

## CHAPTER 4

IN THE TEDIUM OF THEIR ORDEAL, the past was a constant presence. There was no escaping it. Sometimes it came rushing like a flood after the monsoon rains. Even the bandits would fondly recall their families and friends and tell stories to the hostages.

In the evening, before they went to sleep, the children would talk about their parents or their brothers and sisters. They would laugh or cry, depending on the story. “*Madalas kami pumunta sa Zamboanga, halos tuwing Sabado’t Linggo* (We used to go to Zamboanga every weekend),” one would recall. “My brother would tickle me before we went to sleep,” another would say.

Father Rhoel had always been a good listener. He had a weak spot for the children, whom he fondly called the “little ones.” In Tumahubong he played with the children who loitered outside the convent every afternoon. Much later, after his death, *Manang Dolor* remembered how the priest would go out of his way to play with them. Sometimes, Father Rhoel himself acted like a child. “I knew a lot of priests, but nobody had ever washed my hands except Father Rhoel, like he was my son,” the blind woman said.

Atop Mount Punoh Mahadji, Father Rhoel would talk to the children and listen to their stories. He loved to learn from the “little ones” who seemed unmindful of the situation they were in. He promised the children he would bring them to Jollibee, the fast-food chain, when they were freed.

Listening to their laughter, he must have remembered his own childhood: the single-storey bungalow with its cemented patio; the vacant lot in front of the house where he used to plant flowers and fruit-bearing trees;

## THE CLOUD ON THE MOUNTAIN- TOP

the white and pastel-colored orchids his mother tended during weekends; the small chicken house at the back; the mango tree he planted.

FATHER RHOEL was born on November 29, 1965 to engineer Dominador Gallardo and public school teacher Raquel Dayap. The future missionary was the second of five children. His sister Grace came before him, while his favorite brother, Dominador or “Junjun,” came next, followed by Jesse and Edwin.

Because of her fondness for five-letter names, Raquel added an “h” to the name of her second son: thus, Rhoel. He was born in Olongapo City, on Luzon island, where his family lived at the time.

He was small compared to other children his age. When his grandmother tried to enroll him in kindergarten, the school refused to accept him. The teachers said he was too young and too small. He was six years old by then, but the eager grandmother had to wait for one more year to bring her grandson to school.

To the joy of the old woman, Rhoel spent a lot of time in his grandmother’s house. She was fond of her *apo*, whom she said was very thoughtful.

“He was often with my mother when he was young because my husband and I were working,” Raquel recalled after his death. “He used to sit by her side whenever she did the laundry. During *merienda*, he would bring his grandmother food to eat. He was around five years old then.”

When Rhoel was ready for high school, the family decided to settle in Castillejos town, in Zambales province. “We waited for him to finish elementary school before we transferred,” her mother said.

In Zambales, Rhoel went to the San Nicolas Academy. He spent his young adulthood in the quiet, laidback town of Castillejos until he decided to enter the minor seminary.

There, Rhoel struck his fellow seminarians as a silent, formal, and smart young man. His friends described him as the “serious type,” although he did clown around. He had his own brand of “corny” humor. His high school classmates remembered him as the “witty but quiet fellow” who was ever ready to give advice. Because of his demeanor, he was dubbed the “father” of the class.

“He was very mature even as a child and was an obedient son. As the eldest son, he was very responsible,” Raquel said. “You didn’t need to ask help from him. In fact, even when he was already in college, he always volunteered to help me.”

“I will be the one to cook, Ma,” Rhoel would tell his mother. He was also very particular with the details, noticing even how, say, the curtains were hung.

As a student, Rhoel was average, but because he was very diligent in his studies, he won academic honors. He loved to read a lot and to play basketball. Unlike the other children, however, Rhoel went straight home after classes. He did not like going out in the evenings.

Rhoel was a protective brother. His mother remembered a time when a neighborhood toughie teased Junjun. When Rhoel heard the child laughing at a crying Junjun, the future missionary went after the kid.

When he was in college, Rhoel became even more self-reliant. Raquel remembered a time when three of her sons came down with chicken pox while studying at Saint Louis University in Baguio City. Jessie and Edwin went home to Zambales, but Rhoel decided to stay in the dormitory, enduring the pox alone.

He simply did not want to be a burden to anybody, even his family. “He did not want to be taken cared of. He did not want to be a burden to me because he had the pox. I felt very sad then. I cried because I wanted to take care of him. I felt useless. He did not go home until vacation time,” Raquel said.

