country that he almost died serving is going to take the only real home he ever knew.

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Coming out of that unnecessary war and inheriting this place from his grandfather had given him time to look at where he had been. He didn't much like what he saw. Ahead, to where he was supposed to go, he liked even less. Turning his back on both directions, he used this rocky and sparsely timbered land to wall off what he considered a failed society full of broken promises. By hunting, a little gardening, and odd jobs working for the valley elite, he had eked out an existence blessed by a strong back and good health. Now, in his senior years, he is watching those he can no longer put off come to take the only things that have kept him alive.

In one of those unexpected reminiscences, Joe recalls the highlands of Pleiku, Vietnam, and the stunned look on the young Viet Cong's face when he shot him. Joe leans his 30-30 Winchester against the gate post. There will be no more killing like that....ever. He will not argue or refuse the papers. He will let it play out the American way with a heaviness that has its own gravity. He will go....but with grace.



Having gone as far as it can, the black SUV, a large gold colored star on its door, comes to a halt. The deputy follow-up car does likewise. While the deputy remains in his car, the sheriff kicks open the SUV door and hauls himself out.

Sheriff Higgins, overweight but not particularly quarrelsome, has been the sheriff around here for a long time. Just your average kind of sheriff, he keeps getting re-elected because he knows most people, including Joe. Also, it doesn't hurt that he tries to take an easy manner with the well-to-do, who are well represented throughout the valley. Carrying a clipboard of papers, he approaches Joe and smiles when he sees the 30-30 over against the gate post.

"Glad to not see you holding that iron over there," Higgins says, nodding toward the 30-30, "I expect you know why I'm here."

Joe is more relieved than nervous. Relieved to finally start the beginning of the end.

"Uh-huh...I've been waiting for you ever since the certified letter came. I guess after a couple of weeks, you won't have to traipse up here anymore to check on my deer harvesting etiquette."

Higgins laughs.

"Expect you're right about that. But you know, I never did much care about how you hunted to eat. It was just nice to get up out of that valley some. In respects of that, I'll be sorry to see you go. This is all the Feds doing you know."

"Yeah, I know...never have been many places that I didn't have to go to start with. Maybe I'll discover something valuable as a result of all this. Who knows, I got a couple of weeks to get going, right?"

The sheriff hands Joe a stack of papers.

"That's right, Joe. It's all in there and wherever you go or whatever you do, you can use my name to vouch for your lawfulness, whatever that's worth."

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“Okay, Sheriff. Two weeks and I’m out of here. Been a long time coming, I guess.”

After shaking hands the sheriff turns and walks back to his SUV, motioning for his deputy to back out. Once his bulk is loaded behind the wheel and the door is closed, the sheriff sticks his head out the window and yells up at Joe, “Say Joe, can I ask you a question?”

“Fire away,” says Joe.

The sheriff looks in the rear view mirror, watching his deputy depart, and seems to consider the question. After a moment he smiles and says, “Tell me something valuable that you could discover out there where you haven’t been.”

Without thinking twice, Joe replies, “A loyal people.”

Wagging his finger at Joe, the sheriff grins, whips a U-turn in the scrub and drives away.

Thinking about what he had just said and wondering why the sheriff had wanted to know, Joe watches the sheriff go down the hill and out into the valley. Feeling like what will be, will be, he walks over to the gate post and hefts the 30-30. Levering open the empty chamber and magazine, Joe smiles, closes it, and dry snaps the hammer to the sky. All things must pass.



Looking out the small bulkhead window at the azure waters of the Cebu City Port area, Joe leans into the bank and watches the wing dip and rise as the jet lines up for its final approach to the Cebu International Airport. Once the flaps are lowered, the open sea quickly gives way to mangrove swamps followed by small barangays, or villages, amid scattered coconut palms. Just as lines of laundry get close enough to count the bed sheets, a blur of dark tarmac suddenly fills the earth beneath. A heavy bump followed by the feel and noise of reverse thrusters brings smiles to most of the passengers touching down after many hours in a flying tube. Out on the edges of the tarmac, the lush green tropical growth, under a brilliant sky, lends an air of optimism and high spirit to the immediate environment. Joe Benedict welcomes this feeling and smiles along with the others. He had bet on the tropics and the Filipino spirit when he had closed the book on his American life. Before that he had long contemplated such a switch. Now it was actually happening.



