

Rosario

I wrote a biography of my father years ago. Then I wrote a story about the Filipino pensionados which included my father. I've neglected to write anything about my mother. This is a start.

There is no question that my mother Rosario Escobar y Venzon was the dominant person in our family. No one ever called her Rosario, she was always *Chayong*, a common nickname for Rosario. She was energetic, voluble, generous, a risk taker and visionary. Of course she could also be domineering and didactic. By contrast, my father Vicente Ylagan Orosa was laconic and imperturbable. As a cabinet level government official and a Grandmaster of the Philippine Masons, he was used to conducting meetings and speaking in public. But privately, he was subdued and self-effacing. Maybe that is how they managed a strong 60 year marriage. I honestly can say I never heard them argue although my sister Charito said they did have arguments mainly about how generous they needed to be to their five children. My mother could literally fly off the handle, but never at my dad. She always made sure his needs and his favorite foods were provided. Later in life he called her "*hija*" which is Spanish for daughter. My father never uttered an unkind word about anyone. His only vice was to punctuate some of his sentences with Spanish cuss words. They are mild compared to what you'd hear today. I don't know if they would be considered polar opposites, but they certainly complemented one another. They were yin and yang.

My mother was born in Iba, Zambales in 1897. Her birth certificate indicated that her parents Juan Escobar y Gonzales and Teresa Venzon were "*mestizos espanoles*" or mixed Filipino and Spanish heritage. The birth certificates written by Spanish friars always indicated whether the child was *Indio* (native Filipino), *mestizo* (mixed) or *Chino* (Chinese). In case you are doing the math, my mother was 42 when I was born in 1939. My oldest brother Augusto was already 20 and my sister Angelina was 18.

It is probably an understatement when I say my mother was generous. My parents lived in Manila from 1936 to 1965. Most of our relatives, especially on my mom's side, lived in the provinces. Unlike today, there were no universities or colleges in my mother's province of Zambales or in my dad's province of Batangas. To get any kind of college education, you had to study in Manila. The choices were limited to one public university - the University of the Philippines - or to any any number of Catholic universities. There were several notable non-sectarian private universities but they were outnumbered by the Catholic schools. Mom opened the doors of the Orosa household to many young relatives. I only specifically remember 2 first cousins, 1 from the Orosa side and another from the Escobar side. My Orosa cousin went to Holy Ghost College (now known as Holy Spirit), a Catholic school for girls founded and run by German nuns. My Escobar cousin went to Centro Escolar University, a privately owned girls school.

There were others who stayed with our family starting immediately after the war but I honestly do not recall them. My sister Charito recalls them all. The following information comes from her. Among those who stayed were a first cousin who became a medical doctor and a second cousin who became Mayor of Iba. Both are now deceased. Later there were 3 women cousins and 3 male cousins. Several of these cousins survive and we remain especially close to one who lives in retirement in a Chicago suburb. An Orosa cousin stayed briefly during the Japanese occupation while she was working as a nurse at the Philippine General Hospital. Obviously they all couldn't have stayed at the same time but for 12 years we had at least 1 or 2 cousins staying.

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Aside from the boarders there was an endless stream of people who visited our house on Aviles street in Manila. (The street has been renamed Jose P. Laurel St.) I remember 2 seamstress sisters who were from Bulacan, coming to the house to measure and fit dresses for my mom and my sisters. They also did all the curtains and drapes. They stayed as long as it took to finish their work. Mom had other favorite vendors or suppliers, referred to as "*suki*." Most of her *suki* were Chinese Filipinos. There were also a number of Escobar relatives or in-laws who came to Manila for short visits. These people stayed with us. Mom had a B & B before the concept became popular. As far as my mother was concerned, the door was always open.

One of my mom's favorite Escobar nieces was Teresita. Teresita just turned 84 and lives in a Chicago suburb retirement complex. Born more than 3 decades apart, the two loved to talk. Augusto told me the story about driving them to Iba and the two women never paused in their conversation. Back and forth they went. Driving to Iba took 7 hours or more during those pre-expressway days. Augusto said he finally stopped the car to get relief from the chatter. When I told this to Teresita years later, she said the only reason he stopped was because he wanted to smoke. I think there is some truth in both versions.

