

Treasure In Simara

Written by Eleazar Mirasol Famorcan

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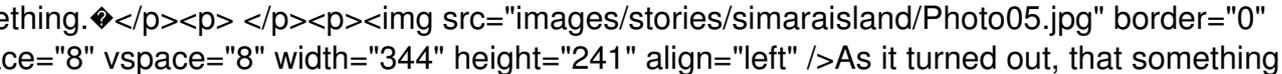
Must have been the naughty wind that tousled my hairdo and with impunity whipped my unhelmeted top. Or must have been my proclivity to enchanting islands. Whatever, it caused a tale to spin in my head as Manong Erwin and I went motorcycling in [Simara](index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=54:simara-pictures-2002&catid=47:photo-gallery&Itemid=69).

Earlier that late April afternoon, we had crossed paths near his house and struck up a conversation. Not long after that, out of the blue, he invited me for a short ride.

The trip would take less than an hour, roundtrip, he assured me. And don't worry about not being able to get back home early.

Me worry? No way holiday, I thought. He need not tell me about time limits. In my island-hometown people enjoy time more than they measure or race against it. There, my days are not structured and I can always take my time.

Let's go! he said as he mounted and kickstarted his handsome motorbike. I want to show you something.



As it turned out, that something lay in the northwestern tip of the island, where a solar-powered lighthouse stands and my favorite cove called Boton sits and gets gently caressed by the sea. There, on a big-enough patch of reefy soil, stand rows of months-old paper trees laden with promise of financial gain.

Many people thought these trees wouldn't thrive in this kind of soil, you know, he said. Well, I couldn't pretend that I knew; as an agriculturist, he should know. He has lived in Simara all these recent years. He's among those who have fallen in love with the island's unhurried life. He has successfully transplanted himself into its soil and acquired a treasure for a wife—a high school classmate of mine, the one with the longest white legs and chinkiest eyes. Grew a family he did and soon went around convincing islandfolks about the rewards of keeping the place green.

Dusk had already fallen as we drove back to the poblacion. On the way he continued to tell me about other things that he takes pride in doing. Besides growing paper trees, something else had been taking plenty of his time and most of his attention lately: digging for treasure.

He told me about some treasure said to be hidden somewhere in Simara. Probably part of the loot the Japanese imperial army stashed away in haste as they retreated from Douglas MacArthur's liberation forces during World War II, he theorized. He said he hoped to find it.

Fantastic, I thought, the tale beginning to whirl in my head.

I guarantee you there's treasure here. I just know it, he said. When I find it, I'll share some of it with you. Come back next year.

The following year, I was back. For one thing, I didn't want to miss out on an alumni homecoming of my high school. But even without that reunion of friends and former classmates, some kind of magic lures me to the place. It was there that I first saw the light and spent countless daylight hours playing with toy boats made out of discarded lightweight Beachwalk sandals and cellophane sails. There also, I learned to ride a bike, and appreciated the connotations of a dalagang bukid—which could either mean the local bread or the native beauty. Secretly, I had wanted to get an update on Manong Erwin's treasure hunt and my portion of the bounty. Well, I did see the hunter, but where's the treasure?

Treasure or no treasure, many things can occupy you in Simara. Early mornings, you can scour the white sandy beach for puka shells and dig for ayagukoy (robber crabs). When the tide is right, you can walk on an almost-dry seabed looking for starfish and seahorses, or swim beginning late afternoon and into well past sunset. And you'd think the glimmering reflection of

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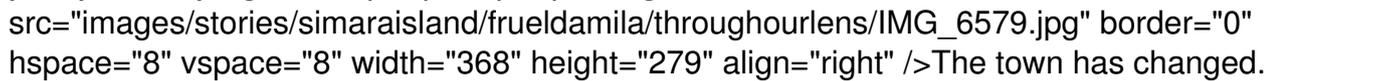
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the afternoon sun has turned everything around you into gold.

Even without the attractions offered by Simara's sea, it's still worth going a long way to see some pretty lass in some ancestral house, who has taken roots somewhere else but whose lineage is distinctly Simaranhon. A lass who goes there almost every summer to unwind, and probably to see and be seen. Whom you passed up to court somebody else.

You couldn't really tell what could happen. When you're feeling 16, and Tess might have decided to stay single a little longer and waited for you. And you might have been given another chance to repent of your juvenile judgment.

The town has changed. Bigger, better-equipped houses now stand where vacant lots and humble nipa huts used to sit. But beyond a few widened streets and the heightened hum of motorcycles and one lone jeepney, it's still relatively quiet there—especially at night. After you eat rice and pinangat nak isra a little past sundown, you stick between your teeth a toothpick made out of an amorseco stem or a coconut midrib and wander to the seaside to gaze at glittering ships not very far yonder. And despite some unmistakable sights and sounds of near-modern conveniences, you can still hear the gentle lapping of the waves. Or the soft moan of the breeze caressing the leaves of coconut trees that line the seawall. Or some hushed conversation of a few souls who have taken advantage of the nightly respite.

Surely Simara's not heaven on earth. It can be boring as hell in its own way, and I wouldn't want to live there a little more than a week, especially during habagat days when the waves turn menacingly raucous and the wind boisterous. And all that's left on the dining table is a mountain of rice and a choice between canned or salted fish.

There's no reliable cellphone signal there, no shopping mall either. Even if you have TV, you couldn't watch it, due to lack of electricity, for a big part of the 24-hour day. Besides fanning feverishly to drive off humidity, there's not much else to do there. You have endless hours to pass the time which is mostly done by watching time pass. Which is probably why many old folks there still play mahjong all day long and youngsters indulge in a game of chess which is like watching paint dry.

So why do I go there on an annual pilgrimage? To slow down and unwind, you know. Most of all, to sanctify memory, to take a fresh peek at slices of my life kept only in the heart, to recover and relish a piece of home.

Some tales about Simara are hard to believe. But Manong Erwin was right about that speck of an island. I can't quite explain it, but he was correct.

There's treasure there.

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