

# 4



## *Comfort Woman*

**O**NE MORNING IN April 1943, I was asked by my Huk comrades to collect some sacks of dried corn from the nearby town of Magalang. I went with two others in a cart pulled by a carabao. One comrade sat with me in the cart, the other rode on the carabao's back. It was the height of the dry season. The day was very hot.

We loaded the sacks of corn into the cart and made our way back to our barrio. As we approached the Japanese checkpoint near the town hospital of Angeles, the man beside me whispered, "Be careful, there are some guns and ammunition hidden in the sacks of corn." I froze. I did not know till then that what we were sitting on were guns. I became very nervous, fearing that if the Japanese soldiers discovered the weapons, we would all get killed.

I got off the cart and showed the sentry our passes. At that time, everyone in the barrio needed to have a pass to show that he or she lived there. The sentry looked at the sacks of corn, touching here and pressing there without saying anything.

Finally, he allowed us to pass, but after we had gone thirty meters from the checkpoint he whistled and signaled us to return. We looked at each other and turned pale. If he emptied the sack, he would surely find the guns and kill us instantly. The soldier raised his hands and signaled that I was the only one to come back, and my compan-

ions were allowed to go. I walked to the checkpoint, thinking the guns were safe but I would be in danger. I thought that maybe they would rape me.

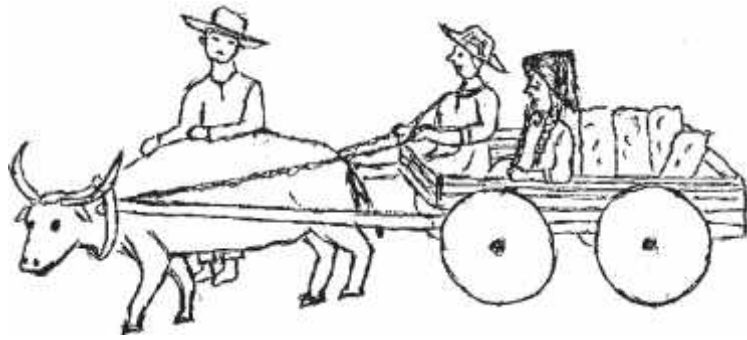
The guard led me at gunpoint to the second floor of the building that

used to be the town hospital. It had been turned into the Japanese headquarters and garrison. I saw six other women there. I was given a small room with a bamboo bed. The room had no door, only a curtain. Japanese soldiers kept watch in the hall outside. That night, nothing happened to me.

The following day was hell. Without warning, a Japanese soldier entered my room and pointed his bayonet at my chest. I thought he was going to kill me, but he used his bayonet to slash my dress and tear it open. I was too frightened to scream. And then he raped me. When he was done, other soldiers came into my room, and they took turns raping me.

Twelve soldiers raped me in quick succession, after which I was given half an hour to rest. Then twelve more soldiers followed. They all lined up outside the room waiting for their turn. I bled so much and was in such pain, I could not even stand up. The next morning, I was too weak to get up. A woman brought me a cup of tea and breakfast of rice and dried fish. I wanted to ask her some questions, but the guard in the hall outside stopped us from saying anything to each other.

I could not eat. I felt much pain, and my vagina was swollen. I cried and cried, calling my mother. I could not resist the soldiers because they might kill me. So what else could I do? Every day, from two in the afternoon to ten in the evening, the soldiers lined



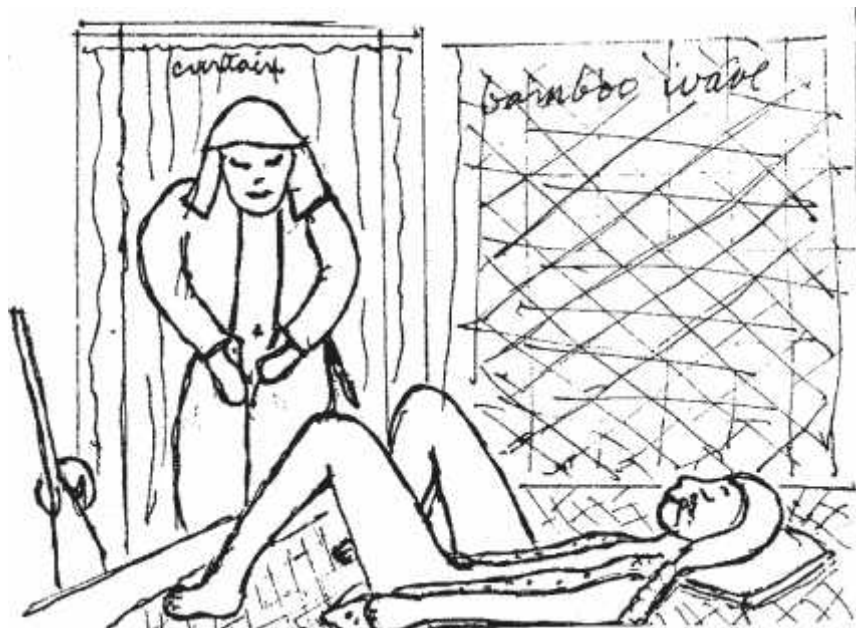
*Smuggling guns and ammunition in sacks of corn past the Japanese checkpoint. I wore a salakot to protect me from the sun's heat.*