Coming out of customs and immigration, Joe takes the first in a long line of taxis and heads across the Mactan bridge to Mandaue. Far below the bridge superstructure, looking like toys in a bathtub, ships of many different flags lie at anchor in the Mactan Channel. Off the bridge, small cars, large trucks, jeepneys, and thousands of motorcycles share the roads and side streets. All throwing up a diesel fog that keeps anything with windows and air conditioning closed tight.

With only a backpack to contend with after a half hour ride, Joe pays the taxi driver and hops out at the congested Southern Cebu Bus Terminal. A huge compound enclosed by high cinder block walls, tin roofed stores,

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and benched waiting areas, the terminal houses the many buses going to all the Southern parts of the island. Sign boards on the front windshield announce to the hundreds of passengers milling about which bus is theirs. Joe locates the bus going to Dalaguete, climbs aboard giving the conductor his fare, and takes one of the last remaining seats next to an attractive woman some years younger than him. Being the only white person aboard, a fact driven home by the many stares he receives, he assumes that what he has heard about getting away from the congestion and tourist traps is true---the further from the city he goes, the more natural and clean it will be. And the more he will stand out.

After traveling along the coastal highway for an hour, making stops, and passing one town after another, the congestion thins out. Crowded landscapes are replaced by rice paddies and fish ponds that border the Philippine Sea and its white beaches shaded by coconut trees. Other places banana trees run right up to the highway on one side while the Sea splashes among mangrove swamps on the other. Vendors with bulky loads of snacks and drinks hop the bus to peddle their wares for a few kilometers, then hop off and catch another bus going back.

After buying some ampaio, or puffed rice cake, from one of the vendors, the lady next to Joe notices his curiosity as she nibbles on the crunchy treat. Boldly, she unwraps another square, turns deep brown eyes upon his curiosity, and says in very good English, "My name is Alicia, and I will give you part of my tasty ampaio if you will tell me where you are from and where you are going."



Alicia Lamdagan, in her mid-fifties and a native Cebuano, proved to be true to the namesake of her heritage. Lamdagan is the Cebuano word for bright. The youngest of three daughters, she watched her sisters marry and have children of their own before she finished her Catholic elementary school. Of exceptional intelligence and spirit, she was put forward by the Nuns to gain a higher education through the nunnery and took her vows as a nun, with a confidence in God and charity, at the age of twenty. Her work, year after year, in the rural Catholic orphanage of the Manta-longon Mountains gave her a lasting rapport with the people of the area. And her brightness proved fruitful for the children she cared for. However, her intelligence, balanced with an even stronger spirit, would not let her walk away when the Diocese eliminated the rural orphanage from its sphere of patronage and ordered her to another service in Manila. Instead, she renounced her vows, removed her habit, and with what resources she could scrape together, kept her orphan children and their home from sinking into nonexistence. Now, headed back to her labor of love and spirit after visiting the city, she has noticed the white man beside her eyeing her snack.



Joe, though surprised by Alicia's candor, is completely taken with the humorous sparkle and openness of her wide set eyes. Framed by long, raven black hair and the bone structure of an intelligent Austronesian pedigree, there is a light in her eyes that disengages any need for him to be defensive. In fact, a rarity for Joe, quite the opposite.

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“Well, I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know for sure what you are eating, but it is valuable information that you seek.”

“Touche,” Alicia replies with a smile that broadens the handsome light of her face. “These little tidbits of rice and sweets are considered a delicacy here in Southern Cebu. Delicious, or lami as we say, their value, I assure you, is equal to your information.”

