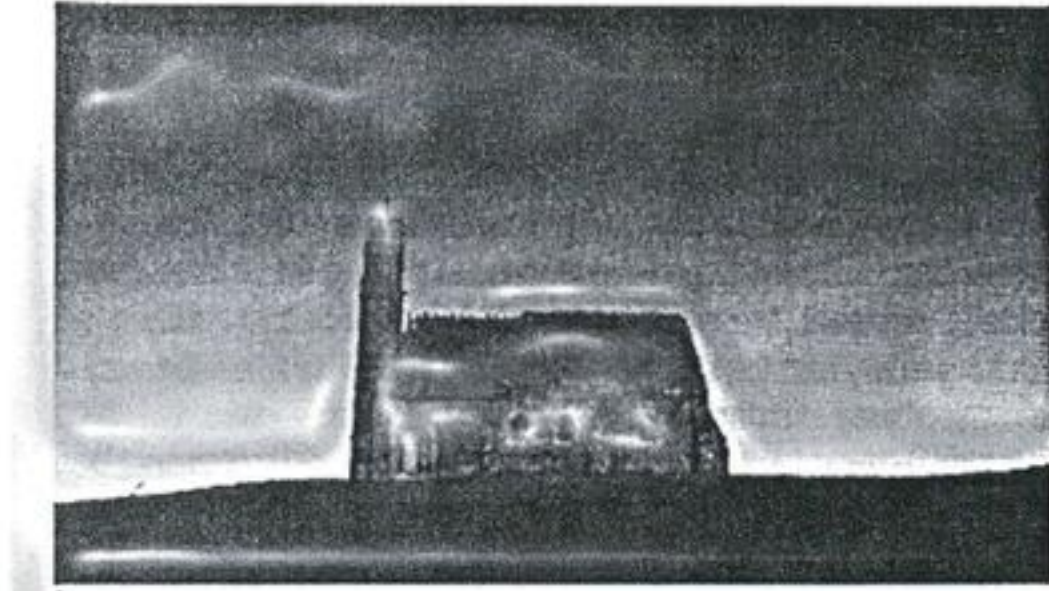


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THE HOUSE ON COVID HILL

By J.E. MAHAFFEY

When the sound came again, Leery refused to get up and check another time – four was enough. Nothing was there! Although she heard it as clear as the storm.

She missed the humble island homes of her childhood.

Nightly creepings on foggy nights were not a regular occurrence in Lucena, Naga, or even Manila. Things like that only occurred in the folklore told by her grandmother. Stories meant to scare children, deterring them from roaming off and getting lost. Stories like those of the *Aswang*. Forget Vlad or his gang, because vampires of the Philippines were shape shifting, malevolent, maneating, and blood-sucking creatures, who could get close to men and feed from them, stealing their life force in many ways. Some called them *Wak wak*, but that was incorrect, they *could* be called *Manananggal*, but Leery knew them as *Aswang*, and their domain stretched from Luzon to Mindanao, and beyond, all along the Malay Archipelago.

But, none of the Philippine islands had a hill *quite* like COVID Hill, with its American Civil War era home, constructed out of round rocks looking just like the ones Leery had seen in (and around) the nearby stream where everyone bathed, stacked up in an out-of-place-but-somehow-right Irish-style

architecture. Leery was sure that it was *not* constructed by choice, but rushed to meet some need. The main field, she was told, used to have a different name, in honor of some high ranking officer from the war; but now, it was only known as COVID Hill, because of the mass graves surrounding it and taking up most of the open land area. Bodies rested in all directions, past the wood lines, and into the forest. With an estimated 16,004 souls underneath the old corn fields, unmarked, with only the house standing watch over them. The statue, cast in tribute to the American soldier who first stormed the hill all those centuries ago, had been reduced to a pair of booted legs anchored to a double-cracked boulder.

All of her instincts had told her during the COVID-19's original outbreak, to stay on familiar ground, and away from cities, but her want of a *bana* was too strong. If only she had went to Laoang instead of coming to North Carolina, things would be different. Immediately she had regretted the marriage – a promise to a man that knew nothing of love. Not her kind of love. Her first red flag should have been how, in his jealousy, he had made her ghost her own adopted brother, Johne.

He would know what to do. Johne had been her best confidante.

