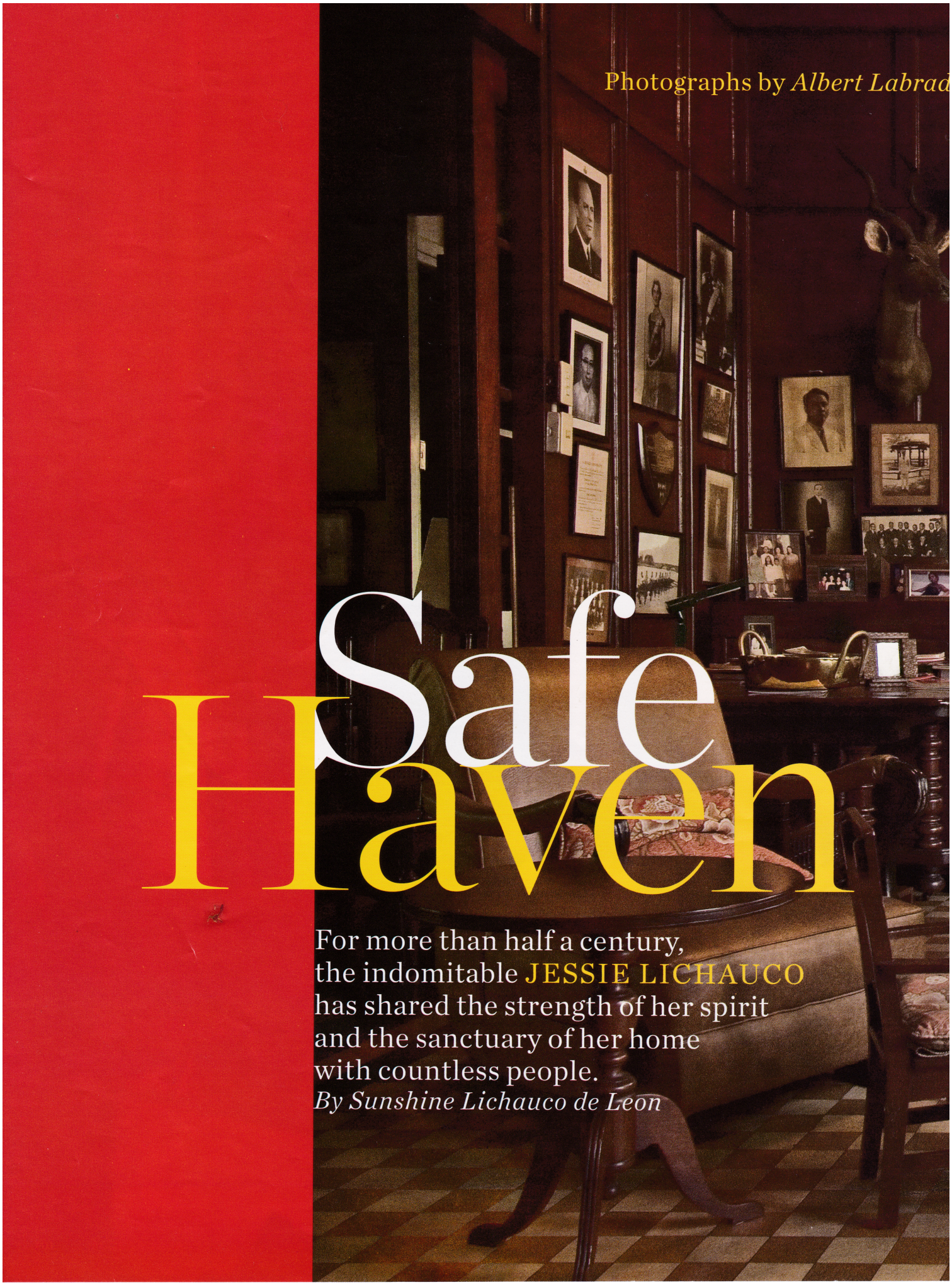


Photographs by *Albert Labrad*

Safe Haven

For more than half a century, the indomitable JESSIE LICHAUCO has shared the strength of her spirit and the sanctuary of her home with countless people.

