

The Bougainvillea

Ma. Elena L. Paulma

Long before I was even conscious of its existence, the bougainvillea had already wrapped itself around the wire link fence that separated our house from the two-lane concrete street outside. On summer months, the whole length of the fence would be covered with its dripping boughs thick with leaves and crimson blossoms.

Every time I watered it with a mixture of water and Mama's urine, I always wondered how this thick foliage could spring from the rather stringy trunks that grew from the ground within the fence. Everyone who passed by always turned for a second look at this familiar backdrop for the swarm of children that filled our street every afternoon. We were slightly in awe of it, not just because of its magnificence, but also because we believed that beneath the brightness of its flowers and vibrant leaves lay a whole different world we could only whisper about.

Therefore, at the approach of noontime, we were careful not to shout too loudly so as not to disturb the probably sleeping beings that lay in the shadows beneath its thickness. Its crimson petals quivered and glowed, became more iridescent even as the rest of us lesser beings, plants animals, and humans, wilted and drooped before the angry sun. It was common knowledge that within that hour between morning and afternoon, when the sun was at its brightest, and everyone turned in for lunch, the *dili ingon nato* (not like us) came out of their hiding places to walk the quiet streets. This was another reason for siesta, actually. It was the spirits' turn to claim the time and space we humans had taken over. Thus, at noontime, if anyone had to go outside, there was to be no yelling or shouting because they might be disturbed, no running too fast because we might bump into them unseen. We were not necessarily afraid, just respectful of their presence.

Aside from the fact that we had a car and went to church together as a family every Sunday, the glorious bougainvillea was also a source of Mama's pride. Everyone in the neighborhood remarked at the beauty of the bougainvillea. Every month or so, its boughs would be trimmed by whichever male relative happened to be staying at our house. These trimming affairs were always well-attended, for these were among the few times our green iron gates were flung open, allowing anyone to come in, and myself to go out.

There were whispers, though, about this bougainvillea. It seemed to dislike being touched, much less operated on with a pair of gardening shears that were sharpened

specially for the occasion. The first time anyone came near with his shears, they say the shears fell from his hands because of the thickness of the stems. Another time, while some of the neighbourhood children were playing in our yard, and the thick-leaved boughs were falling left and right from the top of the ladder where a cousin was snipping at its tips, I tripped on one of the boughs that littered the ground and fell. The ground hit me right smack in the area above my right eye, and there was darkness and there were stars. I had to be carried to our room upstairs. I had a huge lump on my right forehead when I woke up. Nobody spoke of it out loud, but it was on everybody's mind. It had something to do with the bougainvillea. I heard my Mama whispering about it to the neighbors while I was lying in bed and they thought I was asleep.

These theories would be proven right when my father's brother from Davao would come to visit. Perfect timing, my Mama said upon his arrival. The boughs needed trimming. He was a no-nonsense man, and did not believe in things like spirits and such, so he went merrily up the ladder and began to snip and snap at the branches. Perhaps it was because he was too noisy, singing and laughing. Perhaps it was because he snipped too fast and had no respect for the bougainvillea. He did finish the job, and the bougainvillea stood a little more shorn than usual, its glorious manes littering the ground. A friend would later testify that some of the branches looked bloody.

That night, uncle had to be brought to the hospital because his ring finger, where his wedding band resided, had become swollen. Everybody swore that if we hadn't run to the hospital as we had, at that particular time on that particular night, uncle would have lost his ring finger, for we imagined it would have continued to swell all throughout the night if we hadn't been quick enough to have the ring sawed off. His ring, having been made for a normal sized finger, would have bitten into the swelling flesh, and then when he woke up, both finger and ring would have fallen to the floor. This, in exchange for all the leaves and branches he had murdered.

I think it was because of what happened to my friend Banging, and afterwards, Elsa, that Mama finally agreed not just to trim the branches, but to cut down the stringy trunk from which the bougainvillea grew.

Banging was our next-door neighbour. We were of the same age, and together with Elsa across the street, we formed a special kind of gang that ruled the smaller children in the neighbourhood. This consisted of all the younger siblings of both Banging and Elsa. All in all, there were about 21 children in the "Bermuda triangle," that area formed by the three households. Banging ruled.