up outside my room and the rooms of the six other women there. I did not even have time to wash after each assault. At the end of the day, I just closed my eyes and cried. My torn dress would be brittle from the crust that had formed from the soldiers' dried semen. I washed myself with hot water and a piece of cloth so I would be clean. I pressed the cloth to my vagina like a compress to relieve the pain and the swelling.

Every Wednesday, a Japanese doctor came to give us a check-up. Sometimes a Filipino doctor came. The other women could rest for four or five days a month while they had their period. But I had no rest because I was not yet menstruating.

The garrison did not have much food. We ate thrice a day, our meals consisting of a cup of rice, some salty black beans and thin pieces of preserved radish. On rare occasions, we had a hard-boiled egg. Sometimes there was a small piece of fried chicken. Sometimes we also had a block of brown sugar. I would suck it like candy or mix it with the rice, and I was happy. I kept the sugar in my room.

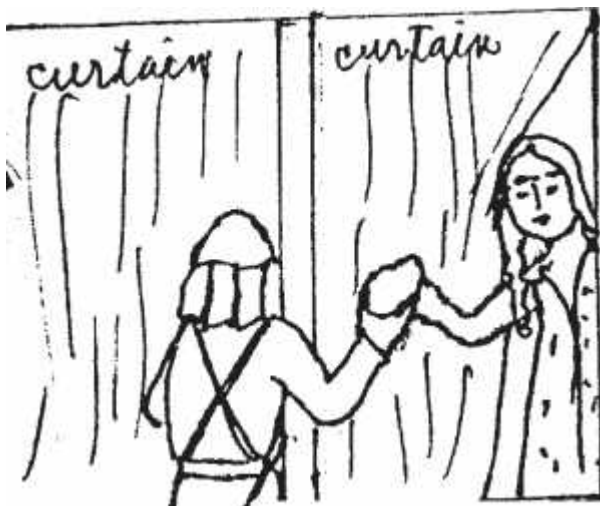
A soldier always stood in the hall outside the seven rooms where we were kept. The guard gave us tea every time we wanted some to



*Twelve soldiers raped me in quick succession.*

drink. Once, he told me to wash my face with tea so that my skin would look smooth. He was kind to all the women there.

We began the day with breakfast, after which we swept and cleaned our rooms. Sometimes, the guard helped. He fixed my bed and scrubbed the floor with a wet cloth and some disinfectant. After cleaning, we went to the bathroom downstairs to wash the only dress we had and to bathe. The bathroom did not even have a door,



We were all naked, and they laughed at us, especially at

*The guard gives me a cube of brown sugar.*

me and the other young girl who did not have any pubic hair.

I felt that the six other women with me also despised the Japanese soldiers. But like me, there was nothing they could do. I never got to know them. We just looked at each other, but were not allowed to talk. Two of the women looked Chinese. They always cast their gaze downward and never met my eye.

The only time I saw them was when we were taken for our daily bath and when, twice a week, we were taken out to get some sun. After bathing, we went back to our rooms. I would hang up my dress to dry and comb my long hair. Sometimes I sat on the bamboo bed, remembering all that had been done to me. How could I escape or kill myself? The only thing that kept me from committing suicide was the thought of my mother.

At around eleven, the guard brought each of us our lunch. He returned an hour later to collect our plates. Then a little before two in the afternoon, he brought us a basin with hot water and some pieces of cloth.