Enjoying his newfound social skills with a complete stranger, Joe replies, “In that case, my name is Joe, not like the GI Joe of Filipino fame, but like short for Joseph of the coat of many colors. I am from the United States, and I am going to Dalaguete to start a new life.”

“I am very familiar with the Joseph of the Bible and what he did,” Alicia says, while searching his eyes for any deception. “Tell me Joe, what will you do in this new life?”

Suddenly feeling a little vulnerable with such a broad question, Joe looks to his hands and considers his reply. Alicia, seeming to intuit the situation, pushes a full package of ampaio into Joe’s hands and says, “Here Joe, I must not make an unfair bargain with you. Enough, try one of these, they really are lami. And they don’t unfairly squeeze your wallet either.”

Tasting the ampaio and finding truth in everything that Alicia has said, Joe shrugs and describes his situation while Alicia seems to listen with a sense that goes beyond just her hearing.

Feeling the benefit of having such a good listener for the first time in recent memory, and having talked about personal things with another, Joe’s long dormant social curiosity starts to peek out from its covers. “What about you,” he asks, “are you from Dalaguete?”

“Not exactly, I’m from Mantalongon, in the mountains above Dalaguete. I could never afford to live along the shore. Besides, I run an orphanage. That is where my work is. And let me tell you, there is plenty of it there. My helper is getting too old to keep up but he has no other place to go. And I have no money to hire so it’s pretty touch and go.”

Having started to share her problems as well, and needing to vent with someone other than God, Alicia goes on to explain how all this came to be.

Joe struggles to hide his astonishment at the gumption and spirit of this woman. Rarely has he met people of such character and charity. Certainly not back where he comes from. Besides, back there, he would never allow such things to be presented to start with. That would require too much trust.

Entering the greater Dalaguete region, Joe and Alicia break conversation and watch the jungle come right up to the highway, broken only every now and then by a house or an ocean vista. Along with their silence, some sort of higher reality seems to come over them. Sensing this, they curiously look at one another, like they are seeing each other for the first time.

“You know I was just thinking,” Joe says.

Alicia solemnly nods.

“Me too.”



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As if having the same thoughts, Alicia continues to nod as Joe says, "I could save my little bit of money and come to Mantalongon instead of Dalaguete, take a look around, maybe fix up a few things. Give the old guy a break. No pay needed, room and board would be nice. What do you think?"

Like one bright soul supplanting the solemn visage of another, Alicia's face lights up as she replies in an almost hallowed voice, "Oh merciful God, that would be wonderful."

After the long stretch of jungle and sea, entering Dalaguete Poblacion is like going from the natural wild to the festive tame in a couple of heartbeats. Multicolored signs asking for business hang everywhere, and both sides of the road are occupied by one structure or another. Banners stretch over the highway signaling that life is good and that this spot is a good place to enjoy it. Pushcart vendors, selling everything from barbecued chicken feet to skewers of shrimp shish kabob, come and go along the market area where fresh fish, fruits, and vegetables, are sold by the kilo. City Hall, with the police station and post office, is located across the street from the market as well. Nothing like the city, but for rural Filipinos, just about all things that are needed for everyday life can be found here.



At the bus stop, just off the first cross street after coming into Dalaguete, eighty-one year old Pedro Abbas sits behind the wheel of an ancient World War Two-era jeep waiting for Alicia's bus to arrive. There is no transportation between here and Mantalongon other than private motor bike. And that is a dangerous ride with young Filipino bikers carrying multiple passengers in and out of the mountains for whatever fare they can get. Since he can't find the part to fix the broken water pump at the orphanage, Pedro is happy to wait for his pick-up...as long as the jeep doesn't conk out. Knowing the bus is due soon from the cell phone texts received by others waiting for the same bus, Pedro uncurls from the driver's seat and attempts to straighten up his old frame. Still slightly bent after pushing his back in as far as possible, he hears the bus coming over the hump bridge into town and stands by to welcome Alicia back to the province.

