

BODY COUNT: 1

Rye Antonio

Adrian sank sullenly into his makeshift chair as he watched the city fall asleep. The late afternoon sun cast a warm tinge over the tall corporate buildings. His eyes traced the endless roads that stretched across and around the asphalt jungle like veins. Above the drowsy cityscape was the most beautiful and chaotic sunset he had ever seen. After rubbing his eyes, the view outside almost looked like a painting.

He heard a screeching noise, a painful, grating sound coming from somewhere unknown. But still, he was unable to turn away.

The vivid colors enveloped the entire metropolis and made everything look like it was burning. From the corner of his eye, he saw a vague shape—a grotesque silhouette flying above the buildings. He looked closer and saw a humped humanoid figure with only half a body, entrails dangling.

Clouds began to recede with surreal speed as the chaotic sunset began to make way for a dusky sky speckled with white stars. A celestial time lapse that Adrian perceived to be happening in real time. City lights blazed in staccato sequence across the towers of glass and metal, now mirroring the dots of light above. It did not look beautiful the way nightfall over silent cityscapes ought to be. Too much noise on top of a menacing red and bruised purple. Like a stab wound.

Instead of feeling fear, the young man grew accustomed to the sight. After all, these were simply a sign of the times. Disturbing, dying, apocalyptic.

The ringing evolved into the creature's distant screech, getting nearer and nearer. The screech turned into a scream.

Adrian blinked, hard. The haunting cityscape was gone, replaced by a barren room with peeling wallpaper. As his eyes adjusted to reality, he noticed small dust particles floating near his face, the streak of sunlight revealing their presence. Warmth traced soft skin untouched by hard labor, lighting up hazel eyes, a color pale enough to notice under the sun, but common enough to never really be noticed at all.

Gone was the nightmarish vision that had played out before him. He attempted to blink away the nightmare, rapidly shutting his eyelids like an old camera shuttering its lens. Everything around him had returned to relative normalcy, the only anomaly being his presence in a tiny bed-space located miles away from his family's sizeable estate in Alabang.

His visions had been getting longer and longer. The visceral scenes playing out in his mind had slowly crept into his waking consciousness, now even becoming audible. He could have sworn he really had heard a scream.

Another loud scream suddenly burst through outside his window.

Startled once more, he quickly looked around him, suddenly conscious of his heart beating softly.

His familiarity with his surroundings slowly returned, as he snapped out of his reverie and focused on the plain bed-space he has been renting. The screaming outside continued.

Before he could be bothered to even glance out of the window, he had to regain his bearings. He took deep breaths while staring at the brown wallpaper which had begun to peel off the walls.

In his head, he named the colors he could see in the room, a trick that allowed him to evade the images plaguing his thoughts, and focus. *Brown. Dark brown. White. Dirty white. Grayish yellow.* The girlish screams stopped, followed by a man's bemused laughter.

Adrian finally turned to his actual bedroom window, looking past its dusty windowsills and foggy glass. Outside this dirty window was not a haunting cityscape, but a patchy yard with dead grass, an empty commercial road, and his landlord trying to teach his daughter how to behead a chicken.

Adrian watched in idle fascination as the young woman, whom he now recognized as Alma, attempted to strike the screaming chicken again, the poor creature bleeding out from an incomplete slit on its throat. It was probably not the first unfortunate chicken on the receiving end of her hesitant slashing and, knowing how pushy her father was, it probably wouldn't be the last.

Manong Pabs, the proud owner of the up and down bed-space complex and Alma's father, scratched the back of his head. He gave Alma a pat on the back which, given how heavy handed- he was, might have felt more like an encouraging shove. The old man moved his hand like a small axe, swiftly chopping the air to show Alma the proper swing—quick and easy. Just as Alma repositioned the axe and squinted in anticipation of its landing, Adrian turned away from the window.

He was still reeling from his nightmare. Scattered in his room were a box of disposable facemasks, two small alcohol sprays, an old backpack, and his personal laptop. Not a lot of things, but in this tiny room he now called a home—or temporary residence—it's not like anything else could fit.

