MY OLD MAN

George Deoso

The man is a former soldier who now, at sixty-five, works as someone's bodyguard. His job requires him to carry a gun. The woman would kid that he had around twenty children. He was hugely built, and he had a voice suited for the battleground; a request for a glass of water could sound like a command to stand ten-hut. Before us he had other families.

One of my half sisters, Evelyn, told us the story of her dog.

"I had a dog once," she said, "back in grade school."

One day she went home from school to find him drinking with other men, sharing some *pulutan* he cooked himself.

She had cried, of course.

I've often wondered how a dog would taste with beer.

An FB friend posted a review of a book of poems about fathers. What he noticed was that the poets mostly wrote about their dead old men, and how easier it was, relatively, to write about their death instead of something else. Mourning. Not happy memories—walking in the park, going out for movies—but lines to hint at buried anger and regret.

"Mine is still alive." Should I be suspicious that I have this much to say?

Here's a contradiction: he is a man of many words, but this isn't the part of him that I fear the most. It would be fair to say that I was hurt more by the woman. She would say she hurt me because I did something wrong, and because she loves me. Here's what love is: a slipper, a clothes hanger, the hard end of a broomstick. Bruises from a pinch, face red from relentless slaps. A wooden stool thrown at me. Of course, loving words: "Putangina mo!" "Gago ka!" "Pag namatay ka, siyempre iiyak ako, nanay ako, pero hanggang doon na lang iyon!" "Bakit ang malas-malas namin pagdating sa anak?" "Wala kang kuwenta!"

I ran away from home twice, but was never wise enough not to be found.

I even once dreamed she had me in her grip. On her other hand was a saw, and she was decapitating me while I pleaded, "No, please!"

Reason should tell me that I have to fear that woman more than the man. But there's something about him, something to fear beyond what she ever did.

He had physically hurt me only once. I had a brawl with another kid so he told me to kneel in front of the bed as he coiled his belt around his hand.

I can't even recall the pain I felt when the belt licked my back.

If you grew up with the man, it's easy to get used to profanities. Every phone call or casual conversation was, and still is, punctuated by his most used expression, "putangina," or its distant cousin, "ukininam."

But you will never get used to him when he's enraged. His voice causes a tiled floor to vibrate and to reverberate in a small house. I always felt weak against this. Imagine a man whose voice was by default loud enough to make you suspect he is angry. Now imagine that man being angry.

So, it wasn't his words. Not exactly. Something else and something worse.

He had made a point of taking me to the barbershop to get a haircut every week or two, from when I was a kid until high school. We would sit on the stools and have our heads shaved, what he called a "clean cut." We would emerge from the barbershop on the Sunday morning road looking like walking eggs.

I got sick of it, of course. My classmates had a choice to grow their hair as long as they want, as long as our Catholic school allow it. They could use wax and look cool with spikes. I wasn't a skinhead, but I had no use for styling products, not even a comb.

By the latter part of high school, he allowed me to have my haircut alone and less frequently.

I took my chance. On the month leading to the JS Prom I grew my hair longer than I ever did before, and when it was time to get a haircut, I got a Mohawk.

I remember the woman looking at me surprised when I got home, not angry but, in fact, a bit worried. "Your dad will be furious," she said.

True enough. After parking the car in front of the house, right after stepping out of it and entering our gate where the woman and I were standing, he threw this sharp look at my head.

"Ano 'yan?" he had said. His fists curled, and I thought he would at once knock the wind out of my body. Instead he said, "Pumasok ka."

Once inside the house, his voice boomed and made the floor vibrate and the walls shake. Expletives. And then a threat that I'll be thrown out of the house because of my rebellion. The woman did her best to calm him

down. Luckily, he did. I wasn't booted out. And he has yet to give me a reason bad enough to make me leave.

The first time I ran away I went to a neighbor's house and sat in her living room. I must have been twelve. She was a friend of the woman, and I was a friend of this neighbor's son, but he was sleeping, so I didn't have a compelling reason for the midnight visit. So I sat there silently, not replying to this lady friend's queries about what I was doing in their house. Later, I heard the woman knocking at the gate. When the lady friend went out, I sprang to the room where my friend slept. I didn't wake him up, but I made myself small in a corner at the far side of the room where his bed could hide me. I hid in the corner, watching the light from the door beneath the bed, thinking about why I was there and whether or not my sleeping friend ever got too tired of being hurt. I couldn't remember the things I did to merit the things the woman did, but I remember the broom and the woman's curses.

