

# THE WALKER

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THE MEMORIES ARE clear, now, of my grandfather, from our time with him in the mountain house in Lalakay. The earthy peace of Makiling appealed to him in his later years, lost as he wanted to be in a memory of Hakone, before the war called him. Mirroring Mount Fuji, past the southbound roads, Lalakay was a nest of numerous old-fashioned cottages, empty plots, hot springs, and even memorial shrines. The municipality boasted of its forest, its bus roads, and train tracks, cooled by breezes, and densely blanketed in fog.

We called my grandfather *ojii-pa*, something between “ojii-san” and the more familiar “papa,” distant as we were from what was Japanese about us, save for our names. Lola’s deftness with needle and bandage had saved him and bound the two of them closely in love, despite a number of barriers, such as language. When she died, he talked even less than before, in a monologue of Japanese and earnest efforts at Taglish. He gave more in the language of gracious silence and gesture.

He had this habit of greeting all of us, even his grandsons, by bowing low, somewhat absent-mindedly. His walk was quieter than the wind on dry days. His hands often fidgeted—on the backs of chairs, when he pulled them out as we scampered to help him, “Ojii-pa, no, no!”, around the old statues of the saints, feathery thread-bound manuscripts and newspaper collections, and photo frames on their shelves that, for some reason, were in constant need of rearrangement. If not fidgeting or shaking in a stiff, rheumatic manner, they were pressed hard together, and folded in some sort of itinerant prayer.

Ojii-pa’s slow, deliberate gentleness was the last thing anyone might associate with war. But in our childhood years seemed exciting—especially for Keiji, who not only liked the novelty of plastic robots, tanks, and soldiers,

not to mention the power of it all, and the ruthlessness. I remember that one summer, Keiji and I once played dinosaurs, pirates, and safari explorers before graduating to rougher games in our weedy backyard.

“Pretend that there’s a war going on,” Keiji said one day, at the height of the Japanese mecha craze. “You and I are in a huge nuclear war. The whole world could end after that kind of war. We’re the generals of two fighting armies...”

“What countries would we be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe... I could be Japan, just like Ojii-pa. Japan always makes the coolest machines. Like Voltes V!” And Keiji then sang, with gusto, the Voltes V theme.

“I thought we were playing soldiers, not robots,” I quipped.

“This is war! In the future, they will use all kinds of weapons. I could have robots, and fighter tanks, and submarines.”

“All right, then I could be the Philippines.”

“Why?”

“Why not? This is our country.”

“You’re the lamest,” Keiji sneered. “If you don’t want to imagine yourself as any other country, then I’d win against you for sure. What a dummy—I just thought up a million cooler things than you.”

We leapt at each other, jostled with sticks and old pipes, and ran and wrestled into the dirt and the bushes, play-fighting for dominance.

And multiple times, Ojii-pa found us and said, as sternly as possible with what was left of his strength, “Eiji, Keiji—*matte!*”—and closed his eyes, and in a pained slump, added, “Enough. No fight, no more fight.” We stopped only when he promised biscuits in the straw-mat sitting room that smelled faintly of incense, though we also had to drink the cold woody tea we disliked. And some days he brought out the square paper, and we made fighter jets while he animated the kind of bird that flapped its wings when you pulled on its tail. We made peace those days Ojii-pa sought it among us, restless and rapt in his pace.

WHEN WE TURNED ten and eleven, my older brother was already several inches taller and pounds stronger than I was, and he challenged me at everything. “That’s for sissies,” he said about small, low-stakes games played in the sand, like jackstones and marbles, and “there’s no way you knew that—I bet you were cheating!” when it came to cards. When the things I excelled at grew boring, they gave way instead to sprinting and tree climbing, or ventures into the fantasy world where Keiji was always the bloodied animal predator, armed hunter, or in the case of the war games, the soldier with the wider arsenal of wood or plastic weaponry at his disposal.

