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Badjao

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Badjao

JULIAN E. DACANAY, JR.

BROTHER, brother.

Now a habit is being formed: I cannot seem to write to people anymore. Three weeks and nothing but some disjointed notes I have just thrown away. I just can't, brother. Look, I started two letters to my director, ten letters to Raquel, but I never finished them, never sent them. I couldn't say what I really wanted to say. Now I can only write in my mind, talk to you in my mind. Why? I don't know, I don't know. Perhaps it is this trip—I'm now in an entirely new and different world and I still feel groggy from things. Somebody said that's how you really feel travelling by boat—as if everything wasn't steady, as if you were continually walking for days in the bottom of the sea. But leaving Manila, it was you I remembered when the last rope on the wharf was unleashed and the boat trembled in the waters. Yes, you, and then all of them at the same time: Father, Mother, my director, my Raquel, our sister Angelita. The thought of them whirled around you, and I felt like the whole boat was shrinking into some undefinable mass being torn from a deep womb and gliding in the unknown.

Why was I leaving? Where was I going?

The answer was not in the wind. It was neither in those moments as Manila turned into a night wound healed with the silence of lights. It wasn't in the thought of Father, or of Mother and not even of my Raquel—it was in you: swirling, en-

larging beyond momentary memory into a clearer vision of our past: once again you were there seated on a bench under a tree outside the novitiate building and you were asking about the family: you asked how Father was, I didn't say anything, you asked again: I said Father was gone, Mother was dying. You were there, at the funeral, your hand digging into my shoulder: you were there, when you spoke to me of life, of grace, of suffering: you were there: you laughed at me and told me to get a girl friend. Yes, the answer was in your spoken dialogues, in your letters and in your prayers, giving me your every strength and receiving none of mine. . .

But why did you have to die, brother?

Listen: you would have made a fine priest and perhaps it should have been you going away instead of me. I couldn't be like you, you know that. You were the brave one in the family while me—I'm just an artist. What's an artist, brother? I don't know: you know. You defined that for me one evening, you said something about one whose role alienates him from society, remember? Remember: one who must live some sort of compromised existence? To meet the world on some sort of footing because even he, as artist, has expenses and commitments: remember? I am that artist. By that, I mean—after Mother died, I had to leave school. I had to work as an illustrator of—of all things—comicbooks! You laughed at me, remember? But it wasn't an insulting laughter: it was the laughter of a student priest beginning to understand the ways of life. You told me to have patience; and from comicbooks I graduated into magazine illustrations, into brochure layouts and advertising designs. I even worked in a printing press and ran several machines. Oh I wish you were still alive! You would have seen me off when I left. You would have laughed finding out where I was headed for. But I would have said to you: listen, brother, don't laugh now, but I'm headed for Sulu. All right, go ahead, laugh. And what am I supposed to do there? Laugh again. Your laughter is as big as life. Listen: do you know right now I'm on the farthest island of this country, called Sitankai, in a small Badjao village called Umapoy? I'm here on some research—legitimate research, mind you—I have a re-

search grant to record in drawings all the major art forms I can find in these islands. Umapoy is a village—but not the kind most people think when they summon up the image of houses on land. For Umapoy is actually an inlet, covering a wide area of shallows, protected from the harsh sea by a narrow sand-bank that leads and ends upon rocks and dense woods on the shore. On the other end stands a one-room schoolhouse and here the village begins. You see houses on stilts, one, two three, four, five—and these houses are then surrounded by boathouses: yes, boats with roofs over them, cloistering Badjao families. At night, you sleep crosswise on the length of the boat and you tuck your legs in for there isn't enough space to stretch them out. You wake up to find your face and your arms and your legs sticky with sea moisture. This is my second day here in this village and I am now waiting for Rauncia, a Badjao girl about twelve years old who is my interpreter. Today we are seeing Panglima Bongao, the village chief—he is also a boatcarver and an artist. He was not in the village yesterday, I was told. So today we see him.

The morning is beautiful in Umapoy.

Last night, I listened to the music of the kulintang and the gabbang and the sorrowful chant of an old, old man.

