

The Snake Charmer

In the barrios near the outskirts of the small town of Tanauan there was always a place where the locals congregated. The spot would generally be a store of some sort — selling anything from kerosene, lard, clay pots, hemp, fibers, preserved fish, folk medicines and herbs, weeks-old newspapers, smoked meats, rice by-products and local refreshments made from fruits. There was never an abundance of any one product, but specific items were always available to the local clientele. Demand for things depended on simple weekly requests that were either filled within days, or patiently waited for indefinitely until supplies from the town trickled down to the *barrios*. Some relatively scarce products would be made available at an easily negotiated price. Terms were based on one's reputation in the community, and the ability to maintain it without inciting unwanted rumors. Such places were centers for informal social interaction. Whether the encounter lasted two minutes or two hours, news and gossip traveled with the ease of rain drops sliding through swaying palm leaves in an afternoon shower. Everything happened in its own time.

In the tiny barrio of Malilim near the main route was such a shack. The place had been blessed with decent carpentry, galvanized roofing and a variety of commonly-sought after goods. From small groups of children that drifted with the passing grown-ups, to the *barrio captain* and his lakadaisical cohorts, there was always a crowd of men, women and animals that flocked to the store. Though the crowd numbered less than a dozen people at any given time, it was always enough to start some conversation, story, or a barter proposition.

Asuncion and Fidel had been courting less than a year. At thirty one, Fidel felt that it was time to do something about his bachelorhood. He was fourteen years her senior but that didn't seem to be a point of contention for either one. They would meet at the store on occasion to chat or just be around each other. Sometimes either one would join a friend or a relative to idle away the afternoons sipping lemonade or eating fruits that were in season. More times than not Fidel would be there on very hot, lazy afternoons.

It was one o' clock in the afternoon and Fidel was again on the same bench he sat on the day before. He espied Asuncion from a distance heading for the store with her friend Consuelo in tow. It was sweltering hot and a few of the locals had stopped working in the fields to take a brief respite from the intense tropical sun. In the shade of the shack's thatched, front awning were two hardwood benches that faced each other. Each bench could seat six comfortably. A six-by-nine feet expanse of packed dirt that led to the front of the store separated them. Behind the modest-sized shack was an orchard that boasted a few old trees. Some of the *narra* and *mango* trees were said to be enchanted, and that a *banana* or *lanzones* tree was a place of power. Nobody really knew which of the trees did what, or if the barriofolk even cared. But to many, the store was considered a place of good fortune. The store owner, Aling Zenia, called to the two dogs that

had secured their spots underneath the benches. The dogs raised their heads towards the middle-aged woman then languidly returned to their brooding. There were five people already lounging on the seats by the time Asuncion and Consuelo came to the front of the shack.

Asuncion greeted Fidel demurely. He reciprocated in kind and made room next to him for both Asuncion and her friend.

“Good afternoon.”

“Hello,” said Fidel without trying to look too happy.

“Good afternoon to you, young ladies,” said Ka Tintoy, an elderly man with missing front teeth.

“Aling Zenia, how are you?” said the girls in unison.

“Oh fine, fine. Come, come,” said the store owner while dispensing a coconut drink to a young farmer, who left promptly after downing his drink.

“Good day. Please,” offered a middle-aged woman as she made her way towards the dusty main road.

Pleasantries were exchanged since everyone knew each other.

It had not rained in a while, so naturally the fields were becoming dry. Nobody really wanted to be anywhere but in the shade. It was that time of the day when the heat intensified — when the sun was directly above you. Whoever was present in the shack made themselves comfortable. The stories were already in motion even before the people had secured their spots. There were anecdotes about one family’s misadventures in town, a sick water buffalo, a town wedding in the next couple of weeks, one man’s niece finding a nice beau, a mysterious event that was left unanswered, a couple known for making excellent preserves and smoked fish, and news about the Americans coming to the provincial capital.

After spending a few minutes with Fidel, Asuncion went to the counter and took out a list.

“Aling Zenia, my mother told me to get a few things. You know, the usual items for her cooking,” said Asuncion while smiling back and forth between the store owner and Fidel.

“Has anybody seen Mang Pilo,” queried the man without the front teeth.