Banging's and our house stood abreast, while across the street, covering about three lots, was Elsa's. At the time of Banging's possession, Elsa and her six siblings each had delivery trucks named after them, for they were into copra and rice and whatever else their

extensive lands in the mountains produced. Often, the smell of drying *copra* that covered the main yard of Elsa's sprawling two-storey house overwhelmed the street. This yard was our main playground when we got bored with dodging tricycles in the two-lane street outside. We would trip across the *copra* lying on the ground, steal into the huge warehouses and slit open the sacks that contained little plastic cars and horses, and when it was time for "Sesame Street," we all filled the main *sala*, our slippers all jumbled next to the front door.

Bansing was the leader of all leaders. We watched her every move, followed her every command, and adjusted to her moods. We knew when she was displeased with something. She would turn away from all of us, go to the nearest wall, of course, a wall that was visible to all of us, and start mumbling and drawing her finger against it. We would all feel guilty, much like the way the people must have felt when Jesus bent down and started writing something mysterious on the ground after absolving the sinful woman. One of us, either Elsa or I, would approach her in silence and wait till she decided to speak. Sometimes, it took her a long time, and we would sit and wait in clumps while she would write and write and mumble. If anyone dared to start a new game, as though her mumbling and writing didn't matter, as though she was just being ignored for this foolishness, that person paid a heavy price. I did it once, and found myself excluded from the games and the free snacks and "Sesame Street" for a whole week. It was a terrible and lonely existence, and it taught me my lesson. I sat and waited with the rest every time Bansing was displeased.

She lived in the house next to ours, their second-floor roof just a few inches lower than ours. While our house was colored blue, their unpainted walls bore the markings of several years of summer suns and monsoon rains. We could see into their rooms and they could see into ours and sometimes, at night, after a full day of fun and games, I would wish we could just tear down the walls between my room and their upstairs *sala* and build a bridge, and we could walk back and forth as we pleased and talk and eat and sleep together any time we wanted without having to ask for permission from anyone. We often talked to each other, while hanging onto the sills of our windows, though it was easier for her because all she had to do was open the window slats. I had to take off the latch which held our screened panel and hold it open before I could even get to the slats. I was always careful not to do that with Mama around because she would scold me about the mosquitoes coming in and her having to spray Baygon and such.

Perhaps we all willed the events that occurred after several years of this regular rhythm in our quiet neighbourhood: the trimming of the bougainvillea, the games and Bansing's moods, Sesame street and Sunday mass. Like an afterthought, it came quietly, the day Bansing was possessed. And it would pass quickly, and cease to be noticed even before it was remarked upon, as with the selling of Elsa's family's trucks, the thinning of the bougainvilleas as well as the children that filled the streets. Bansing, Elsa and I were spending more and more time in our high schools.

Perhaps because she felt a certain sense of responsibility for having planted the bougainvillea, Mama came bearing her holy water and her prayer book. I went because I was Bansing's friend, and because I wanted to see first-hand what a possessed person looked like. We had heard of such occurrences in the far-flung barrios where houses were separated by hectares of rice fields. Now, we had it in our very own neighborhood and this was my very own friend. There were some people milling about in the street and I passed by them feeling quite privileged, for they could not go in and I could, because Bansing was my friend and not theirs.

I was a regular in the house, especially when they had pork with *bagoong* which we never had in our own home. I knew the red tinted cement on the ground floor, shiny and slippery and smelling strongly of the red melted wax which was buffed with coconut husks by Bansing's brothers. Tiago's chair was outside, under the hot, hot sun to kill whatever germs he may have left behind, for it was common knowledge that Tiago, a family friend, had syphilis. We children would push at each other towards the chair. Once they pushed me too hard and I sat on the chair by accident. I hated them for it and didn't go to their house for two weeks.

Leaving our slippers at the bottom step, Mama and I climbed the long length of the wooden stairs and saw, upon reaching the landing, that many others were already there before us. There was Elsa, of course, and we nodded at each other, wearing our church faces.