Rhoel was good at taking care of whatever money he had. His brothers and sister described him as “very thrifty.” He looked after their finances when they were students in Baguio.

He was also very neat, tidy and organized with his things. But he had terrible penmanship. “It was readable but it needed much improvement,” Raquel said. To improve her son’s almost “unintelligible script,” she told him to exercise his hands. She also asked Rhoel’s teachers to give him writing exercises to improve his handwriting. “Good thing it improved through the years,” Raquel said.

Like other teenagers, Rhoel had girlfriends, his mother said. But “he never

told me anything,” she said. “I would not be surprised if girls were after him, because he was good-looking, like his father.”

After Rhoel’s second year in high school, Father Cacho, an Agustinian priest, visited the Gallardo household and asked Dominador if he would allow his son to enter the St. Augustine Minor Seminary. Dominador said he would discuss the matter with his wife.

One night, after the family had turned the television set off and everyone was preparing for the night, fourteen-year-old Rhoel snuggled in between his parents. Had they already discussed Father Cacho’s proposal, he wanted to know. Husband and wife just looked at each other, then asked their son: “Why, what do you really want?”

“I wish to enroll at the minor seminary for my third year in high school,” Rhoel said.

“Do what you want. You have our support,” Dominador told his son. What they did not know was that Rhoel had already finished packing his things and was all set to leave for the seminary the next morning.

After graduating from the minor seminary, however, Rhoel went home confused. He did not know what to do. He was not sure whether he wanted to push through with his seminary studies. Again, Dominador and Raquel let their son decide. “Think about it,” Raquel said.

While on vacation, Rhoel busied himself tending to his plants in their backyard. In the end, he decided not to enroll at the major seminary. Instead, he took up Philosophy at Saint Louis in Baguio.

After graduation, however, he surprised his mother when he asked her to accompany him to the Claret Formation Center in Quezon City.

“I asked him where that was, he said he did not know either, but said a friend would accompany us,” Raquel recalled. “I asked him if that was what he really wanted. He said Yes, so I gave him my blessing. I was surprised to see his things all packed. He had already decided.”

Rhoel joined the Claretian missionaries as a seminarian on May 3, 1987—thirteen years, to the day, before his death. His parents brought him to see Father Angel Ochagavia, the vocation director. But two months later, when Dominador and Raquel visited him, Rhoel had changed his mind. He wanted to go home.

“It was raining hard that day. I noticed that he had lost weight and did not look happy. He told me he wanted to go home with us to Castillejos,” Raquel said.

“I feel like I am losing my vocation,” Rhoel told his mother.

He rode with his parents back to Castillejos that same day. In the evening, Rhoel told his mother he had apprehensions about pursuing his studies. He was not able to sleep until dawn.

“I always pray for you,” she told him. In the morning, Raquel went to church and prayed for her son. “Lord, it is up to you. Whatever it is you want for my children, I will accept.”

When Raquel came home, she was surprised to see Rhoel preparing his things to go back to Claret. “Thank you, Lord. If that’s what he really wants, I will continue to support him,” she prayed.

His decision brought much happiness to the family.

Missionary life for Rhoel started at Bunguiao in Zamboanga City, during his novitiate. His novice master, Father Emilio Pablo, observed that people in the villages appreciated Rhoel’s apostolic spirit and initiative in conducting seminars.

“Little Claret,” his fellow novices called him, because they thought his height and countenance made him look like Father-Founder Saint Anthony Mary Claret.

Rhoel took his first vows at the cathedral in Isabela, Basilan on May 1, 1989. He later served his “pastoral year” in Maluso and took his perpetual vows at Claret House in Quezon City on July 16, 1993.

In his application for his perpetual profession, Rhoel wrote: “My pastoral immersion in Basilan made me experience concretely our witnessing and evangelizing life and mission as well as our community’s presence in the dialogue of life and faith with our Muslim brothers and sisters.”

“These experiences have become a real challenge to me to be a committed missionary and an active witness to God’s liberating love for humanity, conscious that our life and mission demand a total giving of ourselves for the greater glory of God and the salvation of humankind.”

He was ordained deacon at the Santo Niño Parish church in Surabaya, Zamboanga del Sur, a Claretian mission. Rhoel was ordained priest at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Quezon City on December 8, 1994. After his ordination, Father Rhoel was sent back to Surabaya, once a village of Ipil town, for his first mission. While he was there, the Abu Sayyaf attacked Ipil, razing it to the ground and killing at least 53 people.

When he had the time, the young priest would go home to Castillejos. "Every time he comes home for a vacation, he would go around town first and visit friends before coming to the house. He was very well-loved here," his mother said.

During one such vacation, neighbors asked the young priest to stay in Zambales and serve as a diocesan priest. But he was happy being a missionary, he said. Back in Surabaya, he wrote his family: "I am happier here, with the poor people."

In 1999, after bandits killed a group of catechists in Tumahubong, Basilan on Valentine's Day, Father Rhoel volunteered to be parish priest. When his mother learned of it, she wrote her son, "Isn't it dangerous there?"

A few weeks after his arrival in Tumahubong, the new priest started receiving threats from the Abu Sayyaf. The bandits demanded a donation of P10,000 a month from the Claretian mission. Despite the danger, Father Rhoel did not complain. He did not mind the work. He cooked his own food and did his laundry.

Father Rhoel's last visit to his family, in January 2000, was a memorable one for his mother. "I met him at the gate and he hugged me very tightly like he had never done before. Grace noticed that and wondered," Raquel said.

He was happy to see his nephews and nieces again and even volunteered to take care of them. "One afternoon, I wondered why it was very noisy in their room. Then I saw him playing with the kids. He was having a great time. He had skipped his siesta, which he rarely did in the past, unless he had something very important to do," Raquel said.

Every time Rhoel came home for vacation he would stay in the living room, spread a mat on the white marble floor, and lie down listening to his favorite songs on the stereo. When he was not resting, he would either cook, oftentimes inventing recipes, or go around the garden to check on his mango tree or pull out the weeds.

At times, he would stay in the porch at the back of the house, often scribbling notes in his diary or simply enjoying the afternoon breeze in his favorite old rattan rocking chair.

THE COOL BREEZE brought the priest back to his senses. It was one of those rare evenings during their ordeal when the guards were not too strict and the male hostages were allowed to stroll outside the hut.

Sitting on the rough planks of wood that served as the roof of their makeshift prison, Father Rhoel exclaimed, "God must really be here in these mountains."

"Shhhh, they might hear you," Mr. Rubio said, pointing to the armed men around them.

"Look at the sunset, look at those evening stars, look at the trees, the mountain. This must be paradise," the priest answered. "We can have one of our recollections here after our release."

"I hope so," Mr. Rubio answered. "I hope it will be soon, Father."

Waving his hands as if touching the landscape, the priest said, "Look over there, Mr. Rubio. See the ocean? There is Maluso. I spent my pastoral year there."

The school principal kept silent.

"Can you hear that?" Father Rhoel said, excitedly. "Furaydah is singing again."

Furaydah was a young Bajau mother Father Rhoel had met. She sang melancholy songs to lull her six-month-old daughter to sleep.

Father Rhoel recounted how he watched 14-year-old Hanang, she with the expressive eyes and long black hair, weeping while listening to Furaydah's songs. Her handsome Misdal, whom she had married only five months before, was gone, lured by the *saitan*, the evil spirit, to leave his young wife and join the Abu Sayyaf. Hanang had their baby aborted.

"It would be a shame for her to have a child without a father," Father

Rhoel told Mr. Rubio. “The child would have died, because she would not have been able to feed it. But even in death, she has a problem. Her tribe has no more burial place.”

“You know their story, Father?” Mr. Rubio asked. “You’ve been on the island for only a year.”

“Theirs is a sad story,” the priest said, “a very, very sad story.”

INSPIRATION MADE HIM a missionary. The example of priests who had gone before him sustained him in his mission.

On June 8, 1994, the Abu Sayyaf abducted diocesan priest Cirilo “Loi” Nacorda. Father Rhoel followed Loi’s story like it was his own. Later, he heard Father Loi himself recount his experience before other priests during a retreat in Basilan.

Father Loi and his driver were on their way to Matarling from Isabela; it was around 7:30 a.m. and they were only a few kilometers away from his parish. His driver overtook two jeeploads of teachers on their way to school. The teachers waved at the priest as his jeep rushed by.

When they reached Kilometer 12, Father Loi saw armed men in the middle of the street. A log was blocking the road. He told his driver to stop, and the armed men approached the vehicle. “This is just a bad dream,” the priest thought. He knew Father Bernardo Blanco, the Spanish Claretian missionary, was kidnapped on the same stretch of highway only the year before.

