

Rice Soldier

Rina Garcia Chua

““ **A** soldier never leaves his comrades behind. You, as their commander, must maneuver them to their barracks so that they can retreat safely from enemy fire. It’s your job to ensure that each and every one of them lives.”

“What if I leave one behind?”

“Then, you just killed him,” I said as gently as I could. Elizabeth twitched her nose, in that unique way that only she could, and grimaced at me. I caught the quivering of her lower lip as she silently began to scrape the edges of her plate, her spoon and fork dragging against the corners and making a clang-clang-clang sound. Within a few seconds, the grains of rice were all in the middle of her plate. It was a difficult feat: our viand was sinigang. I told her that her soldiers were under the power of the enemy and that they were resisting her commands because they had been ‘brainwashed.’

This new game we were playing was born from a practical need: ever since I had been left to deal with household matters, one of my pet peeves was washing the plates which contained leftover rice. I had the worst time trying to scrape them out before they reached the drain. Elizabeth had the tendency to eat haphazardly and leave behind scattered grains of rice all over her plate. My daughter was smart, of course, but young and naive. I couldn’t expect her to understand how much of a hassle her leftover rice was causing me, but the new game may be a better (and more fun) way to condition her for my benefit.

“There,” she happily announced, breathing a sigh of relief as she pushed her plate towards me for inspection.

I smiled at her before I looked down at her plate. It seemed all clean, but before I could congratulate Elizabeth, I spotted one grain of rice hanging from the gutter of the plate's golden trimmings. I pointed to it and Elizabeth gasped. Again, her lower lip quivered.

"Papa, did I kill that soldier?" She ran a hand on her cheek and I wondered if she had started crying already. I steeled my heart against this (such was the dilemma of a father: it was so easy to give in and hug her for assurance), and placed a tentative hand on the same cheek she just rubbed. Elizabeth looked up to me guiltily, her black eyes big and wet.

"Elizabeth, the soldier is not giving up on you. Don't give up on him, either."

Elizabeth's chubby round face slowly broke into a wide grin and she went back to her plate once more.

While she is finishing the last of the *adobo* I have cooked for dinner (it's not my best because I put too much soy sauce in it and maybe charred the chicken when I answered a phone call, but hey, still damn better than most *adobos* I've tasted), I clear my throat to break the silence that is overwhelming our table at that very moment. Elizabeth barely looks up from her plate.

"Your Tito Francis, do you remember him?" I pause to give her some time to acknowledge the question.

Elizabeth crinkles her nose. I wince. She shrugs. "I guess."

"Your Tito Francis called me up a while ago to tell me about this new business venture he's going to go into. And guess who *he* wants to manage it for him?" I smirk, thumping my chest for effect.

Elizabeth does not even glance in my direction. I ignore this, since this is really important news, and continue, "He has found a reputable company who could sell him high-quality CCTV cameras for dirt cheap and he's recruited a programmer who'll create a program that will synch all these CCTV cameras together in anyone's computer. Amazing, isn't it?" I do not wait for her reply; I am too excited to care. "This is a great opportunity for smaller businesses and schools to have a CCTV camera system in their premises *without* paying way beyond their budget. See? I'm selling this thing already. I'm a natural!" I laugh, thick and throaty, pushing my plate away from me, still filled with the half-eaten *adobo*, scattered rice,

and ketchup. It clinks against Elizabeth's plate and she lifts her chin up to inspect my food.

"What are you eating, anyway?" she finally says out loud, her voice small but robust, pointing her dirty spoon at my plate.

I wonder what she's talking about. I'm eating what she's eating!

"Adobo and rice; like you, Elizabeth *iha*." I think I catch her rolling her eyes but I'm not entirely sure. My heart is pumping like a drum inside my chest and my head is swirling with streams of thoughts: CCTV cameras, potential customers, Francis, the money I can earn ...

"Papa, *no one* eats adobo with ketchup."

I ignore her remark. "Elizabeth, I think your school needs a CCTV camera system. I can get it cheap for them and I'll do the installation myself!" I can feel my heart pumping faster, excitedly, as I stand up to make gestures showing how I will be installing the cameras myself. I nail on the imaginary wall with my imaginary hammer and tilt my imaginary CCTV camera in Elizabeth's direction. I make a square with my fingers and place Elizabeth's face in the middle of the frame. "Smile! You're on your principal's candid camera!" I wait for her to laugh.