From Keiji I learned my silence—that the winner, if me, should never brag; and the loser, if and especially me, should bite it all back, never cry, snitch, or call anyone out for being a bad kuya. Yet, all those victories never seemed enough when they were only between the two of us in the Makiling garden, or the space outside our house’s street. None of it was enough those years that Papa was away, save for the rare days that we didn’t fight at all. When our tired Mama was with us, she would hold us and hum odd tunes that reminded me of the country wind blowing up and down the long grass, or whistling as it bounced off stones—perhaps Ojii-pa’s songs lost in Lola’s translation—and those days were the days when it felt warm.

THE FIRST SUMMERS I remember as a child in Lalakay, there was only the light kind of cool mountain weather. My first fights with Keiji were about who could wear Papa’s old scarf and be warmed by Papa’s smell—about who between us secretly missed him more.

Then, as time passed, I felt colder, even back home, and went to sleep with a sweater under my blanket. First there were the dreams in which I’d wake up in my bed, everything seeming the same, but with some parts of my room looking clouded. I’d wake up in earnest, and know I was awake because my spine would sting just a little, as if pierced lightly in different places. Then I noted to my chagrin that in some places, my senses were heightened to the point of discomfort; and I’d want so much to chalk up each pinprick whisper in the school chapel, each faltering light bulb in a bathroom, each invisible strand of wind to nothing more than my imagination. And none of Keiji’s reassurances—that I could be lying, and was a sissy and coward, and that nothing in the tatami rooms in the Lalakay house had changed enough for me to push him or cry out for Mama at night—none of them made me feel any safer, or for anything, prepared for any darkness to come.

IT BEGAN IN earnest one night that Tita Mika laid out a happy feast for our dinner—steamed fish and rice topped with seaweed strips, with that husky tea splashed over it, but also hot *buko* pies and *uraro* cookies. My brother and I dug in despite our mother’s admonishments.

“You were so noisy and we could hear you all the way from inside,” she said, motioning toward Ojii-pa. “Did you say sorry already to your grandfather?”

“Yes Mama,” we said. “*Gomen nasai*, Ojii-pa.”

“The way your grandfather ran to you, next time he’ll have a heart attack.”

“It’s because of all their TV, Sis,” Tita Mika clucked. “The shows that kids watch right now are nothing but coarse language and violence.”

“That’s absolutely right. Boys, no more TV on weekdays when we get back. You should be doing other things after you study. Read books, or even the Bible. Or why don’t you write letters to send to your Papa?”

I saw Keiji pause and look down at his food.

“How is Roger doing now, Sis?”

“He said everything is well. He said he’s doing okay there in his new station.”

“Did Papa say,” I began, “Did Papa say when he’s coming back?”

“Not yet, *mahal*.” Mama absentmindedly stroked my hair. “Not yet, he’s not sure yet. So will you boys write him nice letters?”

“We sure will, Mama!” said Keiji brightly. “The best letters. Let’s also send him paper cranes, like the ones Ojii-pa makes!”

“Good boy! Do you still remember? Ask your Ojii-pa to teach you again. Maybe you can fold together tomorrow morning.”

In his own seat, Ojii-pa smiled and thrummed his fingers. The mood was good—from when we finished last pie and biscuit and helped Tita Mika clear the table—up until another wave, of sharp little pins of unease, began to prick at me.

“*Mahal*, what’s wrong?” Mama asked me, watching as I turned white clutching a dish. “Are you feeling sick?”

“I feel really cold again, Mama.”

“You can sleep beside me tonight, and use the extra blanket later.”

I barely noticed as Ojii-pa relieved me of the plate. A pang of guilt added to the pinpricks as I saw him wince and draw back, and I saw Keiji’s eyebrows furrow. But I closed my eyes when Ojii-pa did as he rested his free hand on my head, and let it stay there for a few seconds.

“LOSER HAS A consequence,” Keiji said, only the two of us in the corridor, before we went to bed.

“What? What for?”

“You fell four times. Me, only two.”

