Christmas Eve, 1908: A Novel Excerpt

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Time had taken on a rubber quality, stretching here and there, never fixed despite the insistent tick-tocking of the Grandfather clock in their living room. Jose had lost all notion of what day or time it was, and he slept and awoke at strange hours. It was Fernanda who declared that they should "join the world." Earlier that day she had taken out her pearl jewelry and gold hair comb and she had put on a long skirt and a crisp hand-embroidered blouse of gossamer pineapple fabric. He was surprised by this, her fixing of herself, her declaration that she was ready to relinquish her mourning. For over four months, they had shared a cocoon of darkness and dread, confining themselves to their house, avoiding people, even his parents, sending out their servant, their sole umbilical cord to the world. During that time, they said very little to each other, but they shared a bond that was to some degree like a balm.

Before they left their house on Colon Street, Fernanda threw a shawl over her shoulders. She was in black, stark as a fruit bat, and the blackness of her clothing made her skin appear chalk-white. He had always found her fair skin attractive, but this December night, it was unearthly; she could have been a fearsome enchanted being from the forest.

When they entered the church doors, the sacristans were scurrying about, lighting the candles in the tall silver candelabra on the altar. They were early but the church was almost full. The pews and benches were occupied by women and children. The mothers, grandmothers, and spinster aunts waved at friends and neighbors, kissed relatives on the cheeks, talked about food they had abandoned back home, the half-done

chicken and fish rellenos, the pastel de lengua, the piquant goat stew, and Chinese hams, which they had entrusted to their servants to finish and serve on silver platters—they worried about their Noche Buena meal after the midnight Mass. They admired the altar with its seventeenth century silver retablo that glowed silvery-gray. The children, whose skin looked raw from having been scrubbed clean, wore shiny taffetas, fine cotton, and lace. The girls looked like miniatures of their mothers, with long skirts and loose blouses, and they too wore heirloom filigree jewelry; they even had tortoise combs with gold and pearls anchored on top of their heads, like coronets. The older ones searched for their friends, arms flapping upward when they caught sight of them, and thrusting their chests out, hoped their new clothes would be noticed and admired. The young ones wriggled about near their mothers, some of them gumming homemade sweets, their attention focused on the nativity set on the right side of the altar. They stared at the manger and figurines of Mary, Joseph, the angel, the three kings with their camels, some shepherds with their sheep. It was the empty crib they studied most of all, with a hankering since they had been waiting for weeks for the Child Jesus to be placed in it. A girl with a shrill voice talked about her dream of Mary appearing with the Baby in her arms, and how Mary had handed the Baby for her to hold. There was laughter, then sudden silence.

The chattering ceased when they entered the pew; he didn't have to lift his head to know that all eyes were riveted on them. Staring at the tiled floor beneath him, he told Fernanda he would join the men outside, and without waiting for her answer he slipped away. Before leaving the church, he turned and caught sight of Fernanda talking to the girl with the shrill voice. He furrowed his brow and wondered how she could carry on as if nothing were wrong.

The men huddled under the centenarian acacia tree, smoking their cigars to ward off the night chill. They did not share the giddiness of the women and children. They had carried the brunt of the expenses for the new clothes, shoes, decorations, food, and holiday riff-raff, and they dreaded the financial consequences in mid-January. The same thing happened when Jose joined them: the men grew quiet; they paused, shifted their weight, and some coughed as if clearing their throats. Finally someone mentioned the new electric lights being put up by the Americans, what

a nuisance, he said, all the poles and lines scattered on the streets, what a mess. It was all small talk. Another brought up the ongoing legal battle between the Americans and the religious orders over the Friar Lands. It wasn't right for the priests to own all that land, the man said, the Americans are trying to get the land back for the people. Imagine, they paid the Vatican seven million dollars for the Friar Lands. Someone else mentioned the shenanigans going on with the Friar Lands, how, if you knew the right people, you could buy huge chunks of land cheaply.

Jose knew the embarrassment was all about him. They were saying: We don't know what to say to you; we're sorry you lost your only son, sorry that you didn't have to spend on clothes and toys for him; we have no idea what it feels to have a son drown and we are very sorry for you. To make them feel at ease, Jose joined their chitchat and threw in some remark about Father Zobel still fighting in court for the Augustinians' huge tracks of city land.