“Aah... yes, yes. Last Sunday,” interrupted the store owner while packing Asuncion’s items. “He came for some oil and salt. A very private, but nice man.”

“I hear he knows a lot of things,” winked missing teeth.

“Oh? Like what?” interjected Fidel.

“Things you men would never believe,” said Aling Perla, a plump woman in her mid-forties who had a small eatery down the road next to the farmer’s market. She had been there a while chatting with the store owner about some

items she needed immediately.

“I do,” said Tasyo as he raised his coconut drink.

Everyone looked in his direction while he sipped his drink contentedly. They knew him to be an efficient farmer.

“Would you tell us some of those things?” said Fidel.

“Oh, leave it alone,” said Aling Perla.

“But wait, what are we talking about in here.”

“All right, you all. Leave what’s not meant for your shallow minds,” said the store owner.

“Shallow?!” said Ka Tintoy while his tongue played with the gums where the teeth were missing.

“Oh all right, so no one really knows. But it’s best to leave those things alone,” remarked Aling Perla.

“Oh no!”

While the petty argument escalated to a full-blown tirade about the “unexplained” things in life, Asuncion sat next to Fidel and touched his hand. Ka Tintoy expressed his disappointment on how people just took things for granted. Aling Perla was about to launch into another tirade about ignorance. Tasyo half-heartedly tried to mediate, but upon seeing the incoherence of everyone within their own little bubbles, he remained quiet.

All of a sudden everyone caught themselves and were excruciatingly polite once again. Aling Zenia offered everyone a complimentary coconut drink, provided Ka Tintoy regaled them with a tale about their province, if not their barrio.

“Alright, I’ll be a sport,” said Ka Tintoy.

Asuncion and Fidel lowered their voices.

The shack became quiet.

Ka Tintoy began the story after taking a few sips from his glass. “Does anyone know why the trees behind this shack are so huge?” Everyone looked at each other, but no one knew. The spell began.

“A very long time ago, when there weren’t any of the surrounding towns as we have them today, there were a few isolated huts that were inhabited by enchanted beings. Our little barrio was said to be the general area where the story takes place. There was a *bruha*, a witch that lived here, close to the trees. She was ah, err ... a *good* witch.”

“What was so hard about saying ‘good’?” said Aling Perla.

“Well, you know, witches aren’t supposed to be good.”

“I never heard that before. Witches could be anything — good, bad, not so bad, malevolent...”

“Hey, I’m the man with the story. Alright?”

“Oh, alright. I’m sorry,” said Aling Perla in her most self-deprecating tone.

“Anyway, this *bruha* was tending to her garden when...” Ka Tintoy stopped his story in mid-sentence. He craned his neck to look past his audience on the opposite bench. Out on the dirt road one of the younger farmers was half-supporting, half-dragging another man next to him. It seemed that they were trying hard to get to the little store. As the others turned to see what was behind them, the man who couldn’t stand collapsed completely on the dirt road about forty feet away.

“I know that man. That’s Pedring, and the other fellow must be his brother Manolo. Something happened. Let’s help them!” said Ka Tintoy as he strode out to meet the men. The dogs led the way. Fidel and Tasyo were close behind. They rushed to the aid of Pedring and carried the fallen Manolo into the shade. A bench was cleared, and the man was lain gently.

“Oh God,” said Aling Zenia through furrowed brows.

“What happened?”

“He’s not dead, I hope?” added Fidel. Consuelo went close to Asuncion.

“No, but he will be if we don’t help him. I don’t want my brother to die.” Pedring choked on the words.

“What happened to him.” queried Ka Tintoy in his most detached manner.

“A snake bit him.”

“How long ago?” asked the normally quiet Tasyo.

“Not too long... I’m not really sure...but, I think it happened...a few minutes before you saw us. I really need to find some help...,” meandered Pedring as he continued stroking and scratching his head.

“Did you cut him?”

“Of course, I did.”

“Did you see what kind of snake bit him?”

“It was a green one with black markings. I’m not sure,” Pedring impatiently waved his hand in the air.

Ka Tintoy looked around the awning avoiding everyone’s stares. His gaze landed on Fidel. He took the younger man gently by the shoulder and made him face a clump of trees a distance away from the shack. Ka Tintoy pointed to the trees.

