

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Charles Hayes
Return

PICKING HIS WAY THROUGH THE DARKNESS of the banana palms near the Philippine Sea shore of Guiwang, Cebu, Carloi approaches the white cinder block house at the edge of the jungle. Although hating himself for spying, he must answer the question that has troubled him for some time: is his wife having an affair with the white foreigner that lives here?

Leaving the cover of the banana trees, he studies the stars and remembers how he and Rosa led their tribe of Sama-Bajau sea gypsies by the stars. And how those same stars married them and helped them raise a son. A son to assume their mantle of leadership and the lead banglo, or family boat, when they retired to the Cebu shore, still young. Trying to put his finger on when it began to change, Carloi remembers how they were quick to adjust to living ashore, yet continued to live from the sea with their knowledge of the fish runs and a good outrigger. How together they pulled nets of tuna from the dangerous deeper waters and celebrated with love in the isolated island coves afterward. Feeling a sudden wave of shame, Carloi must remember how it's been lately before he loses his will to spy on his wife. How his age began to show and a younger Rosa seemed restless. Then came the little tell tale signs of cheating: fuzzy explanations, unexpected absences, and reports from friends that Rosa was seen in this area. And Carloi's own sighting of her and the foreigner just yesterday at an eatery in Dalaguete while he was passing on the bus. Finally tonight, another disappearance.

Rosa, telling herself that this must be the last time, looks both ways along the highway to make sure she is unobserved. Stepping off the paved road onto a grassy path that cuts through the banana trees to Robert's place, Rosa wonders how she ever became involved with the American. Maybe it was his older looks and secure manner or maybe she was just feeling a little unappreciated at home. Whatever the reason, this whole thing is just too dangerous. The American knows and understands nothing about her.....except maybe her hormones. And he is not the kind to put any stock in to begin with. Let alone jeopardize her marriage for. This will be it. Having tried yesterday to end it in Dalaguete, she was met with manicured resistance and somehow convinced to come by his place this evening for a final goodbye. She knows what to expect, and for the life of her, she can't help feeling excited by it. But this time she has to choke it.

Quickly covering the trail through the trees and the wet growth from a recent rain, Rosa enters the brightly lit porch. Feeling her heart in her throat and hating the bright light, she kicks off her sandals and pecks on the door. Listening to the night sounds of the jungle, she tells herself to be steady in her resolve.

Watching the door open to reveal a candle lit Robert, dressed only in Navy shorts, Rosa catches the scent of Jasmine as soothing twangs of sitar music drift from a back room. Despite these nice extras of the tropical evening Rosa tries to buck up and keep her mind in gear but Robert turns the porch light off and quickly engages her with another kind of attention.

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"Rosa, how beautiful you are, glistened by the night dew. But you're wet, sit down, I'll get a towel."

Moving to a chair, Rosa sits and at the same time realizes that she likes the nice things that Robert has. It is nice here amongst his things. And comfortable, despite her resolve.

Returning with a towel, Robert pats down her hair then moves lower to her arms, lightly massaging as he goes. Dropping to his knees, he lifts her feet to his lap and gently brushes them off before continuing up to her short clad thighs.

Seeing him touch her with such care while her feet touch his firm warmth, Rosa's resolve begins to slip. Sensations that ask for a little more time tell her that a little longer will hurt nothing. Maybe even make it easier.

Dropping the towel, Robert gently spreads her legs and kisses each thigh. Lifting his eyes to her face, he sees in her expression what he has always been good at delivering. Taking her hands and rising, Robert looks upon this lovely creature, primed and sculpted to a tee.

"Come Rosa," he says, "let us say goodbye like the world is ending."

An uncommon need leading her, Rosa simply pulls to.

Lowering his eyes from the sky, Carloi gauges the distance to the house and its dark exterior. From one of the back windows a soft light shows below the partly raised shade. Thinking that this is his destination, Carloi circles the small yard and comes to the window with the jungle at his back. Fully committed now, all his senses center on the moment. Crouching below the window, he at first hears only the sounds of a stringed instrument. But on the shade above him a shadow expands and contracts. Or perhaps two shadows seesawing into one. When the music suddenly stops and begins to recycle he hears the soft kittenish sounds of a woman's abandonment mixed with the sounds of a man's voice. No doubt left in his mind, Carloi knows the woman is Rosa. His heart turned numb, he stands and looks in the un-shaded lower part of the window. On a large bed, cast against the flickering glow of a nightstand candle, Rosa and the foreigner are coupled in a delirium of pleasure. Braced by pillows under her lower spine, making herself more accessible, Rosa whimpers and cajoles the foreigner mounted atop her to do what must be done while he, at the same time, coaxes her to come.

Shattered to an almost surreal consciousness at first, Carloi just stares, frozen. But as the death throes of his spirit surfaces, a primal scream like none this jungle has ever heard issues from his soul. And for a moment the night is dead.

