

NO ACCOUNTING FOR SAINTLINESS

She was compared to Mother Teresa in good works. The problem was this: she wouldn't account for her government grant. The auditors wanted to investigate. So the ambassador told me to go down to Calipayan in Mindanao where Sister Cristina de la Cruz had her headquarters and solve the problem.

After hours of travel on increasingly smaller and more ancient planes, I reached the airport nearest Calipayan, a dirt runway cut into a coconut plantation on the southern coast. The air smelled of salt and smoke from burning field debris at the edge of the airfield.

A short slender man with oiled hair strode toward me. On his narrow hip he had an enormous gun in a brown holster studded with white seashells.

"You are Madam Fraser?"

"Yes, and you?"

"I am Manolo. I am here to carry you to my Mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes, Mum." He took my bag, and I followed him through the small Quonset-hut terminal.

"We're going to Calipayan to Sister Cristina?" The meaning of the name of her home base, Calipayan, suddenly struck me: happiness.

"Yes, Mum. Our boat is just there, with Berting, who will carry us."

The boat was small, carved from a tree trunk. A teenager in khaki shorts and rubber sandals sat revving the engine, holding onto the dock with one hand to steady the boat as we stepped in. My rear end was almost as wide as the boat. Berting pulled out to sea, the soft putt-putt of the engine barely disturbing the huge sense of silence. "What exactly do you do for Sister Cristina?"

Manolo turned in his seat to answer. "Mother helps us in all ways. So I help her in all ways."

"But what exactly is your job?" I tried to remember the list of employees in the project file. "Why do you carry that gun?"

"Pro-teck-shun." He pronounced it as three words. "I work with the fishing co-op. We are pirates."

"I beg your pardon?"

"We are peaceful now; we no longer smuggle. Thanks be to God and to the efforts of our Mother, we have become fishermen."

I sat back to avoid learning more than I wanted to know just yet. I ran through my questions. Did Sister Cristina understand that she was required to submit quarterly reports? Why wasn't she sending them? How much money remained? How far behind schedule was she? Getting the answers would keep me busy today and tomorrow. I'd make the long journey back to Manila the day after tomorrow,



Jan Stamm

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MARY CAMERON KILGOUR

F O C U S

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Friday. A half-hour later Berting pulled the boat expertly up to the dock of a small island. Manolo jumped off to tie a line. He reached for my bag, then for me, and I stepped onto the long, narrow dock. We started walking single file toward the village, approaching two men. As we came close, they yelped and both jumped into the water. “What on earth?”

“You may be the first white person to visit Calipayan in many years, and the people here are very superstitious.”

“Oh, great. Who are these people?”

“They are sea gypsies, like me, but they are uneducated.”

The dock led onto a narrow path of rough coral edged by small bamboo houses and shops on rickety stilts above the water. At the end of the path was a grove of coconut trees and bananas. Manolo turned left along a rickety scaffold to a cluster of wooden buildings also over the water.

“This is our headquarters.”

We stepped onto a wide porch and then into a large room that appeared to be a reception area and office. Chairs lined three walls and four desks lined the fourth wall. Behind each desk was a table covered with crooked piles of paper. Manolo led me through a narrow corridor onto an open porch, off of which were three doors. He opened the first door and motioned me into a small room with a narrow bed of woven rattan with a mosquito net over it.

“The dining room and kitchen are in the next building. The comfort room and shower room are next door. Would you like Nescafe?”

“Yes, that would be nice.” I put my bag down and followed him.

Mary Cameron Kilgour was an FSO with USAID from 1966 to 1995. She served in Pakistan, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Philippines, Liberia and Bangladesh. Now retired in Gainesville, Fla., she writes fiction and creative nonfiction and volunteers with several local groups.

The dining room had a long table covered with oil-cloth and several wooden chairs. Manolo made us each a cup of instant coffee with hot water from a thermos. Just as I took a sip, he jumped up and rushed to the door. “Here is our Mother!”

Sister Cristina entered the room in a rush. I felt the breeze she created, yet she was incredibly short, well under five feet tall, and rotund in a billowing white cotton habit. She smiled, and her face seemed to light up. She came quickly toward me. “You are welcome, my dear lady. You bring greetings from Mr. Ambassador?”

“Yes, Sister, thank you. I’m happy to be here. I look forward to learning about your operation.”

“Good. Tomorrow we will see the fishermen on their boats.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’ll have time for that, Sister. I need to concentrate on the issue at hand. And be back in Manila by Friday.”

“Oh, my dear, we will be disappointed if you leave us too soon. You must stay longer, see everything. What exactly is the issue at hand?”

I took a long drink of my coffee. “Well, Sister, the grant you received last year requires quarterly reports. We haven’t received any. As my letter said, we have no idea how your project is going.”

“That is why you must stay and visit the fishermen on their boats and the weighing and packing operation. And you need to attend the co-op meeting. And see our work with the fishermen’s families, the well-baby clinic and the literacy classes.”