“Somewhere not too far away, about a few minutes away, I believe, is the hut of Mang Pilo. You have to first go through that field, then find the first row of guava trees, you can’t miss them, there’s a lot of them. Count forty paces towards the east and you’ll be close to where he lives. He is an *albulario*, a healer. Try to get there as fast as you can, and then bring him back with you.”

“Yes, sir.” Fidel was eager to bolt. A glass of water was passed down a few hands.

“And hurry up!”

“Alright, everyone let’s try to help this young man,” implored Aling Perla.

Everyone got out of the way of Ka Tintoy. Pedring raised the right pant leg to reveal the small cut he made to prevent the venom from circulating throughout the body. Manolo was still breathing, but very faintly. Aling Zenia tried to put a cool compress on the forehead of the patient. Deep down everyone knew it wasn’t going to do anything, but nobody stopped her. Ka Tintoy followed Fidel’s progress down the dirt road and diagonally to where the wild grass and weed began. He turned to the clump of people fussing over Manolo.

“Somebody clean the wound,” said Ka Tintoy in his most paternally optimistic tone.

Tasyo fanned the patient, unsure of the supposed added benefit of what he was doing.

Aling Perla started praying quietly to herself, mouthing the words as imperceptibly as possible.

Fidel ran as fast as he could in the intense afternoon heat. Before leaving, he wondered why he was asked to drink some water. He knew when he felt the thirst mounting. When he looked back, the shack had already vanished from view. He followed a natural path that led to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing a dirt-packed path led to what seemed like an orchard. Fidel slowed his pace. It became cooler and shadier as he approached the first group of trees. He could smell the fruit in the air. He looked around, turning here and there when something fascinated him. He followed the meandering but graceful path of a deep blue butterfly through an expanse of wild grass. He listened to the sounds of the creatures nearby. He tried to identify the trees around him. *Acacia*. Several coconut trees were to his far left, *mango*, *tamarind*, *guava*, some overgrown hedges and shrubs. *Bougainvillea*. *Guava*. He stopped, then tried to count some more. He faced the general direction of where the guava trees seemed to abound. He started counting his steps. He went through the orchard in a slow and measured way. Then he saw the the roof through the trees. He deciphered the stilts that supported the hut through the angled crossing of tree trunks. He continued towards the hut but then stopped abruptly.

He wondered about the area. He looked at the vegetation around his legs. They seemed more overgrown than what he originally perceived. A gentle breeze wafted through the orchard, disturbing the foliage and the tops of plants and shrubs. He followed an undulation across a wide patch of tall grass to his right. He looked up again to regain his bearing. He wanted to move on, but suddenly the fear of snakes brought him to a halt.

He hopped involuntarily when he heard the voice.

“Young man, you should be a little more careful around here.” The well-intoned, soothing voice was definitely that of an older man.

Fidel had only heard of the man. He felt stupid from being so tense. He realized that he never would've been able to identify the so-called healer, had they been amidst a crowd of people from town. And yet, he was as sure as the next sunrise that the man coming his way was Mang Pilo.

"Mang Pilo? Are you Mang Pilo?" Fidel was beside himself. "If you are..." The man approached and calmly raised his hand, which made Fidel quiet and still.

The man walked without a sound even when he brushed through the shrubs and weed. Fidel noticed the man looking down and around him. Fidel feared the worst. He turned his eyes downward without moving his head. He saw the man bend down to pick up something. Fidel thought the object looked like a dried-up gourd. The old man looked up and smiled through a few missing teeth.

Fidel unconsciously dusted himself off as he stepped to greet the healer.

Mang Pilo looked him over with bemused curiosity. "Are you sick? In need of help? Crazy? Or what?"

"We need your help *Mamay*" Fidel used the benevolent local term for grandfather. He almost forgot the gravity of the situation. A life was in peril if he dilly-dallied. But he couldn't help but stifle a smile at the manner in which Mang Pilo approached him. "There's a man who got bitten by a snake not too far from here."

Mang Pilo's mien changed. He looked at Fidel's eyes intently, studying the character behind the face that tried hard to remain composed. "You took a risk by walking about here like a blissfully ignorant chicken. There are snakes all over the place."

