

# THE THIEF

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I remember when I held my first key. I palmed it like it was a pet insect I was loathe to lose, or a single strand of silver hair. I pressed the key until the blade and ridges left an impression on my palm. Skin branded by metal. I would smell my palm afterward, sniffing the tang of dried blood and rust, and something else, an elusive warmth, like the whiff of lint in empty pockets perhaps. Or perhaps the scent of something eternal: the tickling trace of Johnson's baby powder on my mother's firm, raw and calloused hands, the heat of her maternal grip.

In my boyhood, it was my mother's hands I remembered best. My eyes reaching only her strained belted waist and rounded stomach. I imagined her pockets to be endlessly deep, and full of riches. From her pockets came out groceries, electricity, games, money, all the secrets of the house. If she dug deep enough, she might pull out the whole unwritten history of my childish tremors and childish crimes. But all of this was in the future. Until a certain age, all I wanted was a particular ring of keys.

Mother's keys were bunched together in two rings, with distinct key chains. I thought of the first ring of keys in her left pocket as the "ostrich ring" because they were useless, flightless—keys for the locks and doors that were barely used in our three-story house: the forgotten drawer of the big display cabinet on the first floor, old Yale locks that had accumulated in the tool closet, the attic door and its two padlocked windows, bathroom doors, the steel gates of the water and storage meters, and the big gray box mounted on the kitchen wall that could turn off all lights in the house with a single switch. I was more interested in the ring of keys in her right pocket, the "food and money" ring.

Back then, cabinets and drawers inside the house were always locked, especially the food cabinet in the study room, because the suspicious adults

thought that the maids would help themselves at night when everyone in the house was asleep. There was always a need to ask for permission for anything. Sometimes, a simple tug on my mother's right pants pocket would suffice; most of the time, however, a more direct appeal had to be made, such as four hungry siblings squealing and squabbling at the same time while Mother worked till she was haggard in the kitchen preparing dinner (the fifth sibling, my baby sister, had just been born, and her crying squalls were not yet at peak strength). It was not easy to borrow the key for the food cabinet. My mother was very strict with the groceries, In a family with five children, an iron fist on the food supply was needed. When we took snacks from the food cabinet, we were watched and prodded to hurry up. One time, my father remarked that we kids ate like hungry ghosts.

There were days when Mother would lock the third floor bedroom—the one I shared with her and father and my baby sister. These were the times I most looked forward to. Arriving home after school, I would half-shout “*Tò lai lo!* I'm home!” before taking off my black shoes, and carefully storing them in the wrong spot—under the stairs—as I had done countless times. Father would be in the living room in his pajamas, watching the evening news on Channel 2. I could hear the maids in the back of the house, washing clothes. My older siblings—elder sister—and two brothers, were not yet home. Quiet as a wisp, I would hurry to the third floor, and check if it was locked. And if it was, I would go down to the first floor with an impassive expression on my face. I would put aside the lightning excitement that coursed through my blood, and control the twitches of my hands and feet. Then I would sidle up to Mother, and tug gently at her right pocket.

“*Kwie le ba?*” Is it locked?

I would nod, my eyes on the floor.

Mother would pull out her keys. “*Tau sui tsiá, ta qi-qi ua sa.*” Eat first, before going up to change your clothes. I would eat whatever Mother gave me, even though my stomach felt like a sputtering washing machine.

After eating, I would go up again, this time, two steps at once. My hands and feet thudding on the narra staircase and handrail. On the second floor landing, near the master's bedroom, occupied by my *Áko*, my aunt and Father's older sister, and *Amah*, my paternal grandmother, I heard my mother's shrill voice, “*Ta bán le, di eh puwa si!*” Go slower, you might trip! And the deeper, sharper voice of my father, “*Mang ya tsa, di eh shobe le gùn!*”

Don't be so noisy, you'll wake up your little sister! I stopped for a moment and imagined myself as a center of quiet. I was a water strider on a clear, calm lake. Then I would climb the last flight of stairs. It was not made of narra, but of a softer, more brittle wood, the kind that creaked and snapped, allowed no privacy and kept no secrets.