She doesn't. Instead, Elizabeth's lower lip quivers as she stands up from the table. Her plate is pristine compared to mine—not even one single trace of rice is left on any part of it. She gathers her plate close to her chest, picks up her half-empty glass of water, then squints her eyes at me.

"Don't you *dare* go to my school," she threatens, her voice shaking with (what I believe is) raw anger. Afterwards, she leaves me there at the table, with my *adobo* and ketchup concoction. For a moment it frightens me how much I do not care for her threatening or walking out on me, but before these worries can penetrate my heart, I'm already dialing Francis' phone number on my old cell phone.

"Hello, Papa."

I suddenly was awakened by the small voice that seemed to be hovering over my face. I moved in my sleep and reached out to hold tiny shoulders against me. I sighed heavily and wished for one more minute alone so I could go back to sleep.

"Papa, you've been sleeping the whole day. Please wake up," Elizabeth pleaded, the fright in her tiny voice was very evident. I unwillingly opened my

eyes and rubbed them to clear away the white spots that were in my line of vision. There she was, my little girl (not so little anymore, actually—she was turning eight the next month), peering at me while I sat up on the couch. I sat up and stretched my muscles, feeling creaks here and there. I think I had been sleeping for the past twelve hours.

“What can I do for you, my dearest little princess Elizabeth?” I opened my arms to her, and she gladly stepped into my embrace. Her head found the space in between my jaw and my shoulder, Elizabeth’s spot (as I had christened it when she needed to be burped as an infant; her tiny head always ended up in that area), while her short arms wrapped themselves around my broad back.

“Papa, today is my recognition day in school, remember? I have two awards. You must be there.” Her voice against my neck was muffled. I felt myself stiffen at her request.

“Elizabeth, I didn’t know that today ...”

“I told you two weeks ago, Papa. You forgot again.”

“I’m sorry,” I said reflexively, hating the way that those words easily rolled off of my tongue. However, this was still not enough guilt for me to be jolted into attending a recognition day. The thought of facing the people in Elizabeth’s school—the nuns, the teachers, the parents I had met and formed superficial relationships with for the sake of the parent-teacher association—frightened me no end. Plus, it would be necessary for me to converse with them, to laugh and kid around, because that was what they expected of me ...

“Elizabeth, why don’t you call up your Mama to ask her to come with you today? I’m sure she would love to spend some time with you.” I also hated pulling out the “Mama” card, ever since Elizabeth’s mother and I had separated bitterly a few years ago. We shuttle Elizabeth back and forth between ourselves, with her staying with me for the week and her mother getting her during weekends because she worked full-time. It wasn’t a comfortable arrangement, but when her mom walked out on me that time, it was the only thing I could do so that Elizabeth could still have both parents in her life.

When these thoughts came, I swallowed hard to suppress the urge to turn my back on my daughter and go back to sleep. I knew that when I did, Elizabeth would leave me alone.

“Papa, don’t you remember? Mama is in Quezon for a business trip. That’s why she couldn’t pick me up this weekend. You have to go with me, Papa. I got first place in our poster making contest and I’m also getting a medal for the Math Quiz Bee,” she said, and she bit her pink lower lip afterwards to keep it from shaking.

Oh, my sweet little princess, *I wondered*, how did we get here, anyway? You pleading for me to come with you to your recognition day; and me thinking of anything, everything, to get out of it? When you were born, Elizabeth, I was the happiest man alive. I thought your birth would change me. I thought it would heal this tiredness within me.

I was exhausted, so damn exhausted. But I couldn’t feel this way when it came to Elizabeth. I had no one else left.

“Okay, my little princess. But we’re leaving immediately after the recognition day, huh?” I made my voice a bit sterner than intended to make sure she understood that I meant this. She nodded happily, reached her hand out and I reluctantly reached back, thinking of the bed I was leaving behind.