Adrian's legs found the low stool by the window instinctively, as he has done every day for the past week, and he lowered himself against the peeling brown walls.

These were strange times, even for a strange young man such as Adrian. Though like him, times were strange in a way that the strangeness of it all could still be pushed down. Down, down, down underneath new normal advertising and lifestyle adjustments. But as the current situation worsened, so did the strangeness within Adrian threaten to burst.

The world had plunged headfirst into a global pandemic because of a highly contagious respiratory virus, but it was a different disease that Adrian felt brewing inside of him.

It was not that he was particularly eccentric or hermit-like. He had a couple of good friends. He wore neutral-colored polo shirts and tan shorts. He was updated with everything happening online. He was even pretty good at basketball, even though he never made it to the varsity team. He used to sneak out to bars and malls with friends on school days, back when such merriment couldn't spread the disease or cause death. Just an average high-school student.

But underneath his ordinary affect was a boy with a fascination. A lot of people have fascinations, of that he was sure. Another fact he regarded with certainty though was that his particular fascination was not one he could easily make public. Adrian knew that his obsession with serial killers was, for lack of a better term, creepy. If not downright frightening.

There were times Adrian questioned his fascination. Sometimes, he would even ponder whether he himself had the inclination to act the same way as they do. To kill. To keep killing until caught. He used to shake his head and call himself a lunatic for even considering it. He was normal. Through and through and through. And yet, here he was miles away from home, waiting for the opportunity to snap.

His backpack, which used to contain textbooks and school supplies, now stored his small collection of weapons, a pair of gloves, a bit of cash, and a copy of *The Bundy Murders*.

Most normal people probably didn't wonder if they were serial killers, Adrian thought to himself. They probably read these crime stories with horror, like watching a train wreck and being unable to peel their eyes away. Adrian tried to look at it through a more optimistic lens by following

the analogy that perhaps he just had a heightened interest in looking at the tragic remains of a wreckage. But, when he really thought about it, someone who actively seeks out train wrecks just to morbidly delight in the aftermath would fall under the same category of “creepy, if not downright horrifying.”

But serial-killer-in-waiting or not, running away during a global pandemic was still a dangerous risk on his part. He knew. As he sat on the low stool he refused to dignify by calling a functioning chair, he consciously thought to himself that this was not the best of plans nor the best of times.

But if murderers could wing a full-on five-body-count murder spree in a single evening, then he would be fine as long as he wasn't too careless. His mindset just had to be in the right state.

As it was, the realization that it only took a contagious sickness to wreak havoc on the thin veneer of civilization was already inspiring a sort of transformation within Adrian. The ease with which the threads of the social construct could be undone started to make sense. Behind him, he felt a presence.

The sound of frantic footsteps tapping against marble filled the room. Never mind that Adrian's floor was made of fake-wood flooring, or that the man presumably making the noise did not exist in that room until that very moment.

Adrian didn't need to turn around to know there wasn't anyone there, not really.

“How can anything be solid if nothing is real?” the man drawled in a low American accent, uttering cryptic pronouncements that sounded like they should have made sense. David Berkowitz was not as straightforward as his contemporary murderers, but Adrian could barely control which one of these imaginary guests came out these days, so it would seem he was stuck with the infuriatingly ambiguous Son of Sam, as David was named by the press during the height of his killing sprees.

Deep in thought, Adrian stared outside the window to contemplate the situation. He felt the presence move to his side, broad shoulders pressed against his thin frame. Adrian could not bear to look at the apparition directly, shivering at the thought of seeing an empty smile and menacingly dark eyes that lingered. But there was a thrilling pulse at the tips of the boy's fingers at feeling the man's heavy and ominous presence.

Moving from Adrian's side, the Son of Sam's reflection began to appear in the foggy window glass, a hazy ghost of a pasty white man, who once got away with killing people in increasing succession, frequency, and cruelty until he was caught. His lazy, deep-seated eyes were set under thin, almost connecting eyebrows, which made his expression appear permanently half-asleep, and his face completely devoid of any sort of emotion. The hooked nose, droopy smirk, and receding hairline under a messy curl of dark hair did not help to make him look any more trustworthy. This sleazy face now seemed to examine Adrian's boyish features.