It was the tail end of March 1999 that it happened. I had stepped into the room I shared with my parents and my baby sister. She was asleep in her crib. The air was hot, sticking to my skin like *lumpia* or *siomai* wrappers. I peered into the crib, marveled at the round, sleeping face of my *shobe*. Her little face was the same shade as a dragon fruit. I looked at her for a few minutes, wondering if the little purple-red potato would suddenly wake up. I removed my school uniform—white polo and khaki shorts—and got into a *sando* with holes on its front and a pair of shorts with a snapped garter. Then I stepped out into the third floor landing, keeping an ear out for unusual noises. *Was everyone still where they're supposed to be? What if someone had decided to come up?*

I then returned to our bedroom. With a single motion, I turned and held the doorknob and pulled it toward the door frame with my left hand, while pressing my right hand thumb firmly on the lock. I had practiced this move many times. I need to ensure that there would be no sound of a lock clicking, and that the thud of the closing door would be muted.

I was alone in the bedroom, save for the tiny whimpering noises of the baby and a kind of ringing silence in my ears. I could see my father's workpants hanging behind the bedroom door. The wallet was a visible bulge in the back pocket. In my fear, I thought it looked like a pouch of coiled snakes. I was only able to overcome my fear because I was sure of one thing. I knew that when my father reached for his back pocket, and took out his wallet, suddenly, he was a man in command. He had command of all the riches of the earth. I wanted to feel that. I coveted the distinction of being rich, *ho gya*.

It had yet to cross my mind, that I could also use the key to open Mother's money-and-food closet; that would come later. I wanted something easy first. Maybe because I had overheard my mother and the other adults in the house berating my father for being too generous whenever he went out on Saturday nights. Anyway, I just knew that Father would not notice if he lost a few bills. Or even if he did, it would be easy enough to blame the maids.

I stood on tiptoes, but was not tall enough to unhook the pants. I had to get a footstool from the bathroom, and with the added boost, was now on eye level with the pants' back pockets. I reached for the wallet, and pulled it out slowly. I looked back at the crib; the baby was still asleep. I pressed my left ear against the wooden door to check for intruders. There was no one out there. The wallet felt solid in my hands. It had the same weight as a small bowl of rice. The brown leather was old and scuffed in some places, and faded to a yellowish white in the middle and on the edges. There were many cards and IDs in it made it feel hard. And it smelled like wet cigarettes, sweaty skin, and car fumes.

Inside the wallet, the paper money was sorted by color. It made me think of a box of color pencils, grocery lanes in the early morning, and the clean-cut lines of different cigarettes in the glass panes behind supermarket counters. In the first tier, were green-orange, red and purple paper bills; and in the second tier, were yellow and blue paper bills. I did not know how to count real world money, did not have the slightest clue, as to the value of the numbers written on the bills. In school, I was still only writing down numbers on pad paper. I had never held a real money bill, until that moment. I took a second to run my fingers across the top of the bills, like the magician I had once seen riffling his deck of cards.

I was smart enough to take only a few bills, and from only the thickest wads: two or three purple ones, a couple of reds, a handful of the green and orange. I rolled the bills into a wad, and tucked it into my shorts' pocket.

Deed done, I returned the wallet back to Father's pants' back pocket. I checked to make sure that nothing from the wallet had fallen on me or on the floor. I gave the baby behind me a long look—she was still blissfully asleep. No sound from behind the door. I returned the footstool, and gave myself a few moments, gave in to the quiet of the bedroom. Then I opened the door in the same stealthy manner, and peered down the stairs from the landing. I had not noticed it while I was stealing, but I was covered from head to toe in a light film of sweat. And this was very apt, because I felt slippery, untouchable. On another day, I would try to count my stolen treasure. But for the moment, I was content to stash it away. And I knew that the next time my mother locked the bedroom door, I would be at it again, wrestling with my fears, but ready to steal, and get away with it.

It was a month before my eighth birthday, and I was already a full-fledged thief.

But that was not the first time that I had stolen. The first time, I was only seven years old, and in Grade 1.

It also happened in March, during the final exams week of the fourth quarter. The first exam had just ended, and it was recess time. Ms. Ana, the gentle-faced and soft-spoken adviser of the other grade one section, asked me to buy food and a drink for her from the school canteen. She gave me a whole hundred peso bill. I didn't plan it, but when the cashier in the canteen handed me the change, I pocketed a few coins. Perhaps I wanted to know the feeling of having "pocket money," a phrase I had heard from an older student on the school bus. When I handed the food and change to Ms. Ana, she counted the money and frowned. She asked me to return with her to the canteen. She and the cashier, and a few of the canteen staff, talked for a bit in hushed voices, and some of the staff kept looking at me curiously.

