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## **TOMÁS**

The Journal of the  
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**TOWARD PRIDE OF PLACE  
FOR LITERATURE AND THE  
ARTS IN ACADEME**

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Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Ph.D.

**T**his year, the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies celebrates the fifth anniversary of its revival after a hiatus of four years. To mark the event, the Center is releasing five issues of its peer-reviewed literary journal, *Tomás*, within the third quarter of the year, one issue for each of the major literary genres (fiction, poetry, nonfiction, drama, and literary criticism). Each volume has a different Issue Editor and Managing Editor but all are Resident Fellows of the Center.

I thought this might also be a good opportunity to rethink the question which we writers are repeatedly called upon to confront: why does the study of literature and creative writing matter? In fact, in academe these days, it isn't only the study of literature that requires defending, but the concept of General Education. The recent dramatic shift in the University of the Philippines' GE policy, which now allows colleges to require a minimum of only 21 GE units (instead of 45 units) is uncomfortably close to home. In that face-off, we were told, it was the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) faculty who argued for the reduction of GE units, and the HUMSS (Humanities, Social Sciences) faculty who argued for the retention of the original number. This is hardly a surprise.

I am reminded of something John Meacham said in an essay published in the October 7, 2013 issue of *Time* magazine. (Meacham is Ran-

dom House's executive editor and EVP. He is a former editor-in-chief of *Newsweek*, a contributing editor to *Time*, editor-at-large of WNET, and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for the Autobiography/Biography.) In that essay on the Core Curriculum issue, or "the conflict between knowledge and know-how," he wrote: "What is heartening to those who believe in the value of a passing acquaintance with Homer and the Declaration of Independence and Jane Austen and Toni Morrison, as well as basic scientific literacy, is that there is little argument over the human and economic utility of a mind trained to make connections between seemingly disparate elements of reality. The college graduate who can think creatively is going to stand the greatest chance of not only doing well, but doing some good too. As long as the liberal-arts tradition remains a foundation of the curriculum in even the most elective of collegiate systems, there is hope that graduates will be able to discuss the Gettysburg Address—in a job interview at Google."

So that's the *practical argument* for retaining a liberal arts education: it makes the graduate more—not *less*—competitive in the global job market.

Maybe we could pause for a minute here and revisit one phrase in that passage—*Doing some good*. How exactly does a study of literature and the arts help students to do that?

"In recent years all the more oversimplified political viewpoints have failed, and our awareness of the complexity of the society we live in has grown, even if no one can claim to have a solution in his pocket. The situation in Italy today is on the one hand a state of deterioration and corruption in our institutional framework, and on the other of a growing collective maturity and search for ways of governing ourselves. What is the place of literature in such a situation?"

The quotation is from an essay titled "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature" by Italo Calvino, and he was referring to Italy in the 70s. But, he might have been talking about the Philippines today.

In fact, last February, that very question was raised by a member of the audience during the "Bookstop Tour" organized by the National Book Development Board (NBDB) as part of the celebrations of National Literature Month. Marne Kilates, Chuckberry Pascual and I were the writers invited by the UST Publishing House to be its featured authors when the

book tour stopped at its new bookstore in the UST Main Building. “What are you doing about our current political situation?” this woman asked pointedly. The three of us hesitated before replying.

In the Italy that Calvino was describing, society demanded “that the writer raise his voice if he wants to be heard, propose ideas that will have an impact on the public, push all his instinctive reactions to extremes. But even the most sensational and explosive statements pass over the heads of readers. All is as nothing, like the sound of the wind.”

Did we hesitate because we felt, as Calvino did, that nothing the writers say will be of any consequence to most Filipinos? Or did we hesitate because in *this* society no one actually makes such demands of writers because the writers are themselves of no consequence to most Filipinos?

I believe that, whether one fears the first or the second, as writers, we need to answer the question, for ourselves first, and then for the rest of society. Because, from the very beginnings of history, literature has been, not just a means of self-expression, but a means of self-awareness.

Calvino’s concern in that essay (as it was, I feel, the concern of the woman who put the question to us in UST) was with literature’s political uses, and he mentioned two: to give voice to whatever is without a voice, to give a name to what has yet no name, “especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude;” and “to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts, and in short, the creation... of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action...” (1986, 98-99)

But in 1988, in the posthumously published *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he focused on the larger scene. He noted that the millennium about to end was “the millennium of the book, in that it has seen the object we call a book take on the form now familiar to us. Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium’s end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called postindustrial era of technology.”

His own attitude was completely optimistic. “My confidence in literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it.” (1993, 1) Literature, he said, has an existential function: the search for lightness as a response to the unbearable burden or weight of living. The example he offered was Milan

Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which "is in reality a bitter confirmation of the Ineluctible Weight of Living, not only in the situation of his hapless country, but in the human condition common to us all, no matter how infinitely more comfortable we may be." (7) The novel, said Calvino, "shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight. Perhaps only the liveliness and mobility of the intelligence escape this sentence—the very qualities with which this novel is written, and which belong to a world quite different from the one we live in." (7)

He stressed that he was not referring to a literature of escape. Rather, he meant that "in the boundless universe of literature, there are always new avenues to be explored, both very recent and very ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world. (7-8)

(Of course, Calvino added that he also looked to science—and to computer science—to nourish his "visions in which all heaviness disappears.")

Calvino is not alone in believing that at the heart of great literature are moral issues. This does not mean that the writer offers pat "moral lessons." Rather, in the words of another writer, Susan Sontag: "... A fiction writer whose adherence is to literature is necessarily someone who thinks about moral problems: about what is just and unjust, what is better and worse, what is repulsive and admirable, what is lamentable and what inspires joy and approbation... Serious fiction writers think about problems *practically*. They tell stories. They narrate. They evoke our common humanity in narratives which we can identify, even though the lives may be remote from our own. They stimulate our imagination. The stories enlarge and complicate—and therefore, improve—our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgment."

So that, then, is the *higher or nobler reason* for retaining a liberal arts education, where literature and the humanities have pride of place.

Which brings me back to the situation in our own country, a country constantly beleaguered by crises, both natural and man-made, and at this moment confronted by the possibility of martial law being imposed on the entire country yet again, while still trying to come to terms with an administration not averse to erasing the distinction between real news and "fake news," or of depriving some of its own citizens—such as persons suspected



of being drug users—from basic human rights. I would suggest—as I have done more than once before—that during dark days, perhaps the place to seek solace, strength and salvation, is literature.

I feel the need to add that I refer here to “serious literature,” but with a further qualification: by “serious literature” is not meant literature that is solemn or super-cerebral, i.e. boring or incomprehensible. The literature I refer to might be light, funny, even whimsical in style and tone. It may be in print or on line. It is, simply, literature produced by serious artists, i.e., men and women who are serious about what they do, who produce work in which the stakes are high, for both themselves and for their readers. In short, it is literature produced by writers who risk much, by putting into their work what they truly care about, what they consider important. In so doing, they hope that readers will accept the challenge, and be engaged or disturbed or uplifted... perhaps, sometimes, all three.

All that is well and good. On the other hand, there’s the reality. And the reality is that, even in academic institutions, we in the arts feel the need to constantly assert that the work we do is at least *as important* as, and deserves to be *valued as much as*, the work being done by the people in science and technology. But if the arts must struggle for a place even in academe, how dismal must be their chances in the larger society?

I have been asked: how exactly are literature and creative writing to thrive in the academe? My reply is to describe an imagined scenario where they already *are* thriving. I speak of a healthy literary community, consisting of students who like books, who actually buy books, and read them, who belong to book clubs or literary societies, mentored by members of the faculty who are themselves lovers of the written word. Both students and faculty participate in, or at least attend, literary readings, book launchings, literature conferences and the like, not because they are herded into them, but because they are actually interested in these activities and derive pleasure from them. They subscribe and/or contribute to, or produce literary journals. Support for these activities is accompanied by incentives for the faculty to produce both creative and critical work—literary grants and literary awards, literary journals, a creative writing center, a publishing house that publishes literary titles along with scholarly titles. And, most importantly, writers and the literary scholars in the faculty feel that their outputs are valued as highly as those of the scientists, or of the faculty of the professional colleges, who bring in the money.

I must say that UST has not been remiss in this. Many of these mechanisms are already in place. Members of the University's different Research Centers (which now include the Center for Creative Writing) are honored by the Office of the Vice Rector for Research and Innovation with the Silver Series and Gold series award; and the Faculty Union grants the *Dangal ng UST* Award to both scholars and creative writers. The UST Publishing House which is largely subsidized by the University, was named Publisher of the Year, a few years ago, by the Manila Critics Circle and the National Book Development Board (NBDB), mainly because its literary titles won a large number of awards. The Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies was revived by the University, and is now manned by a corps of writers who are full-time faculty members, selected on the basis of their literary credentials, and who run its programs and projects, (all of them funded by the University) with the collaboration of the Faculty of Arts & Letters' Literature Department, and the Graduate School, as well as the student organization UST Literary Society (or UST LitSoc). There is an active Thomasian Writers' Guild, a student organization which draws its members from several colleges. All of these initiatives are geared toward revitalizing a literary culture on campus, but many of the activities are open to the public. *Tomas*, our literary journal accepts contributions, not just from Thomasian writers and scholars, but from distinguished national and even international writers. And it welcomes, as well, promising young writers.

Perhaps the tallest dream is for the University to put in place an Arts Development Program, which would coordinate all the university's artistic initiatives, and a Cultural Center, with first-class facilities for all the arts, headed by a top caliber arts manager, reporting directly to the Rector himself. I think that this is eminently do-able in UST, with its long tradition of excellence in music, the visual arts, architecture and literature, and its world-class museum and library. What is missing is a theater company. (In my time, there was the Aquinas Dramatic Guild, much respected both inside and outside the campus.)

The rationale for such a program and such a center would go beyond university rankings and accreditations. The rationale would be that the University's top administrators wish to establish and sustain a dynamic artistic culture in the university, because they believe in the importance of culture and the arts for national development.

Again, UST is admirably placed to play a leading role in such an artistic renaissance. One need only recall her most famous son—a renaissance man if ever there was one—Dr. Jose Rizal, who pioneered in practically all the literary genres (including children’s literature and comic books), but was also a man of science; and offered his abundant gifts in the service of his country.

And now I see that I have hit upon what could well be the strongest argument yet for giving literature—and the writers who produce it—a place of honor in academe.

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# Introduction

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Augusto Antonio Aguila

In one of the meetings held at the spacious conference room of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, one of the writing fellows suggested that we come out not with just one issue for 2017, but a five-volume anniversary series which will feature the five genres: poetry, fiction, drama, creative nonfiction, and criticism. At first, we were quite stunned by that suggestion because we knew it was difficult and tedious enough to come out with one. But the surprise turned to enthusiasm when we were given our respective assignments. After the announcement was made online, we received a great number of submissions which were all reviewed by the most seasoned writers in the country. For fiction the submissions were trimmed down to eleven; six are works written in English and five in Filipino. And we are quite proud of this issue's fine harvest.

Chapter 4 of "White Lady/Black Christ: A novel-in-progress" by Charlson Ong provides us with a grim portrayal of the eternal conflict between idealism and pragmatism, hope and hopelessness, and good and evil as a dark-skinned man attempts to find his place and resolves to answer questions concerning his identity in a world that is marred by uncertainty and desperation.

In the story "An Errand," Angelo R. Lacuesta delves into the seemingly simple yet intriguing tasks or 'errands' a driver performs for his rich employer. The story gives us a glimpse of a working class man's fascination for his boss' daily activities, business engagements, and illicit affairs. The

most important detail, the blue pill, which appears in the last part of the story, subtly reveals his boss' sordid preoccupations which the main character secretly wishes to be a part of.

"Better Than Sex" by Dada Fres-Felix tackles the age-old story of an old man with diabetes, who wishes to continue having an affair with a much younger woman despite vehement opposition from his children. But this tale has a twist. In his attempt to please her, he takes Viagra, goes to her room, and discovers that she is having sex with another man. While this seems to be the normal trajectory the story would probably take, the writer surprises us with a perfect ending that defies convention.

Francis Paolo Quina's "Economies of Scale" examines the various complexities of love, how relationships begin and eventually crumble, the unending clash between the desire to move on and forget, and the decision to go on and fight for the person one truly loves, and the many uncertainties and unresolved issues that go with putting one's heart on the line.

In the story "Rice Soldier," Rina Garcia Chua reveals how a father's mental breakdown can have such devastating effects on family relationships and how this handicap can actually destroy even the closest of family ties. But Chua ends the story with an affirmation that love can withstand the most difficult circumstances.

"Re-enactment" by Glenn Diaz takes us into the fast-paced and often unpredictable world of journalists, lifestyle editors, and tabloid writers which in this story actually serves as a backdrop for the major character's fruitless expectations and dismal failures as well as his take on man's futile attempts to 're-enact' memory.

This issue's crop of fiction in Filipino is a good mix of the experimental and the traditional. Three stories fall under what is called "metafiction." These are Rijel Reyes' "Mga Alitaptap sa North Avenue," U Eliserio's "Excerpt mula sa Diksiyonaryo-Gabay sa mga gawa ni Berry Manansala," and Edgar Calabia Samar's "Isang Maikling Kasaysayan ng Pagpaslang." While the remaining two stories, Jack Alvarez's "Pag-ibig sa Panahon ng All-out War" and Joselito Delos Reyes' "Field Trip," may be classified as conventional realist fiction, there is nothing commonplace about the topics that both stories deal with.

“Mga Alitaptap sa North Avenue” deals with the necessity of time, and its various implications in the production of fiction: time that is necessary for researching one’s chosen topic (which may or may not include actual fieldwork), and time that is spent while contending with one’s history or histories (time past), which usually impacts the time that is spent on the actual writing of a piece.

Time is also essential in the dilemma explored in “Isang Maikling Kasaysayan ng Pagpaslang,” a story that seems intent on blurring genres, distinctions, and representations. One reviewer referred to its affinity to Thomas Harris’ *Hannibal*, a suspense thriller, to Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*, a meta-detective series of novels, and to Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, a postmodern historical detective novel. Since it is also set in the academe, with a writer-professor as protagonist, it is tempting to drop another name into the (already) heady mix: David Lodge, who is famous for his campus novels. But perhaps, all these comparisons may only be a disservice to the originality of Samar’s fiction, and if anything, further proof of how cosmopolitan Filipino fiction has become, with writers of his caliber.

“Excerpt mula sa Diksiyonaryo-Gabay sa mga gawa ni Berry Manansala” seems to be the most oblique of all the stories in this issue by presenting itself as an excerpt from a highly idiosyncratic, obscure, and insular dictionary. It throws into relief the myriad processes involved not just in the production of fiction, but also in the consumption of it, particularly, the act of “making meaning.” By presenting small, self-contained, fractured but nonetheless related narratives, the story challenges the usual expectations of wholeness in fiction, and by referring to its entries as inherently “meaningful,” with actual, prescribed meanings inscribed onto the text, challenges the whole notion of reader-response.

