

Charles Hayes

Pay Back (Before "Return")

Having just disembarked from a crowded bus along the only highway, I look down the scrub covered hill at Carloi's dogged labor as I try to unwind from the long cramped ride from the city. Beneath the conical hat his face is hidden in shadow but his upper body glistens brightly under the high sun, showing not an ounce of waste. Slogging along behind the plow and carabao, or water buffalo, its reins wrapped around his neck, he turns the black packed sod. Out on one edge of his future corn patch tall coconut and smaller banana palms run to the rocky shore of the Philippine Sea. A beautiful parcel of coastline. To see such effort as his always gets my attention in ways that bemuse me. Funny stuff: values, character, and the like. Things that are not given much schriff in my rounds. Smiling to myself, I wonder at the labor such work requires and think that I'm glad it isn't me behind that plow. What must it take to drive a man to undertake such work when a little scam here or there can reap far better rewards? Oh well, I tell myself, it takes all kinds to provide the scores for people like me.

I have come here to snooker Carloi out of his Alcoy property because I know that he is in dire straits. His only child, a son, has cancer and Carloi has no money for his treatment, which is relatively easy and most times successful. Without it the boy will die. I have waited for my opportunity to get a piece of this particular coastline and now is my chance.

As I reach down for my pack I notice a striking Filipina emerge from the trees on the far side of the field carrying a bucket of water. That would be Rosa, Carloi's wife, mother of the sick child. Carrying herself like the dirt under her feet is formed for her step, she closes to her husband. My my, what a piece of craft she is. This purchase could be a real pleasure. Riveted by her beauty and the thoughts that it engenders, my pack slips from my fingers as I watch their encounter. From the same dipper of water that they share to their parting embrace when the break is over, an aura of inert passion surrounds them. I can tell that it will be easier to bring down the price of the property than to break through that aura. But then, I am very good at what I do. Even though I am a foreigner my pesos speak as well as others'. And I have my finders who keep me informed. My nice properties along the coast have shown me the value of a good finder.

As Rosa disappears back into the trees, Carloi picks up the reins of the carabao, takes off his hat, and wipes his brow. When he looks up to gauge the sun he notices me and waves. His bright smile tells me that Dan Chan, one of my finders, has done his job. Carloi's visions of sugarplums and a well child have been properly seeded. Now only to clip them without ruin.

Hefting my pack and working my way down a small path through the scrub, I emerge onto the field, hand outstretched and all smiles.

"Nice work, Carloi," I say, sweeping my arm toward the furrows. "I am Tony, Dan Chan's friend, and the man who is going to change your life for the better."

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Carloi's smile fades a little as his eyes hold mine and we shake hands. My little introductory pitch must have led him to cut to the chase.

"This is better property than your others," he says. "Dan Chan has told me of your business and I know the old owners of those properties. A piece of my shoreline with a home lot and a right-of-way to the highway will not come for the same price as your other shore lots. But I will deal with you."

Thinking that this guy speaks pretty good English for a farmer, my rosy picture of a good profit dims a little as I swiftly tack differently.

"Oh I know what you say and I am ready and willing to give you better than the others. We will work it out.....for the boy's sake."

Carloi, who had been studying the sky, as if his terms were somehow written there, quickly looks back at me and a shadow seems to pass within his look.

"You know about my son?"

Shrugging my shoulders, I say nothing as we face each other for several moments. As if the silence between us has ordained the course of this encounter, Carloi suddenly unhooks the plow, rolls up the reins, and stands shoulder to shoulder with the huge carabao. Looking to the tree line nearest the Sea where a string of grey smoke snakes to the sky, he says, "Come, it is time to eat. We will talk more there so my wife may be included."

Without waiting for my reply, Carloi leads the carabao away and I follow.

I have scored and we both know it. My touch is still sharp but women don't cut as easily as men. I hope the food is as good as her looks.



Rosa is not just your average Filipina housewife according to my finder, Dan Chan. A few years ago, just after graduating from Cebu University, she was selected to represent Alcoy in the Miss Cebu contest and finished third. As she shuffles food and drink through an adjoining kitchen door, for the sick kid I presume, her hair accentuates a backside figure even my practiced eye finds exceptional. Gleaming like the bright black coal seams that my dad showed me in a West Virginia coal mine when I was a kid, her long ponytail gently caresses an attractive derriere. Carloi either ignores or doesn't notice my interest but there is something about Rosa's eyes that tell me she knows of her effect.