“Yes, Sister, but most importantly, I need to talk with your accountant and look at the reports he’s been preparing. I’d like to carry those reports back to Manila.”

Our cups were empty. Sister Cristina’s smooth round face looked perplexed.

“Do you think I am stealing your money?”

I gulped. What should I say? Did I believe that? I said the Christian thing. “Of course not!”

“Then why are you only interested in reports when

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you could be seeing our work on the boats, in the homes of our people? I wish to share all of our work with you, so you return to Manila blessed by a full understanding.”

“But the government requires reports, Sister. We have to account for the funds.”

“Are you not interested in the results?”

“Yes, but we need reports too. The auditors, Congress.”

I was sweating. The sun had set, turning the room from rosy orange to gray. Manolo, at the end of the table, the gun still on his hip, lit a small kerosene lamp. I felt foolish, even sinful. I needed to escape. “Excuse me, where is the comfort room?” Manolo stood, turned on a flashlight, and directed me next door. He handed me the flashlight and left. His knitted brow signaled disapproval.

When I returned to the dining room it was empty. I went to my room to unpack my bag. Someone had put a pitcher of water and a basin, towel, and sliver of soap on a table in the corner. I started to wash by the light of the flashlight, dripping water through the slatted bamboo floor into the sea. Then, the window still open to passing boatmen, I changed in the dark and lay down on the hard rattan bed to think through my next moves. This first meeting hadn't gone well. I'd probably have to go to confession before all this was over, for the first time in years.

I must have dozed. Suddenly I heard tapping that became insistent. I opened the door to find a young girl.

“Dinner is ready. They are waiting.”

I put my shoes on, rubbed the sleep from my face and followed her. A pressurized lantern lit the dining room. Insects smacked it and fell to the floor. Sister Cristina, Manolo, a man they introduced as Akub, the captain of one of the fishing teams, and several other men sat at the table, which was loaded with a massive plate of rice and smaller plates of prawns and fish mixed with greens and onions. The young girl was setting bowls of soup in front of each person.

“We shall say grace first.”

My eyes closed for a ritual almost forgotten.

“Bless us, Oh Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty” My eyelids relaxed on hearing the familiar grace.

The food was delicious. I had been hungry. After dinner Akub talked about the catch that week.

“The holds were full by this morning, better than last week by at least 10 percent. We'll know for sure at the weighing.”

Sister Cristina seemed to glow. “Wonderful, wonderful!”

Manolo sat writing in a large black book and didn't say much. Sister Cristina stood up. I peeked at my watch. It was 8:45.

“Tomorrow will come early, my dear. I will say good night and see you at breakfast.”

“Yes, good night. Thank you.” I returned to my room and lay down. The small pillow smelled of mildew but a cool breeze came through the open window and I tucked the rough sheet around me.

The next thing I knew it was morning. From the sounds around me others were already up. I washed, dressed quickly, and went to the dining room, eager to discuss my schedule with Sister.

Manolo was there with Akub. “Ah, Mum, you had a good sleep?” Manolo asked.

“Yes, thank you. Where is Sister?”

“She has gone ahead. We are to join her at the fishing traps in the southeast quadrant.”

What! She expected me to visit the fishing operation, when I had explained that I wouldn't have time? “Manolo, is there an accountant here at the office? I need to find out about the reports that are overdue.”

“Yes, but no one will be here today. We will all be fishing or at the packing plant.”

“When can I speak with the accountant?”

“Perhaps next week. We turn our attention to such matters when we have our monthly co-op meeting.”

God, help me. “Is there any way that I'll be able to see

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the reports and still catch the plane back to Manila tomorrow?”

“I think not, Mum.”

Nibbling on the rice and fried eggs, I thought about my options. I could tell Manolo to take me back to the airport right then. But there was no plane until tomorrow so that didn't make sense. Perhaps I could reason with Sister in the course of the day, spend tonight collecting the reports and still make the plane tomorrow. “Okay, let's go to the fishing zone.” Manolo smiled.

After a two-hour boat ride we reached an area studied with prawn traps marked with colorful floats painted like the jeepney taxis of Manila. It made for a bizarre scene. But there was no sight of Sister Cristina. She had ‘gone ahead.’

“Ahead where?”

“To the packing plant.”

Akub explained the operation with enthusiasm, how each fisherman owned his own traps but paid the co-op a percentage for support services, including loans, technical assistance, supplies and marketing. Each fisher family had improved its standard of living, he said. Piracy had declined. I changed the subject; the less I learned about piracy, the better.

When we reached the packing plant I was surprised to see that it was a refrigerated ship rather than a warehouse. Akub explained.

“The ship will take the prawns directly to the market in Zamboanga City and return within three days.”

“Who owns the ship?”

“The co-op leases the ship from a Japanese businessman in Zamboanga but we hope to buy it within two years.”

