

CARDENAL MORENO

When Padre Martin Gonzalves vanished in the year of our Lord 1875, Governor General Diego De Los Rios sent me to investigate his disappearance in the town of Bayambang.

The trip took two weeks because of the village's considerable distance from the nearby municipality of Los Banos, as well as the unpaved, muddy dirt roads that I had to cross on foot.

Thankfully, we still had one of our delegates, an elderly mestiza named Doña Basilia, stationed in that backwater hamlet. Soft-spoken and gregarious, the old woman was relieved that another agent of the Governor General had received her somewhat rambling letter asking for aid.

"Señor, there is something evil happening in this town," the old widow said when we first met at her tottering farmhouse. "You must forgive the ambiguousness of my words, but they are always watching, always listening."

"What do you mean?"

"Padre Gonzalves was murdered. I saw it with my own eyes."

Our suspicions were correct. I could only pray that the old man did not suffer much. Though we had not seen each other for twenty years, he had been responsible for my upbringing during his tenure as headmaster of the San Sebastian orphanage. Without him, I would be no better

than an illiterate peasant begging for scraps. However, I could not help but wonder why Padre Gonzalves chose to serve in this unremarkable village instead of retiring in the Basque countryside.

What was he looking for in Bayambang?

"Tell me everything," I asked Doña Basilia.

"There are insurrectionists hiding in the forest," she replied. "The same ones who have been burning churches and murdering priests all over the province."

"How many?"

"A hundred, perhaps more."

"What about the townsfolk? Are there any sympathizers?"

"Not by choice, I can assure you. When the rebels came down from the hills, they dragged Padre Gonzalves out of the church. Afterward, those savages gathered all of the villagers, including myself, and made us watch."

Doña Basilia drew in a ragged breath.

"It was madness," she said, choking back a sob. "They stripped off his clothes, tortured him, did terrible things that made him cry out for his mother. While all of this was happening, their leader stepped forward and declared our village the birthplace of a new republic."

"Did you see his face?"

"Unfortunately not," Doña Basilia replied. "The man wore a wooden mask that looked like the skull of a water buffalo. He said that our church was an affront against the old ways, that Padre Gonzalves had to be sacrificed to

appease the *diwata* dwelling in the woods.”

Blasphemy, I thought upon hearing the name that the natives had given to the forgotten gods of the land, the gods of wind and rain, of brooks and rivers, of flame and shadow. Not only were these insurgents rebelling against Spain, they were also rebelling against God Himself.

Although Doña Basilia’s account seemed genuine, I needed more proof.

After all, I was sent to Bayambang to gather information regarding the fate of Padre Gonzalves and to report any unusual activity in the surrounding area. The Governor General believed that my Moorish complexion would help me blend in with the townsfolk. Although my father was of Austrian stock, my mother was a *mujer indigena*. I inherited nothing from the wayward galleon merchant named Heinrich Muller besides his pointed nose and square jaw.

My skin and hair, like my dead mother, Leonor Castaneda, are quite dark.

With some reluctance, Doña Basilia informed me of the rituals that the rebels had enforced upon the town. During the apex of the summer solstice, the villagers would gather a portion of their crops and livestock to offer before the effigy of a goddess called Dayang Masalanta.

Regrettably, although I was familiar with the folk customs still practiced in secrecy by this archipelago’s superstitious natives, I had never heard of such a deity or its devotees.

I recalled then the rumors that hounded Padre Gonzalves throughout his stewardship of the San Sebastian orphanage. According to hearsay, the old man had an obsession with the occult history of this country and had collected tomes of loathsome and forbidden knowledge. All nonsense, I thought, baseless stories designed to smear an honorable and upright servant of God.

Nonetheless, if these were merely idle gossip, then why did the Archdiocese of Manila confiscate the private library of Padre Gonzalves and kept it under lock and key? Did his search for ancient mysteries and hidden wisdom lead him to a grisly demise in this solitary village?

Whatever the reasons were, I would only know the truth after discovering his killers.

Preparations had already begun for the midsummer rites, and Doña Basilia suggested that we join the morning festivities. This would give her a chance to introduce me as her estranged nephew who was visiting from Manila. However, the old woman also warned that the townsfolk had become suspicious of outsiders. Should they learn about my purpose, she advised me to flee.

At noon, the brass bells of the town's church began to peal. Almost immediately, the families of Bayambang started congregating at the village's central square. Confused by the change in the townsfolk's demeanor, I asked Doña Basilia what was happening.