The men were all in military uniform, and some were wearing masks. A bandit, who introduced himself as *Kumander* Kalaw, approached the passenger side of the jeep. The others started breaking the windshield with the butt of their rifles. “This is for real,” Father Loi realized.

“I am just thirty-seven years old, newly ordained, barely two years into the ministry. God, is this my end?” The thoughts raced through his head. The bandits forced him to get down from the jeep and struck him in the stomach and on the side with the butt of an M-14 rifle. They pointed their guns to his head and told him to kneel on the ground. They tied his hands behind his back and took his wallet.

When the bandits saw his identification card, they were ecstatic. “So, you’re a priest,” the commander said.

“Yes, I am a priest,” he answered.

“Then we hit the jackpot,” *Kumander* Kalaw said. “We planned to kidnap teachers but now we have a priest.”

Father Loi could not speak. He turned and saw his driver; he was bound too. They were brought about fifty meters into the forested roadside. He thought the bandits would kill them at any moment. Pointing their rifles at them, the bandits ordered him and his driver to kneel.

“This is our end. Let us pray and hope that even if we die we will end up in purgatory and we will have a chance to go to heaven,” he told his driver.

After two or three minutes, another group of armed men arrived, herding the teachers and students who were on board the two passenger jeeps Father Loi had overtaken at Kilometer 8. In all, there were some seventy hostages. The group walked for about two kilometers and then stopped. The bandits asked the hostages who among them were Muslims. They were released. Among the Christians left behind, the bandits released only the children and the old ones.

The bandits started asking the remaining hostages who among them could afford to pay ransom. Those who said they could not pay because they were poor, including the priest’s driver, were separated from the group. Father Loi was not asked; the bandits later told him they were confident the government would pay for a kidnapped priest. They also retained the teachers, those who promised to pay ransom.

Including the driver, there were sixteen poor hostages gathered on one side. The bandits took the strings of the crucifixes they found in the priest’s jeep to tie them up. They trampled on the crucifixes and stepped on Father Loi’s sick call kit, which contained the oil for the sick and the chrism. This maddened the priest, but he could not move.

After they tied the sixteen hostages individually with the nylon necklaces, they took the rope of a carabao that was pastured nearby and used it to tie them together. “We will tie them together because we will release them. The rope will slow them down and they cannot run and tell the authorities where we are going,” a bandit explained.

They then ordered everyone else to start walking toward the forest, into the mountain. After about thirty minutes, the hostages reached a small hut in the middle of the forest, where they were told to rest. It was then that they heard the shots.

Some of the teachers started crying, thinking it was a rescue operation and they would be caught in the crossfire. One of the bandits said it was indeed a rescue operation and soldiers were shooting it out with the bandits nearby. But after two to three minutes, the firing stopped.

When they reached camp later, Father Loi heard the bandits talking to each other.

“The other one’s skull was broken,” one said.

“I cut off the penis of the other,” another boasted.

“Shut up, both of you,” another man said as he showed off a bunch of peso bills. “You didn’t see the old man? He had a lot of money in his wallet.”

“This jacket belonged to the policeman,” another proudly said.

“I got a ring,” one added.

“I have a new watch,” another one said.

Father Loi tried to hold back his tears.

The other hostages who were brought to the bandits’ camp stayed in the mountains for only five days. They suffered a lot but survived the ordeal. Father Loi, however, spent 61 days in the mountains.

Unlike Father Rhoel and the hostages from Tumahubong, Father Loi was moved from camp to camp as the Abu Sayyaf tried various hiding places. The priest tried to talk to his captors. But most of the time, he just kept quiet, observing the group.

“I pretended to sleep and listen to their conversations. I learned a lot from them, their plans, their connections, their victims,” the priest would say later. But he was always tied. Sometimes even his feet were tied. There were times he was chained to a house post.

A certain Ustadz Ben once engaged him in a debate. “Islam is peace and Islam is for justice,” Ustadz Ben said.

“If Islam is really for peace and for justice, why are you killing innocent people? Is this for peace? Are you doing justice to us?” the priest angrily answered.

The kidnappers thought the priest did not understand Tausug and Yakan. He pretended he was only beginning to learn the languages from his captors and the bandits believed him.

“Christians are really intelligent, they learn fast,” one said in Tausug. The bandits did not know that Nacorda was born and grew up in Basilan.

