

PEOPLE OF THE PHILIPPINES, PLAINTIFF-APPELLEE, VS. DR. REBECCO SATOR, ACCUSED-APPELLENT.

G.R. No. 118025. February 12, 1997

Ponente: VITUG, J.

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VITUG, J.:

A gruesome killing was uncovered with the discovery of the burned corpse of a woman in a secluded place in Barangay Fuente, Carmen, Cebu City. Later charged with murder, after an investigation by the National Bureau of Investigation ("NBI"), Dr. Rebecca Sator, her alleged lover, claimed innocence.

At around 6:30 in the evening of 04 July 1987, Remedios Adolfo, an employee at a beauty salon in Gen. Maxilom Avenue in Cebu City, was about to go home from work when requested by Sharie-Ann Marayan (a.k.a. Susan Marayan), a regular customer at the parlor, to accompany her to a place where she would be fetched by Rebecca Sator. The ladies boarded a passenger jeep bound for Mandaue City. They alighted near the Mabolo Police Station where they waited for Sator, then an Assistant Quarantine Officer at the Bureau of Quarantine, until he arrived minutes later in a Toyota, colored green, car. The victim boarded the car, and the two headed towards Cebu's reclamation area.

Albina Marayan, Susan's mother, indeed got worried when Susan did not come home that evening of 04 July 1987. Albina's anxiety was compounded by the absence of Susan's father, Sonny Marayan, who was still in Surigao. On 05 July 1987, at around 5:00 p.m., the dead body of a woman, naked and burned with the use of gasoline, turned up in a remote barangay of Cebu City. The matter was reported to the NBI which promptly conducted an investigation. Two cars, both owned by the Far East Bank and Trust Company ("FEBTC") and assigned to Sator's wife, a branch manager of the bank, were impounded. The trial court highlighted the investigation report, thus:

"A thorough search inside the cars yielded for NBI Regional Chemist Cesar Cagalawan two strands of hair found at the rubber matting of the baggage compartment of the green Toyota. When compared with hair strands that Cagalawan had taken from the back of the victim's head at the morgue and the site of the burning at barangay Fuente, Cagalawan's finding was that the hair strands were similar. Photograph of the hair found in the baggage compartment (Exhibit `V') and Cagalawan's Biological Report (Exhibit `W') were admitted in evidence. Cagalawan who had eight (8) years experience as NBI chemist at the time of his testimony, was and still is the chemist of the NBI. He noted that the hair strands found at the baggage compartment had elongated bulbs indicating that they were forcibly pulled off. He admitted however that it could not be ascertained that a particular hair belonged to a particular person. But what is important is that this government chemist found hair strands in the baggage compartment of the green car, an unlikely place to say the least. This indicated that the victim was placed inside the baggage compartment of the green car when her body was transported to Fuente, Carmen, Cebu."[1]

On 07 July 1987, when Susan still had not shown up, Albina went in to her daughter's room and, looking for any clue that might explain her daughter's absence, she found an envelope containing brief love notes from Dr. Sator

addressed to "Sha-sha"[2] (Susan), later admitted by Sator to be his, expressing his wish to keep their illicit affair a secret. Albina also saw Susan's unsent letter,[3] dated as of 03 July 1987, to Dr. Sator, that read:

"Dear Charming Pang,

"x x x x x x x x

"You know Pang? I have a big personal knots! Siguro nasayad ka? di ba? I know nga gibali-wala ko nimo! Okey lang!! Abi nimo two months na rin! Ang akong kuyawan nga kong maklaro unyo? Maong magplano ko nga magpalayo. Maglisod ko sa atong problema! I know nga ika-ulaw ko nimo! I promise pang! nga dili ka nako basulon! mag-pray lang ko sa Lord! para nako. Mas maayo ang akong plano nga molarga ko nga magpalayo ko diri sa Cebu. Aron dili masamok. Thank you! This is the last letter.

"P. S. answer please!