Adrian's hands began to sweat. His heart was thumping. Would it not take long before his first murder?

For a moment, the haze that was David Berkowitz's visage turned sharp. Adrian looked at the murderer's face eye to eye. They were only a few inches apart. Dark eyes began to move towards the light. All those nights of casually scrolling past this man's photos culminating into this terrifyingly lucid moment.

The killer smile vanished, and the killer opened his mouth to say something or scream. Adrian flinched in anticipation.

Adrian's deep reverie was broken by a persistent knocking on the door. He shakily turned around and made his way to the door. All it took was two steps, given the size of his tiny bed-space. Each step confirming that there was no one else inside the room but him.

He opened the door slightly. Through the small crack, he saw the landlord's daughter, whom he had witnessed attempting and failing to chop a chicken's head off earlier.

"Good morning, Adrian!" Alma greeted him enthusiastically. It appeared that she had changed clothes, at least. Instead of the stained yellow top, she now sported a loose pink shirt and brown shorts. Alma's preppy silhouette radiated energy. She had a shapely body despite her short stature, and her hair was often styled into a tight ponytail. Even behind the facemask Adrian could make out her smile, probably because it was a grin that always showed in her big, bright eyes.

"G-good morning." Adrian croaked, his voice still raspy from sleep.

Alma met his eyes often. The boy felt it impossible to have a casual conversation with her without his feeling that she was trying to connect. And she would stare intently into his eyes.

Adrian broke eye contact, unable to pinpoint why Alma's gaze was uncomfortably intense.

"*May mainit na pan de sal sa lamesa, kuha ka lang ha!*" Alma said sweetly. She was always enthusiastic, as if everything she said was punctuated by an exclamation point.

"Thank you." Adrian managed to say before swiftly closing the door. Alma was still about to say something else, but Adrian had already closed off their only line of communication.

Alma sighed in defeat. This was not as simple as she thought. Thankfully, she saw the door by the end of the hall open. She called out to the figure that emerged from the bedroom.

Manong Pabs really needed to install thicker walls for anyone in this house to be given any sort of privacy, Adrian thought to himself, as he as he pressed his ears against the thin door of his room in an attempt to

eavesdrop on Alma's conversation. Adrian heard her speaking to someone, a man. Maybe her father, or her brother.

He could sort of make out Alma's exasperation, but with a loud, bubbly girl like her it was quite hard to tell. Despite the tone and volume of her voice, she could just as well be having a casual conversation about the fresh *pan de sal* she had prepared at the shared dining table downstairs.

Adrian felt his stomach grumbling at the thought of biting into the warm bread and gulping it down with cold milk. He was pretty sure that milk was unlikely to be found inside the shared refrigerator; he could make do with semi-fresh bread and tap water.

Wanting to avoid any interactions with the family or any other boarders (though he was kind of sure he was the only one renting at this point) he decided to use his laptop first, and sneak off with some left-over bread after an hour or two, when everyone else had left to do whatever it was they did. It did not occur to him that there might not be any *pan de sal* left if he waited too long.

He sat down on his low stool and opened his laptop, which he had left lying around on the floor. He stayed inside his room the whole day, so there wasn't really any risk of his things being stolen under his nose. Opening his laptop, he connected to the public Wi-Fi, which surprisingly reached the old bed-space complex.

Adrian decided to keep his VPN off. It's normally recommended to keep VPNs on when using public connections to maintain complete privacy, but he knew for sure that no one in this dump checked the Wi-Fi's stored data. Even at his old home where he kept his security VPN on to mask his Internet usage, no one really bothered to go through the data stored on their communal Wi-Fi.

He opened his main social media account to check up on his parents. It would seem they had begun to panic, bringing the search for him

to a public forum, instead of keeping it private between immediate family and local law enforcement. He scrolled down post upon post of his photos, reading the messages of support swelling the comment section from both well-wishers and rumor-mongers alike.