II

Dear Director: I arrived in Jolo safe and sound, after five days of dizzying experience at sea. But as there isn't much to see in Jolo—it's only a town aping all manners of the city—I pushed on with my plan of moving from one place to another, staying just long enough to survey things before deciding on what village to study. I stayed in Siasi two days, then went to Tawi-Tawi, its neighboring islands, then to Sibutu and finally here I am in Sitankai. I was invited to my first Moslem wedding in Parang while I was still in Jolo. It was something new and I took down notes; you know, only the bridegroom participated in the ritual of questions and answers, of incense-burning and prayers by an imam, their priest; the bride simply stayed in her room though she was dressed up for the occasion. I even took pictures of her. Toward the end of the

ceremony somebody moved about the male participants and dropped money into their supplicating palms. I put up my palm in the same manner but I didn't get any. But what really caught my interest was the decoration about the house: here and there, on curtains and wall draperies, I saw variations of the okul design I'd like to study. *Oh everything is exciting and moving so fast! I don't really know how to thank you, sir, for this research grant you have given me. The school officials in town went all out to welcome me as soon as I arrived. They even treated me to a banquet my first night in Jolo. But I guess I am the quiet sort, I didn't talk much and shied away from elaborating on my research. Oh, all my life I wanted to do this sort of thing—go all over the country and see things, draw things. Is it a crazy desire, sir? I don't think so. But it's so lonely a job—for why am I alone doing this? How come nobody seems to like doing research work of any sort, more so in a place like Sulu? Why are people afraid of Sulu? Don't they know there is so much to see here, so much to gather that is of importance to our country? I first saw the Badjaos in Siasi, and in this little town people have to wait for the rains for their supply of drinking water—but oh! am I supposed to talk to you this way, sir?*

Today is Good Friday in Umapoy. Yesterday, we saw Panglima Bongao.

It was Rauncia who accompanied me to his house, paddling the boat like an expert. I saw many Badjaos watching me from the windows of their boathouses and I felt embarrassed being transported by a girl. Panglima Bongao showed black and filed teeth when he welcomed us into his house. We sat on a mat spread out on the floor. His white hair was shaven and his eyes kept quivering. He wore only a tadyong wrapped around his waist; he was thin and stooped. How difficult it was to talk to him! As he spoke only the Badjao dialect and I didn't know it, we communicated with each other only through Rauncia doing her very best at interpretation. But even with Rauncia communication wasn't so easy; having finished only the third grade, she had a very limited vocabulary. Thus most of the time the words were supported by signs. At one instant

I couldn't explain to Rauncia the term *research* and my planned stay in the village. But then the idea came that I compare myself to her. So I told her to tell the old man that I was a student like her, but an older student who came all the way from Manila, and that I had homework to do, like making drawings. I opened my drawing folder which I always carried with me and showed the old man my drawings, asking Rauncia to now explain that I wanted to see and draw some of his works. But when Panglima Bongao saw my drawings, he simply and quickly understood. His black teeth showed in a flash: then he stood up and suddenly danced in joy, shouting soon and calling to all the neighbors to come and he made me show my drawings to them all over again. Then he disappeared as a small crowd pressed curiously about me, only to come back in a little while, separating all those in his path as he spread a long and wide and cloth-colored flag before my eyes.

It was the flag he had made for his village, showing the grotesque design of a crocodile.

III

Listen, Raquel:

I write you letters but I do not send them. I can no longer write them in the way I feel you have always received them. Do you understand what I am saying? I do not know if you understand, Raquel, but forgive me. My eyes are seeing what I have never seen in the city. I tell myself I am seeing all this as an artist but what if you tell yourself that you are not seeing this as an artist? How do you feel before the moment of discovery, before the shock of the discovery, and before the knowledge of that discovery as it falls into the depths of you? Before the moment of discovery: I was tense and very afraid because I was facing the unknown. All the images you have put into mind by reading simply blur before existence. The shock of discovery: this is not only Moslem country I have come upon, whose faith and culture is separate from mine, but I am now face to face with a life that seems to belong to another time. Raquel, I see a community living far