"We must hurry," she whispered. "The Katalonan is calling."

"Who?"

“The priest of the *diwata*.”

Upon arriving at the town square, I saw a mob gathered outside a disused chapel made of sun-dried limestone bricks, its walls laden with moss and unkempt vine trellises.

From a distance came a rapturous cacophony of wails and shrieks. The mob gathered in the street parted—clearing a path for a procession of writhing, wild-eyed women, black shawls flying around their shoulders, garlands of colorful flowers adorning their long, streaming hair.

From behind these celebrants followed a throng of musicians whose faces were concealed under hoods of tattered sackcloth; each one held a syrinx made from bleached bone, playing an utterly dissonant motif that sounded like a mockery of the hymns sung during Sunday mass.

A wooden cart drawn by a water buffalo followed the bacchanalian parade. Like the other carousers, this wagon was also decked out in flowery garlands. Five men armed with hunting rifles and bolo knives walked alongside the slow-moving carriage, guarding some sort of cargo hidden aboard. As it came closer, I saw a naked, shrieking boy, probably no more than a year old, lying on a wicker basket cushioned with feathers and leaves. The infant was placed at the back like a bizarre, living caricature of a newborn Christ, displayed for all the world to see.

“What will they do with that child?” I asked Doña Basilia.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “This hasn’t happened before.”

None of the townsfolk seemed remotely concerned. Some of them even clapped and cheered. I remembered then what Doña Basilia had said regarding the sacrificial animals that were offered to the *diwata*. Instinctively, I moved forward, ready to snatch that pitiful, mewling babe from his wicker cradle. The old woman, however, grabbed my shirt and pulled me back.

“Señor, please. Don’t do anything drastic.”

“They’re going to kill that boy, aren’t they?”

Doña Basilia fell silent for a moment before a dawning look of horror emerged on her kindly face. She put a trembling hand over her mouth, unable to comprehend the awful reality, and I could see moisture forming at the edges of her eyes. “*Dios mío*,” she murmured. “*Dios mío*.”

Fists clenched, I tried to slow down my breathing. The urge to run toward the carriage was overwhelming, but had to weigh my options. Creating a commotion would expose my identity and place Doña Basilia in a dangerous situation. I did not want to save a life at the expense of another.

“You have to go,” I said to Doña Basilia. “Quickly.”

“What?”

“Steal a horse if you must. Don’t stop riding until you reach Los Banos.”

“But what about you?”

“If you don’t hear from me within a week,” I replied, “then you must send a message to the Governor General. Tell him everything that’s happening here.”

“I can’t just leave you alone.”

Frustrated, I grabbed the widow by the shoulders, shook her.

“Do as I say, Señora. I’m begging you.”

Pursing her lips, Doña Basilia nodded, and my grip slackened.

“God be with you, *mi hijo*,” she said, making the sign of the cross. Afterward, she turned around and hobbled away as fast as her aged legs could take her.

With Doña Basilia out of harm’s way, I could concentrate on the task at hand. The wagon slowed down to a crawl and stopped before the stone steps of the church, and the armed guards closed ranks around it. Just then, the doors of the church groaned and swung open.

And the high priest of the *diwata* stepped forth into the sweltering midday heat.

A man wearing a white robe stood before the crowd, his face hidden behind a lacquered wooden mask that resembled the skull of a water buffalo. Like a prince from some ancient myth, the Katalonan descended the church steps and approached the carriage, accompanied by the piercing, otherworldly notes of panpipes and the raucous cheering of the villagers.

Desperate, I tried to force my way past the mob.

The Katalonan took the baby from its wicker cradle and handled it gently in his arms. With a ceremonial flourish, he then retreated into the church along with his retinue.

The denizens of Bayambang, consumed by the orgiastic atmosphere, surged into the chapel, and I could do nothing but watch from the overcrowded entrance, helpless, alone amidst a horde of men gone mad.

Ahead, the Katalonan placed the child atop a wooden altar where the monstrance and the chalice containing Christ's flesh and blood once stood. The noise inside the tabernacle had grown to a resounding, feverish pitch; the townsfolk then chanted a single, mysterious phrase:

"Dayang Masalanta! Purihin s'ya! Purihin!"

When I saw the high priest draw a dagger from the leather scabbard sheathed at his waist, something snapped within me – a thin thread of sanity keeping my reason from buckling.