There were some well-meaning neighbours gathered around Bansing's mother, and Elsa's mother talked about worse cases in the *barrios*, perhaps to make Bansing's mother feel relieved that her daughter was simply lying in her bed muttering and not levitating or throwing people out the window.

"Wipe her forehead with this holy *lana*." Said one, and slowly approached Bansing to wipe the coconut oil that smelled strongly of *copra* on her forehead. She just glared at them and did not grab the bottle or throw it out the window, as one of the possessed had in another case. The one who had applied the *lana* looked quite satisfied and everyone else looked at her with a new respect.

Bansing started to writhe and moan and everyone crowded around the door frame, some edging warily into the room, those at the back craning their heads to see. A little apart from the group was Bansing's aunt who was a *mangunguna* or someone who led the prayers during wakes. Their prayers were often understood only by themselves, for they spoke holy words, which was a mixture of Latin and the old *Butuanon* language which nobody spoke anymore. She sat quietly in one corner, waiting. Sure enough, someone spotted her and whispered to another. Soon, the news of her presence reached Bansing's mother and she came out of the bedroom, looking relieved.

“Come inside, *Tiya*.” The crowd parted to let them through. Spotting my Mama, Bansing’s mother beckoned to us and we walked through, sudden royalties in the presence of a curious crowd. It was hot inside the room, unusually hot, said the others, because of the many spirits. Weren’t the spirits supposed to be inside Bansing, not milling about and taking up air space? I thought if the people would just unblock the door then we could have some air, but I kept quiet.

Bansing had been placed in the room farthest from the window that faced our house, for it was suspected that the spirits living in the bougainvillea had transferred to her body. She had started to writhe and moan and foam in the mouth at midnight, which of course was the best time for spirits to possess anyone. She spoke the tongues of the spirits, which of course, no one understood, and she rolled her eyes very much like the man possessed by demons in the bible, and Jesus cast them out, and maybe he also wrote on the ground afterwards.

Tiya began her incantations, burning a piece of paper with a special candle and placing the still smoldering black substance into a glass of water. She blew into the glass three times, all the while muttering. The crowd pressed into the room. Four candles were lit and placed on the four corners of the bed, and *Tiya* continued to chant. The heat inside escalated. From the window across Bansing’s bed could be seen coconut fronds that swayed in the slight breeze outside. Bansing pointed at it, as if she could see something we could not. Everyone looked at the coconut tree and whispered to each other. Didn’t the spirits come from the bougainvillea and not from that coconut tree? I wondered to myself, but kept quiet.

Tiya had kept her distance from Bansing. Then she drew near, bearing the glass of water now made blessed by the black fragments of burnt paper and her holy words. Bansing glared at her, herself muttering the strange language of the spirits. *Tiya* placed the glass next to Bansing’s lips. What happened afterwards would cause *Tiya* not to show her face for a long while in the neighbourhood. Bansing grabbed the glass of water and threw the contents at the face of her *Tiya*. Everyone was silent. Her head bowed, her hair wet with bits of burnt paper clinging to it, *Tiya* silently went out of the room.

Mama took out her rosary, her prayer book, and her vial of holy water. Contestant #2, drawled a voice in my head, and I quickly suppressed the blasphemous thought.

“I believe in God...” she began, nudging me.

“The father almighty...” I quickly intoned with her, always nervous about these prayers, for I would forget some words when asked to perform before a bigger audience. We only said them during the angelus and with family members.

Everyone else began to pray with us, Mama beginning with the “Hail Mary” and the others responding with the “Holy Mary”. Bansing just glared at all of us from her bed. Once, she shouted “Yawa!” which was a bad word since it meant the devil. Mama chanted the mysteries and the prayers of the rosary a little louder. After that, she drew near with her vial of holy water. Everyone held their breath, but Mama wisely kept her distance, merely twisting open the cap of the little white bottle, swishing it about like a priest would, quite high above the “patient’s” reach. There was no danger, however, of anyone getting hurt, for the bottle was palm sized and made of plastic.