By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon



Jessie and the ancient banyan in the yard have seen the best and the worst times together.

Home is when you find a moment that you don't want to leave." These words spoken by my grandmother, Jessie Lichauco, echo in my mind as I greet the familiar glass-encased lion trophy that guards the rich dark-wood staircase leading up to our family's house in Santa Ana, Manila. I run my hands along the carved mahogany banister and a part of me is awakened by a rush of memories.

As I reach the landing, I am overjoyed to see that although I have been away for some time, I am still welcomed by the familiar sight of my 96-year-old grandmother. She is sitting in what we call "Nana's corner," where she keeps a watchful eye over both the enormous banyan tree in our yard and the sinuous Pasig River flowing just beside the tree, nourishing its roots. With a childlike excitement, I take my shoes off and glide barefoot across the smooth wide planks of narra flooring. I land just in front of her "throne," a half-century-old green, worn reclining chair that used to belong to my grandfather and whose arms continue to embrace her. She lifts her silver-grey head up from the newspaper she has been reading, her skin still so clear, her light-green eyes smiling, and says casually, as if the ten months since my last visit was actually only just an instant, "Oh there you are. I have been wondering when you were going to show up." I answer coyly, "You know I always come back, Nana."

I smile as I remember telling Nana once that I felt free to wander the world as long as I had her as my anchor to return to. With her characteristic quick wit she had responded without hesitation, "Well, if I am your anchor, then you must be my sail." If adventure is something that has characterized my own life, it is the life of my ageless grandmother that has inspired me to live with such insatiable curiosity.

Born on a small island off the coast of Cuba known as the Isle of Pines, my grandmother muses that she is a "relic of the Spanish American War." Orphaned at a tender age first by her British-American mother and later by her American naval-officer father, a Spanish-American war veteran, she spent her school-age years at a convent in Florida. It was after coming of age and working in Washington D.C., however, that she met Marcial P. Lichauco, whom she credits with "having found her"—and it is the love they shared that would show her the door to a new life.

Although their relationship began in America, Marcial, ten years her senior, eventually returned to Manila as he was only there temporarily, as a secretary for the OSROX mission lobbying for Philippine independence. Just shy of 19 years old, Jessie accepted Marcial's invitation to "come to see the country where she would live" in the event that she accepted his marriage proposal. With that, she embarked on a voyage that started with a train to California and finished with a 24-day ship journey that took her to Honolulu, Tokyo and Hong Kong before arriving in Manila. Although half a world away, my grandmother found comfort in the similarities of language between Cuba and the Philippines, and her open-minded nature allowed her to integrate into her new life with ease and grace.