As the window implodes in a shower of glass and bamboo and the shade crashes to the floor, Robert and Rosa leap from the bed and run from the room, leaving a bloody Carloi halfway in the window. Falling back to the ground, Carloi does not hear the jungle come alive with sound as Rosa flees naked into the banana trees. And Robert locks himself in the toilet with a bolo, praying that Carloi will go after Rosa.

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Slowly becoming aware of the jungle panic, and having glimpsed his naked wife sprinting towards the highway, Carloi begins to crawl toward the banana trees, leaving a trail of blood as he goes. Reaching the edge of the trees, he stands and again looks to the sky. Offering a Shepherd's staff instead of his usual hunter's bow, Orion boldly stands out. Clearly seeing the sign but unable to consider what it portends, Carloi disappears into the banana trees, tortured by a new reality. Now he knows.

Quickly crossing the dark highway and disappearing into the rice paddies on the other side, Rosa follows the network of paddy dikes to the small track that leads to the Sea and their native cottage. So far unseen, she manages to get to the coconut grove and into their home without being exposed to others. Quickly she throws on some clothes and dons a pair of slippers while stuffing some essentials in a nipa carrying case. Grabbing a paddle by the door on her way out, she throws her stuff in the smaller outrigger, unties it, and prepares to drag it across the sand to the water. But which direction does she go once she hits the water? Suddenly feeling overwhelmed as her actions begin to catch up, Rosa looks to the stars..... and stops. A thousand different directions are there in their lights, all leading to the same place...where she stands. A hundred baths in salty brine nor a thousand leagues of ocean can erase the humiliation and regret that she feels. Nor the terrible mistake that she has made. There is no place to go to escape what is. Looking to the Sea and the fuzzy glow of Tagbilaran across the Bohol Strait, Rosa sees that her only chance to live with any face is to stay and live with what she has done. The stars will be a party to nothing else. With surrender and guilt filling her up, Rosa re-ties the outrigger, shoulders her belongings and returns to the cottage. Stowing the gear inside the door, she sits on the stoop and looks to where the stars are un-obscured by the palms. Carloi will come from that direction.

The distant sound of a barking dog signals that the quiet of the night is starting to ebb. The call of cocks follow not much later, sending and receiving battle cries from all over the barangay. And the lights of lanterns grow larger upon the dark waters of the Sea as the night fishermen paddle towards shore.

Having dozed fitfully, Rosa lifts her head from her knees to see a blood covered Carloi shuffling through the grove toward the Sea. Ignoring, or not seeing her, he passes, stripping his ragged clothes as he goes to the water. Naked and knee deep in the tide, Carloi tumbles forward and rolls to his back. Floating on the gentle swells of an incoming tide, he uses what's left of his shirt to wipe his wounds, sometimes screaming as he does so.

Having followed him to the beach, Rosa stands by the boats and watches until he stands and walks from the water, again ignoring or not seeing her. Passing close enough for Rosa to see his cuts, Carloi stumbles to the cottage and closes the door. Shaken from her guilt, Rosa runs toward the Barangay Hall screaming for help.

After a hundred and thirty stitches and a trip to Dalaguete to purchase them and the necessary medicine, Rosa and the doctor leave an unconscious Carloi and walk the right-a-way track leading to the highway. Rosa learns what to do and is assured by the doctor that she is capable. And that the clinic is always free, though equipment and medicines, many

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times, must be purchased elsewhere.....if they can be found at all. Knowing only that the cuts were not the result of an assault, the doctor does not press Rosa for details. Rosa's obvious fragile condition tells her that details might be an uncomfortable place to go. And her position as the Barangay Clinic Physician does not require it. Let sleeping dogs lie. The pair say good-bye and part company at the highway where the doctor catches a trisikad for the short ride to the clinic.

Returning to their cottage, Rosa can see that Carloi's fever is still bad. It likely will take a steady dose of antibiotics to break. Luckily they are readily available over the counter and cheap. But still there is her guilt. What can she be to her husband after such a betrayal? That is their sickness that has no medicine.

Coming ashore in the late afternoon after dropping a nice load of tuna off at their distributors, Rosa tries again to establish something resembling a relationship with the man that she lives with.

"A good day for tuna, huh, Carloi?"

Carloi, after looking at his beautiful wife under the large conical hat, simply replies over his shoulder, "It was OK."

At least receiving a reply to her comment, Rosa senses an opportunity.

"You know, Carloi, it reminds me a little of those times when we first left the tribe and came ashore."

Having spoken more in these two sentences than she has spoken in a day, Rosa holds her breath as she watches Carloi, his back turned, roll a small net.

Finished with the net, Carloi pauses in his movements before turning to face Rosa. Her hat now in hand and rich black hair down over deeply tanned shoulders, framed by a Sea alive with sun diamonds, Rosa is the girl he chose to ride the lead banglo with many years before. Holding her eyes for the first time since he almost died, Carloi says, "Me too ... but that was before."