“Pag-ibig sa Panahon ng All-out War,” deploys a familiar trope—a romantic affair set during war—but twists it so queerly, such that one is tempted to read it as an anti-love story. The narrative features a bakla protagonist who meets a lover in the most unexpected manner. The complicated romance that blossoms between them is further highlighted by the violent, ideological war that serves as backdrop.

Seemingly the most innocuous, “Field Trip,” with its main protagonist, Jordan, and his search for a lost bracelet in a town that seems to be

somewhere in between the rural and the urban, echoes the bildung narratives written by Pedro Dandan, Rogelio Sikat, and Genoveva Edroza-Matute. Like the stories of these great realists, “Field Trip” displays an ambiguous relationship with modernity. And like the prose of these writers, Delos Reyes’s writing is full of verve, is infused with a crystal-clear sense of place, and most of all, is able to pack an emotional wallop.



The background features a complex, layered design of overlapping, semi-transparent leaf-like shapes and wavy, curved lines. The color palette is monochromatic, ranging from light gray to dark gray, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on organic, flowing forms.

*Filipino*



# *Isang Maikling Kasaysayan ng mga Pagpaslang*

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Edgar Calabia Samar

**T**ATLO NA ANG NAPAPATAY KO simula nang nahilig ako sa pagbabasa ng nobela. Iyong una, tulad ng maraming kaso ng unang pagpatay, hindi ko sinasadya. Napatay ko lang. Sorry but not sorry. Iyong huling dalawa, pinagplanuhan ko kahit paano. Parang ang yabang ko, sasabihin mo, e tatatlo pa lang naman pala ang napapatay ko. Well, puwede naman kasing marami na, kung gugustuhin ko. Pero hindi naman paramihan ito para sa akin. Namimili rin ako. Ang gusto ko, may literary merit, deconstructive ng poetic justice. Mga nobela nina Umberto Eco at Gregorio Pablo ang binabasa ko noon. Pinaglalaruan ni Eco ang utak ko, tatamnan ng kung ano-anong hinala't akala bago ibubunyag sa dulo na tanga akong sunod-sunuran sa pakana niya. Binibigyan ng halaga ang mga wala naman talaga. Nagbibigay ng kahulugan sa mga bagay nang higit kaysa sa ibig nilang sabihin. Pero gusto ko iyong ginagago ako. Mas ginaganahan akong manggago rin ng iba. Si Pablo naman, iba. Puso ang pupuntiryahin. Bihira kong gamitin ang salitang iyon. Puso. Medyo proud kasi ako kapag nasasabihan akong walang puso ng mga co-faculty ko dahil sa mga estudyanteng ibinabagsak ko. Pero totoo e. Sa puso ako tinatamaan sa mga katha ni Pablo. Dama ko rito o. Paiibigin ka sa tauhan niya. Iyong kakatiting na nga lang na sentimyento sa loob mo, kakantiin pa. Parang napuwing ang loob mo. Hindi mapakali sa lungkot at bagabag. Kailangang hípan ng iba, pero walang iba sa tabi mo para tulungan ka. Kailan ka ba may huling nakasáma sa pagbabasá? Kayâ iyon. Parang sasabog ang loob mo dahil lang sa problema ng karakter na alam na alam mo namang katha

lang. Putang-ina, parang tanga, hindi ba? Ang sama-sama ng loob ko sa mundo pagkakasara ng mga nobela ni Pablo. Parang gusto kong pumatay. At ginawa ko. Walang biro. Huwag kang tumawa diyan, alam mo kasi, 'yung mga pinatay ko, tumatawa bago ko tinapos ang buhay nila. Ano, gusto mo pa ba akong makilala? Gago ka rin, ano. Makikita mo ang hinahanap mo.

AKO SI GABRIEL BUENAVENTURA. Doc Gab Buenaventura. Pero hindi ako doktor na *doktor*. Doctor of Philosophy. PhD. Iyong doktor na hindi alam ng maraming tao na nag-e-exist. O kung alam man e hindi naman alam ang halaga nito. Huwag kang mag-alala. Hindi ko rin alam ang pakinabang nito, lalo pa't sa Comparative Lit ang PhD ko. Ang alam ko, kailangan ko lang kunin ito para hindi ako matanggal sa pinagtuturuan ko. Well, permanent na ako. Ngayon, panahon na para bawian ang mga estudyante ko. Dalawampu't isang nobela sa isang sem. Isang nobela kada linggo sa 18 weeks ng klase, bukod sa tatlong linggo na maninipis ang assigned novels kaya dalawa sa halip na isa. Kulang pa iyon. Kung ilalagay ko ang lahat ng mga nobelang dapat nilang mabása para maunawaan nila ang problema sa mismong pagbabasá, iyung kinasanayan nating pagbabasa, baka ako ang matagal nang patay. Iyan, iyang mga mukhang inosenteng iyan, college freshmen, nanggaling sa mayayamang angkan, iyung di naranasang magutom kahit kailan, o di alam ang pakiramdam nung may gusto ka pero di mo puwedeng makuha, o mga anak ng sinuwerte sa negosyo, na sanay lang na nag-uutos, may gumagawa ng mga bagay para sa kanila, may dumarampot sa mga basura nila, o mga bunso ng mga mandarambong na politiko na magiging politiko rin at lalakíng mas kupal pa sa mga magulang nila, o kahit iyung mga scholar na galing sa probinsiya, tapos, nung nakatuntong dito sa Maynila, nakagamit lang ng computer, pakiramdam e sila na ang gumawa ng computer, mayayabang din iyan, matataas ang tingin sa sarili, proud kahit sa dayukdok na buhay na pinagmulan nila, ginagawang honorable ang kahirapang pinagmulan sa pagta-transform nito into a story of triumph, their triumph, alam mo na, lahat iyan, lahat ng stereotype ng nagkokolehiyo rito sa Maynila, lalo na rito sa unibersidad na pinagtuturuan ko, na dahil mahusay raw, tinitingala sa buong bansa, pero extremes ang kondisyon ng mga mag-aaral, may mayamang mayamang mayaman, may mahirap na mahirap na mahirap, iyan, iyang mga iyan, bigyan mo ng ilang araw, ilang linggo, ilang buwan,

magagawa nang pumatay ng mga iyan. Hindi metaporikong pagpatay ha. Hindi pagpatay sa tingin. Hindi pagpatay sa isip. Totoong pagpatay. Kaya sila ang masasarap paglaruan. Ang masasarap paasahin, bigyan ng pag-asa, bigyan ng pantasya, ng kakapitan. Pagkatapos, saka durugin. Wasakin lahat ng pinaniniwalaan. Tapos, kaunting bulong lang, kaunting buyo, kuha mo na ang loob. Gagawin na ang lahat ng sabihin mo. Ganito ko nakilala si Lia. Dati kong estudyante sa *Survey of Postmodernist Fiction*. Siya ang kasama ko sa huli kong pinatay. Ngayon, obviously, siya ang kailangan kong patayin.

LUMAKI AKO SA SAN PABLO, kung saan ako unang nakapatay. Nasa kolehiyo pa lang ako noon. Sa UPLB ako nag-aral at lingguhan lang ako kung umuwi. Noong first sem, uwian ako araw-araw. Second sem ko napapayag si Ma na kumuha ako ng dorm. Siya pa ang naghanap. Hindi basta dorm, apartment. Isang sem akong nagsolo roon, kahit dalawa ang kuwarto. Okey lang naman kay Ma na mahal ang bayad. Basta mag-aaral akong mabuti. Iyung natipid niya sa tuition ko, sa apartment napupunta. Pero noong nauso ang mga balita tungkol sa mga estudyanteng nahoholdap, napapatay, sinabing maghanap ako ng kaibigan na makakasama sa apartment. May kahati na sa upa, may kasama pa ako sa bahay. Wala namang kaso sa akin iyon. Pero wala rin akong kaibigan sa college na makakasama sa bahay. Kaya sige, hanap ng kahit sino. Buong summer, dahil iisa lang naman ang klase kong kailangang i-summer, nagtatanong-tanong ako. Hindi kasi ako tinitigilan ni Ma sa kakukulit tungkol dito. Nagpaskil na rin ako sa loob ng kampus at sa mga poste't pader at loob ng dyip na mapapaglagyan ko ng anunsiyo. Naroon ang contact number ko. Lalaki rin ha, paalala ni Ma. Ayaw niya siyempreng babae ang kasama ko sa bahay. Baka ikaw pa ang mapahamak riyon, sasabihin niya. Tatango-tango lang naman ako. Siyempre, lalaki. Mas malamang namang iyong babae ang di payagan ng magulang na tumira sa apartment na lalaki lang ang kasama. Feeling kasi ni Ma, ako lang iyung puwedeng masaktan, iyung puwedeng mabiktima. Nakakainsulto. May ilan ding nagtext. Uso na ang phone noon. Karamihan, 5110. Sa akin, 7110. Pag sinabi ko kung magkano, biglang di na magtetest. Alam kong maraming mas bed space lang ang hinahanap. Pero ayoko namang ibagsak-presyo ang kuwarto para lang may makasama ako. Dalawa pa rin ang natirang interesado. Iyung isa, pagkakita ko pa lang, ayoko na

agad. Wala, maayos naman ang porma, nakasalamin, nakacollared shirt na asul, slacks na brown, rubber shoes. Pero basta mabigat ang dugo ko. Nung makita ko, sinabihan ko na lang na may nauna na sa kanya, na pasensiya na pero may nakapagpareserve na pala kay Ma. Okey lang siya nang okey lang, kahit alam ko sa tingin niya ang inis kung bakit nakipagkita pa ako. Kumbakit di ko na lang siya tinext. Natatawa na lang ako sa loob ko. Parang may ginawa siyang kalokohan sa akin dati at nakaganti ako ngayon sa kaniya nang wala siyang kamalay-malay. Nakipagkamay pa ako habang nagsasabing sorry, brad, di ako agad natext ni Ma e, at paulit-ulit lang talaga ang okey lang, okey lang niya. Gusto ko ngang batukan at hiyawan. Magalit ka nga! Ngayon, dapat pala e nagpasalamat pa nga siya sa akin, dahil kung natuloy siya e siya sana ang napatay ko. Iyung isa pa kasi, si Amiel, iyun ang naging kasama ko sa apartment nang halos two years. Taga-Mogpog sa Marinduque. Dulo ng mundo, sabi niya. Magugustuhan ko raw kasi mahilig ako sa reality shows, sa *Survivor*, ganiyan. Punta ka sa Moryones, sabi niya, sa amin talaga nagmula iyun. Sabi ko, sige, isama niya ako. Pero nauna ko nga siyang isinama sa San Pablo. Fiesta rin. January 15 noong 2000. Binabasa ko noon ang pinakabagong nobela (at pinakagago rin siguro) ni Pablo. *Atake*. Iyun ang title. Out of print na siguro ngayon. Tungkol sa isang makata (karaniwang literary figure ang bida sa mga nobela ni Pablo) na nagising isang araw na nasa loob siya ng isang tula. Weird, di ba. At traditional poetry. May tugma at sukat. Biglang kailangan niyang punuan ang mga taludtod. Isipin ang nawawalang salita na katugma ng sinundang linya para makausad siya, makarating sa dulo, sa kasunod na linya, sa kasunod na saknong, hanggang sa wakas, at matakasan ang realidad nito. Dahil kumbensiyonal, madaling makita na love poem ito. Obsessed ang persona, tulad ng karaniwang lover sa mga tula at pop songs, sa mga kuwento't nobela, sa mga soap opera't pelikula. Pero habang nagtatagal, natutuklasan niya na kapag pinalitan niya ang mga inaasahang salitang pantugma, maaaring makitang wala siya sa loob ng isang tula tungkol sa pag-ibig kundi nasa loob ng tula ukol sa isang krimen. *Sinasakal* sa halip na *minamahal*. *Paslangin* sa halip na *ibigin*. Na ang hinahanap at sinusundan ng persona ay hindi asawa kundi biktima. Na-excite ang makata sa posibilidad ng ganoong revision. Crime poetry. Meron ba noon? Binago niya nga ang kuwento. Pero sa pagbabago-bago niya ng mga salita at linya, biglang siya na ang tinutugis. Siya na pala ang biktimang tinutugaygayan ng mamamatay-taong di niya nakikita sa tula. *Poetic justice*. Biglang hindi na lámang niya

kailangang makawala sa loob ng tula, kailangan na rin niyang ilitas ang buhay niya. Ito ang pinag-uusapan namin ni Amiel ilang oras bago ko siya napatay. O ito ang ikinukuwento ko kay Amiel ilang oras bago ko siya napatay, madaling-araw na ng Linggo, kinabukasan ng fiesta pagkagaling namin sa inuman sa plaza. Hindi kasi siya nakikinig. Hindi siya marunong makinig. Tapos, *lasing* na kami pareho. Nagda-drive ako pauwi, sa bahay na lang muna kami tutuloy kasi malayo pa ang Los Baños at nakainom nga. Nagkukuwento ako pero kanta siya nang kanta kasabay ng “Seasons in the Sun” ng Westlife. E putang-ina, buong Disyembre hanggang magbagong-taon, iyon ang napapakinggan ko sa radyo. Tapos, nagkukuwento ako tungkol sa isang interesting na nobela, ang ginagawa niya e nag-e-emote sa “we had joy, we had fun / we had seasons in the sun, / but the hills that we climbed / were just seasons out of time.” Sabi ko, babâ ka nga. *Goodbye, my friend, / it's hard to die*. Sabay-patay ng radyo. Nasa Marcos highway kami noon na dinadaan din ng mga bus papuntang Lucena at Bikol. Itinigil ko sa gilid ng kalsada, ni hindi ako nag-signal lights. Wala halos dumaraang sasakyan. Paminsan-minsan, may trak, bus, motor. Nung makita ko sa side mirror na walang parating, pinatay ko ang headlights. Ang dilim. Inulit ko ang sinabi ko, babâ ka nga. Hindi ko kita ang reaksiyon ng mukha niya pero alam kong nawala ang kalasingan niya. Ha? sabi niya.

Babâ ka muna.

Babâ? Bakit?

Dare lang.

Dare? Anong dare?

Gaano katagal mo kayang mag-stay rito? Kaya mo ba?

Brad, lasing ka na.

Natatakot ka ba?

B-bakit ako matatakot?

Babâ ka.

Ano bang trip mo?

Babâ ka.

Brad, tara na sa inyo, antok na ako.

Babâ ka.

Noon ko lang siya tiningnan. Nag-adjust na ang mga mata namin sa dilim. Natatawa ako sa reaksiyon ng mukha niya. Feeling ko, nasa loob ako ng nobela ni Pablo. Dare lang, sabi ko nang nakangiti, babâ ka muna, please?