beyond the edge of the sea, a floating people, claiming survival underneath the waist-high roofs they have built on their boats. The men are dark-browed by the sun, half of them wearing a body covering that is only a long towel-size cloth sewn at ends and wrapped about the waist. Most of the women are bare-breasted, and the tadyong wrapped around their waist are only wider and longer than the men's, reaching far below the knee. *I have the eyes of an artist, Raquel.* I have sat in studio rooms in the city where women stood before me in their nakedness. But they stood against a background of white, folded curtains, their bodies illuminated with angles of light as they simulated the different poses of body movements, and they looked detached and almost not human under the stare of eyes repressing all feeling and concentrating only on form. *It is so different in Umapoy. The women here move with life and overwhelm you with their existence. I look out and I see them: I see a woman cooking, her breasts exposed and moving as she churns something inside the pot; I see a woman wash clothes by dipping them into sea-water and swatting them against the hull of the boat: I see a woman at bath in the sea, scrubbing her body in ritualistic familiarity. A boat approaches: a woman is seated at its stern, paddling, and you marvel at the grace of her swinging arms that never touch the child on her lap holding and sucking her breasts. The woman in the boat where I am now is called Sesa, wife of Jamiluddin.* The first time Jamiluddin brought me to this boathouse, Sesa, big with her child, was beside herself with excitement and shame. But this behavior did not come from my seeing her nakedness but from my being the first total stranger to come and live with them. Hastily she began to arrange her little kitchen and scrub the walls and the uneven wood planks that passed for a floor, and after a while she was wading slowly in the waist-deep sea towards the other boats. She came back carrying on her head a pillow and a brightly colored mat which she spread on the cramped, uneven flooring, rolled the pillow underneath the mat, and then pointed to me to lie there, an unbroken smile half-covering her excitement. The other morning I watched her sharpening at its edges a short bamboo

stick which I found out later was to be used to cut the umbilical cord of her child at its birth. *But one day, Raquel, one day in Sibutu I saw a woman who belonged to another tribe. She lived in one of those houses now built on stilts beyond the edge of the sea but connected to land on bamboo bridges. I was accompanied by a relative, a schoolteacher, and I went to see her because she owned a native wall screen whose designs I wanted to add to my collection of drawings. I almost slipped on the sagging bamboo bridge leading to her place. Her house was already bent with the onslaught of many winds, dark with afternoon, nipa-walled, and cramped by several ugly partitions. As soon as I was led inside, she was there, seated on a mat on the unevenly slatted floor. She was beautiful, Raquel, with long hair, and as white-skinned as you are. Her left hand made an unfinished, tender move to touch her breasts, as if it was a sudden thought to shield her womanness. Oh Raquel: how does one look at such a moment of discovery? How shall it be with you, beyond what I already know of you? Where are you: now I need the taste of your mouth again, the heat of your embrace. But how shall I look at you on the night of our wedding now that I have seen not only with my artist's eyes? How shall I take you now, how shall we live, what shall I tell our children?*

IV

Listen, all of you. My dearest Raquel, brother, sir. Out here in this God-unremembered little village over the sea, loneliness is a girl like Rauncia. Ask the wind, descend into depths of all darkness and you can touch only fragments of this loneliness. For you also carry it, I carry it, we all carry it like our own worlds and our own desires. Arise, brother. Talk to me, Raquel, and behold this girl Rauncia. Behold this Badjao world she lives in which I now see, perhaps still obscurely, in caress of my own aloneness.

V

Rauncia was gone even before I finished drawing the flag of Panglima Bongao with the crocodile image. It was perhaps close to noon. I looked out over the stairs but the

boat we had used wasn't tied there anymore. I asked the Badjao boys and girls who had remained where Rauncia was; they scampered away. Panglima Bongao came, looked at my drawing, and suddenly shook my hand, saying "Good, good," underneath the display of his filed teeth. An old man, he must have traveled a lot and picked up the expression and the handshake, I thought.

Now it was time to go. Without Rauncia, however, I felt suddenly at a loss. Bravely, I started to tell him in Tagalog that I was going back to the boathouse of Jamiluddin. As he only nodded his head, I told him again, my hands doing all kinds of gestures to explain. He said "Ok, ok," which again surprised me; that must be another expression he picked up somewhere. He moved to the window and rasped an order to somebody. Soon I was being helped into a dugout, holding on to my drawing paraphernalia and some articles I had borrowed from him. These articles were a fishing instrument, an old wooden ladle, a scabbard, and a coconut grater all of which contained carved-out designs I wanted to copy. It was Rauncia who had negotiated the permission to borrow these, before she disappeared out of sight. She had told him, upon my patient instruction, that I would like to draw these as still part of my "homework", but no longer in his house, as that would be too much of a bother already, but in the school-house nearby, where I could also have some privacy. As the boat moved away, he waved and said again, "Good, good."