Sister Cristina was nowhere to be seen. She had come and gone again. Was she trying to hoodwink me? I toured every inch of the smelly ship with Akub and the captain, a Mr. Plaza. Then we had a lunch of grilled prawns, rice, and wonderfully cold Pepsis. Captain Plaza was friendly and talkative but knew little about the co-op side of the operation.

We arrived back in Calipayan as the sun was set-

ting. Little children eyed me shyly, hiding behind their mothers or running away if I looked directly at them. But no one jumped into the water.

Back at the HQ, I was told that Sister would see me at dinner. No one said where she was. I washed and changed into my remaining clean clothes. I wandered back to the office reception area and started leafing through the papers behind each desk. They seemed to be the accounts of each co-op member. When it got too dark to read I made my way to the dining room, where I found Sister talking quietly with some of her staff. She had been in the complex the entire time, because she had not passed by me at the entrance. “Ah, Sister, I thought you had gone out.”

“No, my dear, I was saying my prayers, as we religious do.” Her eyes were twinkling again. “Come. Have coffee before we dine. Have a cookie.”

I sat with them and ate a delicious imported Danish butter cookie.

Smuggled? “Sister, I had hoped to return to Manila tomorrow, but I can't return without the reports.”

“Then you will stay with us longer.”

“It'll be inconvenient. The next plane is Sunday, right?”

“No. Monday. You can attend Mass with us on Sunday. A priest will be at Yulo.”

“I need time with your accounts, Sister. You do have an accountant?”

“I am the accountant,” said Manolo.

I stared at him, and then at her. The shock on my face surely rivaled that of the men who had jumped into the water.

She smiled. “The Americans think we are stealing their money, Manolo. My dear, what did you think of the operation you saw today?”

I sipped my coffee. “It was impressive, I admit.” I took another, longer sip. “But I really must see proof in your records.”

“Perhaps tomorrow night or the next day Manolo can show you the files. Tomorrow we cannot miss the wedding of Akub's son. It will be joyous.”

Manolo drank so much palm wine that he would clearly be in no condition to show me the books that night.

The next day we attended a Muslim wedding, which was mostly social as far as I could see. Sister Cristina said the legal part between the two parties took place in private before we arrived. It was fun, I admit. Manolo drank so much palm wine that he would clearly be in no condition to show me the books that night. We took a boat back from Akub's house. In the black of night without electricity the stars seemed close enough to touch and the water in the shallow bay sparkled with phosphorescence.

I went to bed feeling oddly content, from the palm wine perhaps. I would meet with Manolo immediately after Mass and spend the afternoon going over the records. I slept soundly.

The next morning we left by boat before breakfast, Sister preferring not to break her fast before taking Communion. She had found me a large straw hat, after remarking on how the white city skin on my nose and arms was already red and starting to peel.

Three hours later we pulled up to the dock at Yulo! A half-hour for Mass, lunch with the priest, and the return trip would shoot the whole day. The Mass was sweet. I whispered my responses in English at all the right places and enjoyed myself more than I had expected.

That night I went looking for Manolo. He was nowhere to be found. Sister had also disappeared. "She is praying," said the kitchen girl, Zenaida.

On Monday I awoke early and was the first person at breakfast. The sun was far to the east and to the west the water had an opaque sheen that reflected the sky. The village looked quaint and tranquil.

But the ambassador had been serious when he told me not to return without the reports.

Sister Cristina came in with a bustle. "Good morning, my dear. You must be full of energy to be up so early."

I smiled. "So I am, Sister. I've decided to spend the day going through your records myself. Can you tell me where the records are for the activities that the grant has paid for?"

"Of course. All of the receipts and revenue records are in the four desks in the reception room. And the co-op members' accounts are in the piles behind each desk. What more do you need?"

"Have any plans or targets changed since the grant was approved?"

"No, except that we're ahead on everything. The bottom drawer of the fourth desk has the plans and performance file. We're spending faster than the budget but we're catching and selling prawns and fish even faster. Phase One should end in fifteen months rather than the eighteen months we anticipated. We'll have spent all of the American money by then and will be well over 100 percent of our goals. The Japanese have already offered us a grant for Phase Two and the Europeans want Phase Three. By Phase Four we should be self-supporting."

Mother smiled, Buddha-like, innocent and benign. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and turned my frown into a smile. Our eyes met. "I think I can prepare the reports myself from the information you have." And that's what I did. I spent two days at the four desks and reconciled everything with the grant. Without a Xerox machine, I made notes and certified that I had seen the original receipts. I caught the plane heading back to Manila on Wednesday.

Three months later I returned to Calipayan and did the same thing to close out the project. No one jumped into the water this time. True to Mother Cristina's word, and amply documented, the project's results were really quite amazing. There was a farewell party for me on my last night, with singing and dancing, eating and speeches. I sat next to a Mr. Igocha from the Japanese aid agency. Looking perplexed, he leaned toward me to whisper. "I am surprised the Americans are giving away such a wonderful project."

I looked around the rustic room at the fishermen, at Mother Cristina, the scent of frangipani wafting from the leis around my neck. I smiled. "Me, too." ■