Amid a cloud of dust and diesel fumes, the bus arrives and the waiting area comes alive with activity. Alicia, in the middle of several others, steps down from the door and waves to Pedro. Starting to lift his hand, Pedro freezes when he sees the white man, a backpack over one shoulder, walk up and join her on the way across the street.

"Pedro, this is my friend, Joseph," Alicia says. "He is coming with us to have a look around at our repair needs. Isn't that nice?"

Joe extends his hand and says, "Just call me Joe, Pedro, nice to meet you."

A study in contrasts presents itself as an aged Pedro, deep brown and slight of build with only a little dark hair left, and a younger Joe, white and tall with graying blonde hair, shake hands. A little stiff in manner, Pedro can't hide his surprise at having an extra worker aboard.

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Glancing frequently in the rear view mirror at Joe in the back seat, Pedro mostly ignores Alicia's chatter as they travel from the bus stop straight out the cross street to a dusty and curvy road into the mountains. As they gain altitude, it isn't long before the clutter of the coast gives way to open vistas and a rolling, sparsely inhabited landscape. Halfway up the mountain a huge lizard-like monitor, as long as the jeep, leaps from the jungle, scurries across the road, and back into the jungle. Neither Alicia nor Pedro make any mention of this creature but Joe fervently hopes that his bed will not be one that is on the ground. Never has he seen a lizard so large. Pedro sees Joe's reaction in the rear view mirror and smiles.

About thirteen kilometers into the hills they top out and pass through the small settlement of Mantalongon to an outlying large structure of bamboo and native materials. Set on a rolling plateau, among one of the few hectares of jungle growth at this location, the orphanage, a few out-buildings, and their immediate courtyards, look pretty run down. But the happy children bouncing up and down and waving in the main hall's front yard give the place an air of freshness that belies its true condition.

Alicia asks Pedro to show Joe to an empty native house and get him settled while she helps a couple of volunteers prepare their evening meal. Joe finds the nipa hut, with a grass roof and bamboo slatted floor, neat and adequate for his needs. After dumping his pack on the small bed, he follows Pedro out on a tour of the grounds.

Stopping at the well and broken water pump, Pedro shows Joe the laid out parts of the pump and explains that he was unable to find the proper part to repair it. Amazingly, Joe looks the layout over, cannibalizes a piece from another broken pump lying in a junk pile, and quickly reassembles all the parts. After reconnecting the pump to the electrical outlet, he opens the line and throws the switch. Hissing and coughing, the line shakes a couple of times, then emits a smooth stream of water. Pedro, thoroughly impressed with Joe's seemingly miraculous tinkering skill, grabs Joe's hand and pumps it like it will bring water as well. Truly happy about what he has just witnessed, Pedro lets go of any animosity that may have existed. And with that one small deed Joe gains a loyal assistant instead of a resentful helper. Gladly, Pedro finishes the tour for Joe, pointing out the many things that could use a repair job, then proudly escorts him to the eating area.

Gathered for dinner, happy faces listen to Pedro go on about what he saw done with the broken water pump, and how this glorious act will extend to the many other needful things that are about. For several of the children, Joe is the first actual man who is like the people that they have, on occasion, seen in foreign media.

Alicia, happy to have had such good fortune in meeting Joe, looks down the long picnic table and adds considerable weight to the moment when she says, "Well Joe, it seems that you have made quite an impression around here. We hope you can stay a while."

With a fork full of food halfway to his mouth, Joe pauses and looks at all the smiling people.

"Really, you all, I just got lucky. Just wait until I break something because I'm stupid."

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Amid the laughter that follows, one boy of about ten stands up, waits for the laughter to die, then says in practiced English, "Stay Joe, please. We will take care of you."