I could not understand them because I didn't know much Tagalog, but it was not hard to guess what they were talking about. That day with Ms. Ana and the canteen staff was seared into my mind: Ms. Ana asking the cashier if she remembered my buying and paying for the food and drink; the cashier's emphatic shaking of the head, because there were too many students; Ms. Ana asking if, perhaps, the cashier had counted out the wrong change; the cashier pointing at me, and saying something that made Ms. Ana stand straighter, and pull me closer to her body; Ms. Ana resting her hand on my shoulder; Ms. Ana shaking her head at something a male canteen staff said while patting his pockets. Some of the staff pointed at me and made little circle motions with their fingers, perhaps to say, that I had lost some of the money while running around and playing. It was not that farfetched; after all, I was a kid. Ms. Ana did not get a satisfactory answer, and after a few more minutes, she said to me that it was ok, I could continue playing for the rest of recess. I could feel all their eyes on me as I walked out of the canteen. I ran across the quadrangle, and stood under the shade of one of the trees. I was trying very hard to look at anything, anywhere, other than at Ms. Ana, and the canteen staff.

Or was that really the first time? There was this incident, also in Grade 1, when I stole a can of A&W root beer from a classmate during recess. I guzzled the can of root beer in the boys' comfort room during the afternoon break. Later at home, I got sick and threw up all over the kitchen. When my mother asked me how I got sick, I replied innocently enough that I had drunk a soft drink in school. But where did I get it? I was not given any

allowance. My mother had sharp eyes and ears, and even sharper instincts. She could have sensed something even then, young as I was, but she chose not to say or do anything. Was she pretending innocence for my sake? Or was it a bet, against her own intuition, that I would not be the child to bring her shame?

While cleaning me up, she spoke in an undertone. “*Tsi ge eh chiu yá giát.*” This one has itchy hands. It was a euphemism I would only grasp years later... after getting caught.

Soon, I was stealing larger amounts. The old wallet given to me by my father, was soon full of gold and blue bills, and kept under the junk in my toy drawer in the bedroom on the third floor. The “pocket money” had become a “money fan,” and when I would hold the bills and fan myself in private, I imagined that I was a young maharajah holding the most expensive paper fan in the world.

At eight years old, there was not much that I could buy with my ill-gotten gains without drawing suspicion. But it was all right, because I thought that I was building what the adults called a “money nest,” a very Chinese notion for teaching children to save, and be thrifty. It was also a very cruel image for a child who wasn’t given any allowance. So I built my own nest for the next two years, filled the old wallet until it was as thick as I imagined a gold bullion bar looked like.

In my Chinese school, I also began collecting the “money tales” from my richer classmates, and the “*kupit* tales” of the older students. These stories made me feel as though I had accomplices. I was not the only one after all, the only *tsát*, thief.

A boy classmate regularly took coins, pens and soft drinks from the family-owned store. Another boy classmate, a more brazen one and the teacher’s pet, took to lying the way a classic Chinese Class-A student took to his lessons. While treating us to food in the canteen, he told us that he had convinced his parents that elementary students were regularly encouraged to share their allowance with their friends; and he always needed more money, because he had plenty of friends. A girl classmate made it sound so normal to “borrow” a hundred-peso bill from her dad, and her dad would just laugh and say it was ok, because there was plenty. That was the chorus that infuriated me: *Ya chwe lah!* There is plenty! Plenty of money and plenty of things to buy. Plenty of friends and plenty of enemies to impress. There was no need for

them to bring *baon*, because they could buy from the canteen. No need for the mother to prepare lunch boxes. No need to take the school bus service, because there were plenty of cars. More toys, more clothes, more shoes! And my classmates were so carefree about it, as if they had the right to the money, as if they were born to spend. I wanted the same kind of carelessness.

The older students in the school bus had tales that were eerily, and excitingly, like mine: the blank stares, the innocent face, the deliberate gestures when carrying out the deed, and the ready naming of people to blame if they were caught. Some of them got caught by family members, and began stealing from other sources. Others were more *kao-peh*, thick-skinned. They went on stealing from the same family members who caught them, but this time, with an indifference that thrilled me. *Normal lang naman kumupit. Kin-na eh dao twe.* It is normal to filch. Children steal. One particular tale that stuck in my mind was from a male 2<sup>nd</sup> year high school student, whose dad operated cockfighting rings and ran gambling dens (or so this high-school guy said). His dad would have so much money after “collection day,” that it would literally overflow from the iron vault in the basement. “So why not take a few bills? No one would notice.”

But wasn't he afraid of getting caught by his dad?