Having just finished up a fine mid-day meal of ampalaya or bitter melon, kalabasa squash mixed with Bagio beans, and pork lechon, I am discovering that Rosa is the obstacle when it comes to getting my price. Carloi does not concur on anything with me until he has her approval. And Rosa confounds my many attempts to lay the tracks my way.

"What you offer is not fair," she says. "This beachfront lot is prime white sand beach and very close to one of the major beach resorts of Southern Cebu."

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Before I can reply Carloi says, "She is right. It's worth way more than you offer. If it were not for my son no price would be enough for me to let it go. But I must sell it, which you found out and now want to use in this business."

Abruptly standing from the table, Carloi continues, "Think about what is fair while I check on my carabao. We have a full load ahead this afternoon."

Carloi's exit leaves Rosa and me surrounded by the sounds of silence. A gecko chirps as it skitters up a wall, birds call among the palm fronds near the kitchen window, and the distant air horn of a Ceres bus sounds out on the highway, letting future passengers know of its coming. Thinking that this may be the time to see what extra I can get for being "fair" and feeling an uncommon urge toward Rosa I venture the supposition.

"You know Rosa, you are very good at helping your husband. And, of course, your little boy."

I let this remark sink in as Rosa sits straight backed looking me squarely in the eyes, her face a beautiful mask of repose, her eyes pools of awareness.

"There might be a way I can raise my price," I say.

"I know," she says. "You would have to multiply it by ten."

"You know what that way is?"

"You are a foreigner and on in years but some things just are. I have seen you look at me. I know."

"If I triple the price.....", I begin, but Rosa cuts me off.

"No, you must multiply it by ten."

"And you would go along with that?" I say.

"I would."

"What about Carloi?"

"That's none of your business," she says. "And you must sell the property to a Filipino and never come back to Alcoy."

Smiling and extending my hand across the table I say, "It's a deal. A very beautiful deal."

Rosa looks at my hand as if it is a curiosity then raises her eyes to mine without moving.

"You will not touch me until then. And only then."



Walled off from the common people, the luxury beach resort is the perfect place to sample Rosa and complete my purchase. Savoring the harvest to come, I decide on a little dip to snorkel the reef and loosen up a bit before she arrives. Entering the water amid the rainbow colored fish and coral, I dive and, at the same time, keep my eye on my suite where the money is stashed, and an iced bottle of nice white wine. Two cans of caviar, grace the wet bar. She is not well known this far North and that should

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make my sweet treat more pliable. Yes, this deal will certainly be one to remember. Picking a plumb from Carloi's tree adds a flavor impossible to get any other way. And the property is worth as much as it will cost me. The plum, however, is one of those gems that I consider inestimable.

Bobbing in the water, goggles back, with my own thoughts of sugar plums, I notice the gate guard swing the smaller pedestrian gate open to admit someone. It is Rosa and she is early. But who cares.

Carrying a small briefcase and wearing a short flowered shift with a yellow sash around the waist, high heeled straps, and a brilliant white bonnet over large sunglasses, she moves down the concrete walkway like she is walking an international runway. What a way she moves.

Splashing out of the water in haste I yell, "Rosa, it's me. I am so glad you are here!"

Turning to face the water, she removes her sunglasses, lifts her free hand to her hip, and watches me stumble out of the water and up to her. She does not speak.

"Come, come," I say, as I try to take her elbow, which she immediately withdraws. Taking the hint, anything to leave her beautiful feathers unruffled, I point to my suite and lead the way while talking over my shoulder. "Everything is prepared. The best."

Rosa suddenly pulls up and speaks for the first time.

"What is there to prepare? You do it and I let you.....after we count the money."

"God, you must be a harsh taskmaster with Carloi," I say as I lead on and open the suite. "Have a little wine. Nibble a little caviar."

"Do not speak of Carloi," Rosa says as we cross the threshold. "Leave the wine and fish eggs. I must count the money."

Resigning myself to the basics of our business, I clear the small dining table, lay out the stacks of money, and indicate a place for Rosa to sit. The picking of the plume, a main event enough, will more than suffice.

Removing her hat and glasses and placing them on the bar, Rosa crosses to the table and sits, briefly looking around. Seeing a large canopied bed perfectly framed by the open bedroom door, her review ends short and the coldness of her look bends to a wet warmth for an instant. Passing so quickly it might never have happened, the emotion is gone as Rosa opens her small case and removes the tax declaration for the property, signs it, and begins counting the money.

Still in my swimsuit, I don some slippers and pour myself a glass of wine. Might as well. I hate counting money and I know that it's all there.

Finishing her count and satisfied with the result, Rosa stands, kicks off her shoes and says, "Do you want to begin here or in the bed?"

"However you prefer," I say, removing my swimsuit to reveal my readiness.

