

From Chapter 4 of White Lady/Black Christ: A novel-in-progress

Charlson Ong

...Jose Catapang Crenshaw was born in Angeles City on April 2, 1970 according to the National Statistics Office. His mother Andrea Ruiz Catapang was a resident of Tondo, Manila but went to Angeles to work as a bar hostess at seventeen. She was the youngest of five sisters and left home less out of dire need than wanderlust. There she met Lawrence Ernest Crenshaw, an American civilian employee of Clark Airbase. He was an accountant. At eighteen she was pregnant with Crenshaw's child and dreamt of snow and apple trees even as Crenshaw left for home with nary a word. Still, when the child was born, black and curly-haired, she had Crenshaw written down as 'father' on the certificate of birth. She made inquiries with base personnel about Crenshaw's whereabouts but received no reply. She obtained the help of a lawyer to no avail. A year later she brought the child to her parents' home in Tondo.

"You went all the way to Angeles to get knocked up by a baluga?" her mother hissed.

"Ulikba," her father quipped.

"Crenshaw," Andrea said, "his name is Jose Crenshaw."

"You can call him what you like, won't make him worth one centavo more," her mother said.

"I like him," Andrea's elder sister Rhodora who worked at the post office said.

"You can have him," her mother said.

Rhodora took the boy home to Gagalangin a few blocks from her parents' place, where she lived in an apartment block owned by her lesbian partner, one-eyed Gloria, who trucked vegetables from farms in Laguna to Divisoria. Gloria wore a black patch over her left eye that was blinded in a fight inside a gambling den. Gloria Respicio made her fortune trucking vegetables and advancing credit to farmers. The main reason Rhodora's parents accepted the relationship was because her father, Luis, once asked Gloria for a loan he never repaid. But as much as she made in business, Gloria lost huge sums in gambling tables. She nearly died from the fight that half blinded her at 28. An irate gambler who accused Gloria of cheating in mahjong had stabbed her in the face and neck. When Gloria awoke from her weeklong coma she became a devotee of the child Christ—the Sto. Nino. And when Rhodora brought home baby Jose, the couple doted on their ward as if he were their own Sto. Nino despite neighbors who preferred the Holy Infant Jesus porcelain-hued with golden tresses.

Still, every year, on the feast day of the Sto. Nino, January 7, Jose would be at the head of a throng of children who paraded with the statue of the Christ child from the church through the streets of Tondo. Gloria was the church's main patron and head of the *cofradia* of the Sto. Nino.

Meanwhile, Andrea returned to the Pink Eden in Angeles City where she met more Americans, none of whom remembered Lawrence Crenshaw, but every afternoon, before work, she would hang out by the gate of the Clark Airbase hoping to spy her child's father.

As a child, Jose disliked his name, Crenshaw. He thought it clashed with his blackness and made him even more the target of nasty jokes. He had heard it said that he turned out as he did for being the child of 'tom-boys,' although his classmates often wondered about his foreign-sounding name.

Even as a boy he knew things would've been worse if not for the fact that half the neighborhood owed his 'papa' Gloria money, and that the Catholic school only allowed him in after his 'mama' Rhodora paid for a new classroom.

At five he knew his aunt Andrea was his 'other' mother who lived in Angeles and who visited occasionally and hugged him so tight it often hurt, and that his 'other' papa was a black man in America who would send for him one day. He never said any of this to neighborhood kids or classmates

unsure whether being ‘overcooked’ by the incubator after birth or having a mother who hunkered over black chicken was better or worse than being a black man’s spawn.

At twelve he was a head taller than his classmates and made center of the class basketball team but he couldn’t play for his life and was all the more despised by his mates for failing at the only thing he was supposed to be good for. His grades were middling, though he managed to pass sometimes with help from Gloria’s loans to his teachers.