So, here I am in Elizabeth’s school and she doesn’t even want to see me. I showed up holding brochures of our CCTV package to show the administrators. Sure, I didn’t set up an appointment time with them but that was okay since they knew me as the president of the PTA. They told me to wait for a few minutes in the principal’s office, and that’s when Elizabeth walked in. In her high school uniform, she seems so womanly—the green checkered pattern complimented the light yellow tints of her skin and her long, jet-black hair swaying with her languid movements. When we came across each other, she was giggling with her best friend, Amanda, and they barely noticed me sitting there in the principal’s office. Tucked under her arm was an envelope full of papers. I wondered what they were. This young lady tells me nothing nowadays.

Elizabeth’s eyes widen when she sees me sitting there. I raise an eyebrow, and say something like, “Are you in trouble, too?” which draws a laugh from Amanda ... but Elizabeth is livid. She turns her back to me and drops the envelope on the secretary’s desk before storming out. Amanda waves back at me politely, before following my daughter.

I am sending her a text message now, after my successful talk with her principal (I’m a hundred percent *positive*), and I compose it while standing under the heat of the sun outside her school’s gate:

SEE U LATER. ILL PICK U UP.

I wait for her reply, knowing she will be able to send it because it's her lunch break. A few minutes pass, the sun hot on my nape, and I give up waiting. I spot the old sign for a drinking bar across me. I head toward it, wiping the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. I curse under my breath when I realize that I soaked the CCTV brochures tucked under my arm through and through. As I cross the street, I throw them into the garbage can I pass by.

Inside, the scent of cigarettes and fresh beer assaulted my senses. I felt energized by the sight before me: young boys who (obviously) cut school hanging out in groups around the billiards table, trying so hard to be Efrén "Bata" Reyes while swinging a bottle of *Red Horse* around, or betting on each other. I also enjoy the sensation of triumph within me, knowing that in only a week I can close the deal in on my first CCTV package sale. I can finally get Elizabeth that outfit from *Forever 21* that she pretended not to like when we went to the mall last week. I feel just like these school boys in here – young, careless, wild – and I storm into the bar, raising my voice to announce my presence: "All bets are off, boys! The master is here!"

Every head in the small room rise up to look at me. I stare back at them, but I make sure that I look at the tops of their heads – buzz-cut hair, Catholic-school issued four by four haircuts, bald heads, Mohawks – so that I further intimidate them.

"Well, who wants to try their luck against me?"

No one at first jumps in, but eventually, a short young man wearing the boy's uniform in Elizabeth's school pushes through the crowd. He jerks a thumb into my direction and winks at the other boys behind him. "I know you – you're Elizabeth's *cool* dad." I make a mental note of the way he emphasizes the word "cool," before he turns and directs his next statement to the others, "He can play a mean billiards game. Let's go, I'm betting on *you!*" He turns back to me.

They all cheer. I feel invincible. I am alive.

Within an hour, I have beaten every boy who dared to go against me. I am currently in a game with another boy from Elizabeth's school (he introduced himself to me by saying, "I sit beside Elizabeth during Math. She's smart and cute." I answered back: "Keep your hands to yourself, boy.")

Yes, these are but my many ways to intimidate.) I grab powder from the table behind me, rub it in between my palms, snarl at this young boy who nervously unbuttons his collar, grab the stick, and position myself in front of the table to start the first hit of the game. I wink at the boys watching me, wiggle my butt a little, and tell them, “Here’s how a master gets it done, neophytes.”

At the corner of my eye, I see my daughter’s silhouette at the entrance. I see her silhouette laugh with her friend, freeze before stepping into the bar, and exit quickly. I hit the ball, the ball bounces against the other colored balls, and I hear one sinking into the holes at the corners of the table.

They all cheer. I cheer along with them and dart my eyes to where I know Elizabeth has been a while ago. She’s gone.

She left me. She was gone.

I was thinking about my wife as I was cooking pasta that night. I thought about how Elizabeth loved her mom’s pasta primavera and I was making a piss-poor job at mine right now. I wish I could cook better; I wish she would come back home to me.

In the master’s bedroom, Elizabeth was busy with Beauty and the Beast. I had never been so thankful for the VHS tape player that her mother had bought before she left us, because it now was my ally in making sure that the house was in order without a seven-year-old hot at my heels, asking me when her mom was coming back.

