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Strange Bedfellows: A Martial Law Love Story

By Aurora Almendral | Sep 22, 2017

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I was a child when Marcos fell, but I was old enough to perceive evil. I knew he was the reason my father became a guerilla commander for the New People's Army and had a bullet lodged in his left thigh. Why his entire squad was buried in an unmarked grave outside a village in the Cordilleras. The years of Marcos's Martial Law saw my uncle, Dodong Nemenzo, an outspoken academic and a high-ranking Communist, captured and imprisoned. Marcos was the reason why my cousin, Fidel, was shot through the chest by a soldier during a rally, and why nameless guests—rebels of the underground— disappeared, eternally, after leaving our house. I grew up knowing that some of these people were tortured.

On February 25, 1986, I was home with the mumps. Across town, flocks of yellow confetti fluttered through the air and scattered over the thousands of people who had taken to the streets to celebrate the fall of Ferdinand Marcos. My mother, Gemma Nemenzo, was outside Camp Crame, celebrating. Soldiers defected to the elated crowds, dropping their rifles in solidarity with the people. They were shocked when a television screen showed Ferdinand Marcos taking the oath of

office —but it was his final act as president of the Philippines. The oath was interrupted when rebels took over the last of the pro-Marcos TV stations, and his farcical speech went to black. “It was euphoric,” my mother said.

The same day, Colonel Irwin Ver, head of the presidential guard, favored son of General Fabian Ver, Marcos’s most loyal aide and Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, was at Malacañang Palace. Irwin saluted Marcos, who was still dressed in the barong he wore for the cameras. Despite the oath-taking performance, Marcos seemed to have already accepted defeat. Irwin had not. Our position is still defensible, Irwin reported, ready to fight off an attack from the rebels. “No,” Marcos said. He did not want to kill his own people. Irwin recalled seeing the sadness in Marcos’s eyes, and for a moment he feared that he himself might cry.

IMAGE Jason Quibilan

Irvin Ver became the head of the Presidential Guards, a post his own father had vacated to become Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Irwin and my mother watched the same history unfold from opposing vantage points, but 25 years later, they are married,

and the events that led up to the fall of Marcos still come up often in the house they share today in California.

My mother, a journalist, was at the frontline of the revolution. When the Reform Army Movement RAM, took over the Department of Defense, in the act that set off the military coup that eventually took down Marcos, she was holed up there with Ramos and Enrile, bracing for an attack.

Years earlier, at the height of Marcos's power, my mother fell in love with my father. Elementary school classmates, they met again at the prison hospital. Fresh from a firefight with government forces, he was shot in the leg, captured by soldiers, and was recuperating at Camp Crame before being placed on indefinite detention at the high-security Youth Rehabilitation Center, or YRC at Fort Bonifacio, where many captured rebels were held.

For the three years while he was in prison, my mother and father's relationship played out in handwritten letters, fervent with love for each other, politics and freedom. When he was released, they got married and raised me and my brother to be defiant, egalitarian, full of stories about eating beetles to survive in the mountains. Theirs was the story of the revolution, and their marriage didn't last much longer after 1986.

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My mother doesn't consider herself an activist, but for nine years, from the age of 23 until she was 32, she lived in close

proximity to the violent edge of Martial Law. Journalists were relegated to covering celebrities, Imelda's newest building, the quiet order in Manila. Anything but the biggest story of the era: the government's forceful rule over the country. Friends were interrogated for writing critical stories about the government. People she knew, including her brother Dodong and his wife Princess, were arrested and detained. Stories of torture and disappearances circulated. They demonized Marcos. She was angry when her nephew, Fidel, was shot through the chest by a soldier during a rally, and angry when she heard news of friends killed.

Her adulthood began the day Martial Law was declared, on September 21,1972. My mother stood outside the padlocked gates of ABS-CBN, where she worked. Marcos had muzzled the media and she was, by default, fired. When she turned the corner onto her street, and saw military trucks pulled up to her driveway. Soldiers in full gear had their armalites trained at the windows. The battle lines were drawn that day, and the guns were pointed at her people.

