

New Fiction by Rachel Ramirez: "The Witness"



I am in the grand room of the High Commissioner's Residence in Manila. A crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling, intact. Not even one crystal looks to be missing. The building itself didn't escape the war. I saw the damage as the car approached. The right wing must have been bombed. Blackened walls. Blown out windows. The building lost its symmetry. But this room looks untouched. It still has its high ceiling, its big windows, its fancy chandelier. How can this be when my own home was burnt to the ground? Now I live with my wife and children in a makeshift dwelling built on its ashes.

Captain Pace calls me to the stand.

The room is wall-to-wall with Americans, soldiers in tan uniforms. An audience of white faces is staring, quiet, except for the odd cough, the clearing of a throat. They are waiting for me to speak into the microphone. Sitting at a long wooden table, facing the audience, are five men—the Commission. I am close enough to see their sunburnt foreheads. One of them has his head propped up on his hand like he's bored. Maybe he's just not used to the heat. To my right, a dark-haired woman sits at a small desk. Behind me, a large map of the country is pinned up onto a board. There is a stenographer, his hands curled into position.

I do plan to tell them the truth about that day. At least most of it. Some details are too horrid to repeat. I see those details most nights, wake up sweating, sometimes screaming. Belen, her body turned away from me, pretends to be asleep. In my ears, there is still a constant hum. And during the day, the details drift into my mind like dark clouds.

I see them now, the pair in black uniforms, sitting opposite me at the end of the room.

The Accused, they call them. I find myself looking away from them, looking down at my shoes. My shoes match my borrowed Americano and tie. The Americans dressed me for the occasion, in a suit too big for me. It's like my body inside it has deflated. I want to leave this place. I want to run out the door. But each door is guarded by a soldier. Each soldier wears a hard white hat and stands with their hands behind their back. I wipe my wet palms on the sides of my trousers. I straighten my tie.

Captain Pace also stands with his hands behind his back, his pelvis leaning forward.

"Give me your name, please."

“Dr. Fernando Reyes.”

“Where do you live, Dr. Reyes?”

“Bauan, Batangas.”

I almost don't recognise my own small voice. I hear the captain's thick accent and wonder where in America he is from. I wonder if he was something else before all this. He has the look of a school principal, like my father. He is tall, taller than me, and older. There is grey mixed in with his straw coloured hair. He has kind eyes, perhaps deceptively so. His eyes are the brightest blue I've ever seen. I'll try my best to answer each of the questions, I tell him, without the need of the translator.

I begin. “On February 28, 1945, while we were having our breakfast...”

I heard the town crier on the street outside the house. He was telling everyone—men, women, children—to gather at the church. There had been many meetings like this. Some of them held in the Plaza, hours spent standing beneath the scorching sun. At least, I told Belen, we'll be in the church, out of the heat. Belen wanted to bring baby Dedeth with us—our youngest. In the end, we left her behind with the maid. It'll be easier without her, I told her, and hopefully we won't be long. We headed out without finishing our breakfast, three children in tow, all dressed in church clothes. Miguel, our eldest, had recently had a growth spurt. He was proudly wearing my old linen trousers.

“We went to Bauan Church around 9:30 in the morning,” I say slowly into the microphone.

It wasn't long after we got to the church that the women and children were told to leave. They were being sent to the Elementary School. Before she left, my wife bowed at the Holy

Cross and blessed herself, just as she always did. Then she held my hand and squeezed it. She took two of the children with her. Miguel, passing for a young man in my trousers, stayed with me at the church.

We sat in the pews, eight in each pew, and waited. It was strange to see even the priests sitting amongst us. Then the Japanese soldiers told us to stand so they could search us. One soldier padded me down, looked through my pockets. In my back pocket, he found money, Mickey Mouse money we called it, neatly folded. He told me to take off my watch, my wedding ring. He took it all. He searched my son too. Miguel looked worried although I knew he had nothing on him. Then the soldiers told us to sit again and wait. As we sat there, I looked around at the people in the church. I knew most of them—neighbours, friends, patients. I could hear my son's stomach growling. He told me he wanted to go home. He told me he wanted his mother. I put my arm around his shoulders to comfort him.

Then we were sent out in two groups. We were in the second group. They told us we were going home but led us about 300 yards away, to Sebastian Buendia's house. I knew the house well, had admired it for years, the finest house in the town, beautifully made. Mr. Buendia, I knew, had left years ago for Mindoro, just after the Japanese had invaded. People said he was afraid they would think he was an American sympathizer. He did a lot of business with the Americans. In the good days, before the war, I'd visit Mr. Buendia's house with my wife, to attend his lavish parties. I'd admired the tastefulness of his home's interior, the dark wood furniture. My wife tried to decorate our own modest home after his. It cost me a fortune, only to have much of it taken away, bit by bit, by the Japanese. By the end our house was like an empty shell.

