

## The Patriarch of Milagros

by Max Millard



If you look at this map of the Philippine, you'll see a small island colored red, right in the geographic center. Its name is Masbate. It's one of the poorest islands, with an economy based on farming and fishing. It's a place where the electricity goes off for hours each day, where schoolrooms hold more than 50 students, where most families collect rainwater for washing and buy drinking water from street vendors.

It was there that I went last July with a dozen members of my Filipino American family. After 27 hours of travel, door to door, we arrived in the village of Milagros, There to greet us was a very old man in a rocking chair whose toothless face expanded into a radiant grin upon seeing his daughter, my wife Salve, return from America.

He hugged and kissed her, then grabbed my hand and held it for a long time, smiling and looking deep into my eyes. He muttered some words in the local language, Masbateño, but I couldn't understand, so I just nodded and smiled back.



Carlos Real was 91 years old, and the master of his realm, which consisted of a large house and a backyard lush with coconut palms and banana trees. He had three live-in helpers -- a housekeeper, a maid, and a high school boy to help him get around. He was the father of 10 children and the grandfather and great-grandfather of more people than anyone could count.





He was regarded as the patriarch of Milagros, the town's last survivor who remembered World War II, when the Japanese had invaded and some of his own neighbors had been executed. He was a teenager then, just a little too young to join the army.

He had worked as a farmer until a typhoon destroyed his fish farm. Now, in his retirement, he could enjoy the benefits provided by his children in America. The house had three luxuries that most families lacked: its own well, a generator for when the power went out, and a large-screen TV in the back patio.

He spent most of the day out there, chain-smoking cigarettes and throwing the smouldering butts onto the concrete. He had a chronic bad cough. One

of his eyes was permanently closed and blinded, the result of an accident years before, when his scalp had felt very itchy and he'd poured bleach on his head. Some of it dripped down into his eye, and by the time he got it treated, it was too late.



Despite his household staff, he was a lonely man. He had outlived his wife and all of his peers, and he craved company. But his mind and his memory were still sharp. That was why he so enjoyed these long visits from his descendants in America. Everyone called him Pay, which is an affectionate term for grandfather.

His house was on the same plot of land where he'd raised his family, but a much more modern structure, thanks to the money sent to him every month. He was the reason we kept the house going for all those years. Salve called

him frequently from San Francisco, but had to shout because he was almost deaf. He had been quite sick early in the year, and she wasn't sure if he would make it till our arrival.

Our visit gave him a new burst of energy. He would wake up every day at 5:30 a.m. The whole household would follow, as his aides got him dressed and into his wheelchair, made his breakfast, and began talking loudly so that he could hear. He even woke up the roosters, and after that, sleep was impossible. So I'd go to bed at 9:30 every night, and get up at sunrise with Pay.

Salve is a nurse, and she took great care of him, helping him to take a shower, trimming his nails, and buying him a new aluminum wheelchair. We made an overnight trip to a nearby beach resort, and brought him along. Several relatives lifted him and his wheelchair into the warm ocean water.



In the days after the party, he didn't get back to his 5:30 a.m. routine. His cough got worse and he developed a fever. Salve was worried about him. On August 1st, five days before we were to return to San Francisco, she felt very close to him and kept kissing him that morning. She called up her sister in Washington state and she and Pay talked for a long time with a video connection.

But that evening, he had trouble breathing, so Salve called a tricycle -- a motorcycle with a sidecar -- and asked the driver to take them to the nearest hospital. When they arrived, Salve was told that there was no doctor on staff. So she took him to another hospital, but again, no doctor. On the way back home, Pay died in Salve's arms.

She later recalled that he had been very sad that we were leaving soon, and that his sons were going back to Manila. With no one to spend the day with except his helpers, he felt depressed, and he knew it was the last time he would see his kids and grandkids from America. So Salve believes he chose this time to go, when he was surrounded by relatives and friends, and no one would have to travel far for his funeral.

The next day he was placed in a glass-covered coffin on the back patio. It's a Filipino custom to never leave the dead unattended until they are buried. For the next four nights, dozens of people gathered there to eat and drink and play cards and keep Pay company till dawn. Then we had a big service at a nearby chapel, followed by a trip to the graveyard, where his coffin was lowered to the ground.



Pay had no education, and never learned to speak English. He never earned any money and never traveled outside the Philippines. But five of his children and eight of his grandchildren emigrated to San Francisco, and most of them got married and started their own families. Today the Bay Area is enriched by almost 40 of his descendants and their spouses. Practically all the adults work in the field of health care and elder care. That's a heck of a legacy to leave behind. If Pay knew what he had contributed to America, I think he would have been proud.