At two in the afternoon, the soldiers came. Some of them were brought by truck to the garrison. My work began, and I lay down as

one by one the soldiers raped me. At six p.m., we rested for a while and ate dinner. Often I was hungry because our rations were so small. After thirty minutes, I lay down on the bed again to be raped for the next three or four hours. Every day, anywhere from ten to over twenty soldiers raped me. There were times when there were as many as thirty: they came to the garrison in truckloads. At other times, there were only a few soldiers, and we finished early.

Most of the soldiers looked so young, maybe they were only eighteen years old. Their hair was cut short, only half an inch long. Most of them were clean and good looking, but many of them were rough.

I lay on the bed with my knees up and my feet on the mat, as if I were giving birth. Once there was a soldier who was in such a hurry to come that he ejaculated even before he had entered me. He was very angry, and he grabbed my hand and forced me to fondle his genitals. But it was no use, because he could not become erect again. Another soldier was waiting for his turn outside the room and started banging on the wall. The man had no choice but to leave, but before going out, he hit my breast and pulled my hair.

It was an experience I often had. Whenever the soldiers did not feel satisfied, they vented their anger on me. Sometimes a soldier took my hand and put it around his genitals so I could guide him inside me. I soon learned that was the quickest way to satisfy the men and get the ordeal over with. But there was a soldier who



*The soldiers watch us bathe and laugh at us.*

did not like this. When I put my hand on his groin, he slapped me. He was very rough, poking his penis all over my genitals, even my backside, because he could not find my vagina. He kept pressing against my clitoris which got so swollen



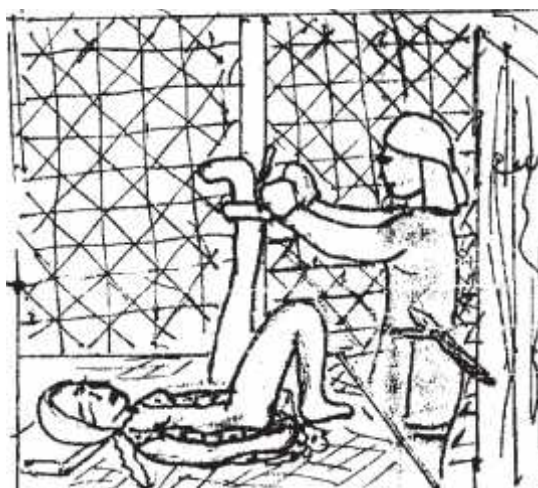
that I was in pain for three days. Even the hot water compress I made could not relieve the pain.

Some soldiers punched my legs and belly after they had ejaculated prematurely, staining their pants with their semen. One soldier raped me, and when he was finished, ordered me to fondle his genitals. He wanted to rape me a second time, but could not get an erection. So he bumped my head and legs against the wall. It was so painful. As he was hitting me, the soldiers outside started knocking impatiently on the wall. Through the thin curtain, I could see their impatient figures huddled in the hall.



*Every day this was the scene in my room.*

Every day there were incidents of violence and humiliation. These happened not only to me, but also to the other women there. Sometimes I heard crying and the sound of someone being beaten up as there was only a partition made of woven bamboo that divided my room from those of the others.



*Sometimes the soldiers tied up my leg with a belt which they hung on a nail on the wall.*

When the soldiers raped me, I felt like a pig. Sometimes they tied up my right leg with a waist band or belt and hung it on a nail on the wall as they violated me. I was angry all the time. But there was nothing I could do. How many more days, I thought. How many more months? Someday we will be free, I thought. But how?

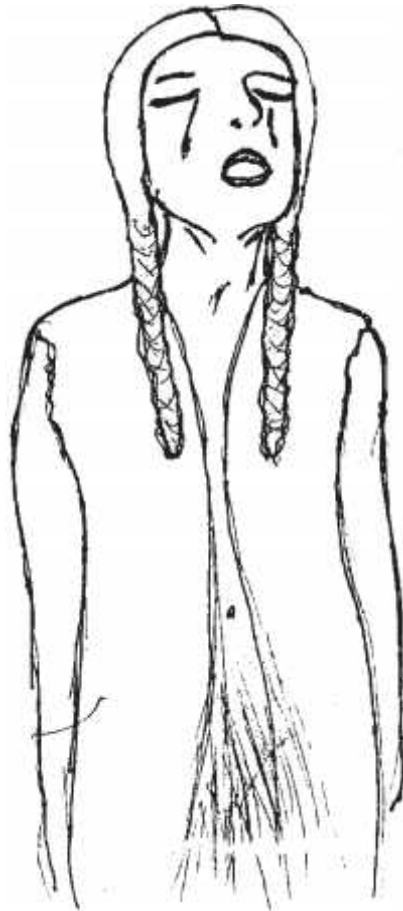
I thought of my guerrilla activities and my comrades. I regretted passing the sentry where the Japanese soldiers saw me. Did my comrades know that I was still alive and undergoing such horrible suffering? Maybe not. Was there anything they could do, I wondered. Sometimes I lost all hope.

