

ENCOUNTER

Engkwentro

Zelda Soriano

"A child is really like that. Our long separation from her has probably affected her. Imagine, we did not visit her for almost five years. Mother said Ineng almost could not remember how we looked. It seems she has not gotten used to being our daughter."

Pablo felt ashamed of himself as he asked himself: maybe I have yet to get used to being a father?

Gina invited her husband to lie down. Pablo did as asked.

"Ka Gina..." Gina yawned to show that she was already sleepy. Pablo did not continue. He felt lonely. The night was going to be long and he must answer a thousand and one questions in his mind. He wanted to get angry because his wife had dropped off to sleep; he wanted to rouse her, and snarl at her: "Don't you understand, I am having a hard time learning to be a father."

Ineng did not want to eat with him that morning. Pablo told Gina about the child's tantrum. Gina sweetly tried to win her first daughter's affection. "Ineng, let us eat together, okay?" The child approached the mother and sat at the table, sniffing.

Pablo found himself facing his daughter at the table. He could not look the child in the eye. He was full of misgivings. This uncertainty he did not feel even when the METROCOM soldiers pursued them after the dispersal of the Luneta rally in 1972.

His apprehension now was heavier than in 1973 when he linked arms with the striking workers at the Batangas Sugar Central and they were almost run over by the truck carrying scabs and goons. This was different from the anxiety he felt in 1973 when he escaped with seven others from Camp Vicente Lim. In a way the cause of his fear then was concrete. There were soldiers around the cell and any wrong move would give them away and they would be shot. But this time there was no enemy nearby and he was nervous.

Pablo wanted to call the name of his daughter, ask her why she did not want to obey him. But he became more nervous when he thought of what she might say in response.

After lunch Pablo found Ineng inside the hut writing. He leaned his M16 on the wall to put his arms around her shoulders. The child struggled with all her might to break free of the arms of her father, crumpled the paper she was writing on and ran swiftly away. Pablo followed his daughter with his eyes. Afterwards, he picked up the crumpled paper, stared at the drawing of a woman with a child. The crooked lines of the letters introducing the crude figures of the persons in the drawing read: "*This is my Mother, this is Ineng.*"

Pablo suppressed his tears despite the sharp pain he was feeling. He felt even sadder than when he had to give up his dream of becoming a soldier because he was born short. Or when he was not accepted as a worker in the blanket and mosquito net factory because his father did not vote for the

candidate of the capitalist owner in the election.

He was tired of thinking. Earlier in the afternoon he decided to talk to the child.

"Daughter, why are you not talking to your father?" Ineng did not answer. "Are you angry with father?" Ineng buried her face deeper on her breast.

Pablo convinced himself that his child was only timid in his presence. "I am your father, after all. Did you hear my voice over the radio? Remember when you were made a hostage by the soldiers in Batangas? They took you to their camp and they made you call your father over the radio. We should surrender so we could get you back."

Ineng raised her face a little. Pablo felt encouraged. "Were you afraid then, child? You know I was worried sick for you then. I could not work well because I kept thinking about you. I even called you over the radio. I asked the soldiers not to make you suffer when it was me they wanted. You are young, why turn on you when I am their enemy?"

Ineng stared at him as if studying his face.

"Bear with me, child. Because of me your life is affected. You had to stop studying because they took you. In addition, we are always apart. We never played with each other. So sorry, child. When you grow up you will understand why your mother and I are here in the mountains — away from you. Just you remember this: we love you. And we are separated from you to be able to get rid of the bad persons

like those soldiers who made you a hostage. When all the evil ones are gone we will always be together with your mother. We will visit Batangas and play. Is that ok, child?"

"My playmates, they have a mother and a father."

"But you have us as your mother and father."

"No!" Ineng ran off and went to her mother.

He felt like crying. Even as he tried to convince himself that such action was to be expected in a child, he was giving way to his doubts. Here he is, a revolutionary disciplined by two decades of sacrifice and hardship to create a more humane society, a society kinder to children — why won't his own child accept him as her father?

What he was feeling now was like the grief he felt when he was in mourning for his father and every time there was a memorial service for comrades who died in the fighting. He was still alive. But he was in effect bleeding from an encounter in which a child was his antagonist.

Pablo sighed as he lay on his back. He did not feel tired in his life as a fighter since 1974 in Calauag until now in any which place in the Southern Tagalog region. He did not lose heart given only their few pistols in their Armed Propaganda Unit to which he was first assigned. He was not impatient with the revolution that had its ups and downs, its defeats and its victories. But now he could not overcome the weariness in his heart and mind.

Pablo got up and glanced at his wife. He decided to go to his daughter who was sleeping with other comrades because she did not want to sleep with the two of them — they whom Ineng called “other people” instead of Mother and Father. One week had passed and Pablo had not heard Ineng call him Father.

Pablo caressed his daughter’s brow. She jerked a little. He hastily lifted his palm while praying to whatever power that she would not wake up. He was again starting to feel fear and sadness in his own daughter. He lifted the child. Ineng suddenly opened her eyes and Pablo felt he was about to melt.

“Child,” he wanted to explain, “Child, I only wanted to transfer you to another sleeping space. Come and lie beside us.” But not a word came out of his throat. He tried to smile so his daughter would not get angry.

“Father?”

Pablo suddenly felt unbounded joy at what he heard. He clasped his daughter tight and asked the child, Call me Father again, my Child.

(1993)

Translation:
Lourdes H. Vidal

GEYLUV

Geyluv

Honorio Bartolome de Dios

I love you, Mike.

That’s all and Benjie did not speak again. His muted lips hushed my reaction to what he’d said. I love you, Mike. The syllables kept whirling in my mind. They were uttered without pretense, but I could feel the melancholy in his tone. The ice cubes in the glass of beer had already melted, the *sisig* had gone cold, the singer had already left, but still neither one of us would speak up.

It’s almost three, let’s go home.

Miss, bill please.

Until we reached his apartment. Still no words. So I made the first move.

Is our trip to Baguio pushing through tomorrow, Benjie?

Yes, four in the afternoon, at Dagupan Terminal. Don’t be late. Good night. Take care.

Are you okay, Benjie?

No reply.

Are you sure you don’t want me to stay tonight?

Don’t worry, Mike. I’m fine.

Okay. Good night. I’ll call you up later.

It had always been our parting ritual. Who got home last, had to give the other a call to make sure that he’s safely home.

I MET BENJIE for the first time at a media party. I was writing an article about the Zambales project of a certain organization for the victims of Mt. Pinatubo, and Benjie turned out