Dahil sa ngiti at please, bahagya rin siyang ngumiti pero alam mong kinakabahan pa rin. S-sige, sige, gago ka, kung ano-anong natitripan mo, sabi niya habang binubuksan ang pinto ng kotse sa kanan niya. Pagkababa niya, hinaltak ko ang pinto sabay paandar ng kotse. Uy, brad, sabi niya, teka lang. Pero dahil medyo malalim ang gilid ng highway, kinailangan kong imaniobra nang kaunti para mas maibuwelo ang kotse pagrampa sa kalsada. Blag. Naatrasan ko siya. Tang-ina naman, brad, sigaw niya. Hinampas ang likod ng kotse. Humarurot na ako. Sa side mirror, sa liwanag ng buwan at ng headlights ng nasa likod kong parating na sasakyan, kitang-kita kong sumusugod din siya ng takbo, parang sa mga pelikula, as if maaabutan niya ako. Sa isip ko noon, tatakutin ko lang naman siya, babalikan ko rin siya. Pero nung nakalayo-layo na ako, naisip ko, ano kaya kung di ko na siya balikan? Na-excite ako sa idea. Matanda na naman siya. Puwede siyang bumalik mag-isa sa apartment sa Los Baños at pagtatawanan na lang namin ang kabaliwan ng gabing ito. May excuse ako. Lasing ako. Gago lang ang di tumanggap ng katuwirang ito. Lasing ako e. Hindi ko na nga siya binalikan. Pagdating ko sa bahay, gising pa si Ma. Tinext ko kasi siya kagabi na nasa bayan lang ako ng San Pablo, umiinom nga sa plaza at kasama ko si Amiel with my high school barkada. Kunsintidor naman siya sa mga ganitong trip ko. Di ko kinailangang itago sa kaniya ang pagyoyosi ko noong high school, o kahit pag-inom ko. Para sa kaniya, mas testament iyon ng coolness ng pagpapalaki niya sa akin. Na liberal na nanay siya. Tropa lang kami pero pagdating naman sa ibang bagay e grabe ang control at motherly issues niya. Manipulative, pero nanay ko kasi e, at kaya ko rin naman siyang i-manipulate dahil alam kong ang weakness niya e i-appreciate lang siya at i-highlight ang pagiging cool mom niya, kaya okay na sa akin. Nasaan si Amiel? tanong niya nang makita niyang nag-iisa ako. Nakilala na niya si Amiel dahil noong araw mismo na lilipat si Amiel sa apartment, biglang nakahanap siya ng dahilan para dalawin ako sa LB. Alam ko naman na gusto lang niyang i-assess ang magiging housemate ko. Sabi ko, maaga pa kagabing nag-decide bumalik sa apartment dahil sa lakad ngayong umaga. Tumango lang siya. Sa isip ko naman, patay tayo kapag biglang natunton ni Amiel ang bahay namin at nag-doorbell. Pero alam ko rin na imposible



iyon. Kataas-taasan, magpaumaga siya sa 7-11 sa bayan kung wala na talaga siyang nasakyan pabalik sa Los Baños. Ako ang nakaramdam ng excitement sa kaniyang potential adventure nang madaling-araw na iyon. First time niya sa San Pablo kahit ang lapit-lapit lang nito sa LB. Campus-apartment lang kasi siya halos araw-araw. May kaya rin naman kahit paano ang pamilya nila sa Mogpog, alam ko. May-ari ng isa sa dadalawang grocery store sa poblasyon ang tatay niya. Kaya nga kaya niyang magbayad ng higit kaysa sa pandorm lang. Predictable ang course niya. BS Economics, pero sabi niya minsan, gusto niyang mag-concentrate sa Cooperative Studies. Gusto niyang magtayo ng kooperatiba sa Mogpog, obviously. Kung bakit, ewan ko, siguro e ganoon ka-boring ang buhay niya roon para ma-excite sa idea ng isang kooperatiba. Anyway, pagdating ko sa bahay, paghiga ko sa kama, nawala na siya sa isip ko. Nakatulog agad ako. As in deep sleep. Ni hindi ko maalalang nanaginip ako. Paggising ko, past 12 na. Pagtingin ko sa phone ko, puro forwarded messages. Contest sa paramihan ang jokes na nanggagago at quotes na nangongonsensiya. Wala na si Ma. Si Yaya Luding lang ang naiwan sa bahay, na mas madalas ko namang kasama talaga nung lumalaki ako dahil si Ma na ang pinagma-manage ni Lolo sa maliit na rural bank ng pamilya namin simula nung naghiwalay sila ni Pa. Actually, simula noong binalikan ni Pa ang una nitong asawa, ang totoo nitong asawa, at saka nag-migrate sa Toronto. Three pa lang ako noon kaya wala akong pakialam. Walang separation anxiety. Wala akong na-miss. Nagkakape na ako sa terrace nang maalala ko si Amiel. Ano nang nangyari sa lokong iyon? Di man lang nag-text, mukhang nabadtrip talaga. Inisip ko kung anong mararamdaman ko kung sa akin nangyari iyon. Kung mae-excite ba ako tulad ng naisip ko nang iwan ko siya. Di na ako sigurado maliban sa malamang, iisip ako ng paraan para makaganti ako. Hindi puwedeng hindi. Sinubukan kong tawagan ang number ni Amiel. Nagri-ring pero hindi niya sinasagot. Baka tulog pa. O baka yamot pa. Nang bumalik ako sa apartment sa LB kinagabihan, wala siya. Inobserbahan ko ang loob ng bahay kung mukha bang dito siya umuwi. Wala, parang di nagagalaw ang mga gamit. May duplicate ako ng susi sa kuwarto niya pero di ko pinagkaabalang buksan. Sinubukan ko ulit siyang tawagan. Cannot be reached. Natulog ako nang di siya bumabalik sa apartment. Paggising ko kinabukasan, wala pa rin. Nagalit yata talaga. Dahil maaga ang klase ko, hindi ko na muna inisip iyon. Pero nang wala pa rin siya pag-uwi ko nung hapon, karaniwang naroon siya sa apartment kapag umuuwi ako nang Lunes ng hapon, campus-apartment

nga lang kasi siya, napaisip na ako. Mas napaisip kesa kinabahan. Anong drama nito? Cannot be reached pa rin ang cellphone niya. Wala akong ginawa. Matanda na siya. One week siyang di bumabalik sa apartment, hindi ko rin siya nakikita sa campus, wala namang naghahanap sa kaniya, wala siyang org, hindi ko alam kung may malapit siyang blockmate, pero walang naghahanap sa kaniya kaya di ko pinapansin. Matanda na siya. Pero binuksan ko na ang kuwarta niya kasi naman baka nabubulok na pala siya roon. Wala, tulad ng inaasahan ko. Iyung gamit niya, grabe ang ayos, pati kumot, nakatiklop. Mahihiyang pumasok ang basura rito. Ini-lock ko ulit ang pinto. Hindi ko na rin siyempre sinabi kay Ma na wala na naman akong kasama sa bahay. Nasa kuwarta pa rin ang mga gamit ni Amiel. Kapag inambush visit ako ni Ma, walang dahilan para mag-isip siyang wala na si Amiel.

Halos isang buwan na simula noong fiesta sa San Pablo nang pagbalik ko sa apartment, dinatnan ko sa labas ang ate raw ni Amiel. Doon ko natiyak na talagang nawawala nga si Amiel. Sinabi ko na matagal ko na ngang di nakikita. Di ko binanggit siyempre ang pagsasama ko rito sa San Pablo. Tiningnan niya ang kuwarta ni Amiel. Hinalughog ang mga gamit nito na puwedeng magbigay ng clue kung nasaan ito. Wala. Nagkaroon ng maliit na imbestigasyon. Kinausap ako ng isang pulis, para masabing tinanong ako, inulit ko lang ang sinabi ko na sa ate ni Amiel. Pero dahil wala namang lead talaga, walang may alam sa nangyari. Wala namang maghihinala na may kinalaman ako sa pagkawala ni Amiel. Good boy ako sa lahat ng societal standards. Ni hindi nga ako nagyoyosi. May alaga pa akong cactus sa apartment. At anong posibleng motivation? Kumalat ang picture ni Amiel sa kampus at kahit sa bayan ng LB. Missing. Walang Amiel na lumitaw. Walang lumitaw na puwedeng makapagturo sa kinaroroonan nito. Ako, iniisip ko, ano ba'ng nangyari sa gagong iyon? Kung may nangyari roon, kung naaksidente o kung ano, napabalita man lang sana. Pero wala. Walang katawan ng kahit sinong puwedeng pagkamalang si Amiel na nakita sa kahit saan sa Laguna o kahit sa mga kalapit-lalawigan, sa Quezon o sa Batangas, o kahit sa Maynila. Wala, wala na si Amiel. Sasabihin mo ngayon, akala ko ba, napatay mo? E gago, nakikinig ka ba? Simula nung iwan ko siya sa gilid ng Marcos highway sa San Pablo, bandang alas-tres ng madaling araw, di ko na ulit siya nakita, di na siya nakita ulit ng iba. Iyung pamilya niya sa Mogpog, umasa pa ring buhay siya noong una, na makikita pa siya. Pero anong petsa na ngayon? Halos dalawang dekada na. Wala nang Amiel na

lumitaw dahil wala na siya, okay? Siguro, nasagasaan ng trak nung hinabol niya ako. Napisak ang katawan sa highway, napitpit nang napitpit, nadurog nang nadurog, nang daan-daanan ng mga kasunod pang sasakyan, tulad ng nangyayari sa mga pusa o asong nasasagasaan. O baka namatay na siya agad nung naatrasan ko pa lang siya, at multo na niya ang humampas sa likod ng kotse, sumigaw, at humabol sa akin. Wala akong pakialam. Basta ang point, ako ang huli niyang kasama bago siya nawala, sa akin ang credit ng pagkawala niya. Isa pa, siya ang nasa isip ko nang plinano kong pumatay a year ago. Imagine, nagtapos muna ako ng college, nag-masters, nag-PhD, naghintay na ma-permanent dito sa A— University bago ko naisipang pumatay sa wakas. But they were well-executed. Pakiramdam ko, pro ako. Na higit kaysa sa disertasyon ko sa PhD, they were my actually my best works. Pero iyung tungkol sa kanila, mamaya ko ikukuwento, steady ka lang, mas importante kasi itong recent developments with Lia. Ang importante e alam mong iyung dalawang pinagplanuhan kong patayin, parehong tagarito sa A—. Estudyante ko iyung una, at ginawa ko sa mismong sem na nasa klase ko siya. Iyung pangalawa, colleague. Nagtuturo rin ng Lit. At creative writing, dahil nanalo nang isang beses sa Palanca noong bata-bata pa siya at may dalawang poetry books na napublish na wala naman yatang nakapagbasa maliban sa mga ka-poetry group niya. Dito sa huli, nakasama ko nga si Lia na estudyante ko sa Pomo Fic elective nang nangyari iyon. Hindi kasama sa plano, siyempre, pero dahil matalino itong si Lia, nalaman niya ang mga balak ko dahil sa suggestions at hints na nasa syllabus ko at lectures.

Tinanong ako noon ng department head namin kung desidido ba ako sa elective na ituturo ko. Katatapos ko lang ng PhD ko, at excited akong magturo ng bagong elective sa undergrad. *Murder in Postmodernist Fiction*. Nagtataka ako sa mga ganoong tanong. Gusto kong sabihin sa kaniya, hindi, nagjo-joke ako, kaya nga nag-effort akong gumawa ng detailed syllabus na may pagkahaba-habang suggested readings, di ba. Pero ang sinabi ko siyempre, yes, ma'am, I think we will attract a number of non-majors to this class. Pero ang nasa isip ko talaga e, putang-ina mo, kaya tuwang-tuwa tayong ginagago ng mga komedyante sa Filipinas e. Kung desido ba ako? Magpo-propose ba naman ako ng elective nang kusa kung hindi ako desido rito e puwede naman akong magpabanjing-banjing tulad ng ginagawa ng ibang teacher dito. Pagkatapos ng ilang pasikot-sikot sa usapan, saka ko natukoy ang pag-aalangan niya. Hindi siya komportable

na may salitang murder sa course title. Tinamaan ng magaling. So may mga salita palang hindi mo puwedeng banggitin. Kahit sa klase sa panitikan. Kahit sa eskuwelahang ito na ipinagpaparangalan ang edukasyong liberal. Sige, maglaro tayo. Kinailangan kong ipaliwanag na hindi literal na pagpatay o krimen lang ang ibig kong tukuyin dito. Sa isip-isip ko, gago ka ba. Panitikan nga ito, alam mong hindi tayo nagtatapos sa literal lang. Pero alam ko rin na ang tinutukoy ko naman talagang murder sa course title e iyon ngang mga literal na pagpatay lang naman talaga sa panitikan. Pero naghanda ako, aba. Sinabi kong sa diksiyonaryo mismo, dalawa ang pangunahing kahulugan ng murder. Una, “the unlawful premeditated killing of one human being by another.” Ito iyong malamang na iniisip niya. Ito iyong labag sa batas. Labas pa sa utos ng Diyos. Diyos niya, to be clear. At ngayon, hindi siya komportableng gamitin ito kahit sa klase. Kaya kailangan ko ng ikalawang kahulugan: “Informally, murder means a very difficult or unpleasant task or experience.” O ayan ha, kailangan pa ng informal meaning ng salita para lang magkaroon ng bigat sa kaniya. Inulit ko na kung iyon ang gagamiting course title, baka mas maraming mag-sign-up sa klase. Baka makatulong din ito para makahikayat ng mga magma-minor sa Lit, o kung sinusuwerte’y baka mag-major pa. Pero wala, ayaw talaga. Her morality trumps any probable discourse. Nauwi kami sa basta *A Survey of Postmodernist Fiction*. Pero siyempre, sa course content ko binawian, sa readings at sa class discussions. Magsawa kayo sa murder. Sa klaseng iyon ko nga nakilala si Lia.

Angeli Torres ang buo niyang pangalan. Siya ang nasa dulo ng classlist ng labing-isang estudyante. Siya ang pinakamaagang dumating sa unang meeting. Nalaman ko na graduating senior na siya at kumukuha ng BS Biology, pero tumutula-tula. Miyembro ng *H--* na literary org at publication sa school. Tsinita, pero siya na mismo ang nagsabi eventually na wala siyang lahing Chinese. Pero baka hindi lang niya alam. Pero wala na akong sinabi.