This small plea brings a subtle seriousness to the table that forces Joe to set his fork aside and clear his throat. Taking a moment to check a rampant emotion that tries to blur his vision, Joe sees all those faces fixed on him. After a moment of inner struggle, he stands and looks at the boy who made the plea, then everyone else at the table. Not really knowing what to say, but at the same time feeling a privilege that he has never known, Joe simply says what he feels, "It would be an honor to be your fixer."



Watching the gecko skitter back and forth across the coco wood beam for the grass roof, Joe finds it odd that he hasn't heard its chirps. The breeze from the oscillating fan makes it comfortable to lie under the cover in the morning and listen to the competing choruses of crowing cocks. Now is his special time to take stock of life in general.....good enough, nothing grandiose. Just plain, simple, and best of all, non-deceptive. Loyal. As the fan swings around the gecko again skitters across the coco brace. Isn't that a little pearl of wisdom, Joe declares to himself. A gecko that uses a fan. Known for bringing good luck and heralding it with their chirps, geckos are welcome guests. But the mute gecko could be a different story. Joe's thoughts play with this possibility until he hears a slight rustle near his door.

Alicia's gentle rap and worried voice ends all his speculation about mute geckos.

"Joe, are you awake? Something terrible has happened and I need your help."

Knowing that indeed something very serious must have occurred to bring Alicia to his door this early, Joe jumps up and into some shorts. Opening the door, he finds Alicia fully dressed and carrying a small flashlight, as is normal for her early rounds. What is not normal is the look on her face and what she says.

"I just found Pedro dead...sitting on his prayer rug in the door of his hut."

Thoroughly alarmed, Joe tries to wrap his mind around the incongruity of Alicia's statement. Pedro seemed fine at dinner last evening.

"A prayer rug?" he says. "What does he do with a prayer rug?"

"Come now," Alicia replies, "I will show you. Pedro is...was a Muslim."

Thinking how little we sometimes know about each other, Joe pulls on a shirt and follows Alicia across the grounds to a replica of his own hut. Slumped over against the open door, a Koran in his hands, Pedro looks like he is only asleep. Joe places his fingers along Pedro's carotid artery but finds no pulse. A closer inspection finds no sign of life.

"His religion was very personal and private to him," Alicia says. "He only prayed in private, or sometimes, at night, in the doorway, like he is now."



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"All this time I spent with him, and I had no idea," Joe says.

"That is as it should be," Alicia says. "Prayer in a closet is sometimes most powerful. We must honor his faith and quickly return him to his maker. I will get a stretcher. Please help me prepare the body for burial."



Joe and Alicia had finished washing and cleansing Pedro by the time the sun was up two fingers. Word had spread quickly in the orphanage but not much beyond which was also as it should be. Pedro had no known blood family. He had come from the Southern islands more than half his lifetime ago. The orphanage was his only family now and this would be a private, simple funeral, according to his faith.

While the oldest children and a couple of farmers from the immediate area dig a grave in the largest and closest coconut grove, taking care to situate it perpendicular to Mecca, Alicia and Joe shroud Pedro in an unused and newly washed bed sheet. Fragrant white flowers of the Camia plant are spread over Pedro and tucked within the folds of his shroud and scattered on the grave floor.

Gently placing Pedro on his right side, facing Mecca, Joe and Alicia take pains to observe his religious beliefs and honor his passing.

The few adults there, as well as the children, drift away when Joe and Alicia, now becoming a pair more than before, each lift a shovel and start covering their old friend. Perspiration glitters upon their brows by the time they finish.

Having patted down Pedro's final resting place under the towering coconut trees, they linger a bit, catching the slight fragrance of ginger, Pedro's favorite tea additive. Weary from their duty, and with feelings too poignant and perhaps too unknown for words, Joe and Alicia reach out. And together, spades shouldered and hands held, they walk back to their home.