When I got to Jamiluddin's boathouse, they had eaten lunch. Badjaos do not have fixed hours for their meals, and seem to eat everytime they are hungry; they have only fish and boiled cassava for their daily diet but most of the time you see them munching on sugar cane. Sesa was already washing some plates and a spoon and Jamiluddin played with their five year old daughter, Alena. They laughed when they saw what I had brought. I tried to explain where I got the articles. Jamiluddin knew only a smattering of Tagalog which he mixed up with Badjao words as he talked to me. This smattering knowledge must have been gotten from his frequent trips to the nearby town of Tubig-Sallang, where he did

odd jobs for a Tagalog missionary priest who had built a schoolhouse with a chapel there. Jamiluddin made his boat-house himself; it is called a lipa. He owns two more boats, a long dugout he uses for fishing, and a jenging for use within the community. Inside his boathouse, you see a sail, a lamp for fishing, one suitcase, a water jar, a stove, two bolos and a fishing net. On the roof, which is galvanized, lay his fishing spears; he also owns a home-made harpoon gun.

For my lunch I simply opened a can of corned beef and Sesa cooked some rice in a little pot and broiled two pieces of dried fish. I invited them to eat with me again but Jamiluddin said in his broken Tagalog that they didn't eat meat. From what I heard, rice was eaten by the Badjaos only on special occasions, as it was the food of land-dwellers and was something hard to get. While eating, I was thinking of taking the afternoon off from my research work since it was Holy Week, and also of resting the next day entirely, it being Good Friday. On Saturday, I thought, I'll go to Tubig-Sallang for my supplies and needs; I might as well celebrate Easter in some primitive fashion...

But I didn't take the afternoon off. I thought of Rauncia, why she had disappeared without telling me, and thinking of her, I felt I should look for her. So I decided to go to the schoolhouse where I could come across her or wait for her, as I did not know where she lived. I told Jamiluddin of this decision and asked him if he could fetch me back in the late afternoon, at about five. As he did not understand anything about time, I pointed to the sun and made a going-down motion with my hand. I also said he didn't have to bring me to the schoolhouse: it was already low tide. In a little while, I rolled my trousers up above my knees and picked up my drawing paraphernalia, a book, the coconut grater of Panglima Bongao which I might find time to copy, and started wading. At low tide, the water wrapped about your ankles and you stepped upon soft plunging beach sand, complex embroideries of coral stones, and dark mats of sea weeds.

It was at the schoolhouse that I first met Rauncia. But I had heard of her from her schoolteacher whom I met in

Jolo, that time when I was still gathering the list of people I could contact in the various places of my research. Her teacher was taking summer classes, like most teachers all over Sulu. She spoke highly of Rauncia, telling me of her intelligence and dependability in spite of her young age and her being a Badjao. This teacher was also the one who told me of Jamiluddin: that he often brought her to town, could be trusted, understood a little Tagalog, and would no doubt welcome me to stay in his boathouse.

When I first saw Rauncia, she was inside the schoolhouse and was conducting a make-believe class to some eight children. She was dressed up like a school girl, all of twelve years old.

But I did not see Rauncia in the schoolhouse now. I sat in the chair where she had sat, where her teacher had sat, and tried to occupy myself first by reading the book I brought. It was a book on the Passion and Death of Christ, by a Jesuit author; a gift of my brother which I was keeping with some special sentiment. But after half an hour, I felt tired, then restless, then anxious. It was hot in the room; I looked out the window and saw Umapoy in the glare of the summer sun. I felt consoled I had left Jamiluddin's boat; it would have been scorchingly unbearable sitting there, the galvanized roof so close to touching your head and the sun reflections on the water flashing into your eyes.

When Jamiluddin came, there was still no sign of Rauncia. I did not accomplish anything by way of drawing either. On the way home, there began the sound of drums, followed by gabbangs, then the kulintangs. I asked Jamiluddin what they meant when the drumming rose and persisted. He said something about some celebration and his further explanation only became a vagueness: something about becoming a member of the tribe. I did not seek to explore a clearer explanation and let it go at that. But the thumping and the music never let go. They would cease for a while, then they would come up again. Perhaps I was just too tired over something, or perhaps disappointed over a desire I didn't want defined, for I simply listened to the thumping and the music when

I shouldn't have, when I should have immediately risen to find what it was all about.