I was found, of course. I was also found the second time I tried it.

On my second attempt, I went as far as five blocks. I hid myself at the back of a jeepney, where I must have stayed for an hour. Later, a kid went inside the jeepney to play, hanging from the bars tacked to the ceiling. I deduced that he must have been the son of the jeepney's owner.

"Your mother's looking for you," he said, swaying as he hung on to the bar. I was crouched by the entrance. "There was a *tanod* roaming around with her a while ago."

I didn't say anything.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I have no name."

"Your name is George, right?"

"I have no name," I repeated.

Make no mistake: I am far from becoming the child called "It." My needs were provided for, and whatever hurt I had, in the eyes of others, should be outweighed by the times when family becomes what it is supposed to be, when the woman and man become the mother and father.

Wounds heal, after all.

But scars are worth looking at too.

An aunt—wife to my father's brother— died, and we had to go to Ilocos for the funeral. The night before the interment there was the usual drinking and gambling. I sat with my cousins around a Monobloc table, with a deck for *tong-its* and *unggoy-ungguyan*. There was a karaoke. Conversations warming the night.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang.

All was silent.

My cousins and I looked around, searching, for there was no doubt about its source.

And there it was. In a corner of the huge lot, just a few paces from the casket where the dead auntie lay among bright funereal lights, there was a gathering of men, drinking Pilsens and Muchos. The noise came from a gun. It was shot on the dry earth of the lot. The other men, one of them the widower uncle, looked approvingly at my smiling father, the gun smoking in his hand.

I must have been in sixth grade. The house was being reconstructed—a second and a third floor were being added. I found myself alone in the house.

The workers and the woman, who oversaw the construction during the week when the man was working, went out to buy materials needed. The walls were yet to be finished: steel bars protruded everywhere. And there was this gap where you could look from the third floor down to the untiled first floor. To the left of our house was a four-story residence, and I was just in time to see a cat strolling on the edge of its roof. Perhaps fascinated by our house, it jumped on to ours. It was an orange and white cat, which walked with the usual feline slyness. I remember this trivia show where the host said that a cat could survive a thirty-foot fall. I also remember the time months ago when I stepped on a cat's tail when I was once told by the woman to buy her a stick of cigarette from a *sari-sari* store. I didn't know that a cat was in my way, and because of the fight or flight instinct it sank its teeth on my smallest toe before shooting to the other side of the road, where it hissed at me.

This orange and white cat strolling on our rooftop didn't look like it had fight for an agenda. In fact, it walked straight at me as if I had some business with it. It brushed itself on my leg, and I think it was expecting me to play with it and call it Mingming while making my voice small.

I did something else. I leaned down, grabbed its tail, and lifted it off the ground. It struggled, naturally. Perhaps because I had small thin hands and because it was putting up a fight, it felt heavy. I kept my grip on it.

Then I leaned over the gap where I could see the first floor. I threatened to drop the Mingming through this gap.

Then I let it go.

It fell, and I didn't see it right itself in mid-air. What I saw, and heard, was how its fall was broken by a vertical steel bar plugged on the concrete second floor. The cat's body hit this bar. There was a sharp "Weeew" sound.

The fall continued and the cat crashed on the first floor, which was too far for my eyes to confirm if the animal had indeed landed on its feet.

What I could recall until now was the sound when it hit the bar, then the floor.

There wasn't a drop of blood when I went down.

It had run out through the open gate and I cannot remember seeing it again.

Before the reconstruction, the house had been the other half of a one-story duplex. There was one of every room expected from a basic house: one bedroom for all of us, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, et cetera. Sometimes when it rained there would be a leak and we would haul out the mattresses, push the center table to one side, and sleep in the living room. The living room was the all-purpose room back then: it was where we would eat and sleep; where the man would drink, or invite other men for karaoke, or where he would brag of his collection of firearms; where my mom would receive guests and where she would beat me whenever necessary. Another thing happened in it:

The man and woman back then had enough money to lend some to the neighbors. She would go out of the house sometimes to collect payment, with a little interest. We didn't need whatever extra the interest could bring; the man earned enough for the school fees and daily necessities. But still it was something to fall back on, she had once said.

It was raining that night and we had to sleep again in the living room. It must have been about eight o'clock. We were all there, the man and woman sleeping beside each other, and I on the sofa. The lamp was switched on, the room dim except on where the orange light could cast its glow.

The woman suddenly woke up because her phone vibrated. She read the message, scratched her head, then stood up and got dressed. I pretended to be asleep.

She went out of the house.

Later, perhaps after thirty minutes, the man woke up. He had switched on the bright light, which gave me an excuse not to pretend to be sleeping.

"Saan Mommy mo?" he asked, his voice grim. He was looking at her phone which she had left on the table.

I told him I didn't know.

He didn't say anything further. He switched on the TV, opened the fridge, and retrieved a bottle of beer. Then he dragged the center table in front of another sofa, where he sat and drank without saying anything. He watched the evening news. I knew he wanted to call her, but that wouldn't work if her phone was here.

The woman told me once before how ironic it was that the man should be jealous. He had after all sired so many children, that he would give different answers when asked how many were there. There was also that time when she found lipstick on his shirt; another time there was blood in his underwear.

"Sometimes," she had told me, "I felt like your Dad's accusing me of the things he does himself."

There was a time once when he called to say he would join his Boss on a three-day vacation out of town, but then a few hours later he was pulling up in front of the house. "It feels like he was testing me," she told me.

I could see, that night, that the woman wasn't acing the test. The man had this shadowed look in his eyes. He drank more noisily. He laid the glass on the table with a bang that was louder than the last time.

"Nasaan na kaya ang Mommy mo?

"Gago siya ah."

"Di man lang nagpapaalam."

"Sino kayang kikitain niya?"

I didn't respond. I had no idea, or perhaps I had, but I was so scared that I just chose to lie there on the sofa, pretending then to have fallen asleep.

At around ten o'clock, we both heard the gate being opened, and then the front door being unlocked.

The man stood up from the sofa. The woman opened the door, shaking the rain off the umbrella. She said, "Dad…"

She wasn't able to continue.

The man had walked to her. After forming a solid fist out of his huge hand, he punched her in the stomach. The umbrella fell from her hands.

Then he took her by the neck and dragged her to the mattress, which was then beside the center table he had moved. The woman was too stunned she couldn't protest.

He pushed her to the mattress, the back of her head almost banging on the edge of the solid *narra* table. She was thrown on the mattress. He went on top of her and I watched, just watched, as he squeezed her neck again.

He squeezed hard. I could see her hands, her tired, veined hands, trying to stop the man, to no avail. Strands of her hair were splayed on a pillow, some on her face. Her hands on his thick hands, trying to stop him from choking her. I saw that. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't even a teenager; I was still in grade school. I was still struggling to get passing scores in my division window cards, I still haven't found reasons to doubt our CLE lessons, and I cry easily at the slightest provocation. What was happening didn't make sense. Not while it was happening, no. I just lay there on the sofa watching them. There were choking sounds coming from her mouth, her face

becoming redder and redder, and her eyes bulging and shining as tears welled up either from the actual hurt or pure shock.

The man: "Saan ka galing, ha?"

The woman: "Aaaack… aaccckk…"

"Sino 'yang kinita mo?"

"Aaaaa… daaa…aaaack."

It seemed like a lifetime. He was about to become a murderer.

He let her go eventually.

The woman took a deep, deep breath. And then coughed, clawing at her throat. She was crying then, openly, the man and I could see that. And I was certain what I felt then: fear and hatred so deep, that looking back now it made me wonder how the child that I was could harbor such anger. I had wanted to cry, too, cry with the woman who was standing up and not saying anything to the man. But I was too scared and too occupied with thoughts of hurting the man that I could only lie there, watching the man look at her still with rage, and the woman, red-faced, coughing, hair disheveled. She walked to the bedroom with its leaking ceiling, and later emerged with a bag. She walked out and into the rain without saying anything.

The man went to the gate to see that it was properly closed long after the woman had left. When he got back to his sofa, he said, without looking at me, "Gago 'yang Mommy mo."

That was years before the reconstruction of the house. When the second and third floors were finished, the woman told me that the night she went out into the rain she went to her sister in Muntinlupa, who tried to convince her to leave the man. She didn't take the advice.

"Imagine if I had left, or if I left with you," she told me while having supper. The man was at work. She looked at our newly constructed house,

waving at the new rooms, bathrooms, and rooftop. "We wouldn't have this. We would be renting in a squatter's area."

I just nodded because, like her, I believed I had no choice.

When I was in college, I did for my thesis a semiotic study of the photographs of the victims of the drug war. I looked into how they were framed, and how we understood these pictures with respect to their position in the broadsheet front pages, even how they were captioned. I once asked the man if he could look into the stash of his Boss's old newspapers for certain editions. He would come home on certain nights handing me a paper or two.

One night he noticed the pattern, and so he asked what I'll be using them for.

"It's for my thesis," I said.

He didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, "Huwag kang magsulat laban kay D—ha? Loyalista ako."

I said, "Okay."

When I had my own job, he discovered how to use Facebook through his phone. At night he would lie on the mattress in our living room with the woman, watching videos of press conferences. Despite having a room of their own, they still preferred to sleep in the living room. He would fall asleep sometimes with the video playing, the voice of his swearing politico droning in the room, from the phone on his chest.

My name belonged to the man, who had been in the marines, in a troop that, according to him, fought wars in the South. His real name is Gregorio. He said he fought beside Yanks who couldn't pronounce the

syllables he was baptized with, and who came up instead with "George" to address him.

The woman was supposed to give me two names, but his nickname was the one which ended up on my birth certificate.

One night the man's car had to be left in a repair shop and he had to commute home from work. On the street leading to ours there was just one lamplight on, no cars around, no other person in sight. That was around midnight. He he had to come home late because he had to wait for the Boss's day to end. Thus, he was walking alone on a dark street, a mere couple of minutes from our house.

The man was superstitious, so he was quite happy to see a woman approaching from the direction he was heading to. Ate Linda, he thought. Ate Linda was an old woman who lived in our street selling insurance to neighbors as a sideline, while minding her own garden, which was the best garden in the neighborhood for she had a wide lot and a gardener to look after it.

The man thought of starting a conversation with Ate Linda, perhaps greeting her a good evening, and telling her how spooky the road became at night.

As they approached each other, he began thinking of what to say to her when he noticed that the old woman's face was hidden by her hair. And there was something bizarre about the way she walked.

They passed by each other without saying anything.

A few seconds later, the man realized what was wrong. He looked back at the woman, who was still moving away from him, her back to him.

It wasn't Ate Linda.

It was another person, dressed in white, floating—no, gliding—on the concrete road.

The man ran to the house to tell the story to his wife, who told me this story.

A friend and I once joined this loose group in the university, a jogging club. An unrecognized org with a spontaneous socmed genesis. Its members come from different colleges, and they usually meet on Fridays at around six to jog around the open field, each at his or her own pace. My friend and I attended a few meetings, and I was pretty sure that not long after we stopped attending the group was dissolved. Despite this, my friend and I became friends with the people in this group.

In one of the evenings after jogging with the org, my phone rang. My friend and I were on our way to the pavilion where we would change into clean clothes. The sun had already set, so the campus was lit by then with orange lamps. I was tired, and I was expecting to sleep in the bus on the way home. When I checked my phone, I was surprised to see that it was the woman calling. She hadn't ever called me before while I was in school, unless I had failed beforehand to give her a reason for being late. But I had told her about the jogging club, and I thought she should have been getting used by now to the Friday evenings when I went home late. So, why the phone call?

"Hello?"

"Kuya, nasa school ka pa?"

I told her I was, but also about to go home.

"Anak, huwag ka muna umuwi ha? Diretso ka muna dito sa Heart Center. Inatake daddy mo."

I didn't know what to say. So I said, "Okay po."

"Huwag ka mag-alala anak, ayos naman Daddy mo. Kailangan lang niya munang ma-confine. Daan ka muna dito, ha? Ingat ka."

I said okay before pocketing my phone.

My friend didn't ask me what the call was about, but I still informed her as we walked to the pavilion.

"Oh no," she said. There was genuine worry in her eyes, as if she knew the man, as if there was any real reason to worry. "I hope he's alright."

"I hope so too," I said.

I was given directions as I hadn't been to the Heart Center before. What struck me, upon first entering its premises, was this monument suggesting the veins and aorta of the human heart in the middle of its driveway. I had a good look at the thing before going inside the hospital.

The man was sharing a room with another patient, a curtain separating them. In the man's part of the room was the woman and Evelyn, my half-sister, having a conversation with the man, who was awake, lying on the hospital bed with his head slightly elevated. They all said hi to me, which I returned as was expected. I went to the man and touched the back of his hand to my forehead, and did the same thing to the woman. As was expected. Evelyn and I exchanged tepid smiles.

Evelyn had a child of her own by then. Her mother was what one would call the original, legal wife. The man had not been satisfied with one and so he had others, a chain of other women, until he found his way to the life of the woman from whose womb I had popped out. His relations to the children before me were, at best, a curious one. Some harbored ill thoughts to the point of employing legal tactics to milk him off his money. The others cared, like Ate Evelyn, who decided to leave her own child in Malabon in the care of another relative to attend to the man after the woman had phoned her to tell her the news. The same way she had called me earlier.

"Inatake ako anak, eh," the man said. There was something soft in his voice which sounded alien to me. Was he getting weak? I noticed, then, under the wan hospital light, the bags under his eyes, and he short white hairs on his scalp. Did the thing that had happened to him made him less than what he was?

I didn't know what to say. I just nodded and smiled awkwardly, opting to sit on a corner without saying anything, as the three resumed talking about the past as if the present wasn't much worth talking about.

From what I gathered much later, the man was in his Boss's house when it happened. It was fortunate that the Boss hadn't been busy, thus the bodyguards and drivers were all in the house. He was just sitting on a chair when he said he felt some weird sensation in his chest; a little later the guards and the drivers saw him faint. They took him to the hospital, the bills to be taken care of by the Boss.

While they talked I noticed the man looking at the others in the room, including myself. As if trying to memorize our faces. From time to time he would repeat his line, "Inatake ako anak, eh."

I had heard it the first time. Why would he say that again and again?

Later, I took the woman aside and told her that I had assignments to do.

"Can't you say anything to your Dad? Perhaps give him a hug?" she said after I told her.

"I don't see any need for that," I said.

She sighed. Then she told the man that I had to go home. After being given some reminders about what to do in the house, what to switch off and what not to forget closing, I went out the hospital doors.

I walked again on that driveway with its heart veins on a pedestal. A few months earlier, our Biology prof had taken the class to the school's

science museum, where he showed us a preserved corpse on a table. The body was cut open from throat to crotch. The prof lifted with a hemostat a piece out of the smorgasbord of dried organs. "This is the heart," he said. The thing was shriveled, like a raisin the size of a fist, and suddenly the smell of formalin became so sharp I thought I might faint.

I had joined the jogging club due to the fear that my heart would turn out to be such an ugly sight one day. When I ran, I could feel my heart. An assertion: I am alive. Somewhere in my chest was an organ pumping blood to where it should be.

The thing at the pedestal in the hospital driveway was still, of course. As expected. It was huge, but it served little purpose.

I waited for a cab by the avenue in front of the hospital. As the taxi took me to the house, I marveled at how a person could feel his own heartbeat, if he took the time to listen. And how one could sometimes will the self not to feel.

Here's something that kept me up that night after my visit to the Heart Center. The left side of the building was designed like a cross. It was imposing, this cross, like a monolith to welcome those who had the gall to enter.

I recently chanced upon an article about the building's history, and I learned that it was part of the slew of infrastructures built in the 70s and 80s.

There was a phrase used by scholars to critique the rationale of the hospital, along with the other buildings built during that time: "Edifice Complex."

The Heart Center was designed by a man named Jorge. The style is aptly called "Brutalism."

I began writing horror stories in high school, after watching a host of gore porn films. I was both repulsed by and fascinated with the shock, the way men and women were split in halves on the screen, the way they bled, the shape of guts. *Saw, Final Destination, Wrong Turn.*

Back then, whenever I wrote, the words "knife" and "blood" and "kill" would find their way to whatever world I was creating. I would print these stories and staple them. At school, I would ask some friends for feedback, and they would tell me they were gruesome.

That was almost a decade ago. I realized long ago how cheap the trick was.

In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noel Carroll enumerates the characteristics of stories that belong to the genre: (1) there must be a monster, and (2) the character/s should react to this monster with horror and revulsion. It is called "horror," because the way the characters feel runs parallel to what the readers should feel. There are other aspects but these two are the most pertinent.

When I write now, I steer clear of fantastic beings. I tone down the blood and guts.

The everyday becomes repulsive. My monsters are neither winged nor fanged. But, to myself, they are none the less horrifying.

My first book was a collection of dark horror stories. When it was released the man and woman bragged about it to their friends. They were happy. I think they still are, because they have yet to read it.

Weeks after the man's heart attack, after he was released from the hospital and allowed to go back to work, the woman told me something the man told her the night I went to the hospital.

"Your Dad thinks you don't care," she said. "It's like you weren't sad, like you didn't feel anything after learning that he almost died."

I told her not to be dramatic. "Of course, I care," I said. "What kind of son doesn't care?"

Yes. What kind of son, indeed?

There's this book titled *Waking the Dead and Other Horror Stories* written by Yvette Tan. There are monsters in it, but the "And Other Horror Stories" turned out to be a lie.

I am thinking of the piece called "Daddy." The whole thing had the air of nonfiction, and I have assumed that it was either the author's actual experiences, or some flight of fancy caused by grief. The protagonist, who also happened to be named Yvette Tan, received a phone call from her dead father. The first time it happened she recognized him at once, but the call was just long enough for her to hear him say her name. The second time was pretty much the same, although this gave her time to think of the things she would ask him should he call a third time. The third time, a conversation happened. She said they—the entire family—miss him. He said he missed them too, but really, the reason why he called was just to tell her not to "forget." They exchanged *I love yous* in the end before the narrative was neatly tied up with an epiphany.

A scholar once said that a horror story must have a monster and that monster must be horrifying and repulsive. The voice of the father in "Daddy"

would be the closest to what a monster would have. But "Daddy" wasn't a monster. "Daddy" was a ghost, but he wasn't a threat, he wasn't repulsive.

I was disappointed. The author's "Daddy" was not a monster.

Here's another contradiction. The woman had for many times now talked to me, confessing how she wanted to leave the man, for she couldn't bear the way he yelled at her, the way he commanded her to do things, like she was hired help in our own house; the way, for many years, she had to tell him what she was doing, even if she hadn't gone anywhere. She was tired. But she doesn't want to leave.

I wanted to ask her, "Why?"

I didn't, because I was afraid she would say something along the line of "I love him."

I wouldn't understand.

The man once asked if I have any film saved as a file, something he could watch with his beer and *pulutan*. He had bought a new flat screen TV. This one had a port at the back where a flash drive could be plugged, from where files could be read and be viewed through the screen.

I have been used to the weekends when he would tell me to feed the DVD player with what he called "bala," or simply put, a disc. There wasn't much range in his taste for movies: action and war films. These films, though set in battlegrounds and profuse with bullets, weren't remarkably violent or extremely well-received. *Rules of Engagement*, *Missing in Action*, *Hard To Kill*, some forgettable James Bond iterations. Escapist enough to thrill but not to upset. Weekend afternoons he would be in the living room, the stereos booming with simulated tank blasts and gunfire.

When he asked for my contribution to these afternoons, I didn't think twice. I transferred to my flash drive a copy of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, which I had just watched the week before. It was a war film, I had thought, he would certainly like this one.

The first few minutes, it was okay. He was having a good time with his peanuts and Pale Pilsen. I had a room of my own upstairs by then, but I would come down from time to time to see what part of the film he was watching . He was transfixed. The entire fifty-five-inches screen was filled with a pale bluish-gray color as the boats with Tom Hanks as Capt. John Miller and other soldiers bobbed towards Omaha.

And then came the beach landing. D-day, heavy artillery. What should one expect? The camera was shaky, the Germans relentless in their salvoes, American soldiers jumping off the boat without even reaching the shore. Bullets under water, men drowned by the weight of the equipment strapped to their body. Some of those fortunate enough to reach the beach were blown to pieces. At one point, Capt. John Miller watched as a soldier stood in the middle of recently dead men, looking for the arm he had lost, finding it alas, picking it up with his good hand, and walking elsewhere to take cover. In another scene, a soldier lay on the sand, crying for his "Mama!" as his guts spilled out of his body, literally. Then there were these few seconds when the captain came across a man severely injured from a gunshot. The captain searched for a medic and, failing to find one, decided to drag the man to safety himself. While doing this, some sort of rocket blasted nearby, knocking him off his feet. When he regained his balance, he continued dragging the man, only to realize, later, that the latter was cut in half by the explosion. The man unmoving, entrails on the sand. A look of shock came over the captain.

The man was looking for war films, so I gave him a war film.

Later, back in my room, the droning of the stereo suddenly stopped. It was quiet again. When I went down, the man told me, "Daming namamatay, Kuya."

He had stopped the film halfway through. On the screen now was a local channel, showing an afternoon variety show with its gyrating dancers and hysterical hosts.

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He had been in the marines before and, from what I had gathered, he was some sort of a medic. He knew how to fire a gun though. He had a wound above an ankle acquired in a battle. There was a scar, but however deep a non-fatal wound would be, it would always find a way to heal.