I dropped the noodles into the hot water and I broke some in the process. I berated myself, thinking that my wife never made any mistakes when she cooked this dish and always did it with a smile, too. I was terrible in all aspects: I was a terrible husband, father, and cook. I just couldn’t do anything right. I couldn’t even keep a job.

When finally I was able to wrestle the noodles into the deep basin to boil, and the sauce was slowly simmering beside it, I went into the master’s bedroom. Elizabeth sat cross-legged on the edge of the bed, her chin on her hands and her long waist-length hair spread around her body. She seemed so small, so tiny, as she sat there and I wondered how someone so small and tiny could understand the gravity of our situation. How could we survive this together?

I plopped heavily beside her on the bed and spread my arms out wide. I closed my eyes and listen to a silly conversation between Belle and the kitchen

utensils. I counted the seconds and minutes in my head before I needed to stand up to turn off the gas and serve dinner.

Suddenly, there was a small head lying down on my shoulder. I sighed deeply, opening my arms further to accommodate her. Elizabeth's head moved around a bit before settling down on the spot where she belonged. I held her tiny body against mine, wanting nothing but to cry and let her share the dread that was settling in the pit of my stomach, but I held back. I ran my fingers through her hair, felt her hug me tighter, and let myself listen to the sound of the candelabra singing, "Be my Guest." In two minutes, I needed to stand up and serve dinner. In two minutes, I needed to start a new life for both of us.

I need to play basketball to signal the beginning of my new successful business venture. I do so with a bunch of young boys who do not even hold a candle to my skills. They all falter as I perform my fantastic rebound, and they curse under their breaths as I shoot another one into the basket.

"So, pretty spry for an old guy, eh boys?"

They do not reply. They stare at me with their bodies and second-hand jerseys, standing there in a circle while I swirl the basketball in my fingertips. The adrenaline rushes through me, and I feel it when I throw the ball back at them. They barely catch this and I laugh at how they fumble. I am so much better than them! I may be old but I am so much better!

Then, suddenly, I spot her: Elizabeth is standing across our house, parallel to the basketball court, and there she is... she's talking to someone. She's leaning over and cupping her mouth with her hand. She's talking to someone. She's not only talking... she's conspiring with someone. I know it. I feel it. She leans over once more and I crane my neck to see who she's talking to.

When I see who she's with, it hits me at the same time the basketball hits my face. The boys laugh and I snarl at them. They all take steps back and I leave them there, jumping across the fence of the court toward where I see Elizabeth talking with her mother. They are talking about me, I am sure of this, just as I am sure of them standing there. No wonder Elizabeth went to bed early—she wants to betray me! She invited her mother over so that they could talk about me and betray me!

Wait, I can't go there yet. I can't let them know that I saw them. Let it simmer first; let their evil plan against me simmer for a while. I move away and run. I start running nowhere, everywhere, feeling my shoes pummel the hard concrete as if I was on autopilot. I stifle my breath as I run past the houses, running and not counting time anymore. I run and run, until I reach our street once again and hear our neighbor's fighting cocks crow. It's four in the morning.

I rush into our house and into Elizabeth's room. I open the door, making sure to bang it so she hears, and switch on the lights. Elizabeth sits up from her bed and stares at me with wide, frightened eyes.

I wipe the sweat off my brows and shout, "You traitor! You little bitch!"

Elizabeth raises her eyebrows. She looks surprised but not frightened. She looks tired. I ignore this and began again, "How dare you talk to your mother! How dare you tell her what I have been doing! How dare you conspire against me after all I have done for you! You never even thanked me, Elizabeth, and you now want to tell your mother how evil I am? How dare you, bitch!" I point a finger at her and she whips her head away from me. I want her to cry, I hope she's crying, but I can't see. The sweat keeps dripping from my forehead and I can't concentrate until I let all this anger and adrenaline out of me. My heart can't keep steady. I need to let this all out.

Elizabeth moves her lips, they don't quiver, and she stares back at me. "Papa, its four o'clock in the morning; I have been sleeping here since yesterday when you left. Mama's not in the country, remember? She's in Japan for a business meeting." She calmly pulls her feet from her blanket and hugs herself. She purses her lips towards me. "Have you slept? Or were you out the whole night?"

I don't accept this. She's lying. Just like her mother lied to me years ago when she said she'll never leave me and that we were forever. She's lying to me just like my own mother lied to me when she said she was never going to leave me and she left me when I was just five for another man. She's lying to me like all the women before her did!