“I don’t remember—”

But then I did. I remembered with much frustration that there would be some kind of price to pay yet again because I fell, because I didn’t have “bombs or missiles,” and because a cut on the side of my palm from falling into Ojii-pa’s *santan* bush was unlike a true consequence of war.

“So, loser has a consequence today. It won’t be so bad, would it? You’re going to sleep beside Mama again tonight, even if you’ll keep kicking me.”

“I didn’t mean to kick you Kuya! That was an accident.”

“Brat, liar,” he snarled. “Mama doesn’t believe you when you say you’re always ‘cold.’ Neither do Tita Mika and Ojii-pa. They’re only being nice to you because you always want attention.”

“That’s not true!”

“Well then, prove it.” Keiji made a fist and flashed a humorless smile. “You wanna show me that you’re not a little pussy-pussy-cat?”

Behind my back, I clenched my own fist. Keiji changed his stance and appeared thoughtful.

“I was thinking, even I find that place next door just a bit creepy. Is that maybe why the Orosas moved out? It’s empty now, isn’t it? The gate’s low enough to jump over, and it’s going to be really easy to break the lock with a shoelace.”

“Kuya—”

“I found an emergency flashlight the other day. You should use it and go into the house next door. And you’ll do it at night! Otherwise there’s no

point," he added. "We'll sneak over while everyone else is sleeping. You'll break in, go to the window on the second floor, and give me a signal that you made it up there. How does that sound?"

He jabbed his finger at me. "Lame-o. Liar. Pants-on-fire. That's how you are. But if you do this, I might just take you more seriously."

I hated my brother then. I couldn't let it go.

"Fine. When am I going to do it?"

"The night after tomorrow. They say there'll be a full moon. Are you pissing your pants already?"

"No, I'm not."

"I really hate it when you suck up to Ojii-pa," Keiji said. "Like that way he went up to you and did that praying thing. Stupid. You're not fooling anyone."

SIX MONTHS BEFORE that full moon, the elderly Mr. and Mrs. Orosa did leave the eerily silent house a few yards away from ours without as much as putting up a "For Sale" sign on its rusty gate. In that short time, all remaining visible life had gone out. The weeds had given up and were brown and bent in surrender, and the concrete had peeled off and some pieces had mixed with the pebbles in the yard. The house itself was almost white with decay, including the door and the windowpanes.

The edge of the windowpanes on the second floor were equally white. But with the glass almost totally smashed, it took on the semblance of something more open like a portal, an entrance into somewhere, a place not as still as the decrepit house seemed to be.

No matter how afraid I was in the hours leading up to our excursion, I did not show it. We behaved well in front of the adults, to Mama and Tita Mika's great relief, but Ojii-pa seemed more restless at certain minutes, closing his eyes and pursing his lips, upsetting the rosaries, the wind chimes, and the mirrors.

At seven o'clock, Lalakay was already thickly curtained in fog. My brother and I had agreed to sneak out separately in the interval between ten and eleven, when the adults were surely sound asleep. He brought with him the small, rectangular LED light that had been hidden in the cabinet, and I followed shortly, bundled in my jacket. It was remarkably cold even indoors.

I quietly shut the screen door and crept down the wooden stairs leading out to the garden.

The night had eyes that seemed to follow me closely.

“Took you long enough,” Keiji said when I skittered up to him where he stood, by the Orosas’ gate. He held the flashlight in a tight grip; from his pocket, he pulled out a ball pen and a shoelace.

“The gate’s open. I’ll stay by it. Break the lock and go inside. Then, turn the light on the first setting—,” here he thumbed the switch and the light duly flashed at its dimmest and weakest; “—and keep it there until you find the stairs. Go up and make your way to the window. Then turn it up all the way, and off—blink it five times. Got it?”

Something in the grass rustled nearby.

“Kuya... I don’t know. What if I can’t do it? What if I don’t come out?”