Hitching the wagon to the old Jeep, Joe prepares to haul a fresh load of coconuts and corn to the local agricultural cooperative. A cooperative that he and Alicia organized to benefit the growers of the region, giving them better and more stable prices for their crops. Feeling reflective, Joe puts off the bumpy ride into town for a while to count his blessings. There is the bartering connection established under his tutelage that brings together the good crops of the highlands and the protein rich fish of the coastal area, helping all persons high and low. Joe smiles as he acknowledges that it is a rare place in the Dalaguete community that the pair of them, American fixer and Filipina teacher, are not known and respected. Life is good. And it is loyal, dependable.

Further reflecting on the passing of Pedro, Joe can see that, in a natural way, it was the beginning for him and Alicia as each other's first true partner. And how that partnership and the proximity of their work together accentuated other needs, despite their older years. Needs that simply and lovingly resolved themselves. How the acceptance and understanding of the people around them acquiesced to that resolution naturally. Hap-

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pily, Joe recalls the smiles that greeted them when they emerged from the same large nipa hut. Smiles and changes as natural as the never ending tropical growth. Fingering his driver's license and ID card, Joe remembers the good wishes he and Alicia received when they took it one step further with a priest, thus setting him up with his Permanent Philippine Residency. And, like the icing on a lovely cake, giving him the inclusion and belonging that he had missed for most of his life. How nice it was that Alicia, no less, also found natural beginnings, ripe with promise. Even as her raven hair began to show touches of silver.

Realizing that the sun is moving, Joe hurriedly fires up the Jeep and heads across the yard to the jungle road. Seeing the youngest orphan boy feeding the chickens, Joe stops and yells, "Hey Antonio, scatter that feed and get in. We will go to Mantalongon and make some pesos."

Antonio lights up, all teeth, and in one swoop scatters the feed, throws the bucket in the back, and jumps in. As Joe eases the Jeep and its load along the rutted road, Antonio stands, grips the windshield with one hand, and points out the coconut trees he is one day going to climb with the other.



Uncoupling, but reluctant to further break the so sweet connection, their fingertips toy along each other's nakedness. Little dances of touch up a thigh, or around a nipple. Looking toward the grass roof in the dim light above them, they see only their thoughts drifting in and out of focus, like the breeze from the rotating fan. The pre-dawn sounds of crowing cocks subsides only long enough to pick out a bird call every now and then. And a new resident gecko, adding its chirps to this chorus, tries not to be out done. To Joe and Alicia, in the languid world of after love, these sounds could all be a symphony, or a concert, the Beatles' "Yesterday," Woodstock, or even the Vatican Choir. There is no limit to their travel nor to what they can hear during these times. Up in years, they consider this sweetness special to them, a blessing.

Speaking to this special place that is all around them, Joe shares his truth.

"You know, baby, if I die tomorrow there will not be an ounce of regret in me. And there must not be an ounce of regret in you. If I have to go first, know without doubt, that I am not gone. I will be in everything that we ever touched, every memory of every look we shared. And as you go on, so do I. It can be no other way."

Joe turns his cheek to the pillow as Alicia's eyes well and birth a tear.

"Because of you," he continues, "each breath that I take is nothing but gravy---extra life above and beyond. I never thought that I could be somebody. Only, did I want to find a way to know that my life was not useless. And, if God would really bless me, a life that was not a lie. Thanks to you, and the God that is a part of you, that is."

Joe falls silent, takes an elbow, and looks down at Alicia. Finding an intoxicating depth in her eyes, his head lowers, as if in surrender. And in a choked voice he concludes, "The bounty of your love fills me beyond words."

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Suddenly, as if he just remembered a fire he must fight, Joe sits upright and declares, "I don't think I've ever spoken that many words at once." Swinging his feet over the edge of the bed, he is about to stand when Alicia grabs both his shoulders from behind and pulls him back down into the bed.

"How dare you! You're not going anywhere until I tell you a thing or two about what a wonderful person you are and all the good and hope you have brought here. And I'll start by telling you that it's not all gravy. You deserve whatever you have been able to gain. And a lot more."