"I do not prefer. But I can see that that is not necessary," Rosa says as she faces me, slips the sash, and drops the shift to her feet. Naked beauty

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incarnate, she turns her body and walks into the bedroom. The dark hair that flows down her brown back to touch those hollows of pleasure is a magnet that pulls hard. I follow.



The Bureau of Internal Revenue in Tabunok, a crowded extension of Cebu City, is one of my least favorite places in the Philippines. But it is a place that must be tolerated if one is to deal property on the Island of Cebu. And that is just the beginning. The actual titling of a piece of property is an even longer and more tedious process, which is why most people like me, and many others, skip it all together and wheel and deal with the far simpler transfer of a tax declaration.

Onerous lines snake back from the reception windows which is par for the BIR. With the inadequate air conditioning, the sweat drenched shirts and blouses of waiting people remind me of kewpie dolls wearing targets with no bull's eyes in a carnival game. Sustaining myself through this procedure, I imagine which ones would be the easiest to knock over with my deals. It is small comfort in the heat but amuses enough to finally get me to the window. Handing over the signed tax declaration to an underpaid and overworked middle aged woman wearing a nametag that says Gloria, I say, "Guiwang, Alcoy, I'd like to change this over to my name, palihug."

Hearing me say "please" in her own native dialect, Gloria looks to my face and smiles. Briefly nodding her recognition, she returns her attention to the computer and enters the search for the property. Working the keyboard rapidly, her smile begins to dim. The longer she searches the further her smile falls. Looking back up at me, Gloria says with as much sympathy as her job allows, "Sir, this property is registered to a Filipina American citizen married to an American National. I don't know who this Carlo and Rosa Santiago are but they are not the owners and can not convey this property. I am sorry. Next!"

"Now wait a minute," I say, about to come out of my skin, "I paid many pesos for this property. Are you telling me I got ripped off?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. It happens often. You should have come here first or used a lawyer. I wish I could help you but there is nothing I can do. Now please step aside. Next."

Livid with anger and ready to explode, I notice the security guard leave his post by the door and approach. Thinking I already have more than I can handle and need not add an arrest to it, I turn from the window and, as calm as one who is jumping out of their skin can be, walk to the exit. The guard, now back at his post, politely opens the door for me and touches his visor with his nightstick. Neither seeing nor feeling the crush of humanity on the street, nor smelling the clouds of diesel fumes that accost me, I stand there looking to the gutter, like an island in the middle of a river of people.



At sea, halfway between the Island of Cebu and the Zamboanga Peninsula, Carlo and Rosa stand in the bow of their banglo, or family boat, watching the brazen orange horizon as the sun rises. Strung out in the waters behind them, except for Dan Chan's liaison banglo off the port

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beam, are the many other banglos of this Sama-Bajau tribe of sea gypsies. Leaders of the tribe, Carloi and Rosa try to gauge the weather ahead and determine whether they make for the nearest land or push on to Zamboanga and the Sulu archipelago. Considering that they have been at sea for two days and are carrying big loads from their sting in Alcoy, Carloi decides on land, a little rest, and a celebration in a suitable lagoon on one of the thousands of islands that are sprinkled around the Philippine Sea. As celebratory flags are hoisted above the banglos, Carloi steers for the nearest lee and some fun. Tying off the rudder once the tack is set, Carloi looks to Rosa, who is watching him with knowing eyes.

"You know, it has been quite a score," Carloi says.

"Impossible without your sister's and rich American husband's place," replies Rosa. "Pretending to have a kid in such a place was easy. I would not even pretend at sea. The waters are an only child for me."

"For me as well," Carloi says as he looks back at the following boats and seems to consider things not of the sea. "Dan Chan is fat with his sweet vengeance after what that ass hole did to his cousin last year. Just fourteen. Bet she is enjoying the fruits of vengeance too."

"No doubt," Rosa says, "her life is changed and any sweetness that she can get is more than right."

Searching the eyes of his mate, Carloi asks, "What about you, Rosa, did you have any feelings about it?"

Moving to the seat just forward of the rudder bench, Rosa runs her toes up Carloi's large shorts and assumes a thoughtful pose.

"Not like you my dear. It was a very small matter."

Carloi, igniting like a snub fused firecracker, grabs her leg, laughing while she squeals, carries her to the sleeping mid-section of the banglo and dumps her on the many cushions there. After taking a moment to appraise her delightful surrender, Carloi follows her down amid their squeals and laughter. To these sounds of the gypsy sea, off the port beam, Dan Chan raises the privacy flag of a couple's embrace. And smiles.