If the police couldn't even find him, they probably would not suspect him once he decided to snap. As far as they were concerned, he was another runaway teenager, lost in an apathetic sea of people in some heavily populated neighboring city or town. He could either be in Pasig or Pateros, and his parents wouldn't have a single clue.

The temptation to act on his insistent urges lingered in Adrian's head, like a fish caught on a hook, being tugged away towards a point of no return.

He closed his laptop, smiling slightly. He felt a bit of power and excitement course through him. It was time for breakfast.

Slowly, Adrian opened his door. Sensing no sign of anyone else, he slipped out into the narrow corridor where the rooms were lined up along the hall. His room was the second to the last at the end of the hall. The last room which had a shared wall with his bed-space was owned by Manuel, Alma's brother.

He turned left and made his way to the top of the narrow wooden staircase. Peeking from the top of the stairs, he saw that there were no other people by the dining room. Unfortunately, the floor on the upper level was too steep for him to see if there was still bread left on the other side of the table.

Adrian decided to take a chance and scurried down the staircase. Seeing the empty dining room table elicited a disappointed groan from the starving not-yet-killer.

“O Adrian, *andito ka pala!*” Manong Pabs greeted him casually. Aside from the extra bathroom, it was the only other room downstairs. Adrian was thankful he always left his room wearing a facemask. He could always reason basic safety, instead of his unwillingness to be friendly. “Hello *po, may binahanap lang po ako,*” Adrian lied through his teeth.

At least it was Manong Pabs whom he had encountered unexpectedly. The old man was loud but pleasant, like Alma. He really did not mind them that much. It was the son, Manuel, that really pissed him off. That arrogant prick was probably off in some comp shop shouting expletives with other DOTA boys.

Adrian had a severe dislike for Manuel. He was smug for a lower middle-class punk, who barely got by with his college education. At least that’s what Adrian thought of him. He never really spoke to the older boy, but he had a pretty good nose for shady people, and that Manuel smelled just like the jerks at his school. That, and the fact he kept calling Adrian, “Edran.” He suspected that this was done on purpose.

The one to go first in Adrian’s killing spree would probably be Manuel.

Adrian did not notice that the object of his disdain was silently tinkering with wires and CPU parts underneath the stairs, casually listening in on the ensuing conversation.

“*Akyat na po ako,*” Adrian mumbled, finally settling with, “*Maglalaro lang sa laptop.*” He kicked himself internally. If there was any doubt in their minds that he wasn’t really a college student entering the next semester, his childish answer might have given him away. But Manong Pabs seemed unsurprised with this response. He just waved the boy off and gave a friendly laugh.

Adrian took this as his cue to exit and headed straight for the staircase.

“Pareho kayo ni Manny, puro kompyuter!” Manong Pabs suddenly called out. The boy stopped in his tracks and managed an awkward nod to acknowledge the old man, before going up the rickety wooden staircase. Manong Pabs sighed to himself, *“Ayun naadik na sa CompSci hanggang college.”*

Manny finally broke his silence and chuckled, mischievously smiling as he continued to work in his PC-building space tucked under the stairs. The old man stuck his tongue out at his son, who mirrored his gesture right back.

Right before Adrian could slip into his room, Alma spotted him along the narrow corridor and smiled, visibly this time, as her facemask was resting on her chin. She appeared to be carrying a crisp box, presumably something new she had bought online. *“Adrian, baka gusto mo pala sumabay sa’min ni Papa mananghalian. Magsisigang ako ng salmon! Paborito niya ‘yun e.”*

He knew they were probably just being nice to him, due to the fact that not a lot of people were renting bed-space at the moment. But pride aside, hunger tugged persistently at his stomach. And he missed the taste of a home-cooked meal. Potential murderers have needs too, it would seem.

“Ah, sige,” Adrian muttered, *“Okay lang.”*

She paused and studied his expression for a bit. Adrian thought she wanted to say something else. Eventually she just said, *“Nice. Tawagin kita kapag ready-to-eat na tayo!”*

He nodded, hoping his mask gave an impression of a polite smile despite him not making an effort to do so. He closed the door as Alma walked off to the direction of Manny’s room.

