

MEMORIES OF CORAZON

It was quite a shock to learn that Corazon had gone into hospice then passed away shortly thereafter, on the cusp of a new year. We had a long conversation around Christmas, when I first learned of her November cancer surgery and subsequent radiation treatments, to be followed by chemotherapy. But she was positive in her outlook, saying that the doctors assured her of “five more years.” It was reasonable, since Escobar women have had a great experience with longevity. Two of our aunts lived past 100. Corazon’s eldest sister Teresita made it to 95. Alas, it was not to be.

Let me start off with an admission. I had a boyhood crush on Corazon. I know, we are first cousins. But those were around prepuberty days. In Tagalog, I would describe her then as “*mukhang bumbay*.” That means she looked Indian, with an aquiline nose, long black hair, brown eyes and a light olive complexion. She carried the best of the Escobar genes, with a tinge of DNA from the Iberian Peninsula (I have the DNA proof). Unfortunately, her mother¹ died at a very young age, leaving seven children between the ages of twenty and six. Corazon was the fifth of the seven. We had very little contact henceforth, until the 1960s.

Having finished college, we independently ventured off into what was the unknown, to the United States. Coincidentally, we both ended up in the state of Pennsylvania. She trained and worked at the Wills Eye Hospital in Philadelphia while I attended Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh. A visit was in order. Greyhound buses were ubiquitous then, it was easy to go direct from one city to another. Corazon stayed in an apartment complex for nurses. She asked where I was going to stay, telling her the YMCA would be good. That was another feature of the 1960s, YMCAs were a clean, safe, reasonable place to stay. She invited me to stay in the apartment she shared with a couple of other nurses. Unlike today, there was no mixed gender housing then. I was “smuggled” into their apartment and surfed their couch. Looking back, that was fun, telling my friends I stayed in an apartment building full of nurses².

Corazon didn’t stay long in Philadelphia, returning to the Philippines to marry the love of her life, Jose “Jojo” Nelle³. But the United States beckoned again. The new immigration law of 1965, under President Lyndon Johnson, made it easier, opening the floodgates. With two babies in tow, the young Nelle family settled in Chicago. As luck would have it, I was in the process of moving from Ohio to Illinois. The succeeding decades were eventful. There were now three Escobar sisters in the Chicago area – Teresita, Yolanda (Yoly) and Corazon. Visits were often. My wife Val accused me of ulterior motives in visiting – being fed Filipino food. Well, why not? Corazon’s *pinakbet* was the best.

Unfortunately, I underwent a divorce, but remarried, to Val Wagner, in 1977. I didn’t have the means to invite a lot of people, but made sure Jojo and Cora were there. Teresita’s eldest daughter Zennie was there too, volunteering to bake our cake and refusing reimbursement. In pictures from our wedding in Crystal Lake, you’ll see Corazon obviously pregnant. That would be Sharon.

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Jojo and Cora were fun, Jojo being my kind of guy. He was down to earth, generous, caring and hospitable. I don't remember him uttering a cuss word. Unfortunately, toward the end of his life, Jojo suffered from ill health, even undergoing a kidney transplant. Corazon was relentless in taking care of him. Despite her own personal health challenges, she provided Jojo with unstinting devotion and skilled care.

We are currently in the midst of an unusually cold winter. That brings to mind another vignette, from the winter of 1978-79. I was doing work in Chicago and roads were nearly impassable. Corazon & Jojo, along with their close friends Tessie & Benny, had purchased a two flat in Chicago. Rather going all the way to Crystal Lake, I made the call for help. So, for a short period, I had a temporary home closer to the plant where I was working.

In our Catholic tradition, we have a Corporal Works of Mercy, based on the teachings of our savior Jesus Christ. There are seven works, but one that Corazon and Jojo took to heart was "Shelter the Homeless." I don't mean the homeless as we know today, but friends, relatives, friends of friends or relatives of friends needing a temporary place to stay. Their list is endless. For privacy's sake, we won't name the instances, but I'll provide one example. My sister Charito's youngest son Joel and his nurse wife Bambie were coming to Chicago, for the latter to work in a nursing home. But first, she had to pass the NCLEX test. She stayed with the recruiter for review, but Joel and baby Tobey needed a place to stay. Although we lived in Crystal Lake, outside of Chicago, I was then working in the United Kingdom, being called back to work even after retiring several years earlier. My wife Val had joined me. Who do you think I called to help? Jojo and Corazon of course. There was no hesitation on their part. So, Joel and Tobey stayed with Jojo and Cora in Lombard. Bambie passed the test, moving on to their own place.

Among the seven Escobar siblings of Iba, my mother Rosario⁴ and Corazon's father Jovito Sr.⁵, were especially close. Corazon's eldest sister Teresita and eldest brother Nasario even stayed with us in Manila. Us cousins carried on this tradition. But now our earthly connections are severed. But it is temporary. Someday we will all be together.

In the meantime,

"He will raise you up on eagles' wings

Bear you on the breath of dawn

Make you to shine like the sun

And hold you in the palm of His hand"

Mario Escobar Orosa

Cape Coral, FL

January 12, 2025

1. Guadalupe "Upeng" Leabres, 1906-1949

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2. I didn't think about it then, but in hindsight, I should not have accepted. It was not long after, in 1966, that a crazed madman broke into a nurses' housing in Chicago, assaulting and slaying several. The lone survivor was Filipina. I am sparing a lot of details on purpose. I had placed Corazon and her roommates in an awkward situation.

3. Jose "Jojo" Nelle, 1940-2009

4. Rosario "Chayong" Escobar Orosa, 1897-1993

5. Jovito V. Escobar Sr., 1900-1976