Determined to get in a complete say, Alicia sits up, places her hand firmly on Joe's chest.....and starts to cry.

"I love you so much, and we are getting old.....nobody lives forever."

Sniffing and sobbing, Alicia is overcome with emotion and for a moment can't go on.

Wiping her face with the bedcover and taking deep breaths, while Joe looks up at her and gently smooths her tears, she eventually seems to regain her composure.

"I never want you to doubt that you mean the world to me and the people around us. You give of yourself in ways that will grow, sending up shoots that will always, in one way or another, further your brand of goodness."

Alicia, the image of abundant grace, lowers her eyes and kisses Joe's breast. And, as if to seal her touch and all their emotional talk, lies upon the warm mark of her lips.

Gently strumming a path down Alicia's spine, Joe cherishes the ensuing silence, pregnant with fulfillment. But, as a touch of morning color comes to the light under the grass eaves, he wonders how he will tell her what he learned on his last trip to the city.



Bursting from the smaller bedroom, almost tearing the curtain from its hooks, adopted 11-year-old Antonio, the last of the orphans, grabs a stick of lumpia from the kitchen table and bolts out the door.

"Tony, slow down. Where are you going in such a hurry?" Alicia calls after him.

Yelling back over his shoulder, Antonio replies, "To take Lucy and Big Boy to the hilltop grass. They have to eat too." Antonio considers the two working carabao, or water buffalo, his personal charge.

Looking across the kitchen table at Joe, Alicia says, "He gets more like you everyday."

"And his smarts from you get bigger too," Joe replies.

Alicia nods and decides that it is time to ask the dreadful question. Sliding a prescription leaf from the local medical clinic across the table, she says, "Joe, what is this?"

Joe's face falls when he sees it.

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"I was going to tell you, sweetheart. It's a referral to a specialist in Cebu City."

"And did you go?"

"Yeah, I went."

Having noticed his occasional dizzy spells and shortness of breath, Alicia, her stomach a sudden steely knot, reaches over the table and lifts Joe's chin, "It's your heart isn't it?"

"Yeah, baby, they say I need bypass surgery."

"Then let's do it. Lots of people get it done."

Wishing he were anywhere else at this moment, Joe takes Alicia's hand. "They can't, Ali. They say that there is something unusual about my aorta and they don't have the technology here to pull it off."

"What about Manila?"

"Same thing there. They want to send me to the United States where they have had some success with this thing. Couple of problems with that though."

Joe pauses and looks to the roof.

"Please listen hard, babe. I don't want to have to say this again. And never forget that I love you and would do nothing to hurt you. It is what it is. There is no trickery here."

Feeling numb and strange, he kisses Alicia's hand as his eyes well up.

"We don't have the money for such a thing. It is tremendously expensive and if you don't have the money, or very good insurance, you can't even get in the door. Since the war, my war, I have given nothing to America. And I have never asked for anything. They have hospitals there for people like me, but they are very poor and wouldn't even attempt such a thing. I'd be condemned to just sit or lie there and watch people with money get fixed while I die. It was such stuff that drove me from that place to start with. To die with your loved ones near, and the dignity of knowing that all that can be done is being done, is so much better to me. Better than feeling like a threadbare throwaway, hung in an auction of life to the highest bidder. For me, that would be suicide. We are better than that. Please, Ali, don't expect me to leave my home for a chance that is no chance and even worse,"

Having spoken his heart in ways that would have been unimaginable when he first met this exceptional woman, Joe gently leads Alicia, weeping and without volition, from the table and says, "Come on, babe, let's take a walk back to the beginning and visit Pedro."



Feeling a little punk, Joe decides that half a day is enough. He will visit the hilltop and enjoy a little communion. It gives perspective to his downs and helps with an old man's moods in general.