Adrian knew quite a bit about his new landlords. They weren’t exactly shy about displaying, and occasionally, even talking openly about their family dynamic. Manong Pabs was a widower who laughed too hard at

his own jokes, and spent too much on overpriced chicken feed. He bought this up and down house with his wife, who had passed away for some reason Adrian never bothered to find out. Alma, the youngest, was the heiress to this grand patch of unfertilized soil, plus the squeaky floorboards on top of it, and Manny, the eldest child, was off scraping money doing god-knows-what. Adrian sensed a bit of rivalry between the two siblings, with Alma always complaining that she could earn just as much as her brother, if it weren't for this global pandemic.

She claimed that the sudden change in the business climate had turned all of her little renovation projects into abandoned efforts, appreciated by no one but herself. She said this quite loudly, as though expecting Adrian to take notice of her DIY woodwork.

Back then, he stuttered that the newly-installed screen on the small window by the shower area looked like a good idea. She nodded her head gravely, not wanting to admit that Manny had placed it there one afternoon, while she painstakingly put double locks on all the boarding room doors.

He heard muffled talking and several doors shutting outside. He supposed that it was probably the two siblings, as they were the only ones occupying the floor with him. Adrian swiftly made his way downstairs and went through the shared kitchen. After making sure that Manong Pabs wasn't going to suddenly poke his head out from his room, or from some other entrance, he pocketed one of the worn knives from the kitchen cabinet.

His room had amassed quite a collection of potential weapons. A broken brick, a shard of glass, a wooden stick he had sharpened into a stake, and now, this knife. This did not include his handy pocketknife, which he kept at his front pocket at all times.

The fragments of his hesitant planning began to come together piece by piece. It was brewing. Soon, it would explode. He knew it, he felt it.

Would a normal person think such disturbing thoughts? It was frustrating because the documentaries he consumed could only know so much about what these murderers were thinking. Did Son of Sam's heart skip a couple of beats at the idea that he was about to go destroy his place in modern civilization by committing a crime that would alienate him forever?

Suddenly, the safety of everyone in his vicinity was hanging on a thread—one that could easily snap once he decides to test his curiosity. For a plan, Adrian wondered, what kind of a guest murderer would be able to give the best advice?

The young man squinted, trying to focus on the details of Alexander Pichushkin's life, the highly strategic Chessboard Killer, in hopes it would conjure the veteran murderer thousands of miles away from where he was imprisoned in a maximum-security prison in Russia. *Alexander Pichushkin. Born on April 9, 1974 in Moscow, Russia. Dubbed as the "Chessboard Killer," he strategically baited his victims with friendly conversations and a free cigarette.*

Adrian looked around furtively, half-expecting the Bitsa Park Maniac—another one of Alexander's monikers—to come bursting into the scene. Silence. He concentrated and tried again with eyes closed this time. *Estimated that at least 30 of his victims were within the vicinity of his home. Ten coming from his apartment complex. Frontal cortex of his brain damaged because of a childhood accident.*

Still silent. Again, Adrian thought.

Became withdrawn and hostile because of bullying. Recorded body count: 48.

Frustrated by the lack of an apparition, Adrian flicked his thumb over the kitchen knife, bitterly thinking to himself that the tough crowd at school were only aggressive within their turf and around their group. They wanted to seem hardcore, but the worst that they could think to do was dunk

some poor nerd's head into the toilet or beat him up. Adrian smirked at the thought of these self-proclaimed bad boys actually facing a real dead body. They would probably screech like little girls. Alexander Pichushkin would have agreed with him.

After all, these popular cliques only hung around back gates and gas stations, so that they could easily take advantage of any poor soul they could see from afar. Cowards. An accurate representation of them in the animal kingdom would be a swarm of scavengers, picking at something alone, weak, and vulnerable. Pathetic.

Actual predators, like lions or snakes, stalk their prey. It was a hunt based on physical strength to reinforce the natural food chain, rather than a ritual attack of vulnerable classmates for continuous domination of the school hierarchy. Predators hunt to kill, not conduct a juvenile court, sentencing a punishment of small violence and cruel laughter.

