

### **The Bodega on Pili Drive Street**

*by Ma. Elena L. Paulma*

Any tricycle on its way to Guingona Subdivision with its boring street names – first street, second street, third street – might pass by Pili Drive, officially recognized by the Butuan City Post Office and fully acknowledged by its residents as Pili Drive Street.

The sights Pili Drive has to offer might marvel at the bed of shells fronting the house of Tam's Emporium, or the curled iron trellis peeking above the tall green gates of Judge P's. The children playing a fierce game of *patintero* may or may not stop running in the middle of the street. But it's a full stop for dog fights, and among the tangle of tails and teeth would surely be Nong Pepe's tiny ball of white hair named *Kibol*. By the time the tricycle turns right towards the highway or left towards Guingona subdivision, the passenger would not have noticed the biggest building on the block, its plain gray facade broken only by the pattern of its chain link gates. This was Pili Drive's *bodega*.

This was in the late 1970's, when Butuan City was already earning its title as Timber City of the South from all the trees it had felled, cut and sold, notwithstanding the great flood that did not drown the loggers early in the decade. Most city-dwellers had farmlands across the Agusan River. They built *bodegas* on residential streets unfortunately named first street, second street and so on. Not so Pili Drive, it boasted its own *bodega*, itself a rather self-effacing building that eschewed the bougainvilleas and *calachuchis* preening through the fences of the other houses vying for best in height and color all along the street.

Quietly contemplating those of us fiddling with the padlock of its gate, it sat solidly on its square lot, its concrete walls rising up on all sides to the height of up to three floors. The whole length of its left wall guarded one side of our paradise, the wide front yard of its owner's house. This was my second home (the first being right across the street) where lived my friends for life, all seven of them, and their cousins across the street, all seven of them too. All of them plus all four of us - we were the children playing *patintero* or shouting *shatom* on the streets during the times when the paradise was off-limits to us. Its grounds would be covered with smelly *copra* drying under the sun or blocked by huge trucks filled with bales of golden *lanot*, all of it harvested from farmlands across the Agusan River.

When there were no trucks inside this compound, and the *copra* had all been gathered, we children took over with *Kibol* as our mascot. There was enough dirt space for our marble holes and more than enough soil to be mixed with water for our mud cakes. There were long green and yellow San Francisco leaves for selling as fish on

market-market days, to be picked when *Nang Nena*, my friends' mama, was not looking. And then there was the whole length of concrete ground cleared of the *copra* or rice grains, from the tiled parking space beneath its arched roof down to the plain gray cement that joined the street beyond the tall gates, just perfect for a game of dodge ball, or *tumba lata*. Sometimes, while waiting for someone to stop crying from having been hit too hard by the ball, or from having been "it" four times in a row of hide and seek, our eyes would turn to the small metal door that was the only opening on this side of the great *bodega* walls. It, too, was always locked. During the few times that little door was opened, we could glimpse only vague shapes in the darkness within. It was an unspoken thing - our being forbidden from entering the *bodega*, our scheming to slip in one of these harvest days.

Once every few months, the first of the harvest days would descend on our little block of street like a mighty storm. Fronting the *bodega* was an empty lot that served as a parking space for all seven trucks named after the seven children. This empty lot, itself another paradise on quiet days, was right next to our house. On harvest mornings, Truck Esther would rouse me from sleep with its blaring horns, the tune of which I will carry with me for the rest of my life, even after all seven trucks would disappear and there would be no more harvest days. These were the times when the tall, heavy street doors of the *bodega* were flung open. The number of hired men (they were called "boys") tripled. All seven trucks spilled out onto the street, Truck Esper backing onto the entrance of the forbidden cavern, Trucks Oliva and Grace and all the rest waiting in line, playing their horn songs. The "boys," stripped to the waist, hoisted bales of fragrant *lanot* and sacks of fresh *copra* or ripe corn down the ridged plank wobbling between the waiting trucks and the ground below, into the *bodega*. *Kibol* would be in heaven, barking at the sacks and getting in the way.

I think we did it only once, breaking the rule and entering that forbidden space. It is too long ago for me now to remember it clearly, but it must have been the stirred up dust and *lanot* hairs, the heavy smell of *copra*, corn and sweat mingling with the singing horns that clouded the air and allowed us to creep unseen and finally, into the inner darkness that possibly hid the white lady and the *capre* and the *wakwak* often seen ("honest *pa*" with a sign of the cross) by the "boys". From the outside, all we had glimpsed were sacks, one on top of another. Inside was a whole little city - blocks of piled sacks and bales rising up to the ceiling.

We broke up then, running to the left, then to the right, shrieking when we bumped into each other at the corners but running past again, each having her own goal in mind - what lurks beyond that corner, what lies at the end of that deep dark tunnel running all the way to the back - wondering if we could climb up the bales of *lanot* and jump up and down its softness like we did on the trucks. Some of our *kuyas* did exactly that, standing tall on the highest piles, hands stretched towards the ceiling. We smaller ones were just scrambling up the steps formed by the gaps in one pile when Nong Pepe walked in. That was the end of the first time I ever entered the *bodega* - when it was full on a harvest day.

The last time I saw the inside of it in all its majesty, without the sacks of corn or the rolled up *lanot*, no half-naked “boys” tripping in and out with their burdens, nothing but the dimness of it from floor to ceiling, was right before *Kibol* died. From the looks of the huge gash on his neck, somebody had tried to catch him with a wire hanger, as is usually done in such cases. He had struggled, as only *Kibol* would, and his cries had awakened his master, saving *Kibol* from being served up as dog dish, but unable to stop the inevitable. *Nong Pepe* had drunk more than his usual bottle of beer the day *Kibol* was buried on the empty lot. Years later, *Nong Pepe* would be found asleep on the floor blocking the front door of their house to keep out the bank authorities who come after the house, our paradise, and the *bodega* were foreclosed.

They were the first to move away, crossing the Magsaysay bridge to finally live on the land where the coconut and the corn grew. Our street would slowly lose its silence to the growing number of tricycles revving their way to the new mall at the end of the now opened street. Across the river, new hospitals and mansions would grow on the farm lands, new roads taking the place of coconut groves. On what were once rice fields would rise new subdivisions with their look-alike doll houses, not a single *bodega* in between.

But long before all these was that day I stood on the high narrow landing that ringed the inner walls of the then empty *bodega*. My friends and I had not run around this time, for there were no more corners that held secret surprises, no maze of tunnels to explore, no stacked bales or sacks to climb and stand on, our hands outstretched towards the darkness above. I had climbed the stairs that first and only time, up to the only unexplored region of that secret place. I was on the highest spot that day, far above everything, and I could see the whole of things. At that time, I did not think, “so that’s all there is to it” because I felt there was just so much of it - all the far corners and all that openness, all that length of floor, ceiling and walls. It would take a long time for a bird to fly every inch of all that vast inner space. I picked my way to one of the tiny windows, gripping the railing for the ground was a long way away. I looked out and saw below me, the promise of my friends’ front yard, its perfect balance of soil and cement, the San Francisco leaves gleaming in the sun, *Kibol* but a white spot in his usual place. Bits of *lanot* that had broken free from the tightly woven bales floated golden in the light streaming through the grilled window. There was a lingering smell of drying corn. Soon, we would all go out there again, after the *copra* had been gathered and all the trucks had driven away.