The eatery, once the main hall and orphanage dormitory, is overflowing with the lunch crowd when he stops by to tell Alicia where he is going

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but the crowd doesn't pick up his mood as it normally would. Taking the Jeep, Joe drives down the road and takes the grassy track up the slight elevation to his special place. The view of the three islands and the seas that surround them is gorgeous enough to lift even the most forlorn. Sitting in the open Jeep, with the comfortable January sun on the back of his neck, Joe looks out over the vast Philippine Sea. Almost before he can feel his breathing become a touch tight, his utter attention is captured by something different about the distant and slightly vague image of Bohol. Kissed by the connecting waters, Bohol is changing ever so gently into a soothing golden mist that advances toward him. Never before has Joe witnessed such pretty happenings. Thoroughly taken and most interested, he marvels at the sky filled with this miraculous display. As the mist descends upon him, touching his skin, it gradually parts to reveal his greatest love, Alicia. Struck with humble awe as the mist disappears and her image becomes the ALL, Joe's forehead sinks to the steering wheel and his eyes close.

\* \* \* FIVE YEARS LATER \* \* \*

The heavy beat of drums, mixing with the enchanting soprano voice of a Filipina singer, blasts from speakers throughout the Benedict Cooperative complex. The cleared main floor of the eatery is crowded with young dancers, and a few not so young. Everywhere there is color. From the hanging banners, to the dress of the dancers, to the blooming bougainvillea, to the food and drink-laden tables, color paints the day. Kitchens, both local and catered, are in high gear cranking out the favorite foods of the islands. Scattered roasting pits send up the musky sweet aroma of lechon from the spitted suckling pigs turning over them. And an occasional long bamboo cylinder containing tuba, or coconut wine, shows itself. It is the yearly fiesta in honor of Joseph Benedict, the late patron fixer of Manta-longon.

Like a glacier in the midst of a blossoming rain forest, Alicia's white, lustrous hair runs to the floral pinks and purples of her sundress as she surveys the activity of her famous kitchen. Noticing someone that she wishes to speak with, she clicks down the lacquered coco wood floor in high heels, her back straight, though carrying the Bible's threescore and ten years. Stopping next to her pancit specialist, Rose, she takes a bamboo sliver and spreads the pancit to examine it.

"This looks good, Rose. These large prawns are what Joe always said made the difference between good and regular pancit. This tray will not last five minutes once placed outside."

"Thank you ma'am, I wish he could be here," Rose replies.

Alicia looks from the pancit to Rose, smiles, and pats her hand.

"So do I Rose, so do I. We'll just have to let him know how good it is."

Nodding with a smile to all the help that looks on, Alicia walks out of the kitchen to look for Antonio.

As the night lights come on, Antonio brings the new Jeep around and



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Alicia, holding a small bag, gets in. The fiesta fades to silence as they drive out to Joe's grave and park. After slipping on sandals, Alicia joins Antonio in front of the Jeep. Taking her arm, Antonio steadies her the last few steps to the small stone marker just inside the iron grill fence. After dusting off the marker with her hand and chipping off the wax of others, Alicia removes three candles from her bag and gives one to Antonio. Using a match, she lights Antonio's candle and nods. Antonio drips wax on the marker and stands his candle in it. Calm is the night as the candle light slightly flickers across their faces. From that candle, Alicia lights the other two and places them beside the first. Cast in grace by the candlelight, they pray, touching the small stone frequently, gathering the spirit that is embedded there. They need only look at each other to affirm and behold that spirit. Joe's spirit. And, again, that which is inviolate, as he had predicted, nourishes them.



Driving back through the little patch of jungle and the Benedict Cooperative, Alicia and Antonio smile and wave to their friends and workers before parking the Jeep. Following Antonio into the house to rest before the main event and her speech, Alicia turns before shutting the door to admire the large rainbow colored banner strung over the courtyard. WELCOME TO THE JOSEPH BENEDICT FIESTA.

"My heavens," she thinks, "how he would have loved it. It is all gravy."

The door closes.