He shrugged, “I've already been caught. Twice. Got punished for it, no allowance and all. It doesn't matter. I know the combination to the vault.”

But why, though? He was given allowance. He had no reason to steal.

Another shrug, “Because it's there. Because it's easy. And no one cares. And have you ever seen or touched a million pesos? It's only *this* thick” He leaned closer to me and squinted his left eye, while gesturing with his index finger and thumb. That was more or less the same thickness of the old wallet I had at home.

And it had been easy. At home, with the possible exception of my mother or aunt, no one would doubt the innocence of a child. Even after my father discovered that he was missing money, and decided to keep his wallet in his car glove compartment, no one looked at me. No one noticed my greed. I felt invincible, and oddly enough, generous. Because now that I had *more*, now that I knew I can *get* more, I could be as careless as I wanted.

Growing up, though we were not exactly rich, we were not deprived either, except for certain things that my mother insisted built character.

So while we kids were not given an allowance, or given anything extra and extravagant—in short, things that were deemed impractical— there was always food on the table, and we even had maids to do the chores around the house. We kids always had the things we needed for school. Our clothes were old, but we were at an age where we did not care, or perhaps did not notice, about how other people regarded our appearance.

Was it because I compared myself to other kids at school, that I found my situation lacking in something? I already knew the feeling of always having empty pockets, and having classmates laugh at me because I showed them an old wallet without money, not even a single twenty peso bill. I saw how students reacted when they were being treated to food in the canteen, and the triumphant face of the one who was being fussed over because of his generosity. It was not money itself that I coveted, even though I liked the things that money could buy. It was more the feeling of having the ability to claim something for myself, on my own. That proud feeling of acquiring something you are not supposed to have. If I had to steal to feel like that, so be it.

I began spending the money I pilfered on my ninth, tenth and eleventh year. The trickle of money went to small treats at first, mostly street food and fast-food, sweet beverages that I knew were bad for me, and small toys like yoyos, and Pokemon and Magic the Gathering trading cards. At first, I followed my mother's rule: "No big money purchases." But the urge to spend took over my good sense. Soon I was shelling out money by the thousands for things that were hard to hide, and toys that would have put me on the spot if Mother had asked how or where I acquired them. Like the expensive air gun I bought at the Christmas bazaar in Harrison Plaza, or the decorative and heavy dog chain that I thought "looked cool," and the limited edition bey blades and Tamiya racing car models. I cannot remember how I managed to smuggle the things into the house under my mother's watchful eye, but I did. Save for the dog chain and air gun, the toys I bought at that time are still with me, in one state of disrepair or another.

I also began spending on my older brothers. Every summer weekend, during the late afternoon, I would pull out a five-hundred peso bill from my stash before heading out to play basketball in the local court. After playing, we would head for this dark, dingy house, close to our street, which had a room I named "The Arcade," because it had six old-school arcade stands, with games such as Marvel VS Capcom, Marvel Super Heroes VS Street Fighter,



Contra, Metal Slug, The King of Fighters, and a game I did not play because it had a pink screen and involved fishing. I would spend all the money on tokens, and at five pesos each, the five hundred pesos went a long way for three bored boys. It meant hours of playing and being away from home, away from the heat, and advanced lessons in math and Mandarin.

My two older brothers did not ask any questions. If it bothered them to have the youngest brother paying for tokens with money he was not supposed to have, they did not say anything, and they kept it from Mother as well. I would not say that they were complicit in my crime, but they were the beneficiaries. I wonder now what would have happened, had one of them chosen to mention anything to the adults before I was actually caught red-handed. Would it have changed anything? Would I have stopped earlier, out of shame? But my thoughts and questions were drowned by the sounds of guns blasting, characters dying, and tokens continually being dropped into slots, the clinking of metal on metal. Sometimes, instead of going to The Arcade, we would drop by McDonald's on D. Tuazon, and have that rare and expensive burger and fries. I wonder, had I chosen not to "share the wealth," would my brothers have ratted on me? No, I think it was clear to me from the start, which siblings had honor and which one did not.

When Father began keeping his wallet in the car, I had to look for other sources within the family. My older siblings were out; they counted their money down to the last centavo. The obvious choice was Mother. I still had access to her food-and-money ring. The hard part was figuring out how to steal from someone who kept records of everything, all the receipts, going back decades. If I wanted a literal value of my life, she could have given me the numbers.