But in the morning, I woke up feeling all right, though somewhat unrested; I wasn't yet used to sleeping in a boat that rocked softly in the night. The day being Good Friday, I was thinking of how to celebrate it; in the city, there would be the silence and the gloom everywhere, moviehouses would be closed, church crosses and statues draped in violet, the three-hour meditations on the Word—but here, who knows of the Man dying at three o'clock to save the world? Jamiluddin had gone fishing all night and had caught a good assortment of fish; Sesa was now dangling a brightly colored fish before my eyes, asking if I'd like to eat it and I nodded and said I wanted it broiled, if you please. This was communicated through pantomime. She washed another fish, a bigger one, by dipping it into the sea, and put it into the pot: that would serve as their breakfast...

Then it came again after we had eaten, the sound of gab-hangs and drums. This time I became curious and asked Jamiluddin and he said it was a custom and he tried explaining what this custom was. But I didn't understand him and so I crawled out of the roofed part of the boathouse, stood on the prow and scanned the community. The thumping continued, grew louder as if the source was coming nearer. Then I saw.

I saw a big lipa boat coming out from the phalanx of boathouses before me. It didn't have any roof but it was festooned with hanging lines of colored paper strips; small colored flags were stuck along the gunwales. High up on the center pole around which all these lines were tied, I saw the flag of Panglima Bongao, its crocodile sign folding and vibrating as if alive in the wind. And all about the wide deck people and women were wildly dancing to the thumping of drums and kulintang.

The sight and sounds so overwhelmed me that I crawled back into the boathouse and told Jamiluddin I wanted to see it. You like, you like, he said in Tagalog, laughing. Yes, I nodded and nodded, take me there, take me there. Now even

his wife was smiling. What custom is that, I asked him, remembering what he had said about it a moment ago. He kept on laughing as he talked that he mouthed most of the words and all I caught was the word *paggunting*. *Paggunting*? I asked, now more excited about the whole affair as I remembered reading something about *paggunting*: it was a kind of ritual or something—but what it was I just couldn't remember at that moment. The mystery added more to my desire to see it. But now the thumping was becoming faint, as if the boat was moving away. It is leaving, I told Jamiluddin, it is going somewhere. No, he said, it will come back, come back. Wait, wait, will come back. His Tagalog words were running out for he kept repeating the same verbs he knew.

The lipa boat did come back and we were ready for it, Jamiluddin now steering his jenging into the open to meet it. I didn't know why, but I had brought with me a can of biscuits; perhaps to give away to the children? The dancing did not stop as I boarded the lipa; everybody seemed welcome, and being a stranger, I appeared more than welcome. A well-muscled Badjao fisherman motioned me to stay beside him. At one corner, a group of men and women worked furiously on the drums and kulintang while out there on the deck, the dancers kept swaying and gyrating in the wind. Oh, it was a grand sight! Umapoy was alive with a kind of holiday frenzy.

The lipa boat, gliding between boathouses, finally stopped at one boathouse on whose hull was scrawlingly painted the letters *Makdum*. Now everybody was leaving the lipa and transferring into the *Makdum*. I was left behind with several children and two old women who kept smiling at me. Jamiluddin had not joined me as he said he was still going to sleep.

Now the Badjao fisherman who had welcomed me into the lipa boat was on the *Makdum* and motioning to me to come over. I left the can of biscuits and carefully, somewhat afraid, crossed to the other boathouse. The *Makdum* was now crowded with Badjaos of all ages. I tried to press in to see what was going on inside the roofed interior. The *Makdum* was

rather a large boat, bigger than the ordinary in the community. Through moving heads and blobs of hair, I peeped in. Somehow I caught the glimpse of a woman dressing up. I pressed nearer. The woman struck me as if she was about to perform a sacred, ceremonial act in the way she was dressing up, her face taut in silence. She was putting on a bright colored garment I had not seen a Badjao woman wear before.

It was my pressing perhaps that led some people in front to give way to me. Now I was wedging myself next to the door where I hoped to see the woman more clearly. As the last man gave way, I saw who else was in the dark interior.

It was Rauncia.