Nung makita ng mga estudyante ang syllabus pagkatapos ng unang meeting, may dalawang nag-drop. Okey lang, hindi ko sila kailangan sa klase ko. Siyam ang natira. Tatlong lalaki, anim na babae. Hindi ko alam kung mas marami lang talagang babaeng mahilig sa fiction, o mas kakaunting lalaki ang trip ang postmodernismo. Dalawa run sa babae, majors ng Lit. Iyung pitong iba pa, kasama si Lia, kung ano-ano nang mga major na

walang kinalaman sa Lit. Naisip ko siyempre na akala siguro nung iba, madali lang ang klase na ito. Basa-basa, bola-bola. Pampataas ng grade. O na baka magiging mabait ako kasi relatively e batang faculty na nagtuturo ng elective. Just to be clear, 32 pa lang ako. Kung nag-math ka sa mga sinabi ko kanina (third year college ako noong 2000), nakuha mo na dapat ito. Maraming ibang mas matanda, mas institusyon na sa school. Akala siguro ng mga estudyanteng ito, makukuha ako sa chill-chill lang. Kaunting basa, mas maraming bola. Well, nagkamali sila. Akala siguro nila, hindi seryoso iyong 36 nobela (yes, mas marami nang 15 sa required Freshman lit classes ang kailangan nilang basahing nobela sa klase; sila ang nag-decide na mag-enroll at magpatuloy sa elective nila na ito). Dalawang nobela bawat meeting, regardless ng haba. Hindi pa kasama rito ang ilang critical essays na magsisilbing framework sa pagbasa sa mga ito. First two readings ang *The New York Trilogy* ni Paul Auster at *910 Calle Kundiman* ni Gregorio Pablo. Daya pa ito kung tutuusin dahil tatlong nobela talaga ang kay Auster, pero manipis naman kaya wag na silang magreklamo. At magaan basahin, kahit maraming papilosopong kung ano-anong ang sakit sa bangs, sabi nga nung isa sa dalawang Lit majors, nagpapa-cute, tatawa-tawa pa. Tiningnan ko siya nang masama pagkatapos niyang sabihin iyon. Hindi na ako nakarinig nang kahit anong pa-cute mula sa kaniya sa klase. Wala na akong narinig na kahit ano mula sa kaniya sa klase sa buong sem. Iyung nobela naman ni Pablo (pansiyam na niya, pero masasabing isa sa tatlong major novels niya), naunang na-serialize sa short-lived revival ng *Bulaklak Magazine* noong late 80's hanggang early 90's. Ito ang pinakamahabang nobela ni Pablo na hindi natapos ang serialization dahil nagsara nga ang *Bulaklak* matapos ang wala pang tatlong taon. Umabot ng 128 labas sa magasin ang nobela. Nabasa ko ito noong nagma-masters na ako dahil sa access sa mga kopya ng magasin sa Filipiniana Section ng A- Library. Tapos, isang taon bago tumigil sa pagsusulat si Pablo noong 2009, nag-publish siya ng complete edition ng *910*, eksaktong 910 pages, tipikal sa mga literary dazzle ni Pablo—at naidagdag niya ang supposedly e unpublished last 23 chapters ng nobela. Dahil siguro serialized sa magazine at correspondent ang bilang ng labas sa bilang ng kabanata kaya ito ang tanging nobela ni Pablo na halos magkakasinghaba ang mga kabanata na tig-aanim na pahina at may apat na pahinang section divider ng apat na “canto” ng libro, na siyempre ay pinaglalaruan ni Pablo ang kahulugan bilang *kanto* ng *Calle* at *awit* ng *Kundiman* sa pamagat ng nobela. So para sa sa first week ng klase,

technically ay kailangan nilang magbasa ng isang trilogy at isang 910-page novel na set mostly sa 19th century sa isang alternatibo at pantastikong Filipinas na pinamamahalaan ng mga aswang at cyborg.

Sinabi kong ang assigned discussant sa bawat nobela e sa araw ng meeting ko mismo sasabihin para siguradong magbabasa sila lahat. Kailangan pa nilang magpasa ng 4-page critique sa bawat nobela. Walang mangangahas mang-bullshit, binitiwang ko talaga ang bs word sa first day ng klase, dahil awtomatikong ie-F ko sa klase. Walang nagsasalita. Kaya nga siguro nag-drop iyung dalawa sa original na 11 na nag-sign-up. Kitang-kita rin ang pag-iwas nilang tumingin sa isa't isa, sa takot siguro na kung ano pang gawin ko't sabihin sa kanila.

Si Lia, hindi rin masyadong nagsasalita sa klase, pero nang siya ang tawagin kong maging discussant ng 2666 ni Roberto Bolaño bandang Setyembre, na-impress ako. Pero hindi ako nagpahalata. Una, mahirap hawakan ang maximalist na proyekto ni Bolaño. Gusto mong isipin na pinaglalaruan ka lang, pero mahirap gawin dahil seryoso ang proyekto. Ang ikaapat na seksiyon e pag-iisa-isa ng mga krimen sa Santa Teresa. Mga babaeng pinapaslang. Pinagsasamantalahan at saka pinapaslang. Isa pa, halos 1000 pages ang nobela. Iyong nabasa lang iyon, okey na. Ang totoo, hindi ako umaasang nabása nila talaga.

Pero may mga binitiwang si Lia na nakapukaw ng atensiyon ko.

“I guess there’s nothing wrong with the depiction of women here as victims ... It happens, it is happening right now. I have quarrel, though, with the vision of reality in which women function only as victims. Why can’t they be suspects here, too? I mean, I’d love to have women here as criminals as well. Bolaño’s seeming attempt to be politically correct here is the more reason that he was politically incorrect. His political posturing on issues of gender and violence has led to a less politicized worldview of crime and femininity, in my own view.” *In your own view ha*, naisip ko noon. Ngumiti ako, mas smirk kaysa ngiti, iyung ngiti na hindi nila alam ang ibig sabihin bukod sa mas alam ko ang nangyayari kaysa sa inaakala niya.

Walang nakapagsalita sa klase. Kahit ako. Iniwan ko lang ang aking enigmatic smile habang nakatingin ako kay Lia na nakayuko naman sa kopya niya ng nobela. Noon ko unang naisip, gusto ko ang babaeng ito. Graduating na siya. At naiisip ko kung ano kayang iniisip niya noong freshman o sophomore year siya at nagda-dissect siya ng mga hayop sa

Bio classes niya. Kung iniisip ba niya ang kasarian ng palaka, o ng daga, o ng pusa. Malamang. *Iniisip niya*. Pero ano kayang nararamdaman niya habang ginagawa iyon?

Naintriga ako kay Lia. Tiningnan ko ang mga lumang isyu ng *H--*. Hindi siya nag-shift sang-ayon sa short bionotes niya sa mga iyon. BS Biology talaga ang kurso niya simula freshman year. At simula freshman year e miyembro siya ng *H--*. Naging miyembro nito ang maraming importanteng pangalan sa literary scene ng Pinas. Well, importante kasi nanalo ng awards—Palanca, Free Press, the works, o nakapagpublish ng sariling mga libro. Nang makita ko ang mga tula ni Lia, nagulat ako kasi nasa Filipino. Sa Filipino siya nagsusulat. Ingles siya nang Ingles sa klase, pero kapag pala tumula siya, Filipino.

Pina-photocopy ko lahat ng tula niya na nakita ko sa mga isyu ng *H--* simula nung freshman year niya. Labing-apat na tula. May isang maikling-maikling sanaysay na malaprosang tula. Malamang e ipinasa niya bilang prosang tula. Masyadong cerebral ang mga tula ni Lia. Halos walang emosyon, walang lungkot, walang pighati, walang kabiguan, na tulad ng madalas na makita sa mga tula ng mga kaedad niya. Hindi rin tungkol sa pag-ibig ang mga ito. Para bang ang inspirasyon niya, sa halip na personal na karanasan, sa halip na relasyon at mga damdamin, idea. Konsepto. Madalas, hindi ko maintindihan ang tula niya. Pero may kung anong gayuma. Tulad ng lahat ng misteryo. Hindi mo maintindihan, kaya hindi mo maiwan-iwan. Kaya hindi ka maiwan-iwan.

Paulit-ulit kong binasa ang labing-apat na tula sang-ayon sa pagkakasunod-sunod ng pagkakalathala nila. Pinag-aaralan ko ang pagkaunlad ng utak ng estudyante kong ito na binabasa ang lahat ng ipinababasa ko sa klase, at talagang may mga binibitiwang higit kaysa kayang sabihin ng iba niyang kaklase. Bago mo ako pangunahan, aaminin ko nang na-obsess ako sa kanya. At least sa utak niya. At least sa simula.

Pinakapaborito ko sa mga tula niya ang “Karnabal.”

Dakilang karnabal ng di-nakikitang  
paghuhunos ng mga espiritung may mahika  
ng realismo, tulad sa nobelang binanghay  
upang lumikha ng suliranin at wakas.

Mapa ng paggising at paghimbing  
ang aklat ng tiyanak sa isipan.  
Walang ibang makaaalam, purgatoryo  
itong babalik-balikan. Mangmang  
akong tutula tungkol sa paglikha.

Tang-ina, sabi ko sa sarili ko. May estudyante palang ganitong tumula. Ang labo. Baliw ang batang ito. Ano kayang nangyari rito nung bata siya? Bakit nagkaganito ito? Tiningnan ko ang FB niya. Siyempre, naintriga na ako talaga. Kaso naka-private. Profile pic lang niya at cover photos ang puwede kong makita. Picture niyang nakatawa, parang binigla siyang kunan ng picture, mukhang nasa bahay lang siya. Mukha talaga siyang Chinese. Pero sige, wala raw siyang kadugu-dugong Chinese kaya hindi ko na talaga ipipilit iyon. Nag-alangan naman naman akong i-add siya sa FB. Nung magmi-midterms ko naisip gumawa ng FB group para mai-add ko silang lahat sa FB ko, iyung siyam kong estudyante. Para hindi halata na kay Lia lang talaga ako interesado. Pero nung makita ko na ang FB niya, saka ko na-realize na ibang-iba iyon sa Lia na nagsulat ng mga tula. Nagmumukha siyang karaniwang college student sa kaniyang FB. Nag-i-status tungkol sa mga klase (hinanap ko kung meron siyang post tungkol sa klase ko, wala akong nakita, o baka na-delete niya bago ko pa man sila i-add sa FB, pero nakaramdam din ako ng bahagyang inis na wala man lang siyang kahit anong post na may kinalaman sa klase namin, o sa akin), may mga pa-mysterious na crush (hindi siya in a relationship, na ipinagtataka ko rin, dahil 'yung hitsura niya e 'yung hitsura na hindi mawawalan ng manliligaw, later ko na malalaman na by choice iyon, siyempre), pumaparty, may mga barkada sa org, nagpopost ng pic ng pagkain niya, ng mga pinupuntahang lugar at kung ano-ano pa. Sa FB niya, karaniwang-karaniwan siya't maglalaho sa pagkakaraniwan ng iba pang mga kabataang walang sariling identidad. Napakalayo noon sa nagsulat ng "Karnabal." O ng "Hati." o ng "Alas Dose." O ng prosang tulang "Namamatay Ako Taon-Taon." Maskara lang ba itong FB? Isang pagpapanggap na kagaya lang siya ng iba para maitago ang talagang siya, ang siya ng mga tula na nasa *H--*? Pero ginagamit niya ang totoong pangalan niya sa byline ng mga tula. Kasama pa nga ang buong middle name niya. Angeli Romero Torres. Ang una ko ngang napansin, ART ang initials niya. Sorry, alam kong irrelevant, pero



nakakaaliw lang. O ang mga tulang ito ang maskara para pagtakpan ang totoong siya? O parehong maskara ang mga ito, at iyong totoong Lia, isang buong mundo na natatabingan ng mga aninong ito? Anuman, ang bersiyon ng Lia na nasa klase ko, iyong nagbasa ng tatlumpu't anim na nobela sa loob ng limang buwan, at iyung naglathala ng labing-apat na tula sa *H---*, iyon ang Lia na gusto ko. At iyon ang Lia na kasama ko sa pagpatay sa one-time Palanca awardee ng aming Lit Department, mula sa pagpapalano hanggang sa pagsasakatuparan noon. At iyon ang Lia na kailangan ko rin ngayong patayin.

NOONG UNA, NAGSIMULA SIYA sa pahiwatig na may alam siya tungkol sa akin. Ako siyempre, maang-maangan school of acting. Sa isang critique nila sa ipinabasa kong *Strangers on a Train* ni Patricia Highsmith, nagsulat siya ng essay na ang beginning letter ng mga linya sa unang pahina ng A4 e acrostic ng PLANNING STAGE OF MURDER. Eksakto rin ang mga spacing katapat ng pagitan ng dalawang paragraph. Noong binasa nila ang *Miss Smila's Feeling for Snow* ni Peter Høeg, ang acrostic sa unang pahina ng critique niya e YOU ARE PLANNING SOMETHING. Sa essay niya sa *Smaller and Smaller Circles* ni F.H. Batacan, nawala ang cryptic at generalized mode niya nang ang acrostic na mabása ko e PAREDES IS IN IT AND IS DONE FOR. Sa isip ko noon, aba matindi talaga ang babaeng ito. Pero di pa rin ako kumakagat, kunwaring di ko napapansin ang mga acrostic sa essay niya kahit ang totoo'y paulit-ulit kong binabasa ang mga iyon para sa iba pang clues ng mga alam niya. Kaya minsan, sinabi na niya sa akin nang deretsahan na alam niyang di ko gusto si Prof. Paredes at na may pinaplano ako. Eto iyung gabing hinintay niyang makaalis ang mga kaklase niya at sinabayan niya akong maglakad pabalik sa faculty room mula sa classroom namin. 5–8 PM ang klase namin tuwing Biyernes kaya madilim na nang naglalakad kami sa loob ng kampus, at wala na halos ibang tao. Sabi ko sa kaniya, anong pinaplano, saan nanggaling iyan. Tonong magkahalong nagtataka't galit pero hindi masyadong defensive para di naman obvious. Huwag daw akong matakot, wala namang ibang makakaalam, basta isama ko siya sa pagpapalano. Marami pa raw siyang gustong matutuhan mula sa akin. Sa isip-isip ko, sinong natatakot, bakit ako matatakot, baka ikaw ang patayin ko riyan e. Hindi ko alam ang sinasabi mo, sabi ko na lang. Pero alam ko na noong it was a losing battle. Hindi ko napaghandaan ang

sudden move niya na iyon. O matagal na ba niyang pinag-iisipan iyon? At sa buong panahon na akala ko ay siya ang pinag-aaralan ko sa kaniyang mga tula at FB account ay ako pala talaga ang pinag-aaralan niya. Lalo akong na-excite sa utak ng batang ito. Kaibigan ko si Prof. Paredes, sabi ko, huling attempt na i-deny ang anumang sinasabi niya. Doc Gab, sabi niya, I read and reread everything you've said in class, they were all leading to that one unavoidable plan... the same thing you did with Marco last year. Doon na ako hindi nakahuma, tumigil ako sa paglalakad at tumingin sa kaniya. Walang kagatol-gatol ang pagkakasabi niya. Kilala mo si Marco? Si Marco ang MA student ko noong isang taon na part-time teacher sa St. Paul's na naging guinea pig ng aking murder scheme. He was my cousin, sabi ni Lia, walang halong emosyon. Tiningnan ko ang mukha niya sa liwanag ng mga ilaw ng mga poste sa kampus. Wala akong makitang similarity ng hitsura nila ni Marco. Niloloko niya ba ako? Ano ito, revenge? sabi ko, saka ko naisip na parang umamin na rin ako. She raped me when I was eight, sabi ni Lia, wala ulit emosyon. Ang unang pumasok sa isip ko sa sinabi niya, hmm, so, hindi ka na virgin, ilan na ang sumunod since then? Pero ang itinanong ko: Pati ba si Prof. Paredes? He's gay, sabi ni Lia, everyone knows that. Of course, sabi ko, bago ako nagpatuloy sa paglalakad. So anong gusto mong gawin natin? tanong ko.