A howl erupted from my throat, animalistic and enraged, while I pushed and kicked the people blocking the central aisle. "Stop!" I screamed. "In God's name, stop!" Two male villagers tried to prevent my passage to the altar; the first one, I punched in the face, breaking the bridge of his nose; I maimed another by stomping on his knee with an oblique kick, and the brittle crunch of bone preceded his agonized yelping; afterward, I pulled the hunting knife tied to his belt.

I left the crippled peasant spasming on the floor, then grabbed some random, shrieking woman whose hair I yanked back before placing the blade across her throat.

"Stay back, you hijos de perra!"

Perhaps the sight of such a random, inexplicable act of violence had stunned the celebrants, for they quickly fell

silent and backed away, creating a wide berth as I dragged my hostage to the altar where the Katalonan and his guards remained standing.

“Have you people gone mad?” I shouted at everyone inside the church. The high priest’s guards surrounded him and the crying infant, forming a wall, and pointed their hunting rifles at me. “Are you not Christians?” I asked, keeping my bewildered captive close. “What devilry has taken over you, that you would willingly give your children over to this fiend?”

Instead of answering, the crowd merely stared, not with hostile glares, but with a strange, intense curiosity; even the Katalonan and his guards kept silent, not moving an inch.

It was as if they were waiting for me to say something, do something.

But what?

A few awful, unnerving seconds passed, with no one speaking, no one making a move at all. I knew, in that instant, that no amount of pleading would convince these fanatics, these cultists, to stop their sacrilege. This would only end in bloodshed, one way or another.

“If you must sacrifice somebody, then I beg you,” I said, on the verge of tears. “Spare the boy. Take me instead. I offer myself willingly to your goddess. My blood for his.”

Trembling, I tossed the knife aside, then pushed my hostage toward the crowd. I saw her scramble back to the safety of her fellow villagers while I knelt on the floor, hands raised, ready for whatever insidious, horrifying fate these heretics held in store. The Katalonan brushed aside

his guardsmen, crossed his arms, then stood inches away. My gaze did not waver as I met his stare through the holes in his mask – bloodshot, unsightly eyes greeted me, not with malice but with a certain, unsurprised satisfaction, as if he were expecting this outcome all along.

To my astonishment, the Katalonan laughed. He took off his mask and held his quaking sides, as if seeing me on the floor, kneeling in supplication, was too hilarious for him to handle. The congregants inside the church also started laughing. One of the guardsmen lifted the infant from the church altar and handed him over to a woman who, I assumed, was the child's mother.

Then, from the crowd, a familiar face emerged.

It was Doña Basilia.

“Oh, my poor boy,” she said. “Did you really think we would harm a child?”

Confused, I gawked at her, unable to speak.

“We are not savages, Señor,” Doña Basilia replied. “Heathens, yes. But not ignorant ones, not like the men you serve. Our gods would never ask for the blood of an infant. What would they gain from such a paltry sacrifice? No, if blood must be offered, then it should be given willingly.”

Disbelief quickly flared into sheer, mindless rage. Springing forward, I lunged at Doña Basilia, hands outstretched, ready to choke her, crush her windpipe, bludgeon her face against the stone pillars. A gunshot rang out. Before I could reach the old woman, white hot, blinding pain bloomed across the left side of my torso. Howling in agony, I clutched the bleeding wound.

"You bitch!" I shouted at Doña Basilia. "I'll kill you, I'll fucking kill you!"

"Manners," she replied, shaking her head; turning, she then told the guardsmen in a curt, matter-of-fact tone: "Hurt him, but make sure he doesn't bleed out. I need him alive."

I was still screaming when the sentries started viciously beating me with the gunstocks of their rifles. Before passing out completely, I heard Doña Basilia say:

"Welcome home," I saw her smile. "We have been waiting for you, *mi hijo*."

After regaining my senses, I found myself lying on the altar.

The world was a blur of indistinct shapes that floated in and out of sight. As the figures coalesced into distinguishable forms, I caught a whiff of the familiar, musty scent of sandalwood and incense. Around me, the townsfolk had gathered: men and women, young and old, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, all of them watching, waiting. Yet there was no animosity glimmering in their eyes, no hatred in their expressions. There was only joy. And love.

As if they were watching a newborn about to be baptized.

"What's going on?" I slurred.