It's me."[4]

On 09 July 1987, as the news of the dead body so continued to circulate, Sonny Marayan, now back in town, went to see for himself the burned remains, still then unidentified. To his great consternation, he saw the body to be that of his 20-year old daughter. Remedios Adolfo, who accompanied Susan on that fateful night, likewise identified the corpse to be that of Susan's. The victim's identity was finally and conclusively established by NBI fingerprint expert Camillus Allego who made a comparison of the thumbprint of the cadaver with that found on the voter's affidavit of the victim at the COMELEC office. A postmortem examination was conducted by Dr. Jesus Cerna, a medico-legal officer at the Cebu Metropolitan District Command, of the then PC-INP. The cause of death, per the Necropsy Report No. N-87-226, dated 06 July 1987, was "Asphyxia by Strangulation."[5]

In an amended information, dated 03 August 1987, Dr. Rebecca Sator was charged, together with two others merelyth of Susan; viz:

designated to be John Doe and Richard Doe, with the crime of murder for the dea

"The undersigned 2nd Assistant Fiscal of the City of Cebu amending his information dated July 29, 1987, accused Dr. Rebecca Sator and others described herein under fictitious names as John Doe and Richard Doe since their true names are unknown of the crime of Murder committed as follows:

"That on or about the 4th day of July, 1987, in the evening thereof, in the City of Cebu, Philippines, and within the jurisdiction of this Honorable Court, the said accused, conniving and confederating together and mutually helping with one another, with treachery and evidence premeditation, with deliberate intent, with intent to kill did then and there attack, assault and strangle and burn one Sharie-Ann Marayan also known as Susan Marayan, thereby inflicting upon said Sharie-Ann Marayan the following injuries:

Generalized expoliation of the superficial layer of the skin and with first, second and third degree burns. Involving 72 percent of the body surface scalp and pubic hairs, singe lips and fingernailbeds, cyanotic, tongue, edematous and protruding eyeball, left protruding eyesocket, right empty fingers, hand, left markedly flexed. Contusion, reddish-purple, 2.0 x 2.0 cm., hemorrhages, subpleural, subepicardial, numerous of varying sizes

as a consequence of which said Sharie-Ann Marayan died, with the aggravating circumstance of use of motor vehicle, abuse of superior strength and cruelty.

"CONTRARY TO LAW."[6]

Arraigned on 11 September 1987, appellant entered a plea of "not guilty." Trial ensued.

The evidence presented by the prosecution consisted of exhibits and the testimonies of several witnesses, namely,

Remedios Adolfo, Ireneo Tangaro, Benjamin Tagalog, Zaldy Sios-e, Camillus Laurel Allego, Sr., Dr. Tomas Refe, Dr. Jesus Cerna, Teofanes Redoble, Cesar Cagalawan, Albina Marayan and Sonny Marayan. Nine (9) witnesses for the defense, including the accused himself, were also heard.

The circumstances of Susan's death were testified to by prosecution witness Ireneo Tangaro who happened to be in the vicinity of the crime on the night of 04 July 1987. He had just finished defecating in a spot not too distant away from his house within the reclamation area when he saw an approaching light green car. There were two occupants, a man and a woman, on board the vehicle, now parked, whom he could see through its open windows. His attention later focused on the man in the driver's seat who appeared to strangle the woman beside him. The woman struggled and shouted, "Don't, don't, help, help." She succeeded momentarily in freeing herself from the hold of the man and in opening the door of the car but she had taken barely one step outside the vehicle when the man, apparently too strong for her, pulled her back in. He continued to strangle her until she finally disappeared from sight. Forthwith, the man started the engine of the car and drove off.

Remedios Adolfo testified having been with Susan at around 6:30 p.m. that day until after she boarded the Toyota light green car at the vicinity of the Mabolo Police Station. On the driver's seat was the accused. It was to be the last time that Remedios would see Susan alive.

Teofanes Redoble, a security guard at the Bureau of Quarantine observed that Dr. Sator had unusually used long-sleeved shirts continuously for about a week after the incident. Sator told Redoble to say, if asked, that Sator was accustomed to have his car windows closed whenever he would drive the vehicle to the office. Redoble testified:

"Q Did Dr. Sator report to the Bureau of Quarantine, the following Monday, July 6, 1987?

"A Yes, he reported to his office.

"Q Did you notice anything unusual about his appearance particularly about his attire?

"A What I noticed at that time was that he was always wearing a long sleeves.

"Q For how long, can you recall, that you noticed him wearing long sleeves?

"A About one week.