I was in the hospital building for three months. Afterwards, in August of 1943, we were transferred to a big rice mill four blocks from the hospital. The mill was on Henson Road, named after my father's family, who owned the land where it stood. We found seven small rooms ready for each of us. The daily routine of rape continued. All throughout my ordeal, I kept thinking of my mother. Did she know I was still alive? How could I get in touch with her?

In December 1943, a new set of officers took over the mill. One day I saw the new captain. His face was familiar. I knew I had seen him before. Once the officer called me and asked, "Are you the girl whom I met in Fort McKinley?"

I bowed my head and answered, "Yes." It was the man who had raped me two years before. He told me his name was Captain Tanaka.

The officers also demanded our services. Once they took all seven of us to a big house where they lived. That house belonged to my father, and it was where my mother worked while she was in her teens. We stayed there for an hour, and there we were raped. Tanaka was there, and so was his commanding officer, a colonel who raped me twice. We returned to the rice mill on board a truck guarded by soldiers.



*I cried every night, calling my mother silently.*

Sometimes we were transported to another big, old house where the other officers lived, and there we would again be raped.

Tanaka seemed to be fond of me, but I did not like him. He took pity on me. It seemed that if he could only stop the soldiers from raping me, he would. Sometimes, if the colonel was not there, he asked me to make some tea for him. He told me that he was from Osaka. He was about thirty-two years old, with eyes so small that they disappeared when he smiled.

From the time he recognized me as the girl he had raped in Fort McKinley, Tanaka became very kind to me. He could speak a little English, and he talked to me often. He asked me my name. "My name is Rosa," I answered. "Rosa means a flower, a rose."

From that time on, he called me Bara which means rose in Japanese, he said. He also asked me how old I was. I told him fifteen by making a sign with my fingers.

Many days passed. I looked at the calendar which hung in a hall outside my room. I realized Christmas was coming in a week. I remembered my mother again. I cried quietly. I missed my mother, and my father, too. Neither of them knew what had happened to me. Sometimes I stayed up all night, thinking about my parents. When morning came, it was back to the old routine.

Even the Japanese doctor who checked me every week did not spare me. Once, after the check-up, he asked me to stay behind. And then he raped me. I cried and cried because it hurt so much. His penis was very big.

By now I had served thousands of soldiers. Sometimes I looked at myself in the small mirror in my room and saw that what I had been through was not etched in my face. I looked young and pretty. God, I thought, how can I escape from this hell? Please God, help me and the other girls free ourselves from here.

We were still taken regularly to the big houses where the officers stayed. The old colonel would always choose me from among the other girls and rape me twice. He did not talk to me. He just gave me a cup of tea with sugar and a big banana and signaled me to eat it.



One morning, after I had cleaned my room, bathed and washed my only dress and towel, Tanaka called me to his room. I was combing my hair. "Bara, come here," he said. I sat in front of his table.

He was writing a letter with a fountain pen which he dipped in ink. Then he held my chin. He dipped his pen in the ink and pierced me with the tip of the pen. It was painful, as if I had been pricked by a needle. To this day, that ink mark is on my chin.

I do not know why he did that. He also ran his fingers through my hair. Then, when he saw a small cockroach on the table, he swatted it and burned it with a lighted cigarette. "*Moyasu*," he said, meaning burn. Just then, we heard the sound of a vehicle coming to a halt. Tanaka stood up and told me to go back to my room. He gave me two pieces of mint candy before I left.

The colonel had arrived. He headed straight for Tanaka's room. It was close to eleven a.m., and soon the guard came with my ration. It looked good—I had a piece of fried chicken, some vegetables and an egg. I kept the egg to eat before I went to sleep.

But as I was finishing my lunch, the colonel came into my room and raped me. I was scared because he looked very cruel. Afterward, he also gave me a piece of mint.

There was nothing we could do about our situation. After some time, I became very ill. I was getting chills, my fingernails were turning black, and I was always feeling thirsty. I could feel that I was going to have a malaria attack. But no matter how weak I was, the soldiers continued to rape me, and I was afraid they would hit me again even if I was very sick.