Adrian could no longer stand his own train of thought. He wanted to vomit. Hands shoving him against metal. Heavy kicks to his legs forcing him on his knees. A crowd of faces looking at him in fascination, in pity. No one dared meet his eyes. The two light pools of melted honey, going unnoticed again and again until they overflowed into a sorry, sappy stream.

He was done being sad. It was time to convert it as his fuel for rage.

The young man stashed his newfound treasure in his backpack upstairs, intending to go back downstairs to loiter in the yard. It would serve him well to have an alibi of "being out in the yard all day," should any suspicions arise from the missing knife.

Before heading downstairs, Adrian looked outside from his foggy windowsill. Seeing the dead grass stained with indeterminate animal fluids thanks to Alma's clumsily culled chickens, and the empty roads that led to recently closed-down businesses, Adrian thought to himself that even if he didn't do anything, things would continue to die, anyway.

He made his way to the dirty kitchen and opened the noisy metal door to the yard. Upon seeing the barren patch, he realized that there wasn't anything for him to sit on or occupy his time with. Unless he wanted to take one of the clucking chickens in Manong Pabs' makeshift pen and practice chopping their heads off for a fresh meal, that is. He settled for folding his arms against his chest and staring off into the road.

He began to let his mind wander, thinking about the sorry state of the world around him. Everyone was too busy pretending to be nice. Looking away. The complete lack of that basic human impulse was what Adrian found interesting in serial killers. They were self-aware. The clarity and acceptance of the evil they do and why they do it puts everyone's gray area for moral ambiguity to shame.

People were expected to do the right thing until they couldn't. And now everyone must suffer, because people were too busy pretending, and there were suckers out there who actually believed them. Like friends that run away and leave you in the mud, Adrian fumed.

Underneath the shiny promise of propriety and virtue, was the primal want to take. No amount of prestige or upper-class upbringing could hide all that natural human dirt.

Adrian felt his hand twitch at the thought.

Suddenly materializing behind him, Alma asked in jest, "*Bakit ka nakatulala?*"

Though he was expecting a different kind of interruption, Adrian managed to look reasonably unsurprised. He shrugged. "*Wala lang. Nag-iisip.*"

"*Ang talino mo naman,*" she quipped, "*laging nag-iisip.*"

Adrian cleared his throat as Alma turned away. Maybe he would spare her. Maybe.

After fifteen minutes of alibi-building, Adrian got bored and made his way back to his room. In any case, no one would probably notice the disappearance of a worn, rusty knife.

The young man pondered that while his father's tenants may occasionally seem enterprising, they had yet to actually do anything to harm him. Perhaps all of the angry babble his father was going on about, that the world outside was crueler than schoolboys who shove their classmates into dirty toilets, was just a bunch of toxic gas-lighting.

His father had said that if he kept getting bullied the problem had to lie with him, not everyone else. The thing was, Adrian thought angrily, he didn't "keep getting bullied." It was just when he entered high school. Before then, he was normal. Through and through and through! Adrian angrily kicked the low stool at the memory. He was normal, until he wasn't. Until some peacocking upperclassmen with fancier last names arbitrarily chose him as a target.

The pipe to the head, one unfortunate afternoon after P.E. class, dimmed the light in his eyes completely. Now all that was left was anger. Dark and empty, like the men he chose to imagine as heroes.

He began aggressively rummaging through his schoolbag in frustration. He pulled out the copy of *The Bundy Murders* in his hands and pressed his palms firmly against it. He was here because of a calling to do greater things with his life! Now more than ever, Adrian was sure of that.

Suddenly, the ground began to shake.

His low stool grated against the floor, his few things moving left and right along with it. This was the sign he had been waiting for—an earthquake.

Another layer of protection had placed him in the perfect situation. Screw being normal. He was now in the middle of his own origin story. The rest will be history.

Weapons, targets, modus operandi, and other random musings didn't matter anymore. The opportunity was finally here. It was time.