Elizabeth studies my face quietly before she says, "I'm not lying to you, Papa. You need to get some sleep."

"I want to sleep," Elizabeth whined. I ignored her and continued holding

her hand against the paper. "Papa, I want to sleep. I used to sleep in the afternoon, remember?"

"Ah," I retorted, firmly directing her hand to reach up and trace the printed strokes on the paper. "But sleeping in the afternoon is for babies. Are you still a baby?"

She wrinkled her nose. "No."

"What are you now?"

She huffed proudly. "I'm a big girl."

"So big girls don't sleep in the afternoon; instead, big girls learn their handwriting." I tapped on her cheek and directed her attention back to the paper. We were learning cursive handwriting that afternoon. I wanted Elizabeth to learn how to write properly and not end up like me, someone who had been often asked if I was a doctor because of the way I wrote.

Together, we traced the big and small L's of the page, taking care to follow the rules of the handwriting book: "Light and heavy; light and heavy," I chanted softly. I kissed the top of her head to encourage her as she gripped the pencil tighter.

Just when I thought that she was getting the hang of it, she suddenly dropped the pencil and placed her head in her hands. "I'm sick and tired of this, Papa. Light and heavy; light and heavy; light and heavy!" she shrieked the last phrase. I released her hand.

Elizabeth was gritting her teeth and breathing heavily. She stared up at me with those wet, black eyes and asked, "This is tiring, Papa. Is there no in-between the light and heavy?"

I had to think about that for a while, before I answered: "There's no in-between, Elizabeth: light and heavy only." She received this with a sigh.

Then, she's angry. She's so angry after what I just said that her whole body shakes in the effort to control her anger. She stands up from her bed, plants her feet firmly on the ground, grits her teeth, and points a finger back at me. I wipe the sweat from my brow again, hating the way this is clouding my vision. It's so hot. I want to take a bath.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Papa!" she screams, the thick blue vein on her neck throbbing. "You don't know what you're talking about because you're sick!" Elizabeth's eyes water now and I take note of how this does not give me the satisfaction I thought it would. "Papa,

why do you think grandma and Mama left you, huh? Papa, you're sick! You need to go and see a doctor as soon as possible because I don't know how much more of this I can take!"

What she tells me startles me. I wipe my face again and turn my back to her. "I'm going to take a bath." I leave her behind—the tension and her suggestion—just as they have all left me behind. There's no one else now, no one else except Elizabeth, and I know that it is only a matter of time before she leaves me behind, too.

I strip off my clothes, pooling them beside my feet. I stare at these for a while, noticing how dirty they are, and without any more hesitation, I step into the shower. I let the water run wildly across my heated skin, letting it soak my anger out, letting it wash over me like Elizabeth's words did a few minutes ago.

Then, I feel something hit the back of my head—so sudden, so fast, so painful—that I double over and collapse to the floor.

"You're the only one I have left, Elizabeth. I wonder if you will ever understand this, because if one day, you choose to walk away from me, I don't know what I'll do. I can't live without you," I whispered this into her hair one summer night when she has fallen asleep in the master's bedroom. When I tried to carry her back to her room, I find that I can't anymore. She was almost a teenager now, a few months shy of eleven, and at her new weight, I recognized that I wasn't getting any younger, either. Things were about to change, and that night was my last chance to let her know how much she meant to me – she was my world, this little princess in my arms, my world.

She is my life.

I wake up suddenly, violently. I feel my feet jerking against the unfamiliar covers of the bed; my head whirling from the sudden bright white lights that are overhead my face. I want to scream and shout, to command someone, anyone, to help me out, but I remember Elizabeth, and instead, I panic. I shout out her name until she seems to materialize before me. She is wearing the same pajamas she was wearing the last time I saw her, but this time, she has tied her hair behind her in a thick bun. She looks frazzled, but her face is stoic as she meets me and sits down on a chair beside my bed.

"Where am I?" I demand, then I wonder about my voice—it sounds so garbled, soft. There's something wrong, but I don't know what it is. Elizabeth needs to tell me *now*.