He was their parish priest, this Father Zobel. Jose had gotten the information about him from Fernanda who worked at the rectory as the bookkeeper. Fernanda started working there a year ago, shortly after Danilo could extend his right arm over his head and touch his left ear, proving he was six years old, and qualifying him for kindergarten. After school, Danilo walked to the rectory and waited for his mother to finish work. It was a perfect arrangement; idyllic in fact, until the body of Danilo was found on the seashore. Fernanda pulled her hair when she saw the boy's body, and Jose fainted when he found out what had happened. The story that finally emerged and which was circulated was that Fernanda had been working in the rectory office, and Danilo had been with her, but growing bored, he left to play outside. He must have been chasing a dog or cat along the seawall when he lost his balance and fell and drowned. It was a simple story, straight to the point. People hated talking about such tragedies because they had their own sons and grandsons and the idea of losing a seven-year old son exceeded their imagination. A one-year-old or two-year-old could succumb to dengue or typhus and die just like that, and mothers had learned to protect their hearts by not falling too much in love with the little ones; but a seven-year old was marked to survive. Him you could love. So beyond the official story of how Danilo died, nothing more was said.

When the church bells sounded the beginning of the High Mass, Jose returned to the side altar where Fernanda knelt. A long black lace veil covered her short hair; after the discovery of the dead child and the hair-pulling incident, a neighbor had kindly cut Fernanda's hair to make the ends even. It was very short, like the French Jeanne d'Arc haircut, new in fashion but still alien to most Filipinos.

The church had become more crowded still, but they were close to the main altar and he could see the three priests and altar boys clearly. Fernanda kept her eyes closed most of the time, and now and then, she would heave a deep sigh, and, pretending she was arranging the veil on her head, would wipe away her tears. He wished she would stop; he wished they had stayed home in the first place.

The people were praying, giving thanks perhaps for the good fortune that had come their way that year 1908—how fortunate for them—asking God for this and that for the coming year, but communicating with God in any case, something he could not do, not now. Father Zobel was one of the three priests concelebrating the Mass. He and the other priests wore vestments embroidered with silver thread—elaborate designs of flowers and scrolls. They looked imposing, Father Zobel most of all, with his aquiline nose and Hapsburg jaw that reminded Jose of Spanish conquistadores sailing on galleons; Father Zobel too had arrived in the Philippines on a galleon. He had traveled far, from Burgos, Spain; to Guanajuato, Mexico; to Manila; to Carcar; and now Ubec.

The scent of candles and incense, the rising-kneeling-sitting in church, the crush of people in that damp stone church made his nostrils constrict, made it impossible to breathe. The four months since his son died was the Calvary of his life. He tried to think of the Mass, of his surroundings, but the suffocating sensation was what was foremost in his mind. When Fernanda got up to go to the Communion Rail, he whispered, "I'll see you back home." And he waded through the crowd and left the church. He could not receive Holy Communion; he was never particularly religious but like other Ubecans he went to Mass on Sundays and Holy days of obligation. That night he did not want to be in that church; he did not want to be near a God who could take away a child just like that.

The cool wind on his face was a blessing, and he took a deep breath, grateful to be rid of the scent of incense and melted wax. Some candle

vendors rushed to him, holding out their candles, promising to dance a prayer for him; he shook his head. He walked past an old woman with a cart selling roasted chestnuts. Two men held clusters of balloons, waiting patiently for the children to be released from the church. He hurried on, toward his house on Colon Street, away from the giddy happiness. But when he approached the two-story building, which was cloaked in purgatorial darkness—not a single lantern hung on the windows—his palms became damp and his breath quickened.

Last year, he, Fernanda and Danilo had placed paper lanterns shaped like stars above every window. At night, they had lit the candles in the lanterns and people walking past Colon Street looked and smiled and knew that a happy family lived in this house. He remembered how he and Danilo had sat at the kitchen table to make the lanterns. He guided the boy's hands to show him how to hold the sticks together. He bound the sticks, formed the frame for the star, and he cut the fine Japanese paper and glued them over the frame. Together they cut the fringes for the bottom ends of the star. How amused he had been at the serious child who pressed his tongue thoughtfully against his upper lip as he used the scissors to snip four-inch strips. When the star lanterns were hanging above the windows, the boy got candles from his mother and he and Jose placed them inside the lanterns. Jose lit them, and they turned off all the other house lights, and they basked in pride at the wondrous stars hanging above every window of their house. Passersby paused to admire their work, and they waved back at them.