I learned how to be careful again in my twelfth year, on the last year of my elementary education. At first, I took only twenty and fifty peso bills from my mother's wallet, only a few bills at a time, and never above one hundred pesos. After stealing from her, I would have a week-long resting period. I did not hear anything from her, no grumbling about wrong bookkeeping and thieving maids, so I was able to breathe easy. But I could not be complacent, because every now and then, Mother would ask me quietly where I got certain toys, and why I had food wrappers in my schoolbag which were not part of the groceries. My excuses still came easily, but after every lie, I could see my Mother's lips closing more and more tightly. Lips wound even tighter. After every question, it became clearer and clearer what lines I was crossing.

At thirteen years old, they began crawling all over me again: the familiar feelings of fear and guilt and shame. It was not because I had stolen from my father, and was planning to steal from my aunt, but because I wanted to steal from my mother. I saw it more than just a way to keep up a certain lifestyle. I saw it as a challenge. If my life were an arcade game, she would be the ultimate boss to defeat.

This went on for a few months, with me taking small amounts, at different intervals or whenever the opportunity arose. I even began taking five peso coins because I knew that even with her obsession to count and record every purchase, she simply had no time to count the coins.

As a back-up plan, I managed to make duplicates of two keys: one for Mother's small drawer in the first floor, where she kept small bills and coins, in case she needed to pay for sudden purchases and deliveries; and two the other one, a copy of the key to Mother's food-and-money closet on the third floor. I got the keys from her bedside drawer, where she kept other spare keys, accounting and record books, and some jewelry (including rings and necklaces collected over the years, from girlhood to marriage). There was something else in the drawer, some old, folded money bills kept inside a small tattered plastic bag. I did not pay any attention to the jewelry. I only wanted easy cash; pawning would have been too complicated. As for the money bills in the bit of plastic, I only gave it a quick glance before putting it back neatly. I even made sure that the bills inside were properly sorted by color.

With the duplicate keys, I thought that I would win in the long game. I had the sort of confidence that comes with executing a well-thought-out plan. I even started "attacking" my aunt's master bedroom, without taking into consideration her paranoia and self-centered attitude regarding material things.

My aunt was the sort of family member who built cold walls around the things she deemed should only be for her. She kept certain things, and a certain amount of cash, just for her own use. In many ways, her personal records were more meticulous than my mother's.

I say "attack," because I timed myself whenever I entered the master bedroom; it was in a very public place with no easy escape routes, and every minute counted. I could only enter the bedroom with stealth at noon on Saturday. I had every reason to come down late for lunch, because it was a weekend, and there were no classes. I timed my attacks for when everyone

was already in the dining room. I had long ago mastered the art of walking down the third flight of stairs without making a sound, and I entered the bedroom on light feet. The first few attacks were successful, and I was able to score a lot. My aunt had tens of thousands in her wallet at any given time. Better yet, she had two wallets, one in her closet and the other in her table drawer (the key was on the headboard, located under little jade frog. I took indiscriminately from both sources, blinded by my greed, and delusions of my aunt having more, always more. At that time, I thought that, unlike my mother, my aunt would not bother herself about finding out just how much more she had. Perhaps that one time—perhaps because I took too much money, or I took money from the wrong wallet—but it was my aunt who finally caught me.

One day, after getting home from school, my brothers and I were standing and watching TV in the living room when *Áko* suddenly came up behind us, and made a quiet announcement.

*“U-lang kang gwa dao twe. Din siyu bai gua siya-nga, ta ka gwa kong.”*  
Someone stole from me. Think amongst yourselves, and tell me who it is.

After that, she went up to her bedroom. My brothers and I just stood there like three mute monkeys. Of course we all knew who the thief was. We did not look at each other, and there was no need to say anything after that. I knew that *Áko* had already told my mother because of the ominous silence in the house. *There is a thief in the house, and it is one of your sons.* My two older brothers most certainly knew that it was neither of them, and after getting their afternoon snacks, they immediately went up to their room on the second floor. I was left alone in the living room, with my gut roiling. I had had plenty of stomach aches before that, but this is the one I remember best. After standing there for what felt like hours, I silently went up to the second floor bathroom, careful not to let my *Áko* and *Amah* see me.

I locked myself in the bathroom and did my business, but my stomach still hurt. I stayed in the bathroom for hours, way past dinner time, stayed there until I got used to the smell of my own shit, to the grouted tiles, to the wet and musty odor of the shower curtains. I planned on staying there all night, to sleep on the floor if I had to. This was my prison, and I got myself into it. There was no need to go down.