At thirteen he ran away to his other mother in Angeles, taking the bus, but she bawled him out and brought him back to Tondo. She was now with a white man, Uncle Tim, who was sixty and did not take to black kids. At seventeen he was accepted to the University of Sto. Tomas where he thought he might learn to be an architect—he had always been good with a pencil and sketch pad—but Gloria’s health was failing—she was diabetic—and her debts were mounting; their home was mortgaged and he would have to work part time for his tuition. Again, he was urged to try out for the varsity squad and earn an athletic scholarship—he was a shade over six feet tall—but still couldn’t play.

Jose worked as a police sketch artist to pay his way through school, but a career in architecture seemed remoter by the day, while his height and heft made him a shoo-in for the police force. It was either that or bouncer for strip joints. So, at twenty, Jose Crenshaw took the exams for police recruits and soon became Police Officer (PO) 1 Crenshaw of the Western Manila Police District (WPD), the district’s first black beat cop. It was 1992, and those who liked the rookie called him Michael Jordan when in good cheer, Dennis Rodman when in a funk; while his enemies, in uniform or otherwise, still said ‘*ulikba*’ behind his back.

Jose patrolled Avenida Rizal and Quiapo, places where he grew up, places he knew by heart. His size intimidated petty thieves and fences, but he knew well enough to keep off the cathouses and gambling dens protected by other cops. He would be called on to kick down a felon’s door, or wallop a thug, or even sketch the likeness of a suspect, but he still couldn’t play ball. And this failing deeply dismayed his colleagues at the WPD who thought they would at last win a national police championship.

When Jose turned twenty-five the apartment block where he had lived till then was repossessed by Gloria’s creditor, a rice trader, before she

succumbed to illness.

Rhodora moved back in with her parents but Jose knew better than to join her. He rented bed space from his superior officer Superintendent Alvaro Lumauig who lived close to the police station. Alvaro was a good friend of Gloria and Rhodora and took Jose under his wing. When Lumauig was made head of an anti-kidnapping strike force as the height of the kidnap-for-ransom cases, mostly involving the local Chinese, Jose became a member of the six-man team that worked directly under Lumauig. Jose learned all about surveillance tactics and equipment. He didn't know before then that mobile phones could be tracked and messages intercepted, and was wary of using his own phone for months.

He was astounded by the speed by which the team could identify perpetrators whenever an incident was reported, going by what seemed sketchy information—the make of a getaway car, the accent of a kidnapper, the place of abduction. It didn't take long for him to figure out that there were no more than three major gangs operating in Metro Manila, who used police informers and involved dismissed cops. He figured it would take perhaps a month to neutralize or chase away the gangs if only the police would strike before the criminals did. But the cops often seemed to be playing a waiting game—sometimes even taking bets on who the next victim would be or where the next abduction would occur—until an order came down from higher up and they'd raid some abandoned warehouse stacked with surveillance equipment or even discover some cash.

Jose felt uneasy about how the strike force functioned, but he knew why he'd been tapped: he'd been on the force less than three years, he had no family, he wouldn't be missed. So he kept his peace and did as he was told until that time when the twelve-year old boy was snatched from near his school in San Juan, Metro Manila. Jose was off duty and in street clothes but he had borrowed the service car for an errand when the report came in through the radio.

"I'm in the vicinity," he radioed PO 2 Ricarte, a fellow strike force member.

"You're off duty aren't you?"

"So what? I can cut them off. What are they driving?"

"I don't think that's a good idea Jose. We have procedure. It's dangerous to engage suspects by yourself. The victim's safety is paramount."

“Is it the Ugarte gang? Blue Toyota Corolla, car-napped last week? I see it.”

“Don’t engage.”

He had never defied authority save perhaps for the time he ran off to Angeles at fourteen to see his mother but even then he wasn’t really defying anyone. No one had told him not to go see her; he just decided to go on his own without telling anyone.

“He has the fool’s wind in him, the *ipu-ipo*, the dust devil,” Jose had heard his mother say to his aunt when Andrea brought him back to Tondo. “Like his father, you never know when it blows.”