Three sharp sounds of a bugle startled him, and he quickly glanced at the Plaza Independencia, wondering what the Americans were up to. The American military occupied the old Spanish fort which stood at the far end of the plaza. The gas lamps were lit there and colorful star lanterns and garlands decorated the grand stand. It would be better there. He walked toward the Plaza. Last May, when the school children were on holiday, the American military band played in the evenings, rousing military songs, a bit of jazz. This memory made him feel hopeful, but then a gust of wind blew, bringing with it the tangy smell of the sea, and he remembered once more that his son had drowned in this sea.

It was impossible. He could not think of anything else. By the time he got to the seashore, Fernanda and countless people surrounded the boy who lay on the ground looking like he was asleep, except for the God-awful gash on his head. A little boy, seven years old. He struggled not to think.

He found a bench at the far end of the plaza close to the fort. The gates were closed; the place was quiet. He was away from the Christmas levity that was driving him crazy. He sat down. Here perhaps at least for a while, he could rest. He looked up at the stars and tried to find peace. The hooting of an owl startled him; owls were rare in the city. The owl continued with its mournful sounds and he felt his eyes well with tears. This surprised him because he had not cried for his son, for his loss, and now finally, he found himself weeping with abandon. It was the kind of weeping that he sometimes did as a child after his father had beaten him. His father was not cruel but he was a strict man who used the belt liberally. Sometimes the injustice of the beatings would cause the late-night crying, silently, so his parents would not hear him, although the tears were abundant.

The wild ringing of the bells announced the end of the midnight Mass and the raucous sound drove him to cover his ears. His little bit of peace had ended. He imagined people rushing out of the church, eager to go home for their family celebration—the Noche Buena meal, where they would have roasted suckling pigs on their tables, and children would quarrel over who would get the ears and tails of the pigs. Last year, Danilo had gotten the pig's tail and he had happily paraded it around. How happy the child had been.

"Papa," the child had said last year, "I want a bird. A black one, the kind that talks." They had seen a man selling a hill mynah, with lustrous black feathers and someone had trained it to say, "I remember… I remember…" Danilo had wanted the bird. Jose told him he'd get him one when he was older; but now he was gone.

Jose shook his head, but the bells kept on ringing. He remembered the mournful tolling of these same bells at his son's funeral—how small his casket had been. The horror engulfed him once more. He felt ugly and powerless. He tried to compose himself, afraid to lose himself, afraid he'd become useless once again. He had little memory of what had happened. Someone, he could not recall who, had found him in the city hall to tell him that the child's body had been discovered. Jose could not remember the details after that. People said he fainted; people talked about the wake, the funeral, the burial, the forty days of prayers. What he remembered most was the silence when he and Fernanda were in their dark house.

He also remembered Danilo's room, which they left exactly as it had

been the day he drowned. Neither he nor Fernanda had the courage to remove a single item from the room that had assumed an aura of sacredness. It was as if leaving the room exactly as it had been kept Danilo alive; it was as if he would still come bounding into his room for the wooden spinning top or the mechanical monkey that would play the drums and which had amused him greatly.

Hands shaking, he pulled out his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away his tears and blew his nose. When finally the church bells stopped, he could hear the soft humming of the crickets. This was a sound that used to comfort him in his youth. The crickets would come at the end of the day, when he and his parents were all together, sitting outside in their garden, watching the gardener sweep up leaves. He would hunt for grasshoppers or beetles to play with. His parents would talk about their work or what went on in their community, because in his world everyone knew what went on. There was something comforting and at the same time hateful about being constantly scrutinized by everyone.

The crickets suddenly became silent and the silence tugged at his mind: there was something about his son's death that he couldn't grasp. Danilo knew never to go to the seawall by himself. Even though he was only seven, he was like a little grownup with a lot of common sense. He was not a risk taker, and often when father and son played, Jose had to coax the child: "Come, come try out your new bicycle, you'll be fine," or: "Come swim with me; I will hold you, you will be safe." But in the end the boy died of drowning. Or perhaps it was from hitting his head on the rocks. Nothing was clear. The vagueness stretched out like the long and implacable night.

Jose took a deep breath and rose from the bench. He never asked why the boy was playing alone at the seawall. He never asked why, shortly after Fernanda started working at the rectory, the boy became very quiet, almost like a mute. He never asked about his wife's silence too, her evasiveness. He never asked why, when they had been happy before—their only concern had been financial since Jose was starting his law practice—why, a strange feeling entered their house, like a fungus growing in the silence and quiet and dark. It was time to get answers.

A mangy dog crossed his path and bounded toward a pile of garbage. The paper star lanterns and garlands that decorated the kiosk fluttered with the breeze as he headed back home.