At sa ganoon nagsimula ang mga pagpapalano namin. Hindi naman sa wala akong choice. May choice ako noon na unahin na siya. Pero siguro na-excite din talaga ako sa posibilidad na may kasamang gumawa ng krimen. Isa pa, fascinated din talaga ako sa galaw ng utak niya (sorry kung paulit-ulit ito, but you should get the point). Ipinabasa niya sa akin nang may bago siyang tula bago niya iyon ipinasa sa *H--*. Noong una, kunwari ay hindi ko alam na tumutula-tula siya. Tapos, sinabi niya sa akin na alam niyang ipinakopya ko ang mga tula niya sa *H--* noong bago pa mag-mid-sem. Mind reader ka ba? tanong ko sa kaniya. Ngumiti lang siya. Sa madali't sabi, nagawa namin ang mga binalak namin kay Paredes bago pa man magtapos ang sem, bago mag-Disyembre. Tulad ng nangyari kay Marco (na inspired ng nangyari kay Amiel), nagsimulang missing si Paredes. Umabsent na lang isang araw hanggang sa halos isang linggo na walang may balita kung nasaan siya. Inactive ang FB at Twitter niya na parehong public. Wala na siyang kung ano-anong shit na pa-deep sa mga status at tweet niya. Tulad ko, nasa probinsiya rin ang mga kapamilya niya, mas malayo nga lang, sa Masbate. Department secretary namin ang unang naghanap sa kaniya

dahil kabi-kabila ang mga estudyante niyang pumupunta sa opisina para magtanong kung bakit di siya pumapasok. Siyempre, walang may alam ng dahilan. Bukod sa amin ni Lia. Sa dinami-dami na ng nabasa kong crime fiction, lalo pa noong tinatapos ko ang disertasyon kong *A Short History of Murder in Philippine Fiction*, alam ko na ang mga posibleng paraan ng pagdi-dispose ng bangkay (mas madali kasing pumatay talaga kesa mag-dispose ng bangkay). May mga obvious siyempre, tulad ng paghuhukay nang malalim at paglilibing dito, pagtatabon ng lupa, at paglilibing ng decoy na hayop sa ibabaw nito para sakaling may makaamoy ng paghuhukay mo sa likod-bahay o sa bakanteng lote ng kapitbahay o kahit sa talahiban sa gilid ng highway e aakalain nilang aso lang ang naroon (o pusa), walang taong nakabaon nang ilang talampakan pa ang lalim mula sa mas mababaw na hukay para sa hayop. Puwede ring sunugin o lusawin sa asido kung gusto mong walang matirang kahit anong ebidensiya kahit ng DNA. Puwede ring mag-alaga ng hayop, aso o baboy, at ipakain dito nang pakaunti-kaunti ang bangkay. Pero matinding energy at production number ang kailangan para mapull-off ang mga ito. Wala namang budget na tulad ng TV series ang hamak na Lit prof na tulad ko. Mabuti na lang at may napakasimpleng paraan para paslangin at basta mawala ang isang tao. Kailangan mo lang ng dagat. Obvious, di ba? At dahil obvious kaya hindi natin pinapansin. Nasa isang arkipelago tayo. Napapalibutan at hinahati ng dagat ang mga pulo-pulo natin. Napakabilis maglaho sa kalawakan ng dagat. Isang biyaheng walang nakakaalam. Isang arkila ng bangka. Isang tulak sa tubig. Isang arangkada pabalik sa dalampasigan. Sa dami ng ibang tao na puro dayo sa lugar, walang pakialam ang may-ari ng bangka kung nag-iisa nang bumalik ang umarkila nito. Kailangan mo lamang ngumiti at umasta nang karaniwan, magbitiw ng joke tungkol sa alon o sa araw o sa picture na kinunan mo, at mag-tip nang mas malaki nang kaunti sa karaniwan (kaunti lang dahil nakapagdududa lalo kapag masyado nang malaki—kataas-taasa’y isipin nilang ang yabang mo). Tapikin pa ang may-ari ng bangka sa balikat, parang close kayo, habang sinasabing sa uulitin, manong, at tatango ito, sasabihing sige ser, siya pa ang tuwang-tuwa na napapayag mo sa kaunting dagdag na hindi siya ang magpaandar ng bangka, dahil kunwaring gusto mong masubukan dito, marunong ka naman dahil may mga bangkang de-motor din ang lolo mo sa resort nito sa Quezon, at wala naman kayong mapupuntahan kundi gitna ng dagat dahil ang pinakamalapit na isla ay halos dalawang oras pa ang layo, at hindi mo naman itatakas ang bangka niya dahil mukha

ka namang may pinag-aralan, at aanhin mo iyon kung naka-board shorts ka lang at sando at walang dala maliban sa cellphone at wallet na pareho pang naka-plastic? So, ganun kadali, goodbye, Marco, goodbye, Paredes! Matagal mo nang napag-aralan ang lugar na pupuntahan, ang petsa (long weekend, mainit kahit dapat ay tag-ulan pa rin, at maraming tao), ang mga patibong para pumunta roon ang biktima nang hindi nalalamang nagmula sa iyo ang gayuma ng paanyaya, ang pagche-check-in nito nang anonimo sa isang resort na hindi naghahanap ng ID, ang kunwaring random na pagkikita ninyo sa dalampasigan, ang imbitasyon sa bangka. Napag-aralan mo na ang layo na kinakailangan mo kung saan imposibleng may makakita sa inyo sa 360 degrees ng paligid ninyo. Puro tubig at abot-tanaw sa paligid. Wala kahit isang ibang nilalang at walang ibang parating mula sa kahit saan maliban sa palipad-lipad na mga ibong walang pakialam. Karaniwang inaabot ng isang linggo bago lumutang ang bangkay ng nalunod. Iyon ay kung hindi pa ito mapagpipistahan ng mga lamang-dagat sa ilalim ng tubig. Kung lumutang man ito, hindi na halos makikilala ang mukha. Dahil walang report ng missing person at walang identification, mabilis na ididisperse ang halos agnas na rin namang bangkay. Walang nasa Maynila na mag-iisip na naririto ang hinahanap na nawawalang estudyante, o guro, halos 200 kilometro ang layo mula roon, at kung ilang libong metro ang lalim mula sa ibabaw ng tubig. Alam ko nang hindi sila marunong lumangoy. Natatawa pa sila pareho nang sinabi kong, Bakit ka sumama rito nang walang life vest, hindi ka pala marunong lumangoy. Kung itulak kita rito? Loko ka, sir, sabi ni Marco noon. You're creepy, you know that, right, Gab? sabi ni Paredes wala pang isang taon matapos si Marco. Pareho silang tumatawa nang nilapitan ko at saka tinabig para mahulog sa dagat. Fuck! si Marco. Puta! si Paredes. Para akong nagbate at nilabasan nang marinig ko ang pagbagsak ng mga katawan nila sa tubig. Sisinghap-singhap sila pareho sa tubig. Nagkakakawag na parang aso. Sir! sigaw ni Marco. Gab! sigaw ni Paredes. Sa pagitan ng paglubog at paglitaw ng ulo nila, ng pagkampay ng mga kamay, ng pag-inom ng tubig, ng pagtatangkang sumigaw, humiyaw, ng pag-iyak, may pag-asa sa mga mata nila na biro lang iyon, na lulundag ako para sagipin sila. Pero nasa loob din ng tingin ng pag-asang iyon ang matinding pagbabanta. Humanda ka pag-ahon ko rito, humanda ka pagbalik natin sa Maynila. At saka ko paaandarin ang bangka palayo. At alam ko na sa sandaling ginawa ko iyon, nadoble pang lalo ang pagpapanic nila. Lalong dumami ang mainom nilang tubig. Mas mabilis silang

lumubog. Halos palubog na rin ang araw. Ang ganda ng kulay ng palubog na araw. Ang sarap mabuhay.

PERO BUHAY PA NGA si Lia. Naroon din siya sa beach at nakita rin ni Paredes. Pero hindi niya kami nakitang magkasama. Hindi kilala ni Paredes si Lia, pamilyar lang ang mukha nito dahil hindi naman ganoon kalaki ang student population *sa amin*. Isa pa, madalas ngang nasa mga literary events si Lia, tulad ng poetry readings ng *H--* at naging fellow pa ito sa isa workshop kung saan naupo bilang panelist si Paredes. Sabi ni Lia, tinanguan siya ni Paredes nang tinabihan niya ang mesang inuupuan nito sa restobar malapit sa beach front. Hindi kami sabay bumalik ni Lia sa Maynila, siyempre. Nag-bus siya. Nag-drive ako. Sa huling tatlong linggo ng sem, wala nang acrostic sa mga ipinapasa niyang critiques. Hindi na niya ako ulit nilapitan nang mag-isa at sinamahan pabalik sa faculty room pagkatapos ng klase. Biglang parang hindi nangyari ang mga nangyari. Tinitingnan ko siya nang mata sa mata kapag may sinasabi ako sa klase tungkol sa pagpatay o sa krimen sa nobelang binabasa namin at tumitingin din naman siya sa akin nang tuwid pero wala akong mabasa sa mga tingin niya maliban sa nakikinig siya nang taimtim sa mga sinasabi ko tungkol sa nobela. Natapos ang sem, naka-A siya sa klase, obviously, at nag-Christmas break. Declared as missing na noon si Paredes. Nakapagpamisa na nang ilang beses sa college chapel para rito. Tatay niya mismo, na public schools supervisor pala sa Masbate, ang lumuwas para asikasuhin ang pagkawala nito. Wala namang makapag-connect ng pagkawala ni Paredes sa pagkawala ni Marco noong isang taon, na halos nalimutan na rin naman ng buong school. Mas malala kasi ang nangyari three years ago na may tatlong estudyanteng nag-suicide nang wala pang tig-iisang buwan ang pagitan. Iyung isa, sa kampus pa mismo ginawa. Iyon ang mas naaalala pa rin sa school. Umuwi ako sa San Pablo bago mag-Pasko. Walang paramdam si Lia. Walang text, walang FB chat. Nagbagong-taon. Wala. Kunsabagay, kahit noong pinaplano namin ang kay Paredes, iniiwasan naming magkaroon ng message trail. Kadalasan, personal na usap kung saan magkikita, kung paano magkikita. Mahirap na. Masarap pumatay, pero mahirap ang mga komplikasyon kapag napagbintangan kang kriminal. Lalo pa't hindi ko naman iniisip na krimen ito. Trip lang. Ano ba ang krimen kundi isang kategoryang nilikha ng batas? Ano ba ang batas kundi arbitraryong paggigiit ng partikular na nosyon ng

kaayusan ng isang lipunan? Semantics. Matters of interpretation.

Buong bakasyon kong pinag-isipan kung anong gagawin ko kay Lia. Kapag hindi ko siya pinatay, handa ba akong habambuhay na niya akong guguluhin kung kailan niya gustuhin? Pero hindi na niya ako kinakausap. Mas okay na bang ganito? Hindi man lang nagpasalamat sa A niya sa klase. Mayabang din ang batang ito. Alam niyang magaling siya. Nang magsimula ang bagong sem pagdating ng Enero, hindi ko na inasahang sasadyain man lang ako ni Lia sa department. Last sem na niya sa college. Ang isip niya siguro e sa buhay *na* pagkatapos ng A—. Pero anong gagawin niya? May iba na ba siyang sinamahan dati sa pagpatay? Ngayon ko lang naisip na ang dami ko pa ring di alam tungkol sa kaniya. Minamataan ko siya kapag naglalakad ako sa mga hallway papunta sa mga klase ko pero hindi ko siya natitiyempuhan. Nang third week na ng klase pero di ko pa rin siya nakikita sa kampus, saka ko sinubukang tingnan ang FB niya. Hindi ko siya ma-search. Blinock ba niya ako? Napilitan akong gumawa ng dummy account para matingnan ang account niya. Wala rin. Ang daming ibang Angeli Torres pero hindi siya, wala siya. Nag-deactivate ba siya? Wala naman siyang Twitter. Ang Instagram niya, deactivated din. Anong meron? Tiningnan ko ang FB group ng klase namin na ginawa ko noon. Active pa roon ang walo niyang nakaklase pero iniwan na niya ang group. O automatic ba iyon kapag nag-deactivate ka ng account? Natutukso akong kumustahin siya sa mga kaklase niya pero hindi puwede, sobrang weird na noon. Tiningnan ko ang online student record niya na viewable dapat sa lahat ng mga naging teacher niya. Nawala ang pangalan niya sa class list ko sa Pomo Fic last sem. Nawala ang lahat ng records niya sa A—. Anong nangyari rito? Sinubukan kong tawagan ang number niya. *The telephone number you dialled is incorrect.* Nag-message na ako sa wakas sa FB group, kinukumusta si Lia. Seen ng 8. Walang nag-reply. Mga putang-inang ito, matapos makakuha ng grade, wala nang pakialam. Dapat talaga e ibinagsak ko ang mga ito. Bandang mid-March, lumabas ang bagong issue ng H—. Nagulat pa ako nang makita ang mga kopya ng journal sa mesa sa bukana ng building bago ako umakyat sa opisina. Dumampot ako ng isa at tiningnan kung naroon ang pinakabagong tula ni Lia, ang panlabinlima niyang tula na ipinabasa niya sa akin noong November bago niya ipinasa sa H— dahil sabi niya, inspired ng klase namin, at inspired din ng disertasyon ko na binasa rin daw niya sa University Archives. Naroon ang tula. “Isang Maikling Kasaysayan ng mga Pagpaslang.” Pero pangalan ko ang nasa byline. #

# Field Trip

Joselito D. Delos Reyes

**N**gayon ang ikalawang araw ng paghahanap ni Jordan sa gintong bracelet. Um-absent siya sa klase kahapon, Biyernes, para simulang hanapin ang nawawalang alahas ni Boss Billy sa palaisdaang binubuwisan nito sa Sapang Tukul sa Salambao, Obando. Ang paalam niya kay Aling Mely, ang nanay niya, mangangapa lang ng singaw na liwalo at tilapya—at matsatsambahang hipon—na pang-ulam. Ito rin ang paalam niya kay Mang Sandro na umalis kahapon para bumili ng lambat sa Binondo at ngayon, para ipahayuma ang nabiling lambat sa Paliwas.

Kailangan niya ang kadenang bracelet ni Boss Billy para maibenta. Kailangan niya ng pera para sa paglipat nilang mag-iina mula Obando pabalik ng Cardona matapos na matapos lang siya sa elementarya. Para na rin—at ito talaga ang mas mabigat na dahilan ni Jordan!—sa kaniyang field trip sa isang linggo. Dahil ang sabi ni Boss Billy noong gabing natuklasan niyang nawawala ang gintong bracelet at ang matagal, mga dalawang oras na bigong paghahanap at pangangapa sa pilapil ng palaisdaan: “Hayaan na, kung sino makakita e di kan’ya na.”