Then I developed a high fever. Tanaka found out I was ill, maybe because he could hear me crying and tossing in bed. He took me to his room and gave me a tablet for high fever. The colonel also found out. He visited me in Tanaka's room and told him that I was not to give service to the soldiers that day.

I was given my dinner in Tanaka's room, but I had no appetite. Tears just fell from my eyes. I was quiet. Tanaka looked at me sadly. I returned to my room at about ten p.m. I could not sleep the whole

night, I just cried silently. I remembered my mother again and the thousands of soldiers who had raped me. I recalled their cruelty, their habit of hitting me when they were not satisfied with having raped me. I felt very weak.

I felt then that only Captain Tanaka understood my feelings. He was the only one who did not hurt me or treat me cruelly. But inside in my heart I was still very angry with him.

Sometimes, when the colonel was not in the garrison, Tanaka went to my room to talk to me, asking me if I felt better after my malaria attack. He would hold my face and look straight into my eyes. But I did not look at him. Sometimes I pitied him.

Since he understood a little English, I pleaded with him to allow me to escape. He said he could not let me go because it was against his vow. He could not do anything against the Emperor. Then he embraced me and kissed my cheeks and neck tenderly. Maybe he pitied me but could do nothing.

Even now I sometimes recall the things that Tanaka did for me. I remember the word "*Bara.*" I have told my granddaughter about this, and she and her mother sometimes call me Lola Bara instead of Lola Rosa.

One day, at about nine in the morning, I was combing my hair and had my back to the door. Suddenly I felt someone holding my hips. I was frightened. It was Tanaka. He started kissing my hair.

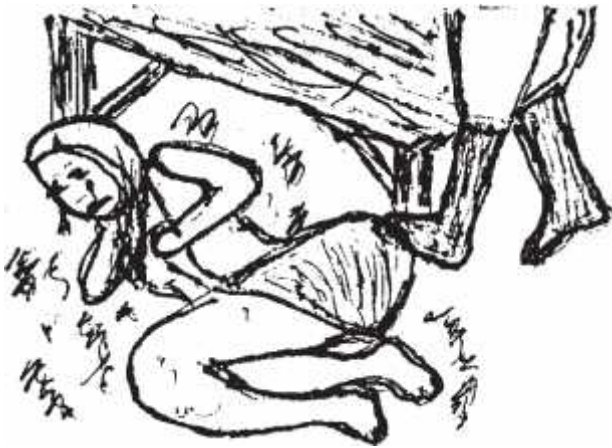
Then he made me lie down on the bed and raped me.

I was very angry, and I was still feeling weak from malaria. Although he was not as rough as the others, he still took advantage of me. When he finished, he said, "*Arigato,*" and left. I understood what he meant. "Thank you," he said for the first time.



*"Please, Tanaka, let me go."*

Once when a soldier was raping me, I suddenly got a malaria attack. I started shaking, and the soldier kicked me. I fell down from my bed to the floor. Maybe he thought that I was just pretending to be ill. But I kept on shivering, and I could feel that even my intestines were quivering.



*My malaria attack. The soldier raping me thought I was fooling him and kicked me.*

The other soldiers waiting outside the room saw what happened. Captain Tanaka also noticed that something was wrong. He went to my room, picked me up from the floor and put me back on the bed. He wrapped a blanket around me and drew open the curtain that hung on my door. The soldiers waiting outside walked away.

The next day, the doctor came and confirmed that I had malaria. I was allowed to rest for a week. I was given two yellow tablets to take twice a day. But I still got malaria attacks every other day. After a week of taking the medicine, I began bleeding profusely. The Japanese doctor was not there, so Captain Tanaka found a Filipino doctor. He told me that I had a miscarriage. When I learned that I had lost a child, I began wondering how that was possible, as I had not yet begun to menstruate. And who was the father?

A week after my miscarriage, I was put back to work again. Even if I still had occasional malaria attacks, the soldiers continued to rape me. Sometimes, when the colonel was away, Captain Tanaka kept me in his room and hung up the curtain in my room so I could rest. When they saw the curtain up, the soldiers thought I was away. Captain Tanaka told them that I was in the hospital because I was sick. The captain did not rape or touch me while I was in his office.