"*Mamay*, please listen, I'm sorry, but if I don't bring you back with me someone might die." Fidel tried hard to be sincere.

"I figured something like that may have happened. The people of this barrio..." He raised his hand towards the shack. They started walking. "They know about this area. They must really need me. And may I add you looked really stupid back there."

"Wouldn't it be better if we hurried a bit?" Fidel became more concerned about how much time they were taking to get back. Considering the man found him easily, it made his job that much easier. *It could have been worse. I could have not found him, or I could have been bitten by a snake.*

Their pace became faster. Fidel started to get anxious. He noticed Mang Pilo slow down periodically if he found something of interest. He never lingered long enough in a spot. He knew what he'd found and what he thought was of value. It made Fidel so much more impatient. But he couldn't say a thing.

At first Fidel tried to lead the way and felt the more stupid because he realized then, too, that the healer most likely knew the lay of the land better than he. Fidel tried to study the man next to him. He tried to look sideways without

moving his head. At which point Mang Pilo started walking faster.

Fidel felt his sweat coming. He was now half running to keep up with Mang Pilo. With the healer in front of him he had a more distanced appraisal of the man. He had no idea how old Mang Pilo was, but he guessed him to be about fifty, if not older. He was a good gauge of these things; after all, he was in his thirties himself. And yet the man ran with the gait of a sporting animal in its prime. His straw hat was tattered at the edges. He wore a pair of black rubber sandals that look like they were cleaned periodically. His faded, brown slacks, which were rolled several inches below the knees, had definitely seen better days. Attached to his thin leather belt was a *gulok* — a smaller regional variant of the military-issued machete. Even in the afternoon heat his white t-shirt looked fresh and clean.

Fidel was mildly engrossed in his assessment of the healer. Before long they reached the open, dirt path that showed glimpses of the store through the trees. He felt relief and elation.

As soon as they reached the shade of the dried-palm canopy, the healer made his way to the sick man.

Nothing was said, but everyone mumbled an inward sigh of relief.

Hearing the solemn whispers of breaths, Mang Pilo thought *Folks, let me heal the person first. After all, I could fail.* He wanted to smile. But he stifled the urge.

“How long ago did this happen?” The question was heard by everyone, even though it was said at such a soft volume.

“About one, or maybe, two hours ago?”

“Is that a question? or an answer,” said Mang Pilo without sounding sarcastic or cute.

“Sorry, aah... two hours ago, *Mamay*,” said Pedring while avoiding the old man’s gaze.

“Did you cut him?”

“Yes, *Mamay*,” said Pedring recalling his annoyance earlier.

“Did you see what kind of snake bit him?” Mang Pilo looked away feeling the young farmer’s discomfiture.

“It was a green one with black markings, aah...I’m not sure.” Pedring impatiently waved his hand in the air. He stopped. The moment indeed had repeated itself. “Yes, a green one A dark green one.”

“Are the markings going around the body of the snake? Or along the length of it.?”

By this time everyone had become less tense.

Fidel noted how Mang Pilo had quieted their inner anxieties. The healer looked over Manolo methodically. Fidel continued to observe closely. The deft and tender-looking hands felt Manolo’s head and chest area periodically. With his palm facing the earth, the healer rested his left hand above the closed eyes of Manolo. A few minutes passed before he took it away. Mang Pilo mouthed the words ever so quietly that it took the utmost silence among those present to hear his

voice, let alone what was said.

He stood up, then walked away from Manolo. He stopped just outside the shade, soaking in the slanted rays of the sun.

“I am going to do something that would seem so unnatural to all of you that I’m afraid it could disturb you all. It is important that nobody reacts to the situation” He looked at everyone, “with fear or sudden jerky movements when it happens.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We’ll be quiet,” declared Aling Perla proudly. “We won’t get in the way.”

Tasyo and Consuelo nodded absently. The others followed suit.

“Please, *Mamay*, just let us know what to do and we’ll do it,” said Aling Zenia, fanning Manolo all of a sudden.

Fidel and Asuncion got even closer together as the others sorted themselves out.

“Yes, that’s right,” remarked Ka Tintoy. “Alright everyone. Make way here.” He started directing traffic as if that was what was implied by Mang Pilo’s initial statement.

