

THE WALK HOME

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The houses along P. Guevara Street lay awash in the sunset's pale orange glow, creeping over the treetops glistening with drops left by a midsummer drizzle. The rain had stopped, deciding perhaps only to finish the day with a light sprinkling, a culmination to a long, dreadful day plagued by an April sun.

On most days, before turning back at the large intersection to his own dorm, Ronnie walked home with Ben. They would cross the overpass to get to the condominium complex which, with its height, received the most amount of sunset. By the time he got to his unit fourteen flights up, Ben could still catch a small portion of the sun slowly sinking into the ocean, like the tip of a coin. But he eventually got tired of seeing the sun set, more stunning viewed from a distance over Pandacan, over Sta. Cruz, where a languid train droned its tired song. It bothered him how short this "golden hour" was, the subject of numerous photographs, which only actually lasted a few minutes.

However, it amused him how many golden hours he could fit in the walk home. Ben looked forward to it every day, and yet there was nothing in it that particularly interested him. He breathed the smoky air, looked at the pink houses with sagging eaves, or listened to their footsteps on the concrete. It could be the stray dogs scampering about, or the music playing from an old man's decrepit stereo, punctuated by pops of static. He enjoyed how everything seemed to be suspended, like in those decorative snow globes, how the yellow flowers of the *narra* trees fell at a glacial pace, like the perpetual afternoons of his childhood which existed in their own time loop.

Recently he had found something that stirred the stillness: Ronnie's hands. He had finally acknowledged their effect on him. Ronnie with his hand clutching a bottle of coke. Ronnie with his hand shielding the flame with which he lit a Pall Mall. Ronnie, with his hand to his side, brushing Ben's ever so slightly (whether on purpose, he would never know), like cat's whiskers retreating at the lightest feel of skin. Nothing too out of the ordinary, nothing done out of paying particular attention to him. He hated

it. He hated how things had the ability to seem, and not be. Yet he loved this particular stretch of road, and how it made things seem.

Today both of them were quiet. The silence hung in the air, with no one to stir it. They turned right onto P. Guevara, which stretched on for a good five minutes on foot, giving them enough time to listen to their own soft footsteps, and allow them to bathe in that silence, and at once allowed sweat to trickle down their brows. It had been a hot afternoon, despite the earlier rain. When they passed a bakery, Ben decided to buy a soda. With his elbows propped on the glass counter, collecting the dust of passing tricycles, he eyed Ronnie, who was standing outside under the awning, an old tarpaulin bearing the name of a mayor in bold red letters. Ronnie's face seemed to be moving in and out of the dappled shade of the nearby tree. Ben felt that he was teetering at the edge of a cliff. Then Ronnie beckoned to him. Ben swept the change onto his palm, pocketed it, and trotted toward Ronnie..

Ben let himself be led. He waited, he thrived on unhurried situations where there was someone else to hurry him. He always made his decisions when on the brink of something else. He responded to prodding, to provocation. He needed to always be sure. *He'd let Ronnie know, but only if Ronnie already knew.* And Ronnie was like a wall. You'd have to wait for that crack through which a bit of light would seep through. It would seem that he knew, and yet Ben could not be sure. What Ben would do once he was certain that Ronnie knew... that was a whole different question.

They had crossed two intersections, and Ben had finished his drink, the bottle sweating in his palm. He threw it into a bin next to a sleeping dog, startling it awake. They were near the large intersection now, perhaps only a few meters away. The air began to cool, the amber began to fade from the sky. Ronnie was fidgeting with the strap of his backpack, toying with it, using his nails. Was he anxious about something? When at last he spoke, he startled Ben.

"Why are you so quiet? Have I said something?" asked Ronnie, still picking at his backpack.

"No", Ben said, "I was just thinking about this street. How it lasts an entire sunset."

Ronnie looked confused.

"It feels like one of those afternoons, you know? When you're still a kid. Those afternoons with a certain kind of light, like when you've just

woken up from a nap, and you're sitting on your front porch eating banana cue. And then when it starts to get dark you get back inside, because you're afraid of dengue or something. But you sit through dinner thinking of those few minutes. And the next day, you wait for it again. You know? Sorry."

Ronnie looked really puzzled. So, Ben said, "Sorry. It's nothing."

"What were you thinking of? You were quiet because you were, what, taking in the sunset?"

Ben laughed. It was a nervous laugh, and he tried to pass it off with a shrug. A leaf fell on Ronnie's hair. Ben stuck his hands in his pocket to keep them from touching the leaf.

He said, "Yes and no. Well, I don't know. This is like one of those afternoons. Those things that I wait for. It feels like everything else that happens is just a prelude to *this*." Ben glanced about him as he said that last word. "I like the colors of the roofs when the sun hits them."

What "this" was, Ronnie would never know. Was it the clouds? The soda? Something else?

What Ben knew was that he liked the walk. The sun painting the houses, the sureness of silence.

But Ronnie still looked uncertain.

At the last intersection, before climbing up the overpass, they said goodbye, as usual.

But the noisy traffic on Lacson made it hard to hear whose voice it was, and what it said, or what it meant.

"So, see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow."