THREE DARK TALES

George Deoso

Missing Hands

The church which stood in a far and poor countryside was built in the 1600s. "Some years after the Spaniards came," the tour guide said.

Though it was old, my classmates and I saw, as we walked past the pews, encased marble saints, and columns, that everything shone. A boy in a tattered shirt was wiping the altar table. And behind him a golden cross, a dozen times bigger than himself, reflected light that came through the windows without panes near the ceiling, where God and angels were painted.

The guide led us to a door, beyond which was the church's museum. In it were more marble figures, church things, paintings, photographs. Saints stood on one corner of the room. Almost all of them had no hands. A Santo Niño, for instance, had his arms raised, but through the lifted robe nothing emerged. It looked as if the little saint's head was placed on a glittering curtain with a pole.

A week later, the professor in history who took us on the trip talked about the Code of Hammurabi.

"An eye for an eye," he said, "a life for a life."

At the end of the class he returned our papers about the school trip. Mine was about the poverty of the province where the church was built. At one point in the paper I wrote:

"The guide said the hands were stolen. They were made of ivory."

At the margin beside this line, my professor wrote, "Just as I thought."

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When I went home that day I sat down at the desk to write some more of the trip. Something about Hammurabi as well.

I opened my drawer, and gasped.

It was full of painted ivory hands. Varying in size and color. Pink, flesh, and one charred one.

The hands waved at me.

I screamed and ran to the door, and stood there for a while staring at my desk. A couple of minutes after I had caught my breath, I decided to go back to my desk.

I peeked into the drawer and gave a sigh of relief.

The hands were gone. Only my pens remained.

I sat down and began to write: "Perhaps the saints deserved it."

Men Like Myself

1942

The enemy separated our flanks, us and the Americans. This man from the other flank, I didn't know him, had nothing to do with him. I was just a young reservist back in *pistaym*.

This white man I didn't know all of a sudden broke out of the line and thrust his chest to the Jap nearest to him. "Kill me, kill me," he was crying. Like us he was hungry and thirsty and emaciated. Just hanging by a thread of hope, which he must have lost, as he knelt there in the dust and sunlight of Bagac. He may have been as old as the father I had lost, the way everyone seemed to have lost someone in those years: from a swing of the bayonet.

The two flanks moved slowly, a pace dictated by the enemy's unpredictable mood swings. Sometimes we were shoved for not walking fast enough; at other times, beheaded for doing otherwise. That time it was slow and we were afforded a view of the drama between this Jap and this soldier begging for death.

The Japanese soldier, for some reason, refrained from granting the man's wish. Instead he surveyed our flank. He had this serious look when his eyes landed on me. What was I supposed to do? He pulled me out of my comrades' line. My thin body was no match for his strength. I was in no mood to die. Resistance was out of question.

The Japanese soldier said, "Keerr this man," his bayonet pointed at my neck.

As I said I didn't know this man. But I had no reason to "keerr" him. We were in the sort of position worthy of a diorama. I, a Filipino soldier, with only one boot, clothes in tatters, standing between the enemy with his bayonet ready to separate my head from the rest of my weak body. And the kneeling American soldier looking up at the two of us, this white man who must have had a family back in America, who must have enjoyed his toast and boiled eggs most mornings before the war.

I didn't know this soldier's name. But he fought for my people. His people came to this land to educate us, prepare us for freedom. Why should I kill him?

You see this clearly calls for a moral judgement. But in those days there weren't many options. Especially once you're pressed to act so as to save your own life.

Was this what the white high-ranking officers called the Filipinos' cowardice and ungratefulness? I heard the two of them once, before the surrender, talking in that pocket of Bataan silence when the Japs miraculously found time to rest between their almost ceaseless artillery fire. "These men," one of the lieutenants had said, "you saw them running scared shit?" And another officer had answered, perhaps fully aware that I and some of my fellows were not quite out of earshot, hunched over bits of the chocolate they threw at… no, shared with us, "Yeah, I swear we can't trust these men with our lives."

The Japanese somehow called someone who had a shovel, which he then slammed against my chest.

"Bury this man!" he said, and amid the wary look of the soldiers from both flanks, the three of us moved to the roadside, with the Japanese dragging the soldier.

"Dig hole!" the Japanese screamed, with his bayonet still raised.

I dug. Beside us, the remnants of cogon grass stood like sentries in the windless noon. The earth was dry, rocks hitting the shovel. I knew what was being asked. So for the next minutes (or was it hours?) and with what remaining strength I had I did my best to dig deep enough.

"Good, good," the Japanese said. Then he asked me again to "Keerr this man," pointing his bayonet at the man, and then at the shovel between my feet.

I had no choice. I used the shovel to hit the man, who offered no resistance whatsoever.

I hit him with the shovel's metal head.

It wasn't hard to reduce him to an unmoving lump curled like a fetus.