While the women were busy figuring out how to best behave under the circumstances, Mang Pilo started mumbling a prayer while pacing back and forth. He was situated a few yards away from the throng but still within earshot. He would stop and stand still, looking at a fixed point in the woods. And then he would go back to a chant, reciting the words in an older version of the provincial dialect.

None dared say a word as the ritual proceeded. In trying to find the “right” place to situate themselves, everyone pretty much stayed wherever they were caught standing or seated. Some leaned near the counter. A few sat at the bench opposite Manolo. Upon hearing the underlying tone of caution from the healer, Aling Perla, Consuelo and Aling Zenia went inside the store. Fidel and Asuncion separated, and she followed after the other women.

Mang Pilo broke his ritual to come back to Manolo’s side. He felt the young man’s pulse by the neck. He went back to feeling the different areas of Manolo’s chest.

Ka Tintoy stopped pacing and went for a stool. He offered it to Mang Pilo and then looked for an inconspicuous corner.

Fidel sat quietly behind the healer.

Mang Pilo broke away from the body and stared back into the woods — the direction where he and Fidel came from. He remained standing and staring into space for a few minutes, then casually addressed the barriofolk.

“I have a visitor approaching.” Some people craned their necks towards the same direction he stared at just a few minutes before. He then raised his hand to restrain their curiosities. “You won’t see him until he’s very close. But please, stay put.”

Everyone nodded in counter rhythms.

Aling Zenia was the first one to notice it. She didn't need to use her arms. Her eyes pinpointed the serpent as it entered the threshold of the shade. Ka Tintoy followed suit. Everyone fell like dominos to the spell of the newcomer.

It was a black snake with a cream-colored underbelly. The black scales had a slippery sheen that covered most of the back and sides of the reptile. Where the black and the cream color met was a threshold of bright orange that seemed to glow like jewels in the sunlight. It was not only beautiful, it was also a very graceful snake.

Mang Pilo remained seated on the worn stool.

Everyone held their breath as the creature made its way towards Mang Pilo. The snake coiled itself a few feet from Mang Pilo's foot. It then raised its head, its tongue darting in and out of its mouth. The heavy-lidded eyes were like gray, polished stones of milky glass. Mang Pilo mouthed what the barriofolk took as a cross between unorthodox, learned human sounds and an actual dialect of unknown origin.

Mang Pilo gestured in the air, his fingers softly pointing at arcs along the horizon. He then made sounds at the snake. The creature lowered its head. It looked to and fro before heading back where it came from.

When the visitor was gone Mang Pilo looked around the shack. Everyone looked at him without flinching, still and mesmerized. The others who accepted the moment were staring at the ground.

"I want all of you to try hard to control yourselves when they arrive."

Fidel sat uneasily by the bench. He felt exposed. He looked over to Ka Tintoy who, more or less, sported the same look of concern and anticipation. Everyone tried to open their mouths but couldn't. Finally, Aling Perla inquired in the lowest and most eloquent voice she could muster.

"When you say '*they*,' do you mean there's more of them coming?"

"Aaahh... I suppose you can say that." He scratched his head momentarily. "I asked that 'one' to tell the others I'm looking for the snake that bit this..." He broke his statement and turned his head towards the woods. "Again, please stay calm. They'll be here soon."

A soft breeze carried with it a mild foreboding, gently sweeping the dust of the sun-baked soil in front of the hut's shade.

In a little barrio like Malilim hardly anyone had a timepiece. But for that moment when everyone was deep in anticipation, *Time* stretched and progressed suddenly with a perceived clarity.

Aling Perla rubbed her arms nervously. Asuncion gripped her skirt tightly. Aling Zenia's eyes darted among the men outside of the thatched counter. Pedring, Tasyo and Fidel exchanged baffled looks. Ka Tintoy stroked with two fingers an invisible tuft of hair under his chin.

Mang Pilo stood and turned to the women. “If there is anyone in here who feels they could not control themselves, then I suggest you go now while there is time. I’m just saying...*seeing these things* might frighten you.”

No one moved.

He lowered his eyes and sat back on the stool.

The breeze changed direction. It blew directly into the shack, carrying with it the scent of wet fields, dried *cara-bao* dung, ripening fruit and the fragrant *ilang-ilang* nearby. A patch of thick cumulus clouds moved in the same direction as the dirt road. It seemed that the sun was pleasantly dimmed for minutes before the first few of them arrived.