"Q When was the last time that you had a talk or conversation with Dr. Sator?

"A The later part of October 1987.

"Q How did you come to have a conversation with him?

"A We happened to have a conversation with Dr. Sator in the later part of October 1987 because he called me up and told me that if ever I would stand as witness in this case and if ever I would be interrogated by counsel, I will tell the Court that every time he goes to his office the window of his car is always closed." [7]

Dr. Tomas Refe, an NBI medico-legal officer, declared that the accused was investigated at the NBI office on 10 July 1987. When requested to roll up his sleeves, Dr. Refe found three almost parallel abrasions running about 5 cms. on the accused's upper right forearm. His testimony:

"Q Now, did you take a look at Dr. Sator at that time?

"A Yes.

"Q Did you notice anything on him?

"A I have noted that he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt and when I was called to see in a certain part of the interview when his long sleeved shirt were asked to be rolled up, I occasioned to see or observe abrasions in the front part of the upper third of his right forearm.

"Q Now, in your opinion, what could have caused the abrasions that you saw in the arm of Dr. Sator?

"A These abrasions are caused by contact with a hard object, by friction or by sliding.

"Q Could you cite us a specific object that could have caused that?

"COURT

Do you think he would know the specific object?

"ATTY. TORIBIO

Any object, Your Honor, that would have caused that.

"WITNESS

"A Well, I could give any object with this part causing these abrasions simplified already. For instance caused by fingernails.

"ATTY. TORIBIO

That is all, Your Honor, for the witness.

"COURT

"Q Sharp fingernails?

"A Hard, sharp fingernails.

"Q Did you find out how many abrasions were there in the body of Dr. Sator?

"A There were three (3) almost parallel abrasions running in the upper part of the forearm.

"Q Could you tell the Court the location or area of the body where the abrasions which could have been caused by the fingernails?

"A In this area, Your Honor.

"COURT INTERPRETER

Witness pointing to the portion of his right forearm just below the front part of the elbow joint.

"COURT

"Q Is that the only area where you found abrasions?

"A Yes, Your Honor.

"ATTY. REMOTIGUE

Upper middle portion.

"COURT

"Q Did you recall the length of the abrasions?

"A I will approximate, Your Honor, that is running about five centimeters.

"Q Caused only by one fingernail?

"A Caused by three fingernails because there were three abrasions running.

"Q Side by side, parallel?

"A Yes, Your Honor."[8]

Against the evidence of the prosecution, the accused could only proffer an alibi. Rebecco Sator admitted his "love affair" with Susan Marayan, and that Susan, on the evening of 04 July 1987, boarded his car near the Mabolo

Police Station. He claimed, however, that he dropped Susan off near the Cebu Skin Clinic at around 7:30 p.m. and, from there, he first went to Edgar del Fierro's "Sing Along" near the Reclamation Area, and then to the Junquera Bowlodrome. Still later that evening, he went to the Dockside Restaurant, also at the reclamation area, then back to del Fierro and to an unnamed dance hall at the junction of Colon and Juan Luna streets. His witnesses corroborated the alibi. Unfortunately, all these places he supposedly visited were close, and of easy access, to the reclamation area where the violent incident took place.

It would appear to be fairly evident that the accused tried hard to build up his alibi soon after the incident. Benjamin Tagalog and Zaldy Sios-e, both residents of Fuente, Carmen, Cebu City, testified about seeing a cream Mitsubishi Lancer with Plate No. PDJ 347 in front of the house of Zaldy Sios-e at around 9:00 in the evening of 04 July 1987. This car, like the green Toyota car, was also being frequently used by the accused.

Benjamin Tagalog declared, thus:

"ATTY. TORIBIO

"Q Did you have a chance to talk with Zaldy Sios-e whom you saw conversing with the occupant of the white car?

"A Yes, we had a conversation.

"Q Why were you able to talk with him?

"A From the store where Zaldy Sios-e bought medicine he proceeded towards home so, I called him and asked what was the conversation about between him and the occupant of the car.

"Q And what did Zaldy Sios-e tell you?

"A According to Zaldy Sios-e he was invited by the occupants of the car to eat with them but he refused and asked the occupants of the car why they happened to take their meals beside the road when there is a restaurant in the vicinity but according to the occupants of the car they were in a hurry because they were proceeding towards Bogo.