And it healed.

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I was in Dumaguete for a writers' workshop when a close friend, who was also a classmate, called from Manila to tell me the news. "P're, we're graduating with honors," he said.

"Are you sure? How did you know?"

"We have seen the list here in the Dean's Office. You're graduating *magna cum laude*!"

I thanked him for telling me the news, congratulated him, and said that I was happy for both of us. I stood for a while at the balcony of the house I was occupying with other writing fellows. I took a deep breath of the fresh cold air of Camp Lookout. It was a nice morning.

Days later I had to submit a bio-note for an anthology where our poems would appear. My co-fellow read what I had typed and told me that I should include the fact that I had finished with honors.

"You worked hard for it," he said.

I agreed, but I told him it was irrelevant. "I don't think I need to announce it to everyone."

Back in Manila, I reminded myself not to tell anyone else about my graduating with honors, not even my family. I made myself believe that, while it certainly was something, it was hardly impressive, at least for certain people. Perhaps the woman would appreciate it, but the man? I doubted it.

A week prior to graduation rites, the woman, as expected, told me that we had to go out to buy what I would wear for the big day. And since I had expected this, I decided that I would tell her that day about the news I had learned back in Dumaguete and kept to myself for weeks.

To my surprise though, the man said he would go with us, for he had to buy a new belt.

So the three of us went off to the nearby mall. After having chosen a pair of pants and long-sleeved, button-down shirt for me, the woman decided that we must eat before heading home. The original plan was to tell her the news during this time of the day, after doing the shopping. The goal was to spare myself the embarrassment, since the woman had the tendency to be emotional when caught by surprise, and I didn't want any spotlight on me during graduation.

I didn't expect that the man would be there too, so for a while I thought of further holding back. But then I told myself that today was much better than on the big day.

We were in the middle of the meal. I said, "Mom, Dad…"

Then I told them.

The woman was beaming. She said she wouldn't be able to finish eating because of happiness. "Congratulations, Kuya!"

The man stopped eating as well and smiled. There was unease, though, in the way he looked around the fast-food joint and fidgeted on his seat. Then he said, "I have to go to the bathroom."

The woman and I had a pleasant conversation while he was away. She congratulated me again, told me how happy and proud she was.

When the man came back we all resumed eating. And then suddenly, after looking at the man for a while, the woman said, "Umiyak si Daddy, oh. Nag-CR ka para umiyak, 'no?"

I looked at the man, and he could no deny it. I hadn't noticed it at first, but when the woman pointed it out, I realized that his eyes were red.

"Ayokong umiyak dito," he said, sniffling.

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We adopted a dog. A year later, we adopted another.

The first one was a cross between a pitbull and a terrier. The other one, a shih tzu. They were cute and adorable as dogs were supposed to be, but also annoying, since we knew nothing about training dogs. We had no idea on what to do to stop them from soiling the doormats, which at times annoyed the man.

I was worried. I feared that one day I would go home, the dogs missing, the man and his friends drinking, sitting around a platter of warm fried meat.

❧

There was no need to worry. The dogs have been with us for years now, and the man has never laid his hand on them in any way that would hurt or turn them into *pulutan*. I went downstairs one night and saw that the shih tzu was at his feet, sleeping, while the other lay beside him on the mattress, his hand on its belly as they snored, almost in unison.

When the pandemic broke out, the man was forced to live alone inside a room in the barracks furnished by his Boss. The barracks had other rooms for the other guards, drivers, and personnel, but there was a directive to limit their movements inside just to be safe.

He didn't go home for many weeks because of the lockdown. After a short day with the Boss, he would return to his room. One day, a kitten roaming the barracks decided to walk inside his room. At first, he just fed it, dropping morsels of rice and strips of meat on the floor. It would walk inside his room in the succeeding days, and the man would still feed it. Then one day it wasn't contented on just being fed. It began sleeping with the man on his barracks bed. He would have his short shifts with the Boss, when his services were necessary, and then at the end of the day he would stay in his room, perhaps watching TV, the cat curled up beside him.

That was the start of a friendship. Whenever he would call the woman he wouldn't just tell her about his day, but also how the cat was: how much of his own food he had fed her, or if she had decided not to stay in his room for the night.

When the lockdown eased up, he was able to go home to us, but at times I would hear him tell the woman, "Kuamain na kaya si Mingming?" or "Nasaan na kaya siya?"