“You’re the fool, Drea, he’s your son, you have to come see him more often if you don’t want him to stray.”

“*Ipu-ipo*,” Jose had wondered what it was until years later in Pampanaga, after the lahars from Mt. Pinatubo had laid waste much of the province. A gust had raised a cloud of dust and gravel that swirled around him and lashed his skin. “Dust devil,” his father had once called it, according to his mother. His father, who was from the land of terrible tornadoes, said his mother, and Jose understood.

Now he could feel it rising from inside him, from the pit of his gut, as he saw the blue Toyota race across the road. He could taste the dust in his tongue as he tailgated the Toyota. The Toyota signaled for him to pass but he refused and continued to pursue the car that now took evasive action. Jose decided to turn on the siren and the pursuit quickened. Suddenly the Toyota turned into an alley and stopped. Two men got out of the car and shot at Jose but fled towards a narrower lane. Jose scampered towards the Toyota and found the boy crouched in the back seat but unharmed. PO 1 Crenshaw realized he was unarmed and quickly pulled the boy towards himself, shielding the boy with his own body should the kidnapers return. After a while he led the boy back to the police car and brought him home to Greenhills.

The Lim family was ecstatic and confused. The mother said the family chauffeur had just called to report the abduction while the father had just raced home after receiving his wife’s message. Mr. Winston Lim was dumbfounded. He took his son aside and they spoke in Chinese. Then he took Crenshaw aside and handed him a card that read: WINSTON LIM, CEO COMPTREX ENTERPRISES: Makers of industrial grade plastics.

“Is there something we can do for you PO 1 Crenshaw?” he asked. Jose shrugged.

“This is all very strange. I’m not sure what went on exactly but I am just grateful my son is safe. We owe you and please come to me if you ever need any help but I think it is best if you leave now,” Winston said.

Jose brought the car back to HQ and walked home. Nothing was said of the events of the day, but a week later Supt. Lumaug asked Jose to look for other lodgings. “I can’t be perceived to be coddling you,” the officer said.

“What did I do wrong? I rescued the boy.”

“You were lucky. What if things had gone terribly wrong? We follow protocol, Jose, I told you from Day One. You’re part of a team. You don’t act on your own.”

Crenshaw bunked with another bachelor cop and was assigned a desk job. After a month he wondered if he’d ever be back on the beat again. He was in the doghouse and he suspected he’d mess up more than protocol, maybe someone’s big payday.

“I don’t think this is the life for me,” Crenshaw finally said to Lumaug, “I’ll submit my resignation letter.”

“And do what?” Lumaug asked, shaking his head. “You’re a good kid, Jose. You have heart, but you’ve got to use your brains more... See the big picture.”

“I know what’s going on,” Jose whispered.

Lumaug eyed Crenshaw briefly. “You think so? You think you’re better off not being a cop? You think you’ll be safer? We still take care of our own, kid.”

Crenshaw stared at Lumaug, and the older man thought he glimpsed a hint of madness in those dark brown eyes. He swallowed hard. Crenshaw felt a sudden stirring once more in the pit of his gut and struggled to keep it in check.

“Listen,” Lumaug said, “take a week off, take two weeks. It’ll be the Holy Week anyways. Think things over. We’ll talk when you get back. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

Jose sought out Winston Lim at his office in Pasig. “My superiors are pissed with me, I’m thinking of quitting,” he said to Winston.

Winston stroked his chin, frowned, stood up and paced the floor. “Wait,” he said and left his office briefly, to return with a white envelope which he handed to Jose.

“I already have a security officer,” he said to the cop. “I thank you again for what you did for our family, but for both our sakes, don’t come here again.”

Crenshaw saw that Winston Lim had written out a check to him for Php 300,000. He wasn’t sure what to do with it and thought of handing it back but Winston said: “Keep it, you have six months to cash it in.”