With the approving grunts of the Japanese, I buried the soldier in the hole I had dug. Then the soldier shoved me back to the line where I belonged.

I had no tears. With the shovel gone from my hands I felt like a blade of grass wobbling before its descent to the parched earth. A group of soldiers helped me continue that long walk that never seemed to end.

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There were flies at O'Donelll. Hundreds, thousands. Omniscient as the stink of ill-fed, ill-clothed, or just plainly ill men. Days went by and the death toll rose as diseases spread from one cramped bamboo hut to another.

At first we had ceremonies for the dead. We would say mass over the pile of bodies where the Japs allowed us to bury them. But because of the shortage of soap, which made it difficult for the men to wash off the stink of whatever rotting flesh they had just carried, there was not much fuss over the dead. They wanted to get over with it as quickly as they could, and the priest never came back anymore to say mass.

It must have been more than a week since the end of the long march. I was in a hut with people like myself, hungry Filipinos, malnourished, bony, and suffering from malaria. I slept on the cramped floor on the days when sleep was possible, when I wasn't haunted by guilt.

But most of the time, day or night, I could see before me the face of the man I was forced to kill. I will never lose sleep for killing a Jap. But the same obviously wasn't true for an American, even one I had no personal attachment to. It was beyond difficult.

I had trouble eating what gruel trickled down on my hands. I received a letter once from my mother, but I couldn't seem to grasp what it had to say. Someone offered me a drag of his Camel, but all I did was to inhale the smoke as it was held in front of my face. Slowly, I realized that when I closed my eyes, I wouldn't be asleep at all; instead, I would remember the scruff of the thin white man, his pained look as I used the shovel to take the life out of him

I didn't know him, but he was supposed to be my friend. He was my friend. I should not survive, knowing that I had killed someone I shouldn't. Someone who was supposed to save men like myself.

I then reached a decision. We, the men—or ghosts of men—from the hut were made to line up one morning. There was talk that we would be sent somewhere up north to work on a bridge, or perhaps on some installations.

We lined up outside the hut under the soft glare of the morning light. Though the sight and smell around the camp was no better than the stink of carrion, the sky was clear.

I surveyed the dim-faced sons of the Rising Sun, guarding the flanks. I found one who had on his face the unmistakable look of someone trying to find an excuse for his daily dose of decapitation. We must have been the same age, though he looked way more alive. His nostrils flared as if he was disgusted with the men he was herding.

So I ran to him.

I made sure his bayonet was drawn.

Fortune

A neighbor told this story. She was walking one night down a street to our block, going home from the hospital where she was a nurse on rotating shifts in the emergency room. It was late, and there were no tricycles to be hailed from the gate of the village somewhere in Batasan Hills. It was an old village. She remembered this as she walked past one dimly-lit block after another. Some lamps were lightless. And as she walked under the light of

the few that still worked, she wondered if the cats that roamed were as old as the village.

"Nine lives," she told us, not entirely out of the blue. She told us that a black cat had walked in front of her. It stopped walking by the feet of a boy she hadn't realize was there until after the first few licks of the cat on its paw. On the third lick she saw the boy, and was surprised not to be surprised at all by the apparition standing by the gutter.

She thought, at once, that the boy in the torn and soot-stained clothes was a ghost. She wasn't scared. When he walked to her to ask for money, she told him she had none, and that she'd have to go home first. She went home, got a twenty-peso bill from her mother (who had just began setting plates on the table), and went back to where the boy stood. She was mildly surprised that he was now dressed in a barong. "Just mildly," she said. The boy took the bill from her hand, said "thank you," turned his back, and walked to the storm drain, into which he slipped and was not heard from again.

"That boy," her mother said as they were eating, "must be the boy who drowned back when the street turned into a lake whenever a storm comes, back when the drain didn't have those steel bars yet."

The legend was that he, a beggar from outside the village, who would knock from house to house once a week to ask for "bakal, bote," drowned as he was chasing down one of his slippers which had been swept by the floodwater. His body was found in the Manila Bay the next morning.

There's a moral to this story. Our neighbor's mother urged her to fly overseas to earn more by taking care of people on the verge of dying. Five years later, she became an American citizen, and now the house she had ran to for the twenty-peso bill is vacant, just a few doors from ours, waiting for new occupants, after the family that lived in it had become citizens of another country.

I am now walking on the street, near the gutter that is supposed to be haunted by the boy. I just came from my own work. The company I am working for is about to be dissolved. In my own house résumé is waiting to be updated.

I am a good man. I do unpaid overtime, pay my taxes, and still make the sign of the cross when the bus I am on passes a Church, or by a roadside accident that might involve dead people. I have beliefs.

Tonight the street stands empty and I am filling it with my exhalations. I walk, push myself forward slowly. This street should give me goosebumps. But nothing happens. No ghost of a drowned boy. No black cat.