The first weapon he grabbed from his backpack was the rusty knife from the kitchen, which he now clutched painfully in a tight grip. Adrian ran outside his room in a rush, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He would slash the first living thing he saw. Maybe start with a rat or cat, if no unlucky human crossed his path.

In his panic caused by the pressure to find something to kill and the violently shaking floor, he ran in the wrong direction and ended up knocking down a box of computer parts in front of Manuel's room. A mess of wires now scattered helplessly, like a pile of coarse spaghetti noodles beside a toppled down Alienware CPU.

The knowledge that Manny was more dedicated to gaming than Adrian had earlier expected felt like ludicrous information to gain at this point.

He forced himself to stand and run down the staircase. As he frantically struggled towards the front door, he tried to focus and embody one last murderous spirit. *Pedro Rodriguez. Mexico in 1959... Railroad Killer? No, Angel Resendiz. Single mother... White. Brown. Stop noticing the colors! Total body count: 15. 15? Silver. Green.*

He burst through the metal doors to the yard, looking wildly from left to right, completely prepared to claim his first kill.

"Adrian, ilag!" Alma shouted. A half-beheaded chicken, blood sputtering from its exposed neck, crookedly ran towards Adrian, who was standing by the doorway. Shocked at Alma's screaming, the poultry blood fountain coming straight for him, he shrieked before sprinting away. The chicken continued to run, zeroing in on him, shifting its direction to where he was running. Adrian started to scream again at the grotesque sight of

the chicken's crooked head bouncing along. The earth continued to shake underneath their feet.

As the bloody chase carried on, the chicken continued to shoot a red, sticky mess across the patchy yard. Alma and Manny stood by the sidelines like idiots, watching the entire scene unfold, unsure of what to do. Manong Pabs fought the urge to scratch the back of his head, choosing instead to rub his temples and sigh over the shrieks of the scared boy and the death throes of the chicken.

After a few more seconds of chasing, death finally caught up with the poor creature, and Adrian's legs gave way in tandem with the chicken's. And they both dropped on the yard, Adrian crushing the chicken and putting it out of its misery as he fell to the ground.

The half-headless chicken twitched as its blood pooled underneath Adrian's unconscious body. At this point, the ground stopped shaking too. Suddenly, everything was still.

Manny accidentally let out a small chuckle. Alma punched his arm while he was mid-snicker.

"Hay naku, pauwiin na nga itong bata na 'to!" Manong Pabs exclaimed, scratching the back of his head. *"Ito kasing si Alma, gusto pa pakainin. Ano 'to, resort?"*

Alma rolled her eyes, *"Sana makakuha muna tayo ng bayad sa renta bago natin siya ipasundo sa magulang."*

"Grabe 'to o," Manny admonished his sister. *"Di naman natin kailangan."*

"Pasalamat nga siyang hindi siya ninakawan, o kung ano," Alma responded, getting annoyed at her brother, *"Renta lang naman e nakitulong naman talaga siya dito. Tama lang naman 'yun."*

Manny took a photo of Adrian passed out at their yard and sent the photo to Mrs. Hernandez, Resident of Ayala Alabang, Muntinlupa City, IP Address 61.9.33.0. and Adrian's mother. It was time to get rid of this smug little brat. Bye-bye Edran.

"Wag kang mag-alala, may reward naman," he said, trying to get Alma to calm down.

This boy was definitely lucky he did not fall into the wrong hands, get chased by the wrong thing, or pass out at the wrong yard. Alma got even more annoyed at her brother's condescending response and childishly insisted, "*Hindi 'yun ang point, kuya!*"

"*Eh, basta kayo na nga mag-asikaso n'yan!*" Manong Pabs interjected, obviously getting frustrated with the situation's complications.

The old man walked back inside to check if the earthquake caused any damage, shaking his head as he left the children outside to figure things out.

Manny, unable to stop himself, finally burst into laughter. Alma instinctively punched his arm again.

They noisily bickered over the headless chicken adding a fresh stain on their yard and the failed killer—runaway—Adrian, who was sleeping soundly for the first time since he had arrived.