My parents enduring legacy was leaving each of us 5 children property consisting of a good sized lot with a completed house ready for occupancy. The titles were free and clear. Sometimes furniture was thrown in. My mom was the main driver in accomplishing this legacy. If my count is not mistaken, my mom supervised the construction of no less than 9 houses. Her partner was Lope Leabres. Lope was the brother-in-law of mom's brother. He was married to one of my Escobar first cousins. (Figure that out.) Neither one of them had any formal training in architecture or construction. Their formal education did not go beyond finishing high school. Lope was a carpenter by trade. He was one of the most skillful people I have ever known. Besides carpentry, he did roofing, plumbing, painting, masonry and glazing. He built furniture from scratch. After I finished college, he built an *aparador* or armoire for my room. Lope never used any power assisted tools. He could work magic with a hand plane and chisel. He was even skilled in butchering and roasting a pig on occasion. Lope would merit a separate essay on his exploits which included 13 children. My mother kept Lope employed continuously for years.

Between my mom and Lope, they figured out how to construct a house. Sometimes there was an architectural plan, sometimes there wasn't. To comply with building codes, a civil engineer first cousin reviewed the plans. The somewhat boxy houses are a marvel of sturdy construction finished with a lot of Philippine wood. They ranged in size from a little over 1,000 sq. ft. to 4 times that size. Mom and Lope's masterpiece was the 2 story house on Horseshoe Drive in Quezon City. Most of the walls were paneled with fine Philippine wood like lauan. This was a type of wood popularly used for paneling in the U.S. You can find this wood listed in old Sears catalogs, sometimes referred to as Philippine mahogany. I have never been to a house with more gorgeous wood paneling. The wood was supplied by my brother Vicente Jr. who operated a logging concession in Mindanao at the time. Sadly, you can't obtain this type of wood anymore. They've been cut down, along with all the finest hardwood. Both my mom and dad spent their last days in this house.

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My 2 sisters still have their properties. My 2 brothers sold theirs. I sold mine to my brother Augusto. Two of his sons live there now (there are 2 houses on the property). Augusto's widow lives there also.

My mother's vision even extended to the end of everyone's life. Decades ago, she purchased a large plot at the new Loyola cemetery outside Manila. This was a cemetery where the choice was being interred underground or in stacked vaults. By contrast the traditional Philippine cemeteries consisted of above ground individual crypts like the type found in New Orleans. My brother Augusto also purchased a separate plot. The plots were large enough to accommodate our immediate family consisting of my parents, their children and grandchildren. In other words there was enough room for four generations of my parent's clan. Today my mom and dad are interred there, along with my other brother Vicente Jr., a brother-in-law and nephew. To purchase such a plot today would cost a small fortune.

There was an old chapel in the Iba cemetery that was in a state of disrepair. Mom asked permission from Henry Byrne, the Bishop of Iba, to repair and use the chapel for her family. Mom being a generous patron of the Iba parish, the Bishop agreed. (Bishop Byrne later presided over the funeral Mass of my father.) She gathered the remains of her parents, her paternal grandparents, maternal grandfather, a child who did not survive infancy, my sister Charito's 2 girl babies and others then had them re-interred in graves in the rebuilt chapel. This was before the Loyola plot was developed and would have been in keeping up with the more traditional Filipino custom. People who could afford it built mausoleums with as much square footage as a small house. Mom stayed with an open chapel and not a mausoleum. Thank goodness. The chapel is easy to locate since it is one of the few structures in the Iba cemetery.

The last few years of mom's life weren't very pleasant. Stricken with Alzheimer's, she was a shell of her former self. There were moments of gaiety. She would sing Spanish songs or recite poetry learned almost three quarters of a century before. Mom passed away in 1993 at the age of 95. (2 of her sisters lived to 100 and 103 respectively.) Rosario Escobar has left a positive indelible imprint on the lives of many people and we won't forget her generosity.

Mario E. Orosa
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