Although the bandits continued to be hostile to him, Father Loi was able to establish a relationship with them. They learned to respect his humility and submissiveness. He always offered to help cook their food. He boiled cassava and helped gather firewood or fetch water even if his feet were chained and his hands loosely tied. He cleaned their camp.

The bandits admired the priest. They said their leaders—the *ustadz* and *imam*—did not do those chores. One bandit commented that priests were different because they knew how to cook, fetch water, and even gather firewood.

There were times when, before the bandits left to ambush soldiers or after they arrived from a military encounter, Father Loi boiled water so that they could have something hot to drink. He would prepare coffee or tea for them, even though the dirty water from the river looked like chocolate, especially during rainy days.

Father Loi learned to survive by drinking the same dirty water and eating cassava and papaya. There were times they had *camote* (sweet potatoes) or chicken from abandoned villages.

Most of the time, especially when they were already on the run, they would sleep on the ground. There were many military encounters and ambushes; Father Loi could not imagine how he survived them all. The daily conditions alone were torture. There were times he was told to prepare himself because he was about to be killed. Other times the bandits would make fun of him and use him as target when they practiced throwing knives.

The priest tried to understand them. They were really fundamentalists, he thought. They were serious about their faith and always prayed and talked about defending Islam. Later, however, he realized they were out only to make money. They only used Islam as a front. It was easy for them to recruit followers because they offered huge sums to entice people to join them.

At some point, it was reported in the media that Father Loi had already joined the bandits, and that in fact he was allowed to carry a gun. It happened after journalists visited the bandits a month after his kidnapping. When they asked him if it was true that many bandits had been killed in military operations, Father Loi said the reports were not true.

He told the journalists that despite the bombings and the ambushes, only two bandits had been wounded and nobody had been killed. The wounded were brought to Jolo. The priest did not know that he was being interviewed on camera and that what he was saying was being recorded. He thought the journalists were only taking his picture.

He also didn't know then that he was about to be released. Barahama Sali, the Abu Sayyaf leader who abducted him, later said the priest was scheduled that day to be released, but negotiations did not push through because the government did not meet the bandits' demand of P4 million. Barahama said government negotiators were only able to raise P1 million.

Later, the bandits told him that his statement had angered the military. They said the soldiers were now hunting him down too.

At first Father Loi did not believe them, but a military encounter three days later convinced him. He saw that the soldiers did not care anymore if the hostage was hit. It was no longer a rescue operation but a "search and destroy" operation.

He asked the Abu Sayyaf for a gun. He said that because the government wanted him dead, he ought to help the bandits survive.

He asked Barahama, who was already friendly with him, and he was given an Armalite. He found out, however, that the gun had no firing pin. They did not know that he knew how to use guns.

"*Brod*, why is it that your gun has a firing pin and mine has none?" he asked.

They laughed and gave him a firing pin. They asked him not to put a bullet in the chamber, however. Later, they trusted him enough to make him carry an M-203 rifle. They said they wanted him to be safe and avoid being identified by the military during encounters.

Father Loi did carry a rifle, but it was slung on his shoulder. He really did not want to shoot any soldier.

Carrying the rifle that way, he would walk with Barahama in front of him. Hadji, another bandit who became a friend, was behind him, and Mauran walked beside him.

They were walking in that formation when soldiers fired at them.

A blast shook the earth, and Father Loi was thrown about three meters off the ground. Many bandits were hit, including Barahama. Father Loi immediately crawled to retrieve his rifle.

(He later learned from the soldiers who ambushed them that he had really been their target. They had thought he was the leader of the group because he was wearing a *kopya*, a Muslim pilgrim's cap. The soldiers admitted, however, that they could not understand why they could not hit him.)

The priest was sure he was hit, but he was not even wounded. There wasn't even a scratch.

He lay on his stomach as bullets rained on them. Then something inexplicable happened. He saw the bullets passing in front of his face as if in slow motion, just like in the movies. "Maybe I am dead or I am having some kind of hallucination," he thought. He touched his body, his face.

He got his rifle and crawled toward Barahama. The commander was still alive and was shooting back at the soldiers. After a few minutes, however, the dreaded Barahama Sali collapsed. Before he closed his eyes to die, he told the priest: "You go now, Father. You escape."

He started to make a run for it but realized he could not move. He could not even crawl because of the volume of fire. "This is the end," he thought. He remembered he had a spare T-shirt in the knapsack on his back. He took the bag and covered his head with it, knowing full well that it could not protect him from the bullets. He also took the plastic water container he was carrying, though he realized it could not even protect him from a bolo.