What seemed like a rippling here and there in the grass and packed earth materialized into snakes. Long and thin, brown ones slithered past darker and thickly-scaled serpents. Green tree snakes moved in counter rhythms with two shiny black ones. They all looked deadly.

The tension in the air was more than Mang Pilo anticipated. He closed his eyes momentarily and willed a sense of peacefulness, respect and calm emotions throughout the shack. In seconds the people relaxed.

The snakes approached. There were at least ten. Some crossed into the threshold of the shade, much like the first one, while others collected themselves in that patch of ground between the dirt road and the shade of the shack. Most of the snakes were the width of a banana and some were even smaller.

What was once a lazy afternoon had changed into a hypnotic and suspended moment in time. And in time, more came.

The new entourage had slower and bigger kinds. Reticulated pythons traveled with colorful poisonous vipers. Other harmless kinds undulated like richly-patterned jewelry past the black-brown *cobras* and *mambas*. Most of the newcomers remained outside the shack but were in sight.

To everyone’s surprise, the ones within the shade went into their own individual ways of coiling and were generally motionless once settled. Still, everyone refrained from turning heads quickly or making any unnecessary body movements. Ka Tintoy’s feet were inches away from a small green kind with white stripes running the length of its body. Tasyo and Fidel kept their legs as comfortable as possible to avoid stiffening.

Mang Pilo stood, moved away from the stool, and walked out into the sun where a greater concentration of snakes waited.

His audience heard him say unintelligible sentences — *things* — to the snakes. To some the words and inflection seemed like a cross between a prayer and a poem, done in a variation, perhaps, of an older mother tongue of the regional dialect. After a while it was apparent that he was indeed *asking* the snakes a question. He walked between the individual coils, looking closely at some more than others, asking and then moving on, acknowledging the replies. The snakes

seemed to respond to the questioning as would innocent men — calmly and without hesitation. Not one flinched from the queries of Mang Pilo — all intent, split tongues darting in and out of mouths, heads poised to face the truth about one of their brethren who had committed an act against one of the humans. Even after the healer had satisfied himself making a cursory accounting of the snakes present, there was no mistaking the understanding and honesty they all portrayed. The snake that bit Manolo was apparently not present.

It was not until the healer was satisfied that the first of the snakes farther away began receding into the trees. The ones under the shade stirred unevenly. The healer detained a few from leaving too quickly; he addressed them directly while the others did their bit to spur the mass departure. Soon thereafter, a continuous flow of serpents radiated from where Mang Pilo stood.

In less than a few minutes they were all gone.

The healer turned from where he stood and walked casually towards the shade, still intent on the unconscious Manolo. “The snake that bit the young man was not with the ones that came. But I’ve asked the others to look for him and tell him about what happened.”

Both the men and women nodded back as if this mode of inquiry happened everyday. None dared to face some form of embarrassment from seeming unused to what just happened. For the others, the anticipation of what was still going to happen was the thing that made them uneasy. Nothing was resolved yet. And it seemed to all present that the healer wasn’t too happy about being disturbed. That he was determined to cure the young man was obvious. And God knew, many *things* were still going to happen.

The healer moved towards the sick man on the bench. In the throes of a potential tragedy Manolo was as peaceful as dead. He touched that part of Manolo’s neck where the jugular vein and carotid artery were located. He felt the young man’s brow, neck, elbows, wrists and palms. He recited a silent prayer; looked towards the horizon and whispered an imperceptible chant; closed his eyes and joined the man’s palms together as he covered them with his long delicate hands.

When he opened his eyes, he looked around and noticed that the others followed something on the ground with their eyes.

It was a green viper with a pointed snout, and it crawled hesitantly into the shade to where the healer sat. The snake stopped as the healer turned.

They eyed each other warily.

Mang Pilo broke the impasse. He stood and leaned slowly — bringing his face closer towards the ground.

Did you bite the young man? Did he threaten your life?

The snake seemed unsure, circumspect and yet somehow ashamed of something it fought hard to quell, let alone hide. It could not look directly at the healer's eyes, nor hold its head steady in midair for more than a few seconds. Its tongue remained mostly inside its mouth. It did not taste the air like the others earlier.