One day, while the man was at work, the woman told me that he was planning to bring the cat to our house.

"Naisip kaya niya 'yung mga aso?" the woman said.

I asked her why was he planning to do that.

She told me that the cat was sick, and the man said it needed someone to take care of it. "Eh madalas na wala siya ngayon sa barracks nila, eh. Busy na Boss niya."

When he finally arrived from work after that conversation, he got out of the car holding a steel cage where the cat sat supine. It was a white cat with gray spots all over it.

The cat was taken out of the cage and was placed on a rag on top of a table at the third floor. Despite the freedom to move around, it just sat there on the rag for much of the day. When the man went home in the days that followed, the first thing he would do was to go up to the third floor, and call: "Mingmiiiiing…mingmiiiiiing…"

We could hear his voice, which he had changed for a while to sound like a screeching kettle. The sound wasn't booming; it floated in the house, carried only by waves and not solid vibrations.

The cat wasn't well. One day, he came down to the living room, morose, telling us, "Parang 'di na kakayanin ni Mingming."

He had guessed that the cat was poisoned. The barracks was disinfected; she must have ingested something while he was away. For days, he would go upstairs, check on the animal, only to come down later quiet and worried, as if expecting it to die.

But the woman was eager to nurse it back to life; despite her fears that the cat being in the house would cause chaos with the two dogs, she had diligently fed it and stayed with it upstairs when she was done with her chores. It was no wonder that one day Mingming was strong enough, not only to stand on the table, but to leave it and even go downstairs. The dogs feared her, so there wasn't much problem about any furniture being broken due to a squabble. She would usually stay at the top of the second floor stairs, and when she would hear the man calling her, she would run downstairs where the man would pick her up and rain kisses on her.

The dogs were used to sleeping with the man and woman on the mattress in the living room. We all felt their unease though whenever the

cat was downstairs, so the man, whenever he was allowed by the Boss to go home, slept in one of the rooms on the second floor, where the cat would curl up beside him.

When he couldn't go home, the cat would sleep in front of the door of the room where she and the man would stay at night.

There was something about the way the cat looked at everyone, and I wasn't sure if the same could be said of all cats. When I looked at our dogs there was something in their eyes that told me they needed us, their humans. But then this cat was something else. It was barely a year old, but it had the stare of an old matriarch with reasons to disdain everything. Whenever I passed it by (it couldn't be helped: she stayed at the room in front of mine), it would purr, its neck strained, as if expecting me to approach and she had to prepare her claws for an attack.

I was way past the age when this would have scared me. Yes, I was bothered, but more than that, I would remember the afternoon when another cat sank its teeth on my toe. The shock was still fresh, some phantom pain somewhere. Then I would remember the afternoon when I dropped a cat from the third floor to the first floor. In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," a man gouged the eyes of his own pet out of perverseness. He said, "It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the offending brute."

I looked at my father's cat. It just sat there looking at me with its fierce eyes, silent. I became sharply aware of my power over the animal. Then I told myself that whatever I was intending to do wasn't born out of

perverseness. I had my reasons: to avenge the child that I was for the hurt was only one of them. The more urgent one was this: I wonder how the man would take it when his Mingming was turned into something else.

I don't drink much, but I could eat *pulutan* too.

I approached it—I could see it breathing, its white and gray paws.

"This wouldn't hurt, Mingming," I said as I leaned towards it.

The monsters in my first book were not people like the man, or people the man adored. I only realized this upon having read the stories again much later. Most of my protagonists were young men at the cusp of adulthood, tortured by the times, by his friends, by the people like the man.

The man was proud when he first held my book. He bragged about it to his friends, and asked me to furnish a copy for his Boss. I signed the copies. No one until now had told me what they thought about the book, except for the publisher and the people I had asked blurbs from.

I must be quite lucky, for the man and woman had not much interest in reading either. Though they were proud. The woman even once said, "Ang anak natin, writer na. Sino'ng mag-aakala?"

I think I'm lucky, the three of us were. They wouldn't know that the monsters in my book were corpses bolted in a crate inside people like myself.

"This wouldn't hurt, Mingming," I said, as I leaned towards the cat.

Then I knelt.

The cat let my hands scratch its head, then its belly. And before long the hostility disappeared from her eyes. It purred, its voice soft.

Then I said, making my own voice small, the way the man did, "Mingmiiiiing…Mingmiiiiing."

The man is my father.

He is my old man, but I am not him.