“Papa,” she starts calmly, “you’re in the hospital. The doctor said you suffered a stroke. You’re in the clear now and grandma’s on her way to help us with the bills and other things... but Papa, you need to rest to get your strength back.”

A stroke?

I move around once more. When I lift my left hand, I see that I have a medical bracelet around it. Connected to my right arm is the dextrose. There’s also an oxygen tube in my nose. I feel constrained. I struggle against these.

“Papa, stay put. You’ll be fine. I’m here.” Elizabeth places a tentative hand on mine. I breathe in deeply, trying to calm down my rapidly beating heart. A stroke? Okay, a stroke. I’m fine, I’m safe. I’ll live. I’m in the hospital. I’ll live. Elizabeth’s here. I’ll be fine.

“There’s something else, Papa.” Elizabeth releases my hand and goes to the table beside my bed. There are pills there—so many, I think, and of different colors, too. She picks up a rectangular white mat of pills and shows them to me. I don’t take it. I wave it away and ask, “What are those?”

“I talked to your attending physician and I told him about your problem,” Elizabeth says, diverting her eyes away from me, “Papa, he referred me to a psychiatrist and they think that these pills may help you. Umm, they say that your stroke may have been a direct result of your hyperactivity due to your ...”

A psychiatrist? I flare up at her insinuation. “I’m not crazy, Elizabeth!” I try to shout out, but it comes out more garbled than alarmed.

“No one’s saying you are, Papa,” she patiently answers back. “But we need to face the reality that these changes you go through are not normal. They are not healthy for you *or* me. We need to get help if we want us to get through this ...”

“I’m not crazy, Elizabeth!” I try to scream once again. Elizabeth stands up and throws the pills on the table. She hits the table with her fist and kicks the foot of my bed. She turns her back to me so that I don’t get the pleasure of seeing her frustration. We stay for a while in that terse standoff.

Once, when Elizabeth was nine, we were walking away from church after Sunday mass. I was in a hurry, struggling to make sure that I didn’t see

anyone I wouldn't want to talk to. I tried hiding my face with one hand, while my other gripped Elizabeth's to direct her out of there. It happened fast: before I knew it, Elizabeth's hand slipped away from me and I swirled around to look for her.

"Elizabeth?" I cried out, craning my neck to try and catch her top of head. There were so many people all coming out at the same time and I couldn't see her. I called her name out loud again and pushed against the outgoing crowd.

I was jolted out of my panic when a small hand found mine. I looked down to see Elizabeth winking at me. She tightened her grip around my hand. "Don't worry, Papa. No one ever gets left behind, right?" She smiled, her teeth pink with the bubblegum I had allowed her to chew during the long mass, and I smiled back, feeling myself calm down.

She eats beside me after I refuse to take the soup the hospital has served. I don't trust the soup because it may have those crazy pills in them. I don't trust Elizabeth even if she has tasted the soup herself in front of me to prove that it was fine. When I still kept my mouth closed as she waved a spoonful of soup in front of my face, she gritted her teeth, and went back to eat her meal.

An hour has passed and none of us have said anything. We sit in thick silence with Elizabeth finishing her food and me watching CNN. Bored by the newscast, I unintentionally glance back at Elizabeth and her plate catches my eye: as always, it is as pristine as the day she finally learned to keep her rice soldiers together.

I stare longer than intended and Elizabeth sees my face turned towards her. She lifts her head up, catches my eye, and stops moving, with her spoon against the plate and her fork poised atop a turon. We stare at each other. Inside me, I feel the truth catching up with us, the realization drawing in like an anvil in the pit of my stomach, and I take the truth like I should take those pills: a bitter mouthful.

This little princess, now a young lady, has endured so much from me, much more than her grandmother and mother ever had. I wonder how long this will last. I wonder how long she'll stay.

I nudge her hand with my finger for it's the closest to me. "Go home and rest, Elizabeth. I'll just press the nurse's button if I need anything else. Anyway, your grandma's on her way here." I break our eye contact and re-

turn to CNN.

Elizabeth gently places her spoon and fork on the plate, making sure they are aligned, and stands up. She moves towards me and sits carefully at the edge of my bed's cushion. She takes my hand.

I shouldn't, but I let her.

END¹

(Endnotes)

1 For Regina Garcia Chua: you have endured more than anyone of us.