See what you have done. Witness your deed.

The snake moved towards the bench that supported the fallen man. It came close enough, but stopped at a certain point — as if deterred by a shielding spell that could not be easily penetrated. The viper followed the healer's arm as it remained pointed at the man lying on the bench. This time the viper spiraled up one of the wooden legs unimpeded, and came close to where the wound festered. Only then did the split tongue dart out from underneath the pointed snout.

Do something about this. Humans don't go out of their way to hunt you. They fear your kind.

For the first time the snake met the healer's eyes — finally. It returned to the ground after having understood what was being asked.

Go. Find the cure for the dying man.

The viper seemed contrite enough. It left uneventfully.

Mang Pilo returned to gauging the extent of the damage done to the young man.

Up to that time no one had said a thing.

The healer looked worried but still hopeful. He turned to glance uneasily at Manolo. It was a learning experience for Fidel to behold the tanned face that could be so misleading in its intent, as well as enchanting in its reaction to things in general. Fidel's attention was glued to every movement or minute gesture that came from the old man. Not one dared to look him in the eye. As if doing so would have been a sign of disrespect — misplaced curiosity — like sneaking a peek at something holy and mysterious — at a time when someone's life was on the line.

“You all have done well. Let's pray the culprit was sorry enough.” To the few that followed his word to the letter, they did begin praying.

The minutes dragged on and still very few dared to start a conversation. Manolo's state did not look very promising. As the afternoon passed like any, the barriofolk began expressing their hopes and optimism in very disjointed ways. Ka Tintoy continued to stroke his imaginary goatee, while Aling Zenia held a rosary tightly in her left hand. Fidel continued looking elsewhere for unexpected visitors. Asuncion mouthed a prayer. Others simply looked at the direction of the sun and noted how low it had gotten since the arrival of Mang Pilo. Still, they did everything in silence.

It was close to late afternoon when the viper returned. The men and women had relaxed a bit from the waiting. At which point, the healer had turned towards the dirt road, raised his right hand slightly to silence the group and then made way for the viper to cross the threshold.

The viper also carried a twig with leaves — a very small twig with unidentifiable purple markings on the green leaves.

Everyone remained still. The only motion came from Mang Pilo as he brought his palms to his waist. Arms akimbo, he maintained a vigilant attitude while the snake went to work.

The viper went up the same wooden leg it had used before to reach Manolo's leg. The wound looked a little worse since he and his brother had arrived earlier that afternoon. The viper withdrew the twig from its mouth, set it aside and then picked at the leaves individually. It bit into the leaf as if it were injecting venom into it. Then it gnawed at the same leaf, mulching the green and purple fibers into some form of dark, oily medicine. The substance in its mouth went from a dark, purple green oil into a milky, light green-colored paste in minutes. The viper coated the wound with the milky green, herbal pap. The wound seemed to miraculously absorb the concoction quickly enough that the viper had to repeat the process with another leaf. At that moment in time, the leaves seemed to be the most precious thing in the world.

After a few applications the viper descended back to the ground, having done what was expected of it. The viper left the threshold of the shack without incident. The healer followed the serpent with a satisfied look. When Mang Pilo told Manolo's brother Pedring to clean his brother's face and limbs, the men and women inside the shack finally exhaled a collective sigh of relief. It was an easing of tensions when the healer finally made eye contact with everyone — of course, some more tentatively than others.

The women came back out from their little enclave behind the thatched counter. Aling Zenia was absently and haphazardly waving her rosary as she praised the Lord and the subordinate saints that made everything possible. Asuncion and Consuelo sat next to Fidel.

Mang Pilo began clearing his throat. And again the shack stood still. He felt for Manolo's forehead, pushed back the eyelids and examined the man's eyes, felt the carotid artery and jugular vein as he moved his deft hands across Manolo's throat.

“Son, your brother will have the fever for another day or two. But he will be fine after that. After tonight always clean the wound. And I hope everyone remembered the color and markings of the snake that bit him,” said the healer as he held Pedring's attention with very warm sympathetic eyes.

The group reacted with variations of a stifled smile. In their own simple means of relating with each other, they actually thought they were sharing a joke.