Hindi man kay Jordan direktang sinabi iyon, pero alam niyang para iyon sa lahat ng nakaririnig, na noong gabing iyon, bandang alas-one na, ay sina Jomar, ang mayabang na bodyguard at drayber ni Boss Billy; si Ma’am Beverly, ang class na class at Ingles nang Ingles na bagong syota ni Boss Billy; si Mang Juaning na bangkerong laging natotokahang pilotohan ang ipinagawang bangka ni Boss Billy kapag dadalaw sa palaisdaan; ang maselang

si Clifford na kaibigan ni Boss Billy mula pa daw noong high school sila sa Pasig; si Mang Sandro na pumalit sa tatay ni Jordan bilang engkargado at katiwala ng palaisdaan ni Boss Billy; si Derik na taga-ihaw ng porkchop at isda, tagatipak ng yelo, at tagabili ng beer at alak noong gabing nag-inuman sila at nawala nga ang gintong bracelet; at siyang naroon, kasa-kasama ng kaniyang ina sa kubo, nakatanaw siya mula sa bintana habang nagkakagulo silang lahat sa labas, malapit sa prinsang ng palaisdaan, lango sa beer at alak. Nagtatawanan, naghaharutan, nagtutulakan sila kahit pa nawalan na nga ng bracelet si Boss Billy. Sa isip ni Jordan, mayaman talaga si Boss Billy, parang hindi ininda ang siguradong napatid na alahas. Parang balewala lang. Kunsabagay, kapapanalo lang ni Boss Billy sa sabong noong araw na iyon. Tatlong manok na inalagaan ni Derik at Mang Sandro kasama ang mahigit bente pang panabong na nakasuga sa pilapil ng palaisdaan. Singkuwenta mil daw ang napanalunan kaya nagpainom sa kubo.

Kasama ni Jordan sa kubo ng gabing iyon na nawalan ng makapal na bracelet si Boss Billy ang kaniyang ina at kapatid na bata, si Millet. Sa kubong gawa sa sapi-saping plywood, yero, pawid, talaksan ng kahoy at tulos na kawayan, rolyo-rolyong lambat, patong-patong na cooler na istayropor at banyera, makina ng bangka, lona. Apat dapat silang nakatira sa kubong iyon: ang nanay niyang si Aling Mely, si Millet na grade three na kapatid ni Jordan sa kaniyang ina, at si Mang Miyas na tatay-tatayan ni Jordan na dating katiwala at engkargado ng palaisdaan ni Boss Billy. Apat sila dapat. Kung hindi lang nawala si Mang Miyas.

Dalawang buwan nang hindi umuuwi o natatagpuan ang kaniyang ama-amahan buhat nang umekstra sa bangkang sudsod. Panahon ng alim-asag at patay noon ang buwan kaya sumama si Mang Miyas sa kumpare nitong si Mang Alonso na taga-Binuangan. Isang gabing sudsod lang sa Manila Bay malapit sa Corregidor, tatal ay wala namang hahanguing laman noon ang palaisdaan maliban sa bagong kalalagay na ganggadaling semi-lyang ng bangus at lapu-lapu. Isang gabi lang daw pero hindi na nakabalik si Mang Miyas. Sabi ni Mang Alonso, nakakita daw ng kakilala sa laot, mga taga-Bataan daw. Pabalik na sila noon at maraming huling alim-asag, matatabang alim-asag, patungo sa pondohan ng Obando. Nakisakay si Mang Miyas sa trol na papuntang Bataan, may pupuntahan daw sa Orani, paalam niya kay Mang Alonso. Uuwi din daw kinagabihan ng madaling araw na iyon. Nagpumilit. Dala daw ang gulanit na backpack nang lumipat ng bang-



ka. Pinayagan ni Mang Alonso. Wala daw siyang nagawa dahil nagpumilit si Mang Miyas. Ibigay na lang daw sa asawa niya ang kinita sa pagsudsod, kasama ang pang-ulam, na iniabot naman ni Mang Alonso kinagabihan kay Aling Mely, pitong daang piso at mga limang kilong malalaking babaeng alimasag.

Dalawang buwan na ang nakararaan mula noon. Hindi na umuwi sa Sapang Tukol ni ang anino at amoy ni Mang Miyas. Nagpa-blotter na sina Aling Mely sa paligid ng Bulacan hanggang Cavite, Pampanga, Bataan, at Zambales. Pumunta na rin sila sa Mauban at Atimonan kung saan lumaki si Mang Miyas. Nagpa-blotter din doon. Pinagtanong sa mga kamag-anak kung napapasyal doon si Mang Miyas. Wala raw. Dalawampung taon na raw hindi nagagawi sa Mauban. Hindi na nga raw nila alam ang hitsura ng butuhan, maitim, at hukot na ama-amahan ni Jordan na noong kabataan daw ay matikas, matipuno, laging nakaparagan, at laging nakapomada ang buhok kahit papalaot.

Pati mga punerarya, pinuntahan ni Aling Mely. Ilang libong piso na ang inuubos ng pamilya ni Jordan at ni Boss Billy kapapamasahe, katutulong sa mumurahing hotel, kapapakain, katatawag kung kani-kanino, kapapaseroks sa malabong larawan ni Mang Miyas na lasing, nakapikit, at bumibirit at may hawak na mikropono ng videoke, na idinidikit ni Aling Mely sa mga poste sa kung saang palengke, presinto, at terminal ng kung anong bayan magagawi ang paghahanap ng asawa. Nakasulat sa ilalim ng idinidikit na papel ang numero ng cellphone ni Aling Mely at Boss Billy. Wala silang tawag o text na natanggap.

Kapag nakabalita sa radyo o telebisyon na may lumulutang daw na bangkay sa Manila Bay, sa Ilog Pasig, sa baybayin ng Navotas, Bulacan, Cavite, sasadyain ni Aling Mely ang lugar na iyon, ang funeraria na pinaglagakan ng bangkay na karaniwa'y biktima ng salvage o nalunod dahil natambog nang lasing.

Apat na beses pumalaot sina Aling Mely at Jordan kasama si Mang Alonso sakay ng bangka ni Boss Billy. Nagpunta sila sa mismong lugar na pinaglipatan ni Mang Miyas ng bangka. Gustong balik-balikan ni Aling Mely ang lugar. Itinuro ni Mang Alonso ang direksyong pagawi sa Bataan na tinungo ng bangkang sinakyan ni Mang Miyas. Sa tatlong pagkakataong iyon, hindi ang asul na kabundukan ng Bataan sa kanluran, hindi ang malapad na pilak na dagat, hindi ang naglisaw na isda sa kaibabawan, hindi

ang mga tuldok ng bangka sa malayo, hindi ang nanunuot sa kalamnang lamig ng amihan sa laot, hindi ang mga tingting na barko sa gawi ng Navotas at pier, hindi ito ang nakapukaw sa atensyon ni Jordan. Hindi rin ang taimtim na paghikbi ng kaniyang ina habang muling sinasariwa ni Mang Alonso ang nangyari noong gabing sumakay ng ibang bangka si Mang Miyas. Ang nakita ni Jordan, ang laging inaabangan ni Jordan, ay ang tanawin ng mga gusali sa Kamaynilaan. Ang kahon-kahong gusali sa silangan mula sa kung saan sila naroroon, ang lugar ng mga gusaling hindi pa niya nararating kailanman, hindi pa nakikita nang malapitan. Sa ikatlong pagkakataong dinala sila sa laot ni Mang Alonso, inabot sila ng takipsilim. Nagsimulang kuminang ang Kamaynilaan. Nabighani si Jordan sa ganda ng nagsulputang kinang. Tinanong ni Jordan si Mang Alonso, pwede raw ba silang mamasyal sa Maynila sakay ng bangka ni Boss Billy, oo daw. Malapit lang naman daw. Pwede raw silang dumaong sa mismong Roxas Boulevard, sa mismong kulay at liwanag ng Maynilang hindi pa nararating ni Jordan na baka narating na ng kaniyang ama-amahan, si Mang Miyas.

Bali-balita, sumama daw sa NPA si Mang Miyas. O sa nagpapatru-lyang militar sa laot para maging ahenteng tutukoy sa mga NPA. O inabot ng unos. Pero walang balita sa Coast Guard na mayroong nadisgrasyang bangka noong araw na iyon o ng mga sumunod na araw pa sa Manila Bay. Wala ding masasabing unos noong panahong iyon bukod sa lamig ng amihan dahil Nobyembre. Baka nalunod daw. O nilunod. O, at ito ang laging pinagtatawanang dahilan ng mga taga-Salambao, lumangoy daw at nakalunok ng ayungin. O, dahil sikat na sikat ang fantaserye tungkol sa mga sire-sirena, dating syokoy daw talaga kasi si Mang Miyas at bumalik na sa kaniyang tunay na kaharian sa ilalim ng dagat. Posible rin daw na sumama sa “sirenanang” kulasisi sa Bataan o sa Cavite. Baka daw naakit, naadik sa mga gamu-gamong dagat at akyat-barko sa Navotas at sa Ternate o sa Naic. Nang tanungin si Aling Mely ng mga pulis kung may pinag-awayan daw ba sila ni Mang Miyas, may samaan daw ba ng loob, may bulyawang naganap bago pumalaot. Wala naman daw. Wala rin siyang alam na dahilan kung bakit sumakay sa bangka ng isang kakilalang mamamalakaya si Mang Miyas, ang kinakasama ni Aling Mely sa loob ng sampung taon. Baka daw may babae si Mang Miyas? Wala daw. Kinulit ng imbestigador, baka daw sumama sa iba. Wala daw, paniniwala ni Aling Mely, wala daw talaga. Naungkat tuloy ang pamilya, anak-anak. Nabunyag sa pulisya na hindi anak ni Mang Miyas si Jordan. Kaninong anak daw si Jordan? Hindi na sumagot si Aling Mely sa

mga tanong ng pulis. Ayaw nang madamay pa ang buhay ng kaniyang mga anak. Hindi na siya muli pang nagpatanong.

“Tinawag pa niyang ‘Danny’ ‘yung piloto nung trol, huminto naman,” pagtatapat ni Mang Alonso. Kinuha yung gamit niya at lumipat ng bangka. Nanulay sa katig ng trol. Nagbabay pa raw sa kanila. Mukha talagang kakilalang-kakilala ni Mang Miyas. Saksi ang lima pang tripulante ng sudsod sa mga sinabi ni Mang Alonso. Hindi raw nila namumukhaan sa pondohan ang tinutukoy na Danny o kahit ang mga kasama nito na nakahilata na sa trol, pagod sa magdamag na panghuhuli. Hindi pa daw nila nakikita sa Navotas, Malabon, Obando, Malolos, Hagunoy, Orani ang tinutukoy na Danny. Kung alam lang daw nila na mawawala si Mang Miyas noong madaling araw na iyon, kinuhanan daw sana nila ng larawan si Danny gamit ang kanilang mga cellphone. O ang bangka mismo na nilipatan ni Mang Miyas. Na pangkaraniwang trol din naman. Walang masasabing katangi-tangi sa kulay, ayos, disenyo, pagkakagawa. Nang tanungin kung ano ang pinta sa tagiliran ng bangka, walang nakatanda. Para daw Danny o Manny o Hanny o Nanny o Ganny ang nakasulat. Pwede ring Manoy, Danoy, Hanoy. Pero hindi rin sigurado kung ‘Y’ nga ang dulong letra. Pwede rin daw ‘J’ o ‘G.’ o Kung ‘N’ ang gitnang letra, pwede rin daw kasing ‘R’ dahil magulo ang pagkakasulat. Parang kabit-kabit na palihis. Pero wala talagang makatiyak sa mga tripulante ni Mang Alonso noong madaling araw na iyon.

“Malay ba namin na ‘yun na ang huling makikita namin si Pareng Miyas.”

“Hindi compulsory.” Iyan ang mariing sabi ng titser ni Jordan tungkol sa pagsama ng kanilang klase sa field trip sa Laguna at Maynila. Hindi raw sapilitan kaya hindi raw dapat asahan ni Misis Magdangal na may mga magulang na magrereklamo sa principal ng Salambao Elementary School na kesyo napilitan o napuwersa silang magbayad. Lalo na ang pagsusumbong sa mga Tulfo sa telebisyon. Hindi raw sapilitan. Kung sino lang ang may gusto at may kakayahang sumama. Hindi ibig sabihin ng may “kakayahang sumama” ay iyong malakas, walang sakit. Ang ibig sabihin ng may “kakayahang sumama” ay iyong may kakayahang magbayad ng nine hundred pesos kahit nagsusuka sa bus, mahihiluhin, nagtatae, may sore eyes, may lagnat, o beke. Kasama na raw sa halagang iyon ang bayad pagpasok sa pabrika ng biskwit at instant noodles sa Canlubang, Laguna; entrance fee sa isang museo sa Maynila, at entrance fee sa Star City na pupwedeng

mag-ride-all-you-can. Ang Star City ang huling pupuntahan sa field trip. Sa parking lot kakainin ang kani-kanilang baong hapunan bandang alas-singko o alas-sais. At matapos ang tatlong oras sa loob ng karnabal, bandang alas-nuwebe ng gabi, babalik na ang mga nag-field trip sa Obando, ihahatid ng bus sa mismong daungan ng mga bangka pa-Salambao. Pagod pero siguradong masaya.

“Hindi pala sapilitan e, ibig sabihin, hindi kailangan sa aral mo,” malumanay na sabi ni Aling Mely, nang sabihin ni Jordan ang kabilin-bilinan ni Misis Magdangal. Hindi daw kailangang sumama ni Jordan dahil wala silang pambayad. Bawat piso ay kailangang tipirin para magamit sa paglilipat nila ng bahay mula Salambao patungong Cardona.

Hinihintay na lang ni Aling Mely na matapos ang school year para makalipat na sila ng bahay. Makuhang-makuha lang nito ang report card ni Jordan at Millet. Makapagsisimula na sila ng bagong buhay na hindi kasama ang hindi na mahagilap na si Mang Miyas. Ang sabi ni Aling Mely sa mga nagtatanong kung nakabalik na ang kaniyang asawa: “Wala. Kinain na ng laot.”

Grade six na si Jordan at grade three naman ang kapatid niyang si Millet. Sa Cardona na magha-high school si Jordan at bahala na kung saan tatanggaping paaralan ang kaniyang kapatid sa pasukan sa Hunyo sa lugar ding iyon. Kailangan nilang manirahan sa Cardona, naroon ang mga kapatid ni Aling Mely. Hindi kakayaning buhayin ni Aling Mely sina Jordan at Millet kung aasahan lang ang papakaunti nang papakaunting inaang gulaman sa Salambao. Hindi niya maaaring asahan ang awa ng mga nagbibigay ng ulam o bigas, o huling isda sa laot.

Kinausap ni Boss Billy si Aling Mely pagkalipas ng isang buwan ng paghahanap kay Mang Miyas. Palilipatan na raw niya ng bagong bantay ang kubo, si Mang Sandro. Napapabayaang daw kasi ang negosyong palaisdaan at ang mga manok na panabong sa gilid-gilid ng pilapil. Walang katiyakan kung babalik si Mang Miyas. Malapit nang hanguin ang bangus at lapu-lapu. Negosyo daw ang kaniya. Gusto niyang tumulong pero hindi dapat masakripisyo ang negosyo.

