

Madarika

—Since the 20s, the International Hotel, on the edge of San Francisco's Chinatown, had housed the manongs—the pioneer Filipino immigrants to America. In 1977, young Filipino Americans fought the eviction of these “old-timers” and the demolition of the “I-Hotel” by linking arms against the wrecking ball—for many of them, the even was an emblem of their awakening into Filipino-American History and culture.

—Madarika, in Tagalog, means “homeless wanderer.”

You ask me my name? They got lotsa names for me—Frankie, Manong Chito, Old-Timer—you walk into a Chinese restaurant with me, you see they call me “Amigo.” Lotsa names. But I'm just a Pinoy, you know? *Pinoy*, that's a password. You see a stranger across the street, his hair shiny with Brilliantine, just like a rooster's dark-blue feathers after the owner spits down the neck and head at a cockfight. So you yell out, “Hey, Pinoy?” If the answer come back, “*Hoy, Kababayan*,” then you know that stranger's a friend: he'll stand at your back in a knife fight.

Anyway, my name is Francisco X. Velarde. X for Xavier. So you see I got a powerful patron saint. I was born in Ilocos Norte in 1906. I still remember the sunrise back home. I was the youngest of seven boys and it was my job to take our *kalabaw* to the field in the morning. I remember lying on his broad back, gray like an elephant. The sun climbing between his horns as he walked, first the pink spreading across the sky like flowers.

Only another place I see something like that was Alaska where I ended up at a cannery in '24. It never got dark, you know, but when the sun would sink below the horizon, the sky would light up in purple and pink just before sunrise. All day we slave on the line. My job is cutting off fish heads. One time, my *kumpadre* Paulino cuts his finger right off but we never find it. You young Pinoys, you never know how hard we worked at that cannery, and it was dangerous, too. But every night we were our own boss, and we played baseball—fast-pitch, slow-pitch—in the midnight sun.

I worked lotsa jobs. Barber, farm worker, dishwasher, houseboy, janitor: you name it, I done it. Every place I been—in Alaska, in Seattle, in Stockton cutting asparagus—

they got these dance halls. A dime for a dance. These days, a dime don't seem like much to you, but you know it was a lot in the 30s. Very dear. *Mahal*. But we didn't mind. Blondies. *Susmariosep!* We were crazy for those blondies. Ay, *naku!* “No money, no honey,” they used to say. After the war, one time, I was going out with a blondie. She had a white fur coat down to her feet: *maganda*. Turned out she was some kinda Russian spy, no kidding. The FBI haul me away and this *puti*—blond hair, blue eyes—he comes into the room and says, “*Kumusta kayo?*” Just like he's from Manila, and his accent's better than mine! That time, I was working the Presidio, folding whites in the Army hospital. They let me go 'cause I got no top secret to give away, you see? Believe it or not—FBI agent talking Tagalog!

Well, I been here at the International since long time before that blondie. I have this room over twenty years. This same bed, *squeak squeak* every night till I think the mice are talking back. That same desk where I used to sit and write letters back home but I got no on there now. Same old view—Kearny Street still the same, twenty, thirty years. This room's all the home I got. They kick us out, I have just one regret: all the lotsa names I got, no one ever called me *Lolo*. Those years playing with blondies, I never had no kids. And so now I can't have no grandson. All I got is you—you college boys ask these question like your doing homework. Look around you. This is all there is. Remember everything about this room: the smell of old linoleum, the faded curtains, the bugs. And when your grandkids ask about the O.T.'s, *the* original manongs, you tell them how we talked today. Tell them Francisco Velarde was here. Lolo Panchito was here.

—Vince Gotera