Mr. Buendia's house had also been emptied. Most of what I'd admired, all but the hardwood floors, had been removed. There

was a Japanese sentry standing outside the door where Mr. Buendia would have stood to greet his guests. He'd be holding a cigar in one hand, his other hand resting on his big belly.

We were told to walk through two doors, down to the basement of the house, where there was already a group of men. We were ushered into the space by soldiers armed with rifles, gesturing with their pointy bayonets. It was dark inside the space. We were packed inside like sardines. I was glad for the dark—at least my son wouldn't see my fear. I was truly afraid then. The windows were shut. The doors were locked. There was no way to flee.

I could hear shouting upstairs. They were shouting words I didn't understand. I held my son close to me, up against my chest. He nestled his head into the nape of my neck like he used to do as a child. I could feel his heat and a heart beating, not sure if it was his or mine.

The familiar bells of Bauan Church rang out at noon, followed by a sizzling sound.

Then, an explosion. It must have knocked me out. When I opened my eyes, I was on the ground. I heard people—grown men—calling out for their mothers. Miguel was no longer in my arms. I desperately crawled around looking for him. Then, another explosion. A splash of flesh. I was half naked, my ears ringing, hell all around. Bodies tangled in shards of floor. None of them my son's. I shouted out his name. I couldn't hear my own voice. I froze when I saw the soldiers. One of them was pouring kerosene. Another was bayoneting bodies on the ground. I panicked. I saw a gap where there once was a wall. I crawled to it. Then I ran. I didn't stop until I got to the bomb shelter. There were people inside the shelter already dead, covered in blood. I called out my son's name. I cried out. I was shaking, ashamed, too much of a coward to go back for him.

"Did you help the guerrillas?" Captain Pace asks. His question

takes me by surprise. I feel my heart quicken. I try to stall. I thought of the houses I visited in the dead of night, outside the town, the injured men I treated. I couldn't just let them die. Belen said it was the Christian thing to do. I was a doctor after all. I cleaned and dressed their wounds. I removed bullets, bits of metal from their flesh. I didn't ask how they got them.

"There are no guerrillas in Bauan."

"Just answer the question, Dr. Reyes. Did you help them?"

I take a deep breath, "No, Sir, I did not." I look away from his piercing blue eyes. A lie and an omission. I don't tell them about my son.

"Did you go back to Mr. Buendia's house later on?"

"Yes, Sir...on March 28. I was appointed by the Colonel to bury the dead."

The Colonel sent me along with the mayor, the policemen and labourers. He told us to gather the bodies and bury them. It was like God, disguised as an American colonel, was punishing me for leaving Miguel behind.

We found bodies on the roads, outside houses, in buildings, in the shelters, on the outskirts of town. We carried them in ox-drawn carts. We wheeled them to a mass grave—a large hole the labourers dug at the back of the local cemetery. We buried them there. No funeral. No priests. Most bodies already blackened. We wore handkerchiefs on our faces to cover our noses and mouths. We still got sick, most of us vomiting from the sight and the smell.

"How many dead persons did you find?"

"I think 250."

“Can you give me their names?”

I list the names I can remember. I start with the priests. Then I begin to name the civilians. Pablo Castillo. Jorge Magboo. Jose Brual. Aldo Delgado. We found Lolo Aldo in his chicken shed. Nothing left of the chickens but stray feathers. We found Lolo Aldo's white-haired head on the ground a few feet from his body.

Belen told me that she waited for hours at the school with the other women and children. She said some of them ran outside when they heard the explosions. She stayed in the school, hid with the children under a teacher's desk. She said she eventually heard planes flying above. She thinks the planes saved them—the Japanese soldiers fled. She found bodies in the playground—the women and children who tried to run. There were more bodies in the streets. The streets were filled with smoke. She walked by the church—burning but still standing, its tower untouched. She said when she reached home, our house was on fire. Just inside the gate, she found our maid. Beneath the maid, she found our baby girl. Both bodies were covered in blood. I didn't tell Belen what I heard—the Japanese soldiers threw babies up in the air, catching them as they fell, on the tips of their bayonets.

Captain Pace interrupts me before I can finish my list. “That is enough Doctor.”

I watched the labourers dig out the bodies from Mr. Buendia's house. I almost couldn't bear it. But I forced myself. I sifted through the remains. I never found my son. Belen said I should have died that day along with him. If only Captain Pace was armed, I'd lunge forward and grab his gun. I'd shoot myself here in front of everyone.

“We have no further questions.”