May pamilya ring kasama si Mang Sandro, at kailangan nilang lumipat sa kubong tinutuluyan nila Jordan para mabantayan sa maghapon at magdamag ang palaisdaan. Malapit nang anihin ang bangus at lapu-lapu na naiwan ni Mang Miyas. Kailangan nang bantayan laban sa maninima, sa

masamang tubig, sa paggataw. Pinakadelikado ang panahong aanihin na ang isda. Pinakamaselan. Hindi pwedeng iwan.

Nakiusap si Aling Mely kay Boss Billy. Patapusin lang ang aral ng kaniyang mga anak. Sa Marso, isang buwan mula ngayon, aalis sila. Makuha lang talaga ang report card. Pumayag naman si Boss Billy. Sinagot pa ang kabuhayan nila hanggang Marso. At nangakong sa pag-alis, bibigyan sila ng pamasaha hanggang Cardona. Samantala, ang bagong katiwala ay nagtirik ng isang kubakob ng lawanit at yero malapit sa prinsa, sa loob ng kubo kung saan naroon ang pambomba ng tubig. Sinabitan iyon ng duyan at doon nagpapalipas ng gabi si Mang Sandro.

Pero alam ni Aling Mely na hindi ganoong kadali ang paglipat. Oo nga't naroon ang kaniyang kapatid sa Cardona pero wala naman siyang titirhan doon. Maaaring makitulong ng ilang araw pero kailangang magkaroon ng sariling titirhan. Masyadong mahal mangupahan. Baka magtirik na lang sila ng barong-barong sa lawa. Sana nga lang ay makakuha agad siya ng trabaho, kahit mag-ipon lang ng pakain sa itik tulad ng ginagawa niya noon bago makilala si Mang Miyas, nang minsang dumayo si Mang Miyas para bumili ng kawayang tulos sa gagawing taliktik ng palaisdaan sa Obando. Matapos ang ikatlong biyahe ni Mang Miyas ng kawayan, kasama na niya si Aling Mely at ang anak-sa-unang si Jordan na noo'y dadalawang taong gulang pa lamang.

Hindi compulsory, bilin ni Misis Magdangal, pero gustong sumama ni Jordan. Sa kaniyang klase, siya lang ang hindi makakasama. Ang inaasahan niyang kaklase at kalaro at kakuwentuhang si Eunice, na nauna nang nagsabing hindi sasama, ay sumama rin bandang huli. Nakapag-ipon daw pala ang kaniyang nanay. Kaya sa munting isip ni Jordan, kailangan niyang sumama, kailangan niyang marating ang Star City, ang lugar kung saan naroon ang kinang na natanaw niya nang puntahan nila ang laot.

“Gusto ni Mama na sumama ‘ko, minsan lang naman daw mapunta sa Maynila,” nahihiyang sinabi kay Jordan ni Eunice. Nabalewala ang usapan nilang hindi sila sasama. “E mahihiluhin nga ako kaya ayoko.”

“Wag muna kayong magbayad, baka sumama rin ako. Magtratabaho lang, basta,” pakiusap ng binatilyong nililitawan na ng taghiyawat ang humpak na mukha at nagkukulay kalawang na ang buhok dahil sa dampi ng maalat na hanging dagat.

Nang umuwi si Jordan noong araw na sabihin ni Misis Magdangal na

hindi obligado ang bawat isa na sumama sa field trip, nagdesisyon siyang hanapin ang bracelet, ibenta kung makikita, at gamitin ang pera bilang pambayad sa field trip at pandagdag sa perang kakailanganin nilang mag-iina sa palipat sa Cardona.

Hindi nahulog sa lugar kung saan hinanap nila Boss Billy ang bracelet. Sa isip ni Jordan, iyon lang ang sigurado, hindi sa kung saan nila hinanap noong gabing iyon. Inisa-isa ni Jordan ang maaaring kahulugan ng alahas: maaaring sa malalim na prinsa, nang itaas ni Mang Sandro ang kahoy na hola para pumasok ang tubig, para sumuba ang mga similya ng bangus at lapu-lapu; maaari ring sa malapit sa matandang puno ng bakawan na kinasabitan ng tulos na ginamit nilang panlabusaw sa ilog na sinusunungan ng palaisdaan ni Boss Billy; maaaring sa daungan ng bangka mismo dahil tanda ni Jordan, medyo umuga ang bangka at nagkatulakan sila sa pag-ahon. Tanda ni Jordan, nakakapit, nakayakap ang syota ni Boss Billy sa kaniya, pwedeng kumapit sa braso at nakapitan ang bracelet at napatid. Inalala niya ang eksaktong sandali kung kailan niya nakita itong suot-suot pa ni Boss Billy, o kung suot na nga ba nang magsimulang mag-inuman? Noong hindi pa sila lasing? Pero palakad-lakad si Boss Billy noon. Sinamahan ni Mang Sandro para ituro ang mga bangus at lapu-lapu na noon ay nagsisimula nang manginain ng feeds na masusing isinasaboy ng bagong katiwala. Sinamahan din sa mga scratch ng tandang, sinamahang humimas ng manok habang ibinibilin kung alin ang pwedeng ipanlabang tandang bago tuluyang sumapit ang tag-araw. Sinuri ni Jordan ang pinakamaliliit na detalye ng pangyayari noong araw na iyon, tinanong ni Jordan ang sarili kung suot na nga ba ni Boss Billy ang bracelet nang umahon ito sa pilapil. Parang wala. Wala siyang matandaang kumikinang na bracelet, hindi gaya ng maraming pagkakataong bumibisita si Boss Billy sa palaisdaan, noong naroon pa ang kaniyang ama-amahan, kapag magpopondo si Mang Miyas at naghihintay ng pera si Boss Billy sa lilim ng malapad na sibi ng kubo. Tangan ang botelya ng malamig na beer, dinudutdot ang tablet sa kung anong laro. Tinatawagan ang kung sino-sino sa hindi maintindihan ni Jordan na usapan tungkol sa palaisdaan, isda, at tandang. Matatanaw ni Jordan ang bracelet, dilaw na dilaw, kumikinang, malapad, maluwag na bahagyang nakalambitin sa braso ni Boss Billy.

Noong gabing nawala ang bracelet, hindi maalala ni Jordan na suot

ito ni Boss Billy habang nagkakasiyahan sa pilapil ng palaisdaan. Kaya maaaring sa mismong daungang kawayan ng bangka nawala. Maaari nang kumapit nang mahigpit ang syota ni Boss Billy sa kaniya. Kaya mali ang hinanapan nilang lugar, sa loob ng palaisdaan, dahil hindi doon nawala, hindi doon nahulog. Sa gilid ng ilog na humahangga sa palaisdaan nahulog, at maaaring nabaon sa putik ang makapal na alahas. Ang alahas na tutugon sa pangangailangan nilang mag-iina, pero higit dito, tutugon sa pagkasabik ni Jordan na makapunta sa Maynila, makasama sa kasiyahan—baka sa huling sandali—ang kaniyang mga kakkase, ang kaniyang mga titser, ang kaniyang mga kaibigan, lalo na si Eunice.

Minsan, pinagsisisihan ni Jordan na naging kaibigan si Eunice, na gaya niya ay anak din ng nagbabantay sa palaisdaan. Taga-Malabon talaga si Eunice, transferee sa kanilang paaralan noong school year na iyon. Nagkakatulad sila sa maraming pagkakataon gaya ng hindi pagsali sa mga scout-scout at pagiging anak nga ng bantay sa palaisdaan. Ilang pagkakataon ding nagkita sila ni Eunice sa pondohan ng isda para samahan ang kanilang magulang na makipag-usap sa mga konsignasyon. Kasabay niya laging kumain ang kakkaseng babae, nagkakapareho sila minsan ng baon na tanghalian sa paaralan: pritong itlog o tilapya o daing na bangus na nakapababaw sa kanin. Kung magkaiba ang kanilang ulam, nagsasalo sila. Nang magbertdey si Eunice, siya lamang ang palihim nitong inilibre ng Magnum na sorbetes at saka maliit na lata ng imported na potato chips. Hindi inubos ni Jordan ang tsitsirya dahil gusto niyang ipatikim sa kaniyang kapatid ang manipis na manipis na kutkutin. Pinag-ipunan rin ni Jordan ang pambili ng mahal na sorbetes at potato chips na iyon matapos niyang matikman nang ilibre. Mahigit isang buwan ang pagitan ng kanilang kaarawan. Mahigit isang buwan niyang pinag-ipunan, mamiso o dos kada araw, para mabuo ang mahigit sandaang pisong halaga ng tig-isa nilang sorbetes at imported na potato chips sa lata na mabibili lamang sa tindahang pag-aari ng principal na katabi halos ng paaralan. Gusto niyang bilhin ang malaking lata ng potato chips na imported pero sadyang kukulangin ang kaunting naipon niya. Gusto niyang magsawa siya kasama si Millet at Eunice sa manipis na kutkutin. Pinagsisihan niyang naging kaibigan si Eunice dahil mistulang siya ang magiging mabigat na dahilan para mabigat niyang ihakbang ang paa palayo sa Salambao. Pero si Eunice din naman kasi ang nagpapasaya sa kaniya at sa kaniyang kapatid na si Millet sa mga pagkakataong wala silang kasama sa kubo dahil nag-iikot sa palaisdaan ang kaniyang ama-amahan at

nagtatalaksan ng gulaman ang kaniyang ina. Madadaan si Eunice sa kubo at magbibigay ng ice candy o ng pinaglumaang manyika o damit kay Millet dahil dalawang nakatatandang lalaki ang kapatid ng kaklase at kaibigan ni Jordan.

Pareho silang walang balak sumama sa field trip. Katwiran ni Eunice, narating na niya ang Star City. Oo nga't hindi pa siya nakarating sa pabrika ng instant noodles o sa sinasabing museo pero sapat na raw ang nakahihilong karanasan niya sa Star City. Hindi siya sanay sa aircon na sasakyan, lalo pa ang bus na may iba't ibang amoy sa loob. Si Jordan, isa lang ang dahilan ng hindi pagsama sa field trip, wala silang pera.

Walang ibang pinagsabihan si Jordan tungkol sa nawawalang bracelet. Walang ibang nakaalam na aalis na sila sa Salambao patungo sa malayong Cardona. Doon na raw siya magpapatuloy ng pag-aaral. Tungkol din daw sa dagat—lawa ng Laguna talaga—ang ikabubuhay nilang mag-iina, ang kumuha ng susong kakainin ng mga itikan sa Cardona. Si Eunice, baka daw sa mismong bayan ng Obando na mag-aral, sa Colegio de San Pascual Baylon, ang pinakamalapit at pinakamalaking pribadong paaralan sa lugar nila. Doon lang mag-e-entrance exam si Eunice. Doon din nag-aaral ang kaniyang kuya at diko. Isa pa, gusto daw ng kaniyang mga magulang na sa high school pinapalakad ng madre at pari mag-aral silang magkapatid. Doon na nakatali ang kaniyang iniisip na pasukan.

Katulong ni Jordan si Eunice sa pagbuo ng kung ano talaga ang totoong istorya nang mawala ang bracelet. Si Eunice ang nagtatanong, ang nag-susuri. Si Jordan ang nagbibigay ng detalye. Pakiramdam nilang dalawa, detective silang tumutugis sa isang tagong kayamanan, na totoo namang kayamanan dahil makapal ang gintong alahas ni Boss Billy. May papel pa silang ginuhitan kung nasaan ang mga landmark na maaaring kinahulugan ng bracelet. Naroon ang kubo, ang bomba ng tubig, ang daungan ng bangka, ang matandang punong bakawan kung saan sila mismong nag-inuman, kung saan nagharutan. Nakasulat kung anong oras ang high tide at low tide buhat sa malaking kalendaryong nakapako sa dingding na plywood ng kubo. Kasabay ng pagguhit-guhit at pagsulat-sulat ang interogasyon ni Eunice kay Jordan.

“Paano mo natiyak na suot?”

“Eh lagi n’yang suot ‘yun kahit na sumasamsam ng lambat o nagbubuhat ng banyera.”



“Baka hindi n’ya suot nung gabi.”

“Imposible.”

“Hindi kaya hinubad?”

“Bakit huhubarin?”

“Malay mo, nangawit. Hindi kaya ninanakaw?”

“Walang nanakaw, e di dapat sana umalis na yung nagnakaw, e sila-sila lang dun.”

“Baka tinangay na ng agos?”

“Mabigat ‘yun, makapal, babaon ‘yun pero di matatangay.”

“Sige, sana makita mo, para makasama ka rin sa field trip.”

“Sana nga, saka kelangan din namin ‘yun, paalis na kami.”

Ngayon ang ikalawang araw ng paghahanap ni Jordan sa gintong bracelet. Kahapon, sa loob mismo ng palaisdaan nangapa si Jordan. Wala. Malayo-layo ang narating niya sa pangangapa. Sinimulan niya sa lugar na hindi aakalain ng sinuman na may hinahanap siya. Dahan-dahan, habang nakahuhuli ng tilapya, palapit siya nang palapit sa lugar ng palaisdaang inakala nila Boss Billy na kinahulugan ng kaniyang alahas. Wala. Lumagpas pa siya sa pag-aakalang inanod ang alahas, wala. Kinapa niya ang mga talik-tik sa gilid ng pilapil na sakop ng palaisdaan, wala rin.

Umahon siya bandang alas-diyes ng umaga. Nilinisan ang mga nahuling tilapya, inihaw habang si Aling Mely ay nasa gitna ng barangay at nag-iipon ng gulaman na papakyawin ng isang mangangalakal na taga-Navotas. Sandaang piso ang kikitain ng kaniyang ina. Nang makaihaw, sinabayan niyang kumain si Millet. Inasikaso ang gamit ng batang kapatid. Mag-aala-una nang muling pumasok si Millet sa paaralan.

“Pag may humanap sa ‘kin, sabihin mo, nangangapa.”

“Hinanap ka ni Ate Eunice kanina, Kuya. Di ko alam na nangangapa ka.”

Kahit hindi naniniwala si Jordan na sa loob mismo ng malawak na palaisdaang binubuwisan ni Boss Billy nawala ang bracelet, tinapos ni Jordan ang gilid ng mahabang pilapil na kahangga ng ilog. Halos naikot din niya ang lawak ng palaisdaan. Wala. Maraming tilapya, may mangilan-ngilang hipong suwahe at ayungin, pero walang bracelet, walang alahas. Hindi bale, may ulam naman sila hanggang Linggo.

Kaya sa mismong ilog, sa pilapil na kahangga ng palaisdaan siya nag-simula ngayon. Tinasa ni Jordan ang nangyari. Kung saan patungo ang kati ng tubig noong dumating si Boss Billy at mga kasama nito, kung saan malakas ang agos. Kung saan lulubog ang makapal na alahas, kung may tulos bang kakapitan ang alahas, kung may bakawang may malalabay na ugat ang sasabitan.