Knowing what he means but seeing an opening that might not come again, Rosa says, "Before what, Carloi?"

His gaze not faltering, and seeing that determination in Rosa's eyes that first drew him all that time ago, Carloi simply replies, "You know what."

"Say it, Carloi."

"No."

"Say it!"

"I can't!"

"Yes you can. Say it!!!"

"Before you fucked the American!!!!"

Sinking to the hull of a neighbor's blocked dugout, Rosa looks away

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but can feel the fire of Carloi's glare.

"Yes," she says, "and I want to die each time I remember it."

As if planted in the sand around his feet, Carloi drops the net, clenches his fists and looks to the small lump of Siquijor on the horizon.

"How many times?"

"Three."

"All that time," says Carloi, "and only three times?"

Beginning to cry, Rosa says, "Yes, I wanted to surprise you. I was doing his house work, trying to make enough money to buy a gift for our son's wedding anniversary. Robert.....the American was very persistent. He knew what he was doing. And I was shamefully negligent of myself..... and you. I would do anything to make it just a bad dream. And then I would still want to die."

Moving to sit on the gunwale of another boat, Carloi fingers the deep scars across his chest and stomach. Glancing at Rosa before letting his eyes drift afar, Carloi finally asks the hardest of all to know.

"Did you love him?"

"No! I knew he was no good, a predator. I hear he is since deported for young girls in the city, and rightly so. He fascinated me with his stories and his things. But I knew he was a snake. Please Carloi, give us another chance. I am sorry.....by God above, I am sorry."

Shaking his head, Carloi stands and walks toward their cottage before turning to face Rosa.

"I wanted to kill you."

Rising from the dugout, Rosa moves toward Carloi as if to shorten the chances of rejection. Searching his open but haggard face, Rosa begs for her "self" in the simplest way she knows how.

"Please don't kill me Carloi. Forgive me."

As evening rapidly settles, Carloi, turning his back again, replies, "If I can."

Ominous skies, rough seas, and a signal 3 storm flag flapping over the Barangay Hall tell Carloi and Rosa that there will be no fishing today. A typhoon cutting across the Northern tip of Mindanao will soon hit Cebu and its Central Visayan neighbors. Already the wind and rain bends the palms, whipping their fronds like green crepe.

The day is spent collecting provisions and moving the boats to within the grove. Their native cottage, anchored in concrete footers, and partially protected within the trees, will or will not make it. Such risks come with the territory of airy economical housing.

As evening closes in, the power goes and the winds start to howl. Sitting on separate sleeping mats, nursing a large candle on the floor between them, Carloi and Rosa watch a corner of their roof disappear. The sound of the Sea slapping against the footers below their windward main window signals that the storm is at its peak. Suddenly a large coconut

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crashes through the grass roof and smashes to the floor, crushing the candle. Groping in the dark, Carloi locates another, lights it, and unsheathes his bolo. Bracing the nut on their heavy breakfast table, he shears the end off with two swings of the blade and offers the fruit to Rosa. With a nod, Rosa turns it up and drinks thirstily. Wiping her mouth on the back of her hand, she returns the fruit to Carloi, watching as he drains it and rolls the hull to a corner.

With not much to do but wait out the storm, they draw closer. Like his recent brush with Rosa on the beach, Carloi is reminded of the resourceful woman that helped him and their tribe survive. Finding it harder to condemn her for being human, he sees a woman of poise and beauty that would be coveted anywhere. How could he have been blind to that?

Rosa, watching the soft light play on her husband's weathered face and its character, forgets the winds and missing pieces of roof. More important than that, she knows that she and Carloi will survive. But, as she moves her eyes over his jagged scars, she also knows that this kind of man will only happen once. When she was a girl only in her teens she knew that. Now a woman, it can be no different.

Long into the night, as the winds begin to abate and the Sea recedes, a jeep's headlights swing across Carloi and Rosa's coconut grove. Knowing who it must be, they do not move. Wrapped in separate blankets, they hear the Barangay Captain call out, "Is everybody OK here?"

A little sad that the official end of the storm has arrived, but thankful just the same, Rosa yells back, "A little chilled is all."

Seeing the touch of melancholy in Rosa's eyes and feeling much the same, Carloi shouts, "Thank you, Captain. We are fine."

As the jeep's headlights swing back toward the highway and the Sea and sky crack with a pale glow, Carloi stands and looks down at his wife.

Lifting her eyes to her husband, Rosa is reminded of his morning stance over the banglo bed before going aft to shoot their tack. Lowering her eyes, she moves the candle and pulls the mats together while Carloi watches. Raising her eyes to him once more, Rosa follows the flickering light on his face and opens her blanket.

The beautiful girl that added a splash of brown to the coral colored waters of a lagoon is still there, treading water for him standing above. Going down, how lovely it all is. How nice to be back.