“I thought you said you weren’t scared?” Keiji’s voice was oddly high-pitched. “You said that you could prove to me that—ugh! You’re not making me believe anything you say until you go up there.”

“Well... when I make it up there, what do I win?”

“What do you mean?”

“If the loser has a consequence, shouldn’t the winner get a prize? Isn’t that fair? When I make it up there, what will you give me?”

“Damn it, I don’t know,” he growled. “Thirty pesos. Make it fifty. The chocolate Tita Mika will give both of us on the way home—you can have all of mine.”

“Maybe that,” I said, and in softer breath, “but if I win... you should... shut up, forever... if I show you, make you feel what I feel...”

“What are you saying? You stupid creep. You’re even kinda scaring me. Just go! We’re here already! Go before... come on, just go!”

We pushed the gate open and I took the light, the pen, and the shoelace which my brother passed them to me. The housebreaking, the stepping into that white-dark portal, then began in earnest.

THE LOCK EASILY gave way when I slipped my lace noose around it through the door's edge, and pulled down hard with the pen. I heard Keiji exhale a short distance away from me as I pushed the wood forward and switched the small light on at its weakest setting—bright enough for me to take a few steps forward into that black cavern.

I walked very slowly. The sounds of the outside world seemed quick to disappear into those that were uniquely of the house. There was a soft, soft scratching on the walls that I hoped was from cats, and a dull skimming vibration on the floor that I tried tracing to my own steps.

I peered in front of me, trying to make out the stairs, but out of the corners of my eyes I noticed some things that remained in the corners of the room. The shadow of a shelf was against a wall to my right, solid straight lines against it. Not too far away from it were metal poles, like the idle pipes we used in our play gleaming faintly.

Then, another curved, fluid shadow...

I swallowed and tried to quicken my pace. The outline of a bannister indicated the presence of the wooden staircase. I perceived it at the moment that my flashlight suddenly began to flicker.

I do not know if it was the muted voice of my brother that I heard behind me, a wordless sound. Maybe I wanted to somehow believe that it was, that he was actually there.

I dropped the pen and the shoelace in my effort to steady myself by grasping the banister, while the rest of my body turn to gel. My skin and my blood had turned cold. Little needles, or pins, were pricking my body. Nearer to the second floor, I could once again hear Keiji, who was perhaps not Keiji, speaking in whispers. Or was it from the slowly curving shadows near the windowpane?

From the broken window I could make out the shape of my brother, waiting below for my signal. But I fumbled with the flashlight as a shadow began to swell at a far corner from the window, and then it took a horrid, actual shape.

My blood seemed to be draining out of my body to give the shadow life. I fought to either scream, or carry out my original mission. To blink the flashlight. Five times—count one to five. So that my brother could find me.

I felt my knuckle pop as I flicked the switch twice.



Then my body felt wrapped in small, cold thorns. I don't know how many seconds passed before I could flick the switch again, and the Keiji below me had begun to shout: "Eiji—Eiji, I can see you! ... What's wrong? Eiji...?"

By the fourth shift between light and darkness, the shadow had grown a little hair on its body—and it was like a twisted, bruised young boy's body—with white skin that gleamed out of the darkness.

Then I perceived the blood that I thought I had lost. There was blood all over the shadow, the boy-body with short hair. Over his shirt, blood spilling from multiple small wounds that looked like they had been inflicted in all sorts of ways, from blades to blunt metal.

After the fifth flick of the flashlight, the boy-body's eyes met mine.

*And I'll be Japan. I'll win. I'll show you... Shut up forever. Loser has a consequence...*

My hand was sharply wrenched open. I dropped the light, and I myself fell. There was a loud, hard scream. It didn't feel completely mine. Then, everything went black.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT was either a dream or a memory, a state in which I was awake and most things seemed real. When I woke up, I was lying below the window of the Orosa house once more. But a portal had now opened to me. I felt the otherworldly mist of the Makiling mountain. I felt it with heightened senses outside of my body.