By contrast, Irwin was in Washington D.C. training at the International Police Academy. He was a lieutenant at the beginning of his military career. When he saw Marcos on a TV news feed declaring Martial Law, he was shocked. As a soldier, he didn't know what would be asked of him. He called his father, "What should I do, what should we do now that there's Martial Law?"

He became the head of the Presidential Guards, a post his own father had vacated to become Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Along with Irwin's brothers, Rex, who

was close-in security to the president and Wyrlo, who headed the tank division of the Philippine Security Command, the Ver family, with the secretive and infamously loyal General Ver at the helm, formed a military dynasty whose power was understood to be synonymous with the Marcoses'.

On February 25, 1986, while my mother was celebrating in the streets, Irwin, along with the Marcoses, were on the grounds of Malacañang Palace, stunned at the events that led to a pair of American helicopters descending on the lawn to airlift them out of their seat of power.

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Irwin believed the helicopters would take them directly to Paoay, to establish a separate Marcos government in their home province of Ilocos Norte. Instead they landed at Clark Air Force base. At 2 a.m., scattered on the furniture of a guest barracks, the Marcos and Ver families were woken and ushered onto the tarmac. The Marcoses, Danding Cojuangco and his family climbed into a jet, and the rest of the party into the bare hull of a U.S. military C130. The floors of the plane were worn plywood, with exposed metal rafters. There was a deafening roar. Irwin clasped his hand over the ears of his two-month-old son. Realization settled slowly. When 45 minutes passed and the plane had not landed in Paoay, Irwin thought perhaps they changed course to Taiwan. Three and half hours later when the plane landed and he read the painted sign of Guam International airport, he realized they'd been heading over the Pacific into American territory. The tanks, firearms and

loyal soldiers he'd arranged would not be needed. He finally understood. They were refugees.

"I asked him a bad question at the time," Irwin said, "*Paanong nangyari, ito*, Dad?"

For six months, Irwin continued to train, putting on a white T-shirt and a pair of borrowed U.S. Army sweatpants, and ran the ridge of a Hawaiian mountain. He had never meant to leave the Philippines, and in Hawaii, he became a soldier without an army.

Irwin wrote letters to Ramos and Enrile hoping to salvage his military career. The valedictorian of his class at the Philippine Military Academy, Irwin accepted that he could not return to the position he left behind, but hoped for a quiet professorship at his alma mater. No one answered his letters. Instead, Irwin and his entire family were stripped of their Philippine passports and barred from returning to the country.

In the accounting of misdeeds after the fall of Marcos, General Ver was associated with the corruption that came with unfettered power—and his sons have inherited an on-going case for plunder. But no money was at play in their life in the U.S. Irwin's first dozen jobs were menial, evidence of the depth of his fall and his desperation. He mowed lawns for milk money. When he saw laborers trimming trees by the side of the road, he asked for a job and worked alongside them, shimmying up trees with a chainsaw to trim errant limbs. His brother Wyrlo, former head of the tank division of the Presidential Security Command, became a hotel security guard. As the family joke goes: Dad *naman, sabihin mo na kung saan nakatago yung* gold bullion. *Hirap na hirap na kami*

dito, they'd say with a laugh.

IMAGE Jason Quibilan

Gemma Nemenzo was a journalist at the forefront of the revolution.

General Ver became the fall guy for the Marcoses. He went into hiding and spent his life on the run, using fake passports

and assumed identities, in part because he could not afford defense lawyers for the cases the American and Philippine governments were mounting against him. He died without seeing his family again.

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When my mother first met Irwin, it was 1985. She and Marites Vitug were interviewing him for Mr. & Ms. Magazine. Still at the height of his power, they conferred upon him the sins of the Marcos dictatorship, and they were scared, nervous. “We believed our own propaganda,” my mother told me.