"COURT

"Q Did you find it unusual for the car to park in the area where that parked?

"A That was the only instance, Your Honor, that I saw a car parked in that premises."[9]

Zaldy Sios-e likewise testified, thus:

"ATTY. TORIBIO

"Q With the kind permission of this Honorable Court.

Mr. Sios-e, do you recall where you were on July 4, 1987, at 9:00 o'clock in the evening?

"A I was in my house, sir.

"Q Where is your house located?

"A At barangay Fuente, Carmen, Cebu.

"Q Did you ever go out of your house at that time?

"A Yes, sir.

'Q When you went out of the house that night, did you see or notice anything unusual?

"A Yes, there was.

"COURT

"Q What time was that when you went out of your house?

"A At 9:00 o'clock in the evening, Your Honor.

"ATTY. TORIBIO

"Q What did you see when you went out of your house?

"A I saw a parking white car in front of our house.

"COURT

"Q Did you find it unusual to find the car being parked in front of your house?

"A Yes, because when I went outside my house, I was called by the occupants of the car and I got near the car.

"Q So that is unusual?

"A Yes, Your Honor, because he invited me to eat with them but I refused because I had already taken my supper at that time.

"COURT

"Q I did not ask you whether the occupant of the car invited you to eat supper with them. The question of the Court is: did you find the parking of the car in front of your house unusual?

"WITNESS

"A Yes, that is unusual for me because that was the first time that an automobile was parked in front of our house.

"COURT

Proceed.

"ATTY. TORIBIO

"Q Will you please describe before this Court the appearance of the white car that was parked in front of your house?

"A There was a Mitsubishi Lancer, colored white, with four doors and with a rainbow-colored sticker placed at the back of the windshield of the car.

"Q After you had a conversation with the occupant inside that car, where did you go?

"A I passed at the back of the car and walked towards the street in order to go to a store to buy medicine."[10]

The two witnesses positively identified the impounded Mitsubishi Lancer at the NBI premises, which the accused himself later admitted to have been using alternately with the light green Toyota car. The cars were then being garaged at his house located in the in-laws compound at Paknaan, Mandaue City.

After weighing the evidence for the prosecution against that of the accused, the Regional Trial Court of Cebu City, Branch 12, rendered its verdict finding the accused guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime charged. The dispositive portion of its judgment read:

"WHEREFORE, finding the accused guilty as charged of the crime of Murder, judgment is hereby rendered sentencing him to suffer the penalty of TWELVE YEARS of Prison Mayor as minimum to NINETEEN (19) YEARS of Reclusion Temporal as maximum and to indemnify the offended party in the amount of P50,000."[11]

Sator interposed an appeal to the Court of Appeals. The appellate court, after its own review of the case, concurred with the trial court in convicting appellant of murder for the killing of the hapless victim but disagreed with the trial court in its sentence. The appellate court held:

"x x x Murder is punishable by reclusion temporal in its maximum period to death (Article 248, Revised Penal Code). Considering that there are neither aggravating nor mitigating circumstances present in the instant case, the proper imposable penalty should be the penalty prescribed by law in its medium period which is reclusion perpetua, pursuant to paragraph 1, Article 64 of the Revised Penal Code.

"WHEREFORE, modified as indicated above, the appealed decision is hereby AFFIRMED."[12]

This Court, too, after a painstaking review of the records of the case, including the exhibits and transcribed testimonies, is convinced of the culpability of appellant Dr. Rebecca Sator. The trial court did not err in considering, among other things, these circumstances; viz:

"1. That the corpse discovered at Fuente, Carmen, Cebu was Susan Marayan;

"2. That Susan Marayan and the accused had an illicit relationship;

"3. That the accused endeavored to keep the relationship secret;

"4. That Susan Marayan believed herself or pretended to be pregnant thus making the disclosure of the relationship imminent. Moreover, Susan was insecure of the affection of the accused whom she complained to be neglecting her x x x;

"5. That Susan was admittedly in the company of the accused at about 7:00 p.m. of July 4, 1987 when she boarded his green Toyota car with Plate No. GBZ-386 near the Mabolo police station;