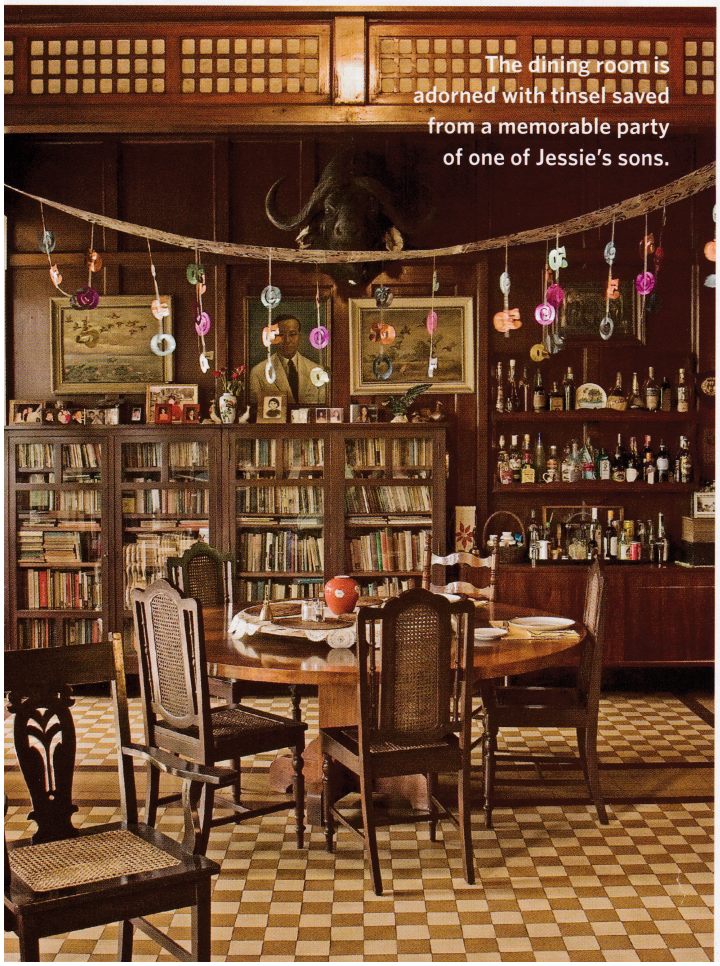
Always in awe of what would make a young girl at this time venture alone to a country of which she knew nothing about, I recall asking Nana many times what made her do such a thing.

The answer has remained as solid and consistent as the hardwood walls of our 200-year-old house. She says in her poetic matter-of-fact way: "Curiosity, Adventure and Love." It has been 75 years since she crossed the Pacific Ocean in 1933 and the life that my grandmother has led, both with her husband during their 35 years of marriage and as a widow for another 35 years, has been nothing short of extraordinary.

"Nana Jessie" always told me that "things have a way of falling into place" and the story of how our family ended up in our Santa Ana home best illustrates this. Before World War II, grandfather often drove down Pedro Gil Street (formerly Herran) and asked her which house she would choose if she could have one on the Pasig. Although she had never seen beyond it, she always pointed to the high wall bordering the house we currently occupy. It so happened that during Liberation my grandparents, who had moved eight times during the Japanese Occupation, found themselves taking refuge at the abandoned house located behind that same address. After the war, my grandfather went to America and located the house's owner—an American who also happened to be named "Jessie." He then made arrangements to buy the home as a base for his growing family, which would eventually include seven children, 16 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.



Stuffed birds keep eternal watch in an antique cabinet.



The dining room is adorned with tinsel saved from a memorable party of one of Jessie's sons.

Just as the house sheltered my grandmother and many others in times of need, she has embodied that same strength and spirit throughout every moment of her life. Described by her close friend Tita Radaic, a Filipina whom Nana befriended when she was a student in London more than 50 years ago, as "a quintessential citizen of the world whose compassion knows no boundaries" my grandmother has opened her home and her heart to countless people. Nana says that long ago she had made "a deal with the Lord that if there was anything that He needed her to do, to just send it to her." Every moment of her life has since been lived as a testament to this promise through the people she has helped, and the family and extended family she has so steadfastly cared for. I have witnessed that everyone truly is welcome in our house, and that people really have "entered her home as a stranger and left as a friend for a lifetime."

I have often wondered what drives Nana's innate desire to help people, strangers or friends alike, and why she seems to consider all humanity her family. She says that if we are all children of God, then we are supposed to be related and help each other—all of each other and not just family: "What is important is giving people a step up, especially those that are economically disadvantaged, and if you find yourself in a position to help people, you should."

My grandmother was one of the first of her generation to help people find work overseas. One time, when word spread that she had helped relatives of her staff, she woke to find a line of people outside her door. Her efforts knew no limits: from finding employers to obtaining immigration papers to even providing pocket money for their trip! Many of them have stayed in touch by writing letters or visiting her through the years. She recalls one such visit with great affection. One day, decades after they had met, a woman dropped by the house unexpectedly and during her conversation pulled out a bit of money that Nana had given her for transportation needs when she left the country in the 1970s. The woman said she kept the money as a good-luck charm because it reminded her of when she had met my grandmother.

Nana explains that since she was living a comfortable life in the warm embrace of her home, her generosity of spirit was in gratitude that she and her family did not need the help she offered. She says, "Anyone can write a check if they have the money but it makes a difference when there is a personal connection and interest in what they are doing. It's the difference between weeping and having someone hand you a handkerchief and offer you a hug."

As the sun's rays filter through the window slats casting shadows on the African animal trophies lining the walls, Nana and I move to our round table for a late afternoon snack. With each turn of the Lazy Susan, more depth of her insight is revealed. Nana believes that sharing a meal in the home is the best way to know someone, and for those new to the Philippines, the best way to begin to understand the country. Even those who drop by unexpectedly are always welcome as it is not a matter of serving a banquet but simply a means of interaction. "When I invite people, it's not particularly to eat but instead for them to have time together and become aware of each other," she says.

My great-grandmother Luisa Lichauco had taught Nana the importance of having a sanctuary in her old age where she can sit in comfort and security, and after our meal we return to this "home within a home." She shows me her latest invention, a bell attached to her wristwatch, designed to further ensure that, in an age where it is not quite as easy to get up and run around, "everything she needs is within arm's reach."

Nana's corner is full of books, magazines, and ever-present news programs on TV, as she believes one never stops learning. Ancient-looking books are stacked on a side table, waiting for her to manually fix those whose bindings have fallen apart, an act she finds relaxing. Nana pays as much loving attention to restoring each book to its original grandeur as she does to trying to uplift the lives of the people who enter her world through words or deeds.

The collection of wood furniture, which so warmly invites you to explore its history and comfort, is as eclectic as the stories revealed in every moment spent with Nana. Each piece represents a link to our family's history, stemming from different periods and styles, yet effortlessly blending together to create a harmonious feel. I look at the immortalized faces framed on our walls as black-and-white photos, some of historical figures who befriended my grandfather during his work as Ambassador to the United Kingdom, corporate lawyer and Solicitor General; and others of family members whom I never met but all of whom were familiar because of my grandmother's myriad tales. Everything about our house breathes history but it is my grandmother's gift of vivid memory and dutiful storytelling that brings the past to life.

When friends marvel at how young she looks and acts at her age, she states simply, "I don't know what 96 is supposed to look or behave. All I know is I am happy to be here and am enjoying my 'bonus years.' I guess I must still have some purpose left." She continues: "I am the age of self-preservation. This means I refuse to worry about things over which I have no control."

Nana emphasizes the importance of letting things go: "Stress is a very destructive emotion that goes through your mind and then makes your body suffer. We have a choice of how we want to deal with things and no matter what may happen, I have no real reason to be unhappy. I am in good health, fairly sane; I have friends, my children, and something to eat."

As we sit together, Nana looks serenely out at the majestic tree, which solidly guards her home and through which she has planted her own roots, and at the river that seems to feed her soul. She admits that their 64 years of shared experiences make her feel that the tree has indeed become a part of her, and she speaks of its beauty, strength and tenacity. "I feel completely safe in this house, which has been through hundreds of years of wars and natural disasters. It's still here and I have had the good fortune of having it for company. We came in the possession of each other." She continues, her green eyes turning grey-blue with the light, "It's a good companion during a typhoon. The rhythm that comes in from those winds and the branches—how they go into a crescendo, sometimes moving together and sometimes in opposition. It is quite like the tree is performing a ballet."

If the tree has in fact acted as the anchor to my grandmother's life, the important Pasig River, which runs from Laguna de Bay and flows out into the historic Manila Bay, she says, "is her lifeline." Nana explains, "I have great respect for this river as it has served a great purpose and will continue to do so. It's a little bit of eternity in a way." ⁂