The next time they met was in California, 18 years later at a UP High School reunion. My mother, who still held some latent belief that as a Ver, Irwin was a monster, was immediately fascinated. After the fall of Marcos, she had written books and articles on the heroes of the revolution, and on the changing Philippines. History is written by the victors, and she had never heard Irwin’s side. When the night wound down, she and Irwin exchanged email addresses and continued their conversation in a long volley of messages. Both divorced, when they arranged a date at a restaurant in North Berkeley. They talked for seven hours. They were bound together by the past, but time and displacement gave them perspective.

As a son, Irwin is loyal to his father’s memory and defends his reputation. He’s more likely to emphasize the sunnier sides of the Marcos dictatorship than my mother. He knows there were many regrettable abuses of power at the lower levels of government, but insists that Marcos never ordered foot soldiers to commit arrests, torture, and disappearances. “It felt like a war situation, a combat situation. We were both on the

offensive and the defensive. It is not uncommon that would happen," said Irwin, "that some soldiers would act on their own."

During a visit to Manila last June, I asked him if he thought the long years of Martial Law were justified, given that history now understands the communist threat to have been exaggerated. He stands by the initial reasons.

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"You'll have to ask your Uncle Dodong whether he thought they were capable of capturing the government," he said with a laugh. Then he reminded me that they really don't get enough credit for keeping the Communist threat at bay. With the fall of Vietnam and the war in Korea, the military thought that the Philippines was on the brink of falling to Communism.

Twenty minutes later, my mother burst into my room. "You know I have to correct something that Irwin said. I keep telling him. He thinks Martial Law kept the Communist threat down, but really they were their best recruiter." I write it in my notebook. It's the sort of argument they have that wakes up us kids—me, my brother and sister, and Irwin's two sons, Bien and Irwin, Jr.—on Sunday mornings during family vacations.

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August 21, 1983. The day that Ninoy Aquino was shot, my mother was in Manila, caught up in the grief and confusion that followed. Irwin was in his family quarters in Malacañang Park. He had stayed home with his infant son who had a fever instead of going to a planned golf game at Villamor Air Base, a

coincidence that saved him from becoming a more prominent suspect in speculation about who killed Ninoy Aquino. He was watching TV when his father barged into his quarters dressed in *pambahay*, to tell him something had happened at the airport.

“If he knew that something like that would happen,” Irwin said, to me, to my mother, to my mother’s friends and family, to everyone who has asked him, “he would have been in uniform. He would have been at his office, monitoring the situation. But he was as shocked as the rest of us. No, I don’t think he was involved.”

Irwin believes his father did find out, but he took the knowledge to his grave. “It’s better you don’t know,” General Ver told him, “You’re still in your military career.”

When General Ver died in Bangkok in 1998, Irwin was in California and had to appeal to then-President Estrada to waive the executive order placed by President Cory Aquino to bar his family’s return. Irwin was allowed to enter the Philippines for the first time, to attend his father’s funeral.

Irwin told me the story as we were driving through his hometown of Sarrat earlier this year. As soon as he got off the plane in Manila, he was ushered into a press conference.

“Do you think your father will be buried at Libingyan ng mga Bayani?”

Irwin ducked, anticipating the follow-up question about his father, who went down in history as a national villain, “That’s the usual burial place of soldiers.”

“Do you think your father was a hero?”

"I told them, 'He was a military man who served his country,'" and then he added, "The next day we were lambasted by the media! Your mother's friends!"

Irwin laughed, as he always does. He is not bitter. And this I do not understand. "If you look at history," he told me, "regimes always fall. The people wanted a different leader. We were part of that change. That regular change." He understood this was the role he played in Philippine history. The one in which he loses everything.