Hindi lamang kamay ang gumagana sa pangangapa ni Jordan. Pati ang mga payat na paang halos ay nagpadupilas sa kaniya sa ginagawa niyang paghawi ng magalas na putik sa ilalim. Salat, tapak, lubog, tapak, salat. Hindi na halos pansinin ni Jordan ang nakakapang isdang naglulungga sa mga tulos at taliktik. Mahapdi na ang kaniyang palad sa tama ng palikpik ng pumupusag na tilapya, liwalo, at ayungin. May sapat na silang ulam. Hindi na halos pansinin ni Jordan ang mahapding gasgas ng mumunting tahong sa taliktik ng ilog, ng taliptip na kumapit sa tulos. Hindi na rin niya alintana ang hapdi ng sikat na araw sa kaniyang batok, ang lagkit ng tubig na sumasaboy sa naluluto niyang balat. Sinasabayan ng sisid ni Jordan ang pangangapa kung malalim para ibaon ang kamay at paa. Sa ilalim ng tubig, pabukaka siyang kumakapa sa magalas na burak. Bahagyang umuusad patungo sa kawayang daungan ng bangka.

Malapad ang tatlong pasimano ng daungang yari sa kawayan, malalaki ang posteng puno ng buli na binili pa sa Laguna. Inihanda talaga upang maging matibay na haligi, tuntungan, at talian ng bangka. Sinuri ni Jordan ang paligid ng daungan. Malalim ang putik sa ilalim. Maraming nakakapit na patay na tahong. Makapal na rin ang lumot sa ilalim ng sahig na inaabot ng high tide. Binuhay ni Jordan sa kaniyang isip kung paano dumaong ang bangka noong gabing iyon. Saan maaaring itinali ng bangkero ang daong ng bangka? Saan unang humakbang si Boss Billy sa daungan? Ano ang in-unang paa, kanan o kaliwa? Saan kumapit na barandilya? Paano itinawid si Ma'am Beverly mula sa bangka? Binuhat kaya ang syota o tumalon nang nakakapit sa braso ni Boss Billy? Ginahak ni Jordan ang putik sa ilalim at pali-paligid ng daungan. Wala. Nilaliman pa niyang lalo ang kapa, wala. Siniyasat niya ang mga taliktik na kawayan sa paligid, pawang tumigas na putik at natuyong tahong at lumot sa lambat. Wala ang kinang na hanap niya. Hinimas niya ang poste sanga ng punong buli, subyang ang napala ng kaniyang palad.

Inisa-isa ni Jordan ang mga singit-singit ng kawayan sa ilalim, pataas

hanggang sa mismong sahi ng daungan. Nabanaagan niya ang maliit na maliit na kinang. Hindi maikakailang ang bracelet. Balot ng putik bukod sa maliit, gatusok ng aspileng liit, na kinang nang tamaan ng panghapong araw. Madilaw na kinang. Nanginginig na inabot ni Jordan ang bracelet. Balot nga sa natuyo at nanigas na putik. Ibinabad niya sa tubig ng ilog, kinuskos. Bumalik ang brilyo. Mabigat sa hipo. Nangilid ang luha ni Jordan. Para siyang naghihina. Tinimbang-timbang niya sa palad ang kadenang ginto. Ganoon pala ang tunay na alahas. Umahon siyang nakakuyom sa palad ang bracelet. Hindi niya gustong ipaubaya sa kaniyang bulsa ang alahas na kaytagal niyang hinanap, kaytagal nilang pinagplanuhan ni Eunice.

Kinalunesan, ipinagtapat niya kay Eunice ang natagpuang kayamanan. Dalawa lang ang tanong ni Eunice, paano ibebenta? O kung isasauli ba niya kay Boss Billy? Nilinaw ni Jordan ang bilin ni Boss Billy sa lahat ng makaririnig nang gabing mawala ang alahas: ang makakita, kaniya na. Ang higit na pinag-isipan ni Jordan ay kung paano magiging pera ang alahas. Gusto niyang maging pera nang maibayad na kay Misis Magdangal ang para sa field trip, at ang siguradong malaking sosobra sa mapagbibilhan ay ibibigay niya sa kaniyang ina. Siguradong matutuwa ang kaniyang ina. Makabibili ng gamit nila ni Millet. Makabibili ng kaldero, kawali, sandok, mga kutsara at plato at baso. Ang gamit nila sa kusina sa kubo ay iiwan nila dahil kay Boss Billy ang lahat ng iyon. Na gagamitin na ni Mang Sandro at ng kaniyang pamilya. Makakabili na rin ng damit ang kaniyang ina, maibibili siya ng pantalon, ng bagong uniporme. Baka nga makabili pa nga ng materyales para sa ipatatayo nilang bahay sa Cardona. O baka makabili pa nga ng buong bahay dahil talagang mabigat ang alahas!

“Pero baka magalit nanay mo, baka ipasauli sa ‘yo?’”

“Hindi, matutuwa pa nga ‘yun,” pagtitiyak ni Jordan sa kaibigan.

“E pa’no mo nga ibebenta?”

Naririnig lamang ni Jordan sa usapan ng kaniyang ama-amahan at ni Boss Billy ang sabungan sa Dampalit. Narinig niya ang tungkol sa kung sinong sugarol na nang mapagtatalo ay nagsangla ng kung ano-ano sa sanglaan sa loob mismo ng sabungan. Sa kanila narinig ni Jordan na may sanglaan ang bawat sabungan para sa mga sugarol na nagigipit. Bawat sabungan. Pero hindi dapat sa malalapit na sabungan kaya malabo niyang

maibenta ito sa Malanday at Dampalit. May malaking tsansang may makita siyang taga-Salambao. At kung talagang mamalasin, baka mismong si Boss Billy ang makita niya. Kaya nagdesisyon si Jordan na sa Sabadong darat-ing, pupunta siya ng sabungan sa Del Monte sa Malabon, iyong malapit sa Monumento para isang sakay lang sa dyipni buhat sa Obando. Bahala na. Wala naman sigurong makakilala sa kaniya. Kapag naibenta niya sa Sabado ang alahas, eksaktong Lunes ay mababayaran niya ang field trip na magaganap ng Biyernes.

Nanghiram si Jordan ng sandaang piso sa ipon ni Eunice. Nagdalawang isip ang kaibigan sa pangahas na hakbang na ito. Noon lamang maglalabas si Eunice ng perang walang katiyakan kung babalik pa sa kaniya. Paano kung mawala ang alahas? Paano kung makita ni Aling Mely at pinilit ipasauli kay Boss Billy? Paano kung mahuli mismo ni Boss Billy si Jordan sa sabungan?

“Sige kung duda ka, ‘wag na lang,” alumpihit din si Jordan. Wala siyang alam na pagkukuhanan ng pera. Mahaba-habang pangangapa ng ayungin at tilapya ang gagawin niya maitaguyod lang ang halagang kailanganin bilang pamasaha sa Sabado. Umabsent na siya ng nagdaang Biyernes, makakahalata na ang kaniya ina dahil may sapat naman silang pang-ulam. Naroon nga’t nakayelo pa sa cooler ang mga tilapya at liwalong nahuli niya ng magkasunod na araw. “Pwede rin namang maglakad ako.”

“Alam mo ba kung ga’no kalayo ang Monumento?” pag-aalala ni Eunice. “Baka kahit isang araw mong lakarin ‘yun di ka mangalahate.”

“E wala e,” kibit ni Jordan. Hindi niya makita ang posibilidad na maibebenta iyon sa ibang sanglaan sa bayan. Paghihinalaan siya. Hahanapan ng kasamang matanda. Hindi niya basta-basta maibebenta sa kung sinong may pera sa pondohan. Oo nga’t maraming milyonaryo doon lalo na iyong mga may-ari ng konsignasyon o mamamakyaw, pero tiyak na tiyak na may makakakilala sa kaniya. Hindi katulad kung sa sabungan, sa malayong sabungan, pwede ngang ibenta ang alahas dahil maaaring nahihiya ang sugarol kaya ayaw magpakita. O kaya, hindi mapuknat sa pagsasabong kaya walang panahong humarap sa sanglaan. Sasabihin lang niyang alalay siya ng isang sugarol. O pwede ring pamangkin. Palalakin niya ang kaniyang boses para magtunog matanda. Poporma siya na parang sanay na sanay na sa sabungan. Madali na ang hitsura, matangkad si Jordan sa karaniwang grade six. Maraming taghiyawat. Mabuto pero may umbok na ng laman

ang katawan. May kaha na. Ibinulong niya sa sarili ang simulang linya: “Magkano ‘to? Binebenta ng tito ko. Bilis, lalaban na ‘yung manok namin.”

“Sige pero siguraduhin mong ibabalik mo ha, lagot ako sa kuya ko,” naroon pa rin ang pagdududa ni Eunice sa kaibigan. Pero nadaig ng pagpapahalaga at tiwala.

“Nabili ko nga yung sorbetes nung bertdey ko, tanda mo? Ipon lang ‘yun.”

“Iba noon, may tatay ka.”

Ganoon pala. Parang lahat ng makita niya sa loob ng bakuran ng sabungan paghinalaan niyang si Boss Billy o si Mang Sandro. Parang lahat kamukha ng dalawang tao na pinakakaiwas-iwasan ni Jordan. Parang lahat ay may kahawig na taga-Salambao. Parang lahat ay nakita na niya sa pondohan sa Obando. Parang lahat ay nakatingin sa kaniya at nagtataka kung bakit siya nasa loob ng bakuran ng sabungan. Kinubabawan ng hinala si Jordan noong Sabado ng hapong iyon na ibebenta niya ang bracelet. Nasa loob iyon ng kaniyang lumang pantalon. Nakadukot ang kaliwang kamay niya sa bulsa bilang proteksyon, mahirap na, baka mawala uli. Kaya nanlalagkit na sa pawis ang kaliwang kamay niyang ito na hindi inaalís sa pagkakadukot sa pantalon.

Maingay. Naglisaw-lisaw ang mga sabungero. Kailangan niyang kumilos na parang sanay na sanay na. Hindi dapat siya parang tatanga-tanga. Pero hindi makita ni Jordan ang sanglaan. O kung may sanglaan nga ba?

“Kuya, sa’n na nga ‘yung sanglaan?” nilapitan niya ang isang akala ni Jordan ay hindi nalalayo sa kaniya ang edad. Kibit-balikat ang isinagot. Halos hindi tumingin sa kaniya ang tinanong. Tuloy-tuloy lang sa paglakad papasok sa mismong gusali na pinaggagawaan ng sabong. Ang maingay na gusali.

“Tata, eskyusmi po, sa’n nga po ‘yung sanglaan dito?” may kausap ang halos kaedaran ng ama-amahan niya. Pinili talaga niya ang medyo maputi para hindi talaga taga-Salambao, hindi taga-pondohan, hindi mangingisda sa Obando. Hindi rin siya tiningnan ng tinanong. Tuloy-tuloy lang sa pakikipaghuntahan. Puro tungkol sa sabong ang pinagsasasabi. Akala ni Jordan, hindi na siya sasagutin kaya nagsimula na siyang humakbang palayo sa pinagtanungan.

“Du’n Totoy. Kita mo yung nakaupo sa malapit sa pinto? Yung matandang ubanin na may kahon sa gilid, ‘yun ‘yun. Mang Jose pangalan.” Nakaturo ang pinagtanungan ni Jordan sa gawi ng pinto ng sabungan. Bahagya nang ipinaling ang ulo.

“Salamat, Tata.”

Tinimbang-timbang sa palad. Sinilip ang pagkagawa. Ikiniskis sa kung anong batong itim ang alahas. Bago ibinalik ni Mang Jose kay Jordan.

“Peke. Tubog lang ‘to,” malamig na siwalat ni Mang Jose.

“Hindi ho pwedeng peke ‘yan, hindi ho magsusuot si Boss Bill...”

Muling kinuha ni Mang Jose ang bracelet. Muling sinipat-sipat.

“Akala ko ba tito mo ang may-ari, bakit ngayon boss mo na?”

“Si Boss din ho, si tito, saka si Boss...”

“Ninakaw mo ‘to ‘no?” sabad ni Mang Jose. Nanlamig si Jordan. Natahimik. Naghanap ng isasagot. Dalawang bagsak ng pangit na balita. Peke ang alahas, tapos ay pinagbintangan siyang magnanakaw. “Ano, hindi ka nakasagot, ninakaw mo ‘to ‘no?”

“Hindi po!” napiyok si Jordan sa pagsisikap na palakihin ang boses. Sa pagsisikap na ipaliwanag.

“Ano, boss mo ba o tito mo? Ano ba talaga?”

“Boss.”

“E bakit hindi siya magbenta nito mismo, bakit ikaw?”

“Nasa loob nga po, ilalaban ang manok ngayon.”

“Hindi nga, kilala ko lahat ng nasa loob,” tinitigan ni Mang Jose si Jordan, sinusukat ang kuwento. Hinihintay ngang umamin na gawa-gawa lang ang kuwento, na amining ninakaw nga ang alahas na hawak-hawak ngayon ng matandang ubanin. “Ano aamin ka na? Maraming pulis dyan ngayon, hindi nga lang nakauniporme.”

“Wag na lang ho,” akhang kukuhanin ni Jordan sa kamay ng matanda ang bracelet. Kinuyom ni Mang Jose sa palad ang alahas.

“Peke pero maganda pagkaka-peke. Bibilhin ko.”

“Ho? Magkano ho?”

“Six hundred, ibibigay ko lang ‘to sa anak ko. Ipatutubog ko muna uli.”

“Ho? ‘Wag na lang ho.” Akmang kukunin ni Jordan kay Mang Jose ang bracelet. Itinikom ni Mang Jose, inilayo kay Jordan. “Akin na po, wag na lang po.”

“May mga pulis akong kaibigan d’yan,” itinuro ng kuyom na kamay ang loob ng sabungan. “Alam kong hindi sa ‘yo ‘to. Sige ka.”

Sa kubo noong gabi ring iyon, binibilang-bilang ni Jordan ang mahigit limandaang pisong nasa higaan niya. Limang dadaanin, isang singkuwenta, at mga baryang sukli ng kaniyang pamasaha nang balikan sa Malabon at pagkain ng isang cupcake at juice na nasa tetrapack. Tulog na ang kaniyang nanay at kapatid. Naiilawan lamang ang kaniyang sulok ng bombilyang de-diyes. Itinabi niya ang isang sandaan para bayaran ang utang kay Eunice. Hindi niya alam ang gagawin sa natitirang pera.

Siguradong uusisain ng kaniyang ina ang pinaggalingan ng pera kapag iniabot ni Jordan. Wala siyang maisip na pwedeng panggalingan. Pwede niyang amining galing sa pinagbilhan sa pekeng alahas. Pero baka magalit si Aling Mely. Baka ikuwento kay Boss Billy, at kapag nalamang nabili lamang sa halagang six hundred, magalit. Magwala. Dahil ang paniniwala pa rin ni Jordan, hindi magsusuot ng pekeng alahas si Boss Billy. Baka bigla silang palayasin. Wala pa ang report card nilang magkapatid. Hindi pa sila makakaalis. Malabo nang sumama siya sa field trip. Kulang ang pera at hindi siya pwedeng manghingi ng pandagdag. Inisip ni Jordan na ilihim na lang. Dahan-dahang gastusin kapag nasa Cardona na sila. Pero bago iyon, itinabi niya ang sandaang piso ulit para bilhin ang malaking lata ng imported na potato