Rauncia was lying on a mat and she was covered with a thin white sheet. Her face was powdered with a white paste and the thin cloth easily revealed that she was naked under it. Panglima Bongao was there, and three old women, and two other old men, all squatting, as grave as the woman now all dressed up like a priestess in their midst. I saw on the mat some incense burning from a coconut shell, and a small knife, and a bamboo stick that was sharpened at its edges. So this is paggunting, I thought, and then I suddenly knew. I knew, with a sharp rush of memory, what paggunting was all about. It was a ceremony, a circumcision; I remembered not only boys were circumcised among the Badjaos, but also young girls. It was a ritual that made one a full-fledged member of the tribe.

But with the knowledge, I caught the sudden movement of Rauncia and she saw me for the first time. Her eyes darted wildly, as if she was frightened. She hastily mumbled something and the Badjao priestess bent an ear over her mouth. Then the woman looked up and was soon motioning to me. I was caught by surprise and at first I did not know what she was trying to say; immediately even Panglima Bongao was now talking and everybody in that room was looking at me. Then I felt I knew what they wanted to tell me, what their hands signified in their gestures.

Don't look, sir, Rauncia finally uttered, so weakly. Go away, sir.

I turned my head away. Somebody stepped to block my view into the interior and I let him take my place. The sound of words struck me as strange and didn't belong there, for I didn't think anybody there understood English; only Rauncia and I understood. Then slowly and quietly I moved away. The people smiled as I edged myself out; it was a funny kind of smile I saw, as if it was they who felt embarrassed. I went back to the lipa boat and sat on an edge. After a while I took the can of biscuits, opened it, and started distributing its contents to the children around me.

But after lunch as I stayed in the schoolhouse in deference to Good Friday, the pain came. Reading the book on the Passion and Death of Christ, I suddenly felt that I didn't belong in this village. I was a stranger, I couldn't look into their rituals. I thought: why had I come to this village? Then I remembered my brother who could have become a priest: would he come to this village and preach? Without knowing why, I felt angry and didn't know how to spew the tightness out: I thought of Raquel, where she was at the moment, perhaps in church? perhaps in her room and writing to me? I wished she would suddenly appear at the door of the schoolhouse now, alive and warm with the knowledge of our love. But only the sun burned at the door and I felt lonely for so many things I couldn't name, and it was like being caught in the white anger of the vast, hot desert of the afternoon.

That night, everybody in Umapoy seemed headed for the sandbank. It was towards dusk that I had noticed men constructing something on the sandbank. Even Jamiluddin and his family were going there. In the boathouse I watched Jamiluddin open the trunk and take out some clothes. His wife did the same thing; only what Sesa brought out surprised me. It was a brightly colored garment. I watched Jamiluddin put on some trousers; he looked funny for the first time; I had gotten used to him wearing only a tadyong. As the roof was so low that you could sit down under it but not stand up, Jamiluddin put on his pants sitting down. He was even funnier to look at as he struggled awkwardly into them.

The sandbank was already crowded when we reached it. It was an entirely different sight to me. The Badjaos had come wearing the finest of clothes I never thought they had. The women wore long-sleeved blouses of varied colors, buttoned in the middle so that the flaps cut a triangle shape that exposed a part of the stomach. Sesa said this blouse was called *alla-bimbang*. Over their heads were large-sized bandanas whose ends were either loosely wrapped several times or just placed on top of the head to form their own patterns. Their *tadyongs* had patterns of the most intricate designs. Some of the men were in loose trousers which Jamiluddin said was called *sawwal*; others wore *trubenized* shirts but no pants, only cover-cloths to hide their loins but not their rumps; while others wore colored shorts like those worn by basketball players. Half-naked children ran and played in the crowd.

Then I saw more clearly now what the men had constructed that afternoon. In the middle of the sandbank around which the crowd gathered, they had constructed an intricate structure of poles beneath which they had spread colored mats on the sand. Petromax lamps hung suspended from these poles. Outside the area of the mats, to the left, squatted the orchestra of men and women who would play the *gabbangs* and *kulintangs*. I saw Panglima Bongao with them, and the Badjao fishermen who had welcomed me to the *lipa* boat that morning. The Badjao fisherman carried a drum and looked like a warrior in his costume.