My mother, when she first started seeing Irwin, was nervous about introducing him to her family. The Communists, in the military narrative, were the enemy. On a recent family party, he leaned arm to arm with my aunt, Princess Nemenzo, giggling like imps about god knows what. He sends a text to Gringo Honasan to thank him for the Bicol Express he sent over for the party, ribbing him about the spice, "Is this your revenge?" People expect that if Irwin were to be bitter towards anyone it would be Gringo Honasan.

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"If there was combat and we were on different sides, we'd probably shoot at each other. On a professional basis," he stressed. They've never had to do that, and despite the fact that Gringo led the coup that took Irwin down, they're friends now, and go out for a coffee or breakfast when Irwin visits Manila. "I know him as a person."

June 2014, Irwin and my mother stood on a California mountaintop, flurries of snow catching in their hair. After more than ten years together, Irwin and my mother decided to elope.

I was always fascinated by Irwin's ability to face the people most aggrieved during the Marcos dictatorship. "Were you worried about your family?" I asked. "Did they ever say anything?"

IMAGE Jason Quibilan

25 years later, they are married, and the events that led up to

the fall of Marcos still come up often in the house they share today in California.

"I was not worried, but I never told them about your mom until it was too late for them to stop me." The situation, he knew, was delicate, but being forced to confront their relationship may have hastened acceptance on both sides, that the Marcos years were in fact in the past.

"You see, Ja," my stepfather explains to me, using my childhood nickname, "I hope you get the idea now, I'm not antagonistic to people who have different views, opposing views to mine. I respect that everyone has a way of looking at life, of how we should run our government."

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Irwin told me that when he met my mother's friends they went in for the joke: "'Hey, why are you sleeping with the enemy?' I understand that to some of them, I am the enemy, but I don't think of them that way." He was more concerned that they would feel uncomfortable having him around.

When Marites Vitug met him again, decades after their interview across a desk in Malacañang Palace, the person she saw wasn't the formal, coolly intelligent man she remembered. "Oh my god, he's such a gentle soul!" Marites told me. In a humbler setting, out of power and working a regular job, "He becomes very human," she said.

Watching my strong-willed mother interact with Irwin, Marites told me how she and another journalist friend, Cris Yabes, warned my mother in a feigned disbelief, "Gemma, you're ordering around the former PSG commander!"

“It’s the soldier in him,” I joked, “he’s still following orders.”

Fit and with a strong sense of propriety and tradition, Irwin’s past life as a soldier seeps into his current one. When the whole family gets together on Christmas, he organizes the trip to midnight mass with military precision. One day, locked out of their house, I called Irwin at work and he detailed an ingenious seven-step process of up-turned rocks, hidden rope pulleys and windows rigged to slide open just wide enough to slip a hand through and retrieve a spare key. Any would-be robbers were assuredly thwarted, and by the time I got into the house, I felt like James Bond, had all of his assignments involved solving quotidian domestic snags.

At their home in California, Irwin and my mother are just as likely to argue about Bongbong Marcos’s political prospects, as to fret about when their children will finally settle down to get married, or deliver excited updates about a potted vine that sprouted a six-foot-long tendril overnight. Irwin dotes on his bonsai garden in a room full of my mother’s books. Some evenings they put on a CD and glide around the smooth wooden floors Irwin installed in their living room, the better to twirl my mother around in. They hold hands as they walk down the street, and he tells her stories of his childhood hijinks, just to make her giggle.

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Their wedding party in Manila was attended mostly by my mother’s friends and family, Victor Corpus, Gringo Honasan,

her brother Dodong Nemenzo, Marites Vitug, and Amick Alfafara, a cousin who worked on the Agrava Commission. “We were trying to protect the country,” he told us in his speech, “and I know now that you were trying to make it better.” Then they danced.

When I ask him if part of what attracted him to my mother was a path to redemption, a chance to defend his father, his side to her friends and family, who were most affected by it, he laughs. “I can hardly even convince your mother! No, that doesn’t factor into it at all. It’s really because I love her. We don’t understand why other people don’t understand.”

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