"6. That at about that time, while defecating in the area known as the lover's lane, about 700-800 meters away, Ireneo Tangaro witnessed a man and a woman arrive in a car and after a while witnessed the man strangling the woman who struggled futilely to free herself by holding on to the man's arms;

"7. That at about 9:00 p.m. of July 4, 1987, Tagalog and Zaldy Sios-e saw the green Toyota with Plate No. 386 and a cream Lancer car with Plate No. PDJ 347 at barangay Fuente, Carmen. Both cars were admittedly used interchangeably by the accused;

"8. That the victim died of asphyxia by strangulation, with her hand raised and her fingers with its long fingernails in a markedly flexed position;

"9. That the killer was able to transport the body to a remote and secluded area in Fuente approximately 40 km. away from Cebu City;

"10. That her face and body were burned after her death to prevent her identification;

"11. That the accused suffered parallel abrasions on his arm compatible with fingernail scratches. He was notably wearing long-sleeved shirts to the office the week following the incident;

"12. Hair strands were found in the baggage compartment of the green Toyota car."[13]

The unbroken chain of events can only lead to the fair and reasonable conclusion that appellant, to the exclusion of all others, is verily the guilty person.[14] The Court shares the following disquisition made by the appellate court; thus:

"Appellant was the only person who could have the opportunity and the means of killing Susan Marayan. He was the last person seen with Susan on 4 July 1987 near the Mabolo Police Station. That Susan boarded appellant's green Toyota car and who drove towards the reclamation area. At about 7:00 o'clock that same night, Ireneo Tangaro who was defecating at the said area saw a green Toyota car stop, with a man and a woman inside. He saw the man strangling the woman who was heard to be crying 'Don't! don't! 'Help!', help'. After a few minutes, the car left. At about 9:00, the green Toyota car was seen somewhere in Fuente, Carmen. The following day, in a secluded place in that barangay, a dead naked woman's body was seen. The autopsy

showed that the dead woman died of asphyxia by strangulation. Besides, appellant had the motive for it is not disputed that he and Susan had been having an illicit affair which has been kept a secret as the appellant is legally married to a career-oriented woman who happens to be the Branch Manager of a reputable bank. The desire to keep the relationship a secret was jeopardized when Susan believed herself, or pretended to be, two (2) months pregnant. The handwritten love note dated 3 July 1987 (Exh. `X-8') which Susan did not send proves this fact. Thus, the letter reads:

"`Dear Charming Pang,

`x x x x x x x x

`You know Pang? I have a big personal knots! Siguro nasayad ka? di ba? I know nga gibali-wala ko nimo! Okey lang!! Abi nimo two months na rin! Ang akong kuyawan nga kong maklaro unyo? Maong magplano ko nga magpalayo. Maglisod ko sa atong problema! I know nga ika-ulaw ko nimo! I promise pang! nga dili ka nako basulon! mag-pray lang ko sa Lord! para nako. Mas maayo ang akong plano nga molarga ko nga magpalayo ko diri sa Cebu. Aron dili masamok. Thank you! This is the last letter.

`P. S. answer please!

It's me.'

"While the tenor of the note shows that Susan Marayan never intended to reveal the relationship with the appellant as she was intending to go away from Cebu, Susan could have changed her mind. Her not sending the note to appellant could be taken to mean that she wanted to tell appellant personally thus the meeting with the latter on 4 July 1987.

"Men do not ordinarily commit grave crimes unless there is in their minds a motive strong enough to overcome the natural repugnance against crime, and the fear of punishment which usually follows detection (Dale, C. J., in *Son vs. Terr.* 5 Okl. 526, 49 Pac. 923).

"The imminent danger of the disclosure of the illicit relationship, the effect of ruining his reputation as a doctor and his good social standing in the community and that of his wife and children, the repercussions if his wife discovers that he sired a child by another woman and the anger upon learning of such unwanted pregnancy, may have brought the accused to commit such crime.