It was close to dark when Mang Pilo made his desire to take leave be felt. Everyone had been so thankful that Manolo seemed to have become an adopted relative by everyone present in the shack. And each person expressed their gratitude to the healer with as much obsequiousness as was possible, without being unnecessarily excessive. Pedring was

beside himself.

Aling Perla handed the healer separate packets of hand-rolled cigars and smoked fish. Pedring offered him his own handmade knife. Aling Zenia went through her basket to see if he'd like some freshly-picked fruits.

As expected, the healer offered a mild refusal. His modesty and gentleness seemed to have had no effect on the women though. They placed the staples and foodstuffs next to a small wicker basket. He smiled enough as he put packets aside while he sorted out his gifts.

Once Manolo's return to health was assured, everyone started going their separate ways. A few others were still preoccupied, particularly Pedring, but Tasyo and Ka Tintoy tried their best to calm his fears. Aling Perla assured Pedring he was worrying about nothing.

Fidel volunteered to walk Asuncion and Consuelo home.

They all shared a gleam of complicity in their stares. The dark descended upon them without a hurry.

"That was unbelievable, wasn't it?" remarked Asuncion. Consuelo merely nodded her head.

"Something I'll be telling my children one day," said Fidel.

They all walked quietly for a while.

Fidel looked around him. His companions were slightly startled. But he motioned that it was nothing. He walked in silence, keeping his thoughts to himself. By the time they reached Asuncion's home, the lanterns had all been lit. There were people waiting for the girls. Fidel said a brief hello and goodbye to everyone within earshot. Consuelo stayed a while before moving on to her house which was only a few yards away. He had a general idea of what time it was and thought about using a shortcut to get home. Upon reaching that fork where it would either mean a long, smooth stroll or a shorter but meandering trail inside an orchard, he opted for the former upon seeing how dark and forbidding the normally harmless-looking path seemed. He kept thinking of snakes all through his walk.

Days passed and news of Manolo's recovery traveled faster than a brushfire. Fidel saw Asuncion and Consuelo at Aling Zenia's little shack two days after the healing spectacle. That was when he first heard of the young farmer's miraculous recovery. Ka Tintoy offered Fidel a brief hello, a toothless grin and a complimentary drink of his choice. He sipped his coconut drink and continued stroking his imaginary goatee after pleasantries were exchanged. They all spoke of the incident casually. That particular day everyone was more or less business as usual. It was a cloudy, breezy day and everyone was trying to avoid being caught by the ominous rain clouds that were heading in their direction. After Asuncion and Consuelo had gone their merry way, Fidel lingered for a few more minutes, hoping to hear more about Manolo or Mang Pilo.

Fidel was always intrigued by the unexplainable. And now it seemed that for the first time in his life, he had access to the source of *that* mystery. He thought of Mang Pilo and how intimidating he would seem to someone who didn't know him. But underneath it all Fidel felt a sense of pride from having played an important role in a life and death situation. Best of all he thought the "snake charmer" was someone he could learn from. And he recalled quickly some of the images that he knew would remain embedded in his memory for all time. He thought about the things that made people like the healer special. What their purpose were for being in this world? How long did they live? And if they truly were of the world as he knew it?

The breeze got cooler and slightly more forceful. Ka Tintoy finished his drink and decided it was time to leave. Fidel left a few minutes later.

Three weeks passed and it seemed like the episode with the snakes became just another folktale.

No one ever had the opportunity to see Mang Pilo up close again. A number of the locals claimed to have seen the healer, but always from a distance. And with each sighting it always seemed like the healer was never close enough to warrant a positive identification. Fidel, though he vaguely remembered the identifying marks and signs that led to the old man's hut, admitted later on, that he truly didn't remember the way. He thought of Ka Tintoy: how and why he knew of the general direction of where to find the *albulario's* home? Not that anyone was intent on disturbing Mang Pilo's privacy and peace ever again. Nor that the knowledge of his existence within their midst was a fortunate arrangement that they could draw upon if ever any one of them were in dire need. From then on, when seeing each other in public, the others from that fateful afternoon would always recognize the subtle smile — that twinkle in the eye — a secret camaraderie that could only have been shared from having experienced the *mysterious*.