She then handed it to Bansing’s mother and told her to “bless” her daughter three times a day, like you would take biogesic if you have fever. She whispered that she would come back for the bottle, for it came all the way from Lourdes in France, where the original, therefore more powerful holy water could be collected, and that it was okay to finish it all off, because she could always ask for holy water from the priest in the cathedral, but this water in the bottle was actually holier, so it should work. The whisper was loud enough for everyone to hear. Then standing with head bowed before Bansing’s bed, Mama was quiet for a long while, as if deeply praying. She was wearing her pious face, the one I tried to imitate during the times when our gang of three would go to church. Wearing our most solemn faces, each of us would kneel down, clasp our hands together, bow our heads, and close our eyes, willing the others to give up first and sit down on the pews behind. The one who knelt the longest sort of won this contest of piety. I put on that face while waiting for Mama, knowing everyone was looking at us.

After a while, Mama genuflected and, nodding at me, she stood up. In the silence, the crowd parted to let us through. As we came out of the room, I kept my back straight like that of a royal princess, my eyes downcast like a saint’s.

Bansing was to have several more seizures from the possession, proof that the holy water did not work with the spirits either. Maybe the spirits were too strong. Soon, the talk died down, the crowd thinned and we went back to our normal routines. Bansing still had not shown herself in the streets. After a week, Elsa and I decided to go and visit her.

Bansing was back on her feet, cooking rice. One look from Bansing and we knew we had to wait till she was ready to tell us about the possession, if ever. This was more than the writing-on-the-wall-don’t-bother-me kind of waiting. We simply followed her as she moved about the house, sweeping the floor, and scrubbing their stairs.

“So you want to come play?” Elsa asked when Bansing finally sat down.

We waited.

“Sure.” she said. And that was how Bansing went back to the streets again. Nobody

said anything about anything. Nobody dared. We all played fiercely, eager to get back to normal.

Bansing was quieter, and would sometimes stare out the window whenever we came to visit. Perhaps Elsa and I did not ask her about what had happened because the three of us were beginning to learn that there were some things we did not know about each other, some things better left unsaid. It would take maybe a year before Bansing would tell us that the night before she was possessed, someone had lifted the mosquito net and crawled into the single mat on which she lay. At that time, she did not tell us what had happened or who did it. It would only be years later, when all of us would come back for home visits from our universities, that we would learn it had been a cousin, the son of *Tiya*.

About two months after Bansing's possession, Elsa disappeared from the streets and the games, much like Bansing had on the day she was possessed. It was rumored that the bougainvillea spirits had again taken a victim, but this event did not draw as much attention as Bansing's case had. As with movies which come in a series, *Possession 2* was an old story after *Possession 1*. Nobody felt inclined to watch anymore. I went to visit her in her bedroom. Elsa lay in one of the beds, quite alone, staring quietly at the ceiling.

"Hey," I greeted her.

"Hey," she said. Someone had told me that Elsa had run away to the farthest end of the street, and sat on the steps of the old Miranda Hotel that stood at the corner. She had come back home after a while, and stayed in bed, and refused to eat. Her Mom had scolded her, asking her what had possessed her to do such stupid things.

"I wanted to watch a movie with a friend and Mama did not give me any money," she said after a short silence. Perhaps she was not yet ready to tell me what I had heard from her classmates. Elsa was one of those who came in late after recess, the trail of a sickly sweet smoky smell following her, a smell that pervaded the girls' and boy's bathrooms and was identified in whispers as Mary Jane to hide its real name, *marijuana*. Only much later would she tell me about this, when she had already become a professional, married and with kids, and we could laugh about the stupid things we did in our youth.

I nodded, lay down beside her, and we both stared at the ceiling.

Two possessions in one summer, and all because of the bougainvillea which continued to bloom in the summer heat. Mama consulted two priests and a nun before she made her final decision. Bansing, Elsa and I no longer played in the streets with the other kids, so we did not see the final hours of the bougainvillea. They say the one who wielded the sharpened *bolo* to cut down its spindly trunk fell ill. Others say the branches looked bloodied. I had seen one of those cut branches before and indeed, they looked red at the center. I

would learn later that branches which are alive always look that way when cut.