It was a moment of surrender to the Lord. "If I will die here I will accept it, but this I ask, please give me a place in your kingdom," Father Loi prayed. He recited the act of contrition and started confessing his sins. "Lord, I'm sorry for all my sins. Please forgive me, Lord. I hope you will still accept me."

He bowed his head and kissed the ground. He waited for a bullet to hit him. But after about three minutes, he realized that the shooting had died down. He touched his head and his body to make sure he was still alive. "Why wasn't I hit?" he wondered.

Bullet shells littered the ground, but he did not even have so much as a scratch. He had counted at least 14 or 15 bullets fall to the ground in front of his face. He wondered why none struck him.

Then he remembered that while the shooting was going on, he saw some kind of smoke. He thought it was merely smoke from the firearms, but it was a thin cloud surrounding him.

(Months later, when he recounted his experience with some monks, they told him that that was the mantle of the Blessed Virgin Mary.)

It was not the first time he enjoyed that protection. During his first month in captivity, he was caught in the middle of an intense firefight between the military and the Abu Sayyaf. Helicopter gunships unloaded on the camp for almost three hours. Father Loi, chained to the post of a hut, prayed hard. "I hope you will help me, I hope I will be rescued."

"Lord, please help the soldiers, I hope all the Abu Sayyaf here will die."

Then he turned and saw the bandits praying too. "*Allahu Akbar*," they shouted. "Do not abandon us. Do not let the soldiers win this war."

Moved by pride, Father Loi wanted to tell the Abu Sayyaf: "Your God will not protect you, stupid fools. You are animals! I believe that God will listen to me and not to your prayers."

It was around three in the afternoon, and it was unbearably hot. Suddenly, a dark cloud covered the place. It was eerie. The fog in the mornings was a thin mist; the cloud that afternoon was as thick as a mantle.

Father Loi could hardly believe it. "Lord, thank you for helping the soldiers. Now the Abu Sayyaf will not see them."

But when the shooting stopped, Father Loi was stunned by what he saw. About 30 soldiers were dead. He saw them with his own eyes, including the officer whose nametag read “Lt. Juljuli.” Only two bandits were wounded, however.

The priest felt as if lightning had hit him. He cursed the Lord. “What kind of God are you? Maybe you are a God of the Abu Sayyaf. You are a God of crazy people, of kidnappers and rapists. I don’t want you anymore! I don’t believe in you anymore! You are no longer the God of my life!” He was crying.

If he had not been tied to the post, he would have grabbed a gun and shot all the bandits in sight. He wanted to avenge the death of the soldiers; at the same time, he was consumed by a hatred of God.

“What kind of God are you? You don’t even listen to your servant. You abandoned me! You are not the Christian God I know!” he shouted at the heavens.

He did not pray for weeks.

Finally, in the depths of despair, he started conversing with the Blessed Virgin Mary. Later, using his fingers, he prayed the rosary. He told the Virgin Mary about his hatred for her son. “I hate Jesus Christ. I don’t want your son anymore. He is not God.”

He talked to her, and he talked to St. Joseph, and he talked to the other saints. Once, he even talked to the Holy Spirit. He caught himself, and started laughing. “Jesus is of course part of the Holy Spirit. But in the mountain, my theology was destroyed,” he would say later.

After he survived his ordeal, he asked the Lord for pardon. “I’m sorry for losing my faith and trust in you. I sinned against you, I’m sorry. I hope you will forgive me and I hope you can still accept me in your kingdom.” He bowed his head and again kissed the ground.

ON MOUNT PUNOH MAHADJI, darkness swallowed the forest. The silence of the night seemed to reach the heavens. The children were silent, and the women too. Some of the men were already snoring, and the guards were sitting in their bunkers.

“Time to rest, Father,” Abu Mahamdi, a former teacher who joined the bandits, told Father Rhoel. “It’s getting cold already. The cold wind is bad for the head. It makes one remember the past. It’s not good to be lonely here, especially now that we have nothing much to eat.”

“Yes, I’m going to sleep now,” Father Rhoel said.

Inside the hut, he lay down beside the other male hostages.

“Are you going to sleep now, Father?” Mr. Rubio asked.

“Not yet,” he said. “Let us pray.” They prayed the rosary in whispers. The other hostages who were still awake joined them.

Before he closed his eyes to sleep, Mr. Rubio heard Father Rhoel still praying. “I’m sorry, Lord, for everything that I have done,” he heard him say.