Before me remained the full boylike form—except now, it looked not at me, but at another figure close by, coming closer to me. It was a crouching form of a spirit—the living form of my grandfather.

I saw him swat at the mist and kneel over me, then turn his head to look at the body.

*Kankeinai*, he addressed it. *Kankeinai*.

The boy-body flared, its outline turning from a semblance of red in temperature to a kind of hot yellow. Ojii-pa's fingers curled over mine.

*Kisama! Kankeinai darou!* Anger emanated from the boy-body, but also a sense of deep anguish, that in the moment, I shared. Dull needles came again to pierce me and I cried out, but whatever came for me came harder for my grandfather, who only winced.

The boy-body's eyes remained open and pierced endlessly but Ojii-pa's grip never wavered. It tightened with each shock. *Kankeinai*, he repeated, *kankeinai*.

The boy-body dispersed. But others then began to form.

Three spirits emerged, almost like negatives of photographs, and took shape in a circle around us. Two of the bodies were covered in a muddy dark green, their faces grotesque, grimacing. They materialized and scabbled around a third, pink, less stable entity.

Their words cut deepest. *Busu, baita*.

*Stop, please stop! Officer?* A woman's disjointed voice. *Officer please, mercy...*

*Hajime. Oi, Hajime-san... Doushita?*

*Korose*. I realized to whom they spoke.

*Officer? Please, for God's sake. I have a... family. Family, Officer. A baby, baby girl. Officer, for my baby—*

*Hajime-san! Nani wo matteru no? Korose!*

*"Ie," Ojii-pa fumbled to say with his own lips. "Urusai! Yamero!"*

*Stop please*, said a woman's voice. I was losing consciousness. *Stop, let me go. Officer, no—*

*"Kisama!"* my grandfather broke out, grasping me with otherworldly strength and to the spirits, gesturing firmly at himself. *"Washi dake wo sagashiteiru."*

Ojii-pa—

*"Kankeinai." Not you, but me. Leave Eiji.*

Only after an aching stretch suspended time did the two mud-green bodies disappear, leaving in their wake a flood of others on the floor. They were of every shape and color. I felt gray from rounded souls that shone with something wet, like pooled rain. Faded tan souls seemed to nurse their skin and grapple to hook broken bones and joints, back together. Several shapes, like the boy-body's, were shaded different tones of harsh, or rusted, or slowly fading red.

Dizzied by all this, I felt my senses fading. The last image before my eyes closed was a muted pink shade and soft hair like a doll's, and my

grandfather's last words to it were as clear as he could make them: *Gomen nasai. Gomen. Yurushite, kudasai.*

BACK IN OUR house that night I was only bruised, but very much shaken. My grandfather had run to the old house when Keiji shouted, and without hesitation had raced up the stairs as if his youth and the urgency of the war had returned to him. When my brother, mother, and aunt found the two of us, they declared that there were no other human forms present.

If my brother doubted my account of what had happened, he said nothing. He only awkwardly came forward and said, "Eiji, I'm sorry."

I tried to laugh as I said, "It was so scary in there. Do you believe me now, Kuya? Do I win now?"

"Stupid!" My brother threw his hardest punch at me yet, and the last that I remember for a very long time, as he finally cried in earnest. "Stupid! I was so—you're so stupid!"

The ordeal had left Ojii-pa visibly weaker, but as we left the Orosa house he looked back at it and chuckled. There seemed to be an ease in his step as he leaned on Keiji's shoulders on the way home.

THE DAYS WERE quieter after that. We spent them looking after our Ojii-pa together; his walk had gradually become slower and his breath, more measured, but his hands were looser now, no longer mixing the odd artifacts or praying to the wind.

Still, my brother and I, remembering best his gentle hands brushing against our heads, are hard pressed to imagine them once around the handle of a bayonet, cradling any of those bloody bodies with regret.

