

Excerpts from
Secrets of the Eighteen Mansions
A novel by Mario I. Miclat

Ours was touted as the dawning of the age... To usher it, we thought we had to change the world. We unveiled a future even darker than our youth's darkest days... In our Spring and Autumn Period, we let a hundred schools of thought contend and our hundred flowers wilted. We fervently prayed to reach the apex even as we jumped into a bottomless pit. Our age refused to dawn. (quoted from Letter #2)

The setting sun painted the [Philippine] sky with all possible shades of red, serving as backdrop to the wide University Avenue lined with coconut trees in groups of three. In China, all gateways of importance must face south, while paintings and poetry depicted the rising sun. Would I now come back to my tropical isles, be Filipino and celebrate our sunsets? (quoted from File I – 1)

We, a motley delegation of left-wing activists, were to be *talahib* plumes in the eye of the wind. I wanted to ask my friend, Boyong, to please tell Mamma that I was borrowing Daddy's reversible jacket. But it was already impossible telling him. Alma, followed by the children of CPP Chairman AG, their aunt, a *Manila Times* correspondent who just called in sick, and myself would be entering the vortex. (II – 1)

Beyond the screen, the US naval officers' housing project at Cubi Point came to my mind. We passed between two identical two-floor villas with gray brick walls and tiled hipped roofs beneath skyrocketing trees lined in equal intervals, fenced, not with tall hollow block walls as in Manila, but by trimmed cypress hedges. Turning left, we headed to the second villa, bigger than the first, but smaller than the two earlier ones... [In this compound of 18 Mansions], it wouldn't take long before I realized that I was a naïve, Americanized, tropical islander hurled into the dazzling court of an old Oriental empire. (II – 3)

The papers carried the news about two grenade explosions at Plaza Miranda in downtown Manila on August 21...

“We can pack up and go!” Sandro shouted. No one paid attention. Everyone was absorbed in the newspaper they read... It was the bloodiest act of terror that happened in our country during peace time.

Without a word, Flor left the library. When her husband, Felipe dela Vega, disappeared early in the year and was never heard from again, demonstrators on Mendiola Bridge, near Malacañan Palace, asked her to speak. She climbed up the platform, stood there, and did not utter a word. Each time she sighed or shifted her body, the crowd fell more silent than ever. When she climbed down two or three minutes later, she got the longest applause...

At dinnertime, nobody spoke about Plaza Miranda. Flor complained about the eggplants with ground pork wallowing in peanut oil, turtle in thick spicy sauce, and dried shrimp *hibe* soup with winter gourd... I learned from the cooks that they spent so much for our meals. They buy for us the most expensive things they could from the central committee commissary. That’s why we did not have watermelon in summer. That would be cheap. We’d have them in winter, grown in commune greenhouses.

Pack up and go? We lived in heaven. (II – 5)

I was naked save for my briefs. I sat reading in bed, my back against the wooden headboard. The night was warm. Nanay was taking a shower. I let the book drop on my lap as she stepped out of the bathroom. She was wearing only a towel wrap around. Three months after she delivered our baby, she was back to her former figure, thanks to some exercises she had read in one of those supplementary Philippine Sunday magazines. She smiled shyly at me when she noticed I was looking. I glanced at the window overlooking the dimly lighted walls of Sian, capital of the ancient Tang Dynasty.

Someone knocked on the door. I slipped under the bed sheet. It was Eige. She wanted to sleep with us. She promptly lay down under the sheet at Alma’s side of the bed. Nanay positioned herself in between Eige and me, guarding my nakedness.

(VIII – 3)

I groped in the dark and touched the frozen stillness of the cement wall. I was deep down the bowels of the blacked out tunnel under the basketball court. In the deafening silence, I waited to hear a reassuring voice. All I heard was a cry for help. “*Huwag po!* Please don’t allow it to happen!”

It was I, uttering a forbidden prayer. I asked that Mao Tsetung should reject another request for arms delivery made by AG.

Li Changhong was the wife of Premier Chou En-lai’s adopted son. She told me that Teng Hsiao-p’ing wrote in his remark to AG’s letter the words “*mábì dàyi*, careless.” He was referring to the M. V. Karagatan fiasco. Now, we were waiting for Mao’s decision.

“*Huwag po!*” I cried. “Don’t make it a contest between Teng’s right and Mao’s left.”

... I asked Meng Zengjin how one would know whether a state policy was correct or not.

“I know by instinct,” he replied, “that if it comes from Chairman Mao, it must be correct.”

“How do you know if a policy comes from him and not from his advisers?”

“If it is correct, then it comes from Chairman Mao,” he replied. (VIII – 6)

I would be hearing versions of their story told by five or six persons speaking simultaneously. The details varied every time. And I always had to ask for clarification, in case I wrote their story.