"Something wonderful," a voice spoke from above. I felt slim fingers running gently across my hair as the unseen

woman continued to talk. "Do not be afraid, child. The pain will only last for a moment. Here, in this place, you will receive your birthright."

Doña Basilia?

She walked in front of me, her face concealed behind a horned wooden mask. No longer did I feel anger toward the old woman, only a deep, indescribable sense of loss, of disappointment.

"You're the Katalonan," I muttered.

"Why do you hate us so, Francisco Muller?" Doña Basilia asked.

How did she know my real name?

I had not given it to anyone besides the Governor General.

"We are the same, you and I, born from a bloodline older than the House of Habsburg," Doña Basilia continued. "You could have been a prince serving the dictates of our merciful Mother. Instead, you skulk around like a filthy rat, doing the bidding of thieves and rapists."

"I'm nothing like you."

"Oh, but that's where you're mistaken," she replied. "You are every bit the son of our beloved Leonor. You have her eyes, her lips, the tawny color of her skin. She may have left Bayambang a long time ago, but I will never forget her quiet beauty that rivaled the sunset."

"You knew my mother?"

"I did, dear nephew," Doña Basilia answered, holding my face. "Though Leonor spurned her divine lineage, she

was still my sister. You have no idea how long I've waited to see her again, and now my prayers have been answered. Oh, precious Mother, she has come home at last."

"You're lying."

"I wasn't certain at first," the widow continued. "When Padre Gonzalves spoke of you, I thought it too good to be true, too coincidental. A half-breed agent of the Guardia Civil? One whom he had raised in an orphanage? Ridiculous. But that all changed when I watched you save that little boy. Right then, I knew you were one of us. Why else would you do such a thing?"

"Anyone would've done the same," I grunted, wincing, trying to move.

From the other end of the aisle, a masked acolyte approached, carrying a bundle of rags in his arms—or at least that's what it seemed like at first glance, until the clump of cloth started moving, writhing, as if it were hiding a foul, noisome creature within its folds.

"I've yet to see a white man lay down his life for an *indio*, especially a child," Doña Basilia replied. Pain flared up along the entire length of my body, and I groaned like a dying animal.

"We shall purge the blood of the infidels from your veins and replace it with the Mother's seed. She will reshape you as a reward for your selflessness. Know that Dayang Masalanta accepts your offering. You are among your true family now, Francisco, Son of Leonor."

Doña Basilia placed her index finger atop my heaving solar plexus and traced a line. I felt a sliver of intense,

piercing pain when a gash inexplicably appeared on my stomach. Blood seeped out as the wound parted and revealed the glistening organs beneath. The old woman continued her vile and unnatural surgery, using no blades to make her incision, only her bare fingers.

The acolyte carrying the mysterious bundle of cloth approached the altar, and as he did so, the clump twitched and writhed violently. Small black tendrils wriggled from beneath flaps of crusty rags. Though sheer, unbearable agony flayed my senses like a barbed whip, I shrieked when I caught a glimpse of the *thing* that they wanted to put inside my body.

“No! God, please! No!”

It was spherical, the size of a man’s fist, with slick, jet-black skin that had the sickening smoothness of a catfish’s body, with tentacles protruding from every angle. Doña Basilia took it from the suppliant’s hands. She lifted it and was greeted with cries of adulation.

“*Pagpalain ka, Cardenal Moreno,*” Doña Basilia shouted. “Long may you reign!”

I do not recall what happened next. Mercifully, perhaps I had blacked out before the grotesque procedure could be completed. There is only so much horror that a mind can endure before it breaks completely, shattered by torments inconceivable. But in this darkness, this warm and endless abyss of absolute non-existence, I felt no pain, only rapturous pleasure.

And that was when I heard her voice.

The voice of the Mother.

I saw her lying on a bed of monstrous fungi hidden in the bowels of the earth, a pulsating mass of fleshy globules and ropy intestines. She was beautiful, a sight more marvelous than the Madonna of Bruges. Around the Mother's bloated womb squirmed thousands of her misshapen children, wailing for milk, basking in her insidious warmth. These were my brothers and sisters, my kith and kin. Oh, how foolish I was! Finally, in my mother's hometown, I was no longer an unwanted bastard, but the scion of an ancient, noble people.

I opened my eyes and saw the congregants in the church.

They were weeping with rapturous joy.

"*Dayang Masalanta,*" I replied. "*Purihin s'ya. Purihin.*"

After a long, long time of searching, I was, at last, home.



Illustrated by Mina Citlali