One late morning, Tanaka asked me to bring two cups of tea to his room. On my way there, I overheard him and the colonel talking. By

now, I could understand some Japanese although I could not speak it. I heard the two men say that they were planning to conduct a zoning operation in Pampang, our barrio, because many of the residents there were guerrillas. Our soldiers had captured guerrillas from there, and they were in the garrison downstairs, said the colonel.

At that point, I walked calmly into the room and put the two cups of tea on the table. As I was walking out, I heard the colonel say, "We will set fire to Pampang." I understood because he used the word *moyasu* which, I had learned from Tanaka, meant burn. I was crying in my heart. The first thought that came to my mind was my mother who lived there. Pampang was just six kilometers from the rice mill where I was held captive. How could I get word to my mother that the entire barrio would be burned?

I knew how cruel the Japanese Imperial Army could be. When they burned down a village, they had their machine guns ready to shoot at anybody fleeing the fire, especially if they found guerrillas there. Even rats and cats were killed.

Two o'clock came, and my daily ordeal with the soldiers began. That night I could not sleep. In the morning, as the sun rose, the soldiers went for their daily exercise. "*Miyo tokai kono sorakete!*" they shouted. When the routine was over, they shouted "*Banzai!*" three times.

I was in luck that day because the guards took us downstairs so we could have some sunshine. The seven of us went down to the open field where the soldiers had their exercises. The field fronted the street, but the Japanese had fenced it off with barbed wire so no one could escape. The three guards with us were laughing and joking. I walked close to the street



*Tied up, along with guerrilla captives, for torture.*





*Beaten by the colonel.*

and saw an old man pass by. His face looked familiar to me, and I knew that he lived in our barrio.

“Tonight your barrio will be burned,” I whispered to him while the guards were not looking. “Get out of there.” Then I quickly turned away, pretending there was nothing the matter. Later we were sent back to our rooms for our daily routine—cleaning, bathing, washing.

At lunch I could hardly swallow my food. I was very tense. The soldiers lined up outside my room

as usual. I finished at nine in the evening. While I was in my room resting, I noticed that the colonel and the captain were leaving the building with some soldiers. I heard their vehicles driving away. Some of the soldiers remained to guard us.

After more than an hour, I heard the colonel and Tanaka rushing up the stairs. The colonel grabbed me from my bed and slapped me hard. My eyes swelled and there was blood on my face. The colonel was very angry because when they reached Pampang, there was not a single soul there. He suspected that it was I who had frustrated their plans, as I was the only one who had heard them talking.

I was dragged downstairs to the garrison where the colonel beat me up, tied my hands with a rope and hung them on the wall. I forced my eyes open to see what was around me. I saw some guerrilla captives. They also had many bruises and, like me, their hands were tied up.

When daylight came, I was very thirsty, and my entire body was in pain from the torture that I had undergone. At noon, the colonel went down to the garrison to inspect the prisoners. He poured water on our faces. I welcomed every drop of water that reached my parched lips. My throat was dry, and I eagerly drank up the water.

Then suddenly I felt very cold. I knew that I was going to have another malaria attack. I was shivering, but my hands were still tied

up. My whole body was shaking, and I wanted to lie down. I cried, "I want to die now." Then the high fever came, and I thought I could not remain standing for long. My head was aching and felt so heavy, I could barely hold it up.

Someone held up my chin. I forced my swollen eyes to open. I saw Captain Tanaka giving me a cup of tea. He held the cup to my lips, but suddenly the colonel came down shouting. He bumped my head against the corrugated iron wall of the rice mill. I passed out.

I was still unconscious when the guerrillas attacked the garrison. My mother would tell me later that the Huks assaulted the rice mill that night to free their imprisoned comrades. They found me there still chained, and they freed me as well. One guerrilla carried me with him as the Japanese soldiers pursued him. Unable to carry me any farther, the Huk dropped me in a shallow ditch on the roadside. Fortunately, it was a moonlit night, and Anna, my mother's cousin, lived nearby. She was up late preparing the *kamote* she was going to sell in the market the following day. The moon lit up the road fronting her house, and she saw me sprawled on the roadside. She informed my mother, who promptly came to get me.

The first thing I remembered when I regained consciousness was the colonel shouting and bumping my head because Captain Tanaka was giving me something to drink. I had difficulty talking, but the first thing I asked my mother was, "What happened to the six women, my companions in the garrison? Were they killed? Did they escape?" But my mother did not know.

It was January 1944. I had been held captive as a sex slave for nine months.