“Don’t write it anymore,” said Milan years later. He was afraid that if we kept reporting conflicting details, people would start doubting the veracity of the entire experience.

“Why?” asked Dindo. “Wouldn’t it be better to remember and be doubted by others, than to forget all together and grow old doubting about our past lives?” (IX – 2)

“We mustn’t allow him to jump from the rooftop,” Ernie Duque stage whispered. He pointed with his kisser lips the dark figure at the rooftop, swaying back and forth, seemingly preparing to make a fatal jump...

”Somebody should climb up behind his back and convince him to sober down,” Ernie Duque suggested without volunteering himself. As nobody stirred, he ordered Apung Nacio to collect bed sheets to make a net in case the figure fell. Gathered at the ground below, we were suddenly united by a crisis situation. To think that just a few moments back, we figured in another crisis. And it was of our own making.

Living among a highly organized nation for five years, we remained blissfully unaffected and innocent in our enclave. Blessed with the most divisive Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology of constant, perpetual, and universal struggle, we lived the life of disunited tribesmen. The consequences could have been fatal, had not a PLA security man come with Interpreter Meng, even as a Chinese militia force stood guard at the front gate...

Apung Nacio came back with the bed sheets. He peered into the rooftop to reckon where he and a possible companion should position themselves. “Aruu!” he exclaimed. “That’s no human being above that roof! It’s a tree top swaying in the wind.” (X – 7)

I started to run as fast as I could. I saw a distant light. It was coming from a peasant house. I stopped running and walked naturally to avoid being noticed. Walking past through it, I started running once more. Walk. Run. Walk. Run. The earth started to feel soggy. I had reached the stream with no bridge... Why don’t you freeze in winter? It would have been easier to cross.

I bent to touch the water with my fingers. It was icy cold. My feet would freeze fording it. I shouted a slogan, “Turn grief into revolutionary courage!”

I’m a good swimmer! My body would fight the cold if I swam. I could even swim downstream and be in Changsha even faster. I’d remove my clothes, tie them in a bundle, and raise them in one hand. In Changsha, they’d know I’m not an undesirable element. I’d be quoting Chairman Mao by heart! I began removing my shoes, my socks, my pants, my thermal underwear. I stepped into the water. Someone grabbed my arms from behind.

“Zenmele!” he shouted. “What’re you up to?”

I burst into tears...

“Please, I just... want to see... my wife and baby in Peking,” I said.

He pulled my hair, twisted my head, and made me look straight in his eyes. He was the head militiaman. (X – 7)

I should go eat my lunch. I would want to look at least physically healthy when my daughter got to see me again. And Nanay must not see me down and low. I emerged from my room. Snow, about 10 cm deep, covered one side of the corridor... I found no one in the canteen other than the cook. Even so, he was crouching underneath his heavy coat and did not even look up... I took my food, returned to my room, and ate alone. Looking out of the window, I saw every fall of snowflake adding a ton of gloom to the gray surroundings. There was no way avoiding the sight. If I closed my eyes, black snowflakes fell over blackened earth. (X – 8)

A solitary snowflake swirled awhile in front of my eyes, settled on my glasses, and got stuck there. I remembered the white talahib flowers which covered the hills surrounding our town. I imagined them as snow. The *amihan* breeze blew down from China and scattered their efflorescent seeds in September. I tried catching them. They kept flying away. A solitary plume lingered. I gently pinched it between my thumb and forefinger and placed it on my palm. How delicately white and brilliant it was. After a while, I gently blew at it to set it flying free again together with its kind. But in mid-air, it formed into cluster with others, and fell to the ground. (X – 8)

I’ve been liberated from the lies. I looked at the sky, covered by thick dark clouds. I felt apprehensive. Now it would be more difficult for me to weave the truth anew.

(X – 8)

I asked the driver to stop by the commune store so I could buy something for Nanay and Maningning. I bought a piece of colored paper for our baby, a pencil, and a box of thumbtacks which I fashioned into a pinwheel while on the plane. Yes, indeed, the store now sold bales of colorful printed cotton cloth, so different from the heyday of the

Cultural Revolution. I got the most beautiful peasant print I could buy, dainty plum blossoms on yellow-brown earth background. I imagined Nanay sewing it into a blouse for her self.

It was nighttime when I arrived at the Eighteen Mansions. I was so happy to see Nanay and Maningning, as they stood waiting for me in the cold... I gave Nanay the piece of cloth wrapped in the rough brown paper of the commune.

“This is what I actually needed,” she said, obviously delighted. “I’ve wanted for a long time to change the curtain of our pantry upstairs.”

I am not sure if she noticed the tears beginning to swell at the corner of my reddening eyes. Maningning just stared at me. After a while, she took my hand and led me to her room. She showed me a framed picture of my self.

“This is my father *Tatay*,” she said without looking at me. “I really miss him so much. I wonder when he will be back.” (X – 8)