"As succinctly put by the trial court, `the angry tone of a man heard by Tangaro was the irritation of the man, his passion for the girl now on the wane, being called to account for neglecting or ignoring her, possibly pressured to acknowledged that he was going to sire a child by her.' (p. 10, Decision)

"This is not a case of `paregla' or senseless killing as aptly observed by the court a quo, that `the elaborate efforts made to prevent identification of the victim, as shown by the severely burnt face, could only have been made by one who expected to be connected to victim's death x x x. The victim would simply have been left in the place where she was killed. But the killer took elaborate pains not only to hide the victim but also to hide the identity. Her body was brought to a secluded place in Fuente in the hope that it would never be discovered. It was burned so that even if it were discovered, it could not be identified and no connection would be made to the killer.' (p. 10, Decision)

"All these, taken altogether, lead to no other inference than that the appellant is guilty of the crime charged." [15]

The inconsistencies allegedly committed by prosecution witness Ireneo Tangaro who, such as the trial court did observe, has tended to exaggerate at times are not enough to destroy his entire testimony. While it might be unlikely for Tangaro to have been able to distinctly recognize the faces of appellant and the victim inside the car considering the poor illumination in the area, it, nonetheless, could not have prevented Tangaro from sufficiently

discerning the incident then transpiring inside the car, the vehicle being only about two fathoms away from him. A witness' exaggerations could, in fact, show that the court is not dealing with a rehearsed witness. Most importantly, no evidence has been presented to show bias or ill motives on the part of Tangaro that could have caused him to falsely impute to the accused the commission of such a heinous crime.

Appellant's alibi is definitely weak. His assertion of being at the various places which he and his witnesses have pointed to, even if true, did not preclude his having been likewise at the scene of the crime only a short distance away. Again, as aptly so observed by the appellate court:

"From the time appellant arrived in Cebu City from Mandaue at about 7:00 p.m. to the time he picked up Susan at the Mabolo Police Station and the time he reached Edgar's place, only 30 minutes had elapsed. The Mabolo Police Station and the reclamation area is only 700-800 meters away. Taking a car, one could reach the place in several minutes. The strangling as testified by Ireneo Tangaro took only a few minutes. The places where appellant was in that fateful night are all very near the reclamation area where the strangling took place. It could not have been difficult for the appellant to be at the place in the Reclamation Area considering the nearness and easy accessibility from the places where he claimed to be at that moment. The defense miserably failed to demonstrate that it was physically impossible for him to have been at the scene of the crime." [16]

The Court is satisfied that appellant's guilt has been established beyond reasonable doubt. The appellate court is correct in holding that the penalty, there being neither aggravating nor mitigating circumstances, is, pursuant to paragraph 1, Article 64, of the Revised Penal Code, the medium of the penalty prescribed by law. Murder is punishable, under Article 248 of the Revised Penal Code, by reclusion temporal in its maximum period to death. Its medium period is reclusion perpetua.

WHEREFORE, the judgment of the Court of Appeals that sustained the trial court in finding the accused-appellant Rebecca Sator guilty beyond reasonable doubt of the crime of murder but which modified the penalty to, instead, reclusion perpetua, is AFFIRMED and it is thus hereby imposed. Costs against appellant.

SO ORDERED.

Padilla (Chairman), Kapunan, and Hermosisima, Jr., JJ., concur.
Bellosillo, J., in the result.

[1] Rollo, Court of Appeals, p. 130.

[2] Exh. X-1 to X-7.

[3] Exh. X-8.

[4] Rollo, Court of Appeals, p. 218.

[5] Exh. T, Folder of Exhibits, p. 18.

[6] Rollo, Court of Appeals, p. 210.

[7] TSN, 24 December 1987, p. 9.

[8] TSN, 23 December 1987, pp. 6-8.

[9] TSN, 04 November 1987, pp. 17-18.

[10] TSN, 02 December 1987, pp. 3-5.

[11] Rollo, Court of Appeals, p. 135.

[12] Rollo, Court of Appeals, p. 223.

[13] Rollo, Court of Appeals, pp. 216-217.

[14] People vs. Genobia, 234 SCRA 699; People vs. Sunga, 238 SCRA 274; People vs. Adofina, 239 SCRA 67; People vs. Cedenio, 233 SCRA 356; People vs. Lorenzo, 240 SCRA 624; People vs. De Vera, G.R. No. 113116, 30 October 1996.

[15] Rollo, Court of Appeals, pp. 217-219.

[16] Rollo, Court of Appeals, pp. 222-223.

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