Then, as if by a signal, the Badjao fisherman began to beat his drum. He was followed by the group behind him. Soon, upon the rise of the beat, a pair of dancers stepped anonymously from the gathered crowd into the arena of colored mats. They swayed in slow motion and traced bird-flights with their hands, their faces becoming masks of seriousness and silence, their eyes, as if unseeing, looking inward into memories of ancient cults. Then even before these two dancers were finished, another pair stepped in, and then another pair. They kept coming, pair by pair, two women, a man and a woman, an old woman and a boy, two little girls, two old men, and each pair left as the other came. The drummer continued,

played on, now looking like a dark god as the crowd gathered and pressed in silence, watching and waiting for the end of one dance and the beginning of another.

As I stood there, I saw the Badjaos as I had not seen them before in my week's stay in Umapoy. For suddenly they looked different and in the brightness of the lamplight that flowered about them, you could forget that their life was the sea, that they lived in cramped boathouses and ate cassava roots and were naked from the waist up. They were there suddenly before you and as they beat the drum and danced and as the lamps drove away all darkness from the faces of the watching crowd, they seemed to lay claims to all powers given to man from the beginning of the world. The drummer suddenly was not a poor fisherman but a heartbeat; the dancer was all grace; and the crowd was an audience reliving memories of their own glory.

And then suddenly the dancing stopped, the drummer stood quiet, and no other pair of dancers stepped forward. There was a silence in which I felt afraid, having stepped out of the line of the crowd while watching, enthralled as I had been with what was before me. Now out of the darkness appeared Rauncia. She was wearing a costume that made her look as if she were no longer a girl. She walked to the center, stopped there, and looked back at the drummer. Then she was looking in my direction.

She came to me and said, will you dance with me, sir?

I didn't know what to say. She stood there: and her eyes contained a knowledge of past sorrow she wanted to tell me but I saw her suddenly, quickly different from what she stood there for: she looked so strangely beautiful, as if she were not herself, not the Rauncia I had met in the schoolhouse teaching some children. She was now a Badjao, all of her being as she stood there. But the drummer started to play again. I hesitated. The crowd stopped its breath watching. Now Panglima Bongao was shouting at me. Then the women cried out; the men raised their hands and shouted. Even Jamiluddin was also shouting at me, but in Tagalog. I

understood what he was saying. The drummer kept on playing. The gabbangs and the kulintangs beat furiously.

Go ahead, Rauncia, I said. You dance first.

Rauncia stepped into the center of the mats, looking at me, and then began to dance. As I moved to follow, the crowd fell into the strangest silence I had ever known.

THE NEXT morning, I went to Tubig-Sallang to buy my week's supplies. Rauncia came with me on the trip because she said she wanted to buy some needle and thread. At the wharf, I told her and Jamiluddin to just stay in the boat and wait for me; I told Rauncia I'd buy what she needed. I went and bought my needs, then proceeded to the Telegraph Office. I sent telegrams to Raquel, to my director, to my sisters and brothers who were now married, to three of my best friends, to two of my former teachers. The telegrams were all messages of Easter greeting. To Raquel I sent a telegram that perplexed the office clerk for it wasn't written in the manner of telegrams sent. It was a very short letter, written in complete sentences, with you's and I's, telling her of my loneliness and my love.

Then I proceeded to the schoolhouse with the little chapel. I knew the missionary priest had gone on a vacation and perhaps would not still be there. The schoolhouse was deserted all right, and the chapel was bare, a simple structure with rainstains on the unpainted ceiling. The altar had no flowers, no cloth cover, no candlesticks. There was a tiny cross hanging on the wall. The pews were few, of odd sizes and makes, disarranged in the small room. There was no altar platform, no communion rail, and the glass vessel that contained the sanctuary lamp bore no light inside. It was so cold and musty.

I was taken aback. But I knelt on the floor and prayed one Our Father. I smiled and whispered, Happy Easter, God, wherever you are. Then I went back to the wharf and gave Rauncia her needle and thread. She was happy. I took out a small package from one of the two bayongs I held and also gave it to her. Here, this is also for you. She tore the wrapper; it was a bracelet. Thank you, sir, she said and was more

than happy. Happy Easter, I said. What's that, sir? she asked. I smiled. Oh, it's a greeting to a feast in the city, I said. If you come tomorrow to the schoolhouse, I'll tell you all about it. You can bring your friends and we'll have a little party.

I looked about, and then at the sun, then at the sea.

Come, I said, let's go back home before the current changes against us.