Now, with internet services virtually gone, she had no way to find her lost brother. With two-thirds of the world's population either dead, or so sick that they wished that they *were*: communications were down, companies were gone, and resources were spread out. Facebook and other internet companies had no national connections, and connections that *did* exist were only localized services, nothing national. Worldwide connections a thing of the past, putting her homeland quite literally ... a world away, and out of touch. And in some eerie case of irony, the last she'd heard of Johne, was that he had left for the Philippines in search of *her* -- and their friends -- to help where he could during the epidemic's fourth wave. Now, Leery was less than a hundred miles from where he grew up, and Johne was where she had grew up.

She missed him always helping her, there to assist with homework research, looking up things she couldn't because of no data available for her internet browsing (so he'd screenshot it, or send her a PDF file of the information or documents she needed), or he would just listen when she needed to vent. Johne would talk to her about anything and everything. Even her cramps, it didn't matter, she could talk openly and honestly about whatever she felt like; and, he did the same, confiding in her. With him, she was comfortable, safe, and secure. He was there for so long, never questioning her or judging, just being a good big brother.

After he was robbed, he was unable to get another phone or to a computer, she waited many months, but no word from him came. She didn't understand at first, why it took him so long to get back online, but then she knew: Johnne was in trouble, she found that out later – not because of anything he had done – but because he had been betrayed by those around him, set up to be robbed. He did reach out to her around Easter, after the second wave of COVID, she'd received a communication in the form of an email file that had been passed across the globe for several weeks before reaching her. She seen it one day after logging into a local server, but marked it as spam, blocking him from sending another.

She could only imagine what that must have done to him.

Her *bana* had quickly moved in for the kill and asserted his husbandly opinions, for her to keep out of contact with Johnne. "LeeryJean, it's him or me!" He had spat in anger.

Her Catholicism made the decision for her, leaving no question between choosing a husband over an adopted brother; but now, she was a widow, and her brother was somewhere out there in a dying world probably thinking she hated him. She'd never even said goodbye or told him why. Johnne always lost those he loved due to misunderstandings. She had seen it so many times, so when she was led to believe he had wronged her, or done anything offensive, she *should* have known there was more to it. Instead of talking to him, she shut him out, and that was wrong.

She removed the block, but his email was somehow gone. Never read. Her so-called *bana* had the codes – something he'd insisted on in his jealousy – and deleting Johnne's email was not beneath him. She pondered that for weeks, before sending Johnne a message in response to the email she never read; but so far, her message remained unopened. If only she had contacted him sooner, before the final wave of the Coronavirus. She was sure that he was still alive, and imagined him going somewhere like Mindanao, in Dipolog, making his way to Dapitan, and over to Casul. Would he visit Mount Malindang? Johnne was still youthful, and in good health, her fellow pinays would adore him, and try to keep him. Did he go for his sister, only to find Leery was gone, and then give up – or was he out there somewhere, looking for her in what was left of the world?

When she was just seventeen, Leery had been befriended by an older girl named Vixanna. She had an American accent, and claimed to actually be *Aswang*, but not an evil one, and that was why she had helped Leery. For some reason Leery's thoughts went to that tall blonde. What had happened to her? Did she return to America, or was she still roaming the Philippines with her golden locks like beams of light from a lighthouse shining across a sea of brown? Whoever, or whatever, Vixanna was, she had

seemed to have a strong interest in stopping the mistreatment of children. As if in some way she had been made a protector of the youth, and had in fact protected many young lives. Saving them from other, less honorable *Aswang*. But, what life could any *Aswang* feed upon in a world full of death?

Would Vixanna find Johnne?

Leery had seen so many mass graves: plain wood boxes, *stacked* three at a time, lined up in long rows that had been dug shallowly into the Earth by tired and shocked neighbors. Emptied vessels given back to the soil that had made them and all who came before them, to be returned and used for new life. Fertilizer. Life built from death, dependent upon its gifts. The epidemic fed on the world with its quota of bodies like an overdue bill collector returning the borrowed material to its home. Johnne once expressed to her that he was not afraid of death, but in fact welcomed the idea of it at times to release him from his existential torments – his survivor's guilt – being the only one alive of his childhood friends, surviving so many tragedies and accidents. He felt that fate was keeping him alive, to bear witness, and contemplate what he had seen and experienced. Was he finally free? No more misunderstandings or broken hearts?

No. He was alive. She knew.

A metallic-like tapping echo came from down the hall, traveling through the walls, and with a sigh, Leery got up out of bed to go see what it was.

Death had swept through the lands calling many people back to the ground, but somehow, without knowing, she knew – that Johnne was still among the living. She wondered what he would think of COVID Hill. Would he be creeped out by her choice of domain? Would he understand why she stayed?