That summer we graduated from war games and learned to make paper birds and flowers, and even tried to drink the tea. True to his word, Keiji gave me his share of the chocolates Tita Mika wrapped for us to take home. We had a peaceful bus ride back to Manila, and Mama fell asleep humming to us, closer to her dream of a proper family.

There were many wishes lived out after the few remaining summers that we spent in Lalakay. The small kindnesses my brother and I afforded to the family and to each other, beginning that fateful night, bonded us more firmly in our teen years. By then, he had more faith in what I was made of

and never hesitated to be rough with me at basketball or tease me when I was with girls. In most other things, however, Keiji took it upon himself to be something like my best friend and a bit like my guardian angel.

And soon, I understood and shared in that joy of caring for and protecting, when Papa came back and chose to stay in Manila with us. Our home felt full like that of Hajime and his dearest Pacita, Naomi, and Mika—when a windfall came into it, and we both became kuyas to Marië.

I TRY TO recover these parts of Lalakay now that I have grown older and lost my sixth sense of it. For the most part, the needles and cold clouds have left, and only the smallest shocks of my childhood linger. I've tried to grasp even the things that horrified me most. I am afraid to lose those particular memories of Ojii-pa, who searched in that old house for some form of forgiveness and in those strange moments, seemed to have found it.

"What's there to forgive?" I replied, when Keiji last brought up the summer of the "haunted house." "Boys will be boys. You know the kind of games we play. Eventually it was a phase we grew out of, right?"

"You know it was different," Keiji said. "Something did change that day."

"That being?"

"True, we were just being ourselves. We got used to the games, the rough-housing, losing and winning. But I realized from your words and from how you screamed from that house... I'm so sorry I couldn't swallow my jealousy or my pride, and I didn't tell you anything before you went in. But never again would I have wanted you to get hurt—to lose you."

"Kuya, I feel the same," I said. "That's something Ojii-pa would be happy to know."

"He would have been happy to see us grow up, see Papa come home—and meet our Marië."

The baby of our family never played at war. From an early age, our sister's sensitive and curious spirit scoured books, old news clippings, and Mama's recounting of Lola's many memories. As for the spirits of the mountain, the souls of the men, women, and children, who hid in those homes and sometimes never left them...

Marië asked many questions that were difficult to answer: why our grandfather had stayed on after soiling his hands, why the little foreign blood in us did not burn in our veins; what the world was like inside of our grandfather, what it was that still linked his spirit so deeply to the mountain, and how it was for me when I shared this gift. I never shared this view, but Keiji asserts that what remains of it has become both a gift and an inheritance—though not as great as Marië’s value for knowledge, or my brother’s own kindness.

When we visited Makiling for the last time as a family, after Tita Mika’s decision to sell the land, Keiji and I brought Marië to see the Lalakay we had grown up in. We watched her smile and step on the idle train tracks, count the salbabidas and beach balls being sold outside the hot springs resorts, and trace with her eyes the greenery that surrounded our old house and the houses immediately around it.

It was after summer then, and for the first time we all saw the bloom of so many strands of wild wheat grass that blanketed the path between Ojii-pa’s house and the Orosa’s. The grasses were tall and seemed to touch the low-lying clouds, but what we noticed most sharply was the color of their grain—a fresh, vivid golden-white.

And that day, Marie adorned the landscape with more color. She surprised the two of us by opening her bag and drawing from it a multitude of paper cranes. She had made them from all kinds of paper. One by one we laid them at the foot of the rusting gate like grave markers. We prayed our litanies for the dead, the still-living, and whoever could find meaning while passing through.

Though Ojii-pa did not live long enough to see his third grandchild, and died from a seizure a few years after that night, it was a good enough time to go, to rest in a peace that he had earned, and which lived on through each of us.

He had known how my brother and I were bound to him, and, finally, to each other.

During our last vigil by his bed, he had murmured, “*Anshin shite.*” And then his eyes focused on a faraway place in the garden and the woods behind it. “*Shite kudasai. Peace now. For everything.*”