During Holy Week, Jose visited his mother in Angeles. She was alone again. Timothy Lowry had relocated to Thailand. There was still no word from his father, Andrea told her son. Jose shrugged. It had never mattered to him.

“I just want to talk to him, to hear his voice, before its too late,” she said. And Jose noticed that his mother had shrunk, was half the woman he had always known. She was ill of ovarian cancer, and there was little more that doctors or faith healers could do.

Jose thought that he should feel shock, pain, or sadness, but he didn’t know where inside him these emotions were kept. He tried to conjure compassion even for a stranger, but fumbled.

“Promise me, son, when I’m gone, you will seek him out. Don’t give up, let him know who you are: Jose Crenshaw.”

Jose went to the adjoining town to seek out Anselmo Dela Cruz, a carpenter who had been crucified every Good Friday for the past ten years after his son was cured of leukemia.

“Does it hurt?” Jose asked Anselmo who was preparing for his annual ordeal. “How much do you love your mother?” Anselmo asked, but Jose had no answer.

“Are you willing to give up your own life for hers? Half your life?”

Jose still had no answer.

“God doesn’t bargain, brother. It’s all or nothing. You have to be willing to lay it all on the line every time.”

Jose went home. He knew his time had not come, but he returned on Good Friday to watch Anselmo and four other men and a woman crucified. Then helped tend their wounds.

Andrea died that June. Her son was beside her at the end. He never returned to the WPD, never handed in his resignation. He buried his mother, cashed in his check; bought himself a modest home in Angeles, and a carpentry shop.

Jose hired Anselmo to train him in carpentry and serve as foreman for projects. When Holy Week came Jose walked to where river and farm were now a desert of gray volcanic ash and glass stretching to the far horizon. He asked for a sign and felt the earth tremble beneath him. A wind borne by many wolves howled and a dark cloud swirled about him. He was whipped by gravel and lashed by sand, pilloried against rocks and dragged through winds. When it was over, Jose was covered in blood and ash.

He found Anselmo who gazed at Jose in awe.

“How long were you in the wilderness?” Anselmo asked. Jose shrugged. “You were gone for three days and nights. What did you see?”

“A child, the boy I rescued borne by an eagle and three angels with wings aflame. Then a black man appeared. I remember thinking he was my father. ‘Father,’ I said to him, ‘it is I, your son, Jose Crenshaw.’ ‘Why do you seek me?’ he asked. ‘Because I am your son.’ ‘Fool,’ the man said, ‘you seek your own darkness.’”

The first time he was crucified Jose felt his heart being stabbed as nails were pounded into his palm. He was certain his heart was torn and bleeding even as the sun baked his skin. “Father, father, why have you forsaken me?” He wailed to the sky but hearing the mockery from below: *Itim na Nazareno*, the Black Christ.

The following season, a TV crew arrived and interviewed Jose as he was about to be nailed to his cross. Was he doing this in order to find his father? They wanted to know. Did he have a message for his old man? Did he want to go to America? What was all of this for?

In truth, finding his father was now the farthest thing from Jose’s mind. He knew now, more than ever, that he was of dust and would return to dust. But the dust of him was an angry cloud that would be a storm; that would flay the unjust and mark the unclean.

“It is my Father who has found me,” he said to the interviewer in English. “I am his will. I am the hour.”

His words made the evening news and upset the Cardinal who had

heard crazier claims but somehow the words of this black man with scraggly beard nipped him in the gut.

“Judas,” the seventy year-old priest whispered to no one. He was just reminded of the actor who played Judas in the movie version of Jesus Christ Superstar that he had seen many years ago as a seminarian.

Notes:

Baluga/Aeta: Indigenous people who occupy remote parts of the Philippines, often hunter-gatherers.

Ulikba: black chicken

Cofradia: Co-fraternity, a religious organization of lay people who support the activities of a Parish.