



*Figure 7.6 Tatay took a picture of us during the reconstruction of the house in Poblacion, Lobo, Batangas, circa 1969. From left to right: Ate Josie, Kuya Boying, Ate Evelyn, Ate Susan, Ate Majel, Uncle Sixto, and Cayong Muntí (me). Image credit: Josie G. Serrano.*

After supper, I followed the throng of cousins marching up the staircase to the open sky terrace on the second floor. We hunkered down in the Ambassador *sala* set of narra armchairs that had an inlaid carving of grapevines on the backrest and rattan-woven seats. The furniture became known simply as *soli-biya*, referring to the intricate wickerwork found on seating and sleeping types of furniture, such as chairs, chaise lounges, and

beds. This furniture helped to cool the skin in hot and humid weather.

Bathing in the full moon's light, Angely Ada provided the narration as she eased back in her chair, her mind steeped in the occult and superstition. The out-of-towners and I hung onto every word, teetering at the edge of our seats when she began her tale.

"On a pitch black, moonless night, a lone driver was slowly maneuvering his jeepney on the zigzag road of Bitukang Manok, which was full of twists and turns and highs and lows," she said. "His headlights glimmered on the unpaved road, shining dimly on the dense underbrush as he drove by, not a soul in sight. The chugging sound of the diesel engine and gravel crunching underfoot echoed in the mountainside."

"As his gaze scanned the road, the driver caught sight, in the rearview mirror, of the blurry figure of someone sitting at the far end of the passenger cabin behind him." Angely's ashen face gleamed in the moonlight; her hands tightly clasped on her lap.

"Wait a minute, that can't be right. I haven't picked up anyone along the way!" The driver muttered under his breath, unaware of ever having stopped to let someone on board. He gulped at the fresh, damp mountain air and held his breath."

"He turned to look behind him but saw no one there. He looked at the rearview mirror again, and there she was, a woman clad in a flowing white dress with pale white skin, long black hair, and deep-set, hollow eyes staring right at him." Angely's eyes widened, her breathing becoming heavier and heavier.

"He turned his head around again but found no one there. Positively befuddled, he slammed on the brake pedal, sending the jeepney to a screeching halt on the empty road. He turned around to do a triple take and look full on, but no one was there. The woman in white had vanished in the thick dust!"

The earthy smell of the low-flowing Lobo River, *tuyong sampalok* (dried tamarind), and horse dung in the street below added to the stillness of the night. The old ancestral house in

Lobo Poblacion had long been gone. Still, the small town's familiar scent lingered in the air, stoking my imagination to conjure an apparition of the magnificent old house.

The unmistakable presence of my grandmother in the kitchen, dressed in her floor-length white gown, overshadowed my fear. She had come from another place and time and stood for everything I loved about the house. That image was not to be confused with the malevolent spirit in Angely's story.

An eerie quiet descended upon the gathering until someone suddenly blurted out.

*"Multo! It's a ghost!"*

My cousins and I erupted in shrieks and screams, soon after accompanied by howling street dogs in the neighborhood.

*Ow, ow, owooooo!*

A chill cascaded down my spine and catapulted me off my seat. I landed on the floor with a thud, my ears glued to every word, wide-eyed and agog at the ending.

"Some say the White Lady was an *engkanto*, a mythical guardian of the forests. Others say she suffered an ignoble and untimely death during the war and now haunts the darkest ends of the earth, unable to rest in peace until she finds her killer and avenges her death. Beware the moonless night!"

Angely finished her story with a shroud of mystery.

I tossed and turned on the straw mat, too riled up to sleep. The house lizard was at it again with its incessant mating call in the rafters.

*Tuk-kô, tuk-kô, tuk-kô.*

Hence, the onomatopoeic name *tukô* of the tokay gecko in Tagalog. The regular rhythmic sound finally lulled me to sleep with a prayer.

The following morning, guttural screams and shouts bellowed from the street below, stirring the household to life. The children scampered in all directions. My cousins and I hid behind the enormous foundation of the former grand staircase

as Inong Gambol (literally, badly beaten up Ino) came around the corner. How he acquired his name, I would not know.

*Umph! Hrrmph! Harrr!*

A scraggly older man with a mental illness, Ino was left alone to roam the streets, frightening almost every child in my generation who knew little to nothing about him. One day, he recognized Tatay from the road and approached him quietly at the front gate, grabbing his hand for the ritual of pagmamano, to which my father replied and gave him his blessings.

*“Kaarwaan ka ng Diyos. May the Lord have mercy on you.”*

They knew each other. Ino grumbled something unintelligible and walked away, the only shred of cognition I had seen of him during my summer episodes in town. Ino died of old age in the end.

I had climbed the dark wooden stairs leading up to the porch of the bahay na bato on N. Babao Street at least once before it burned down in 1968. Every glimpse since then, albeit extensively reconstructed only to become a mere shadow of its former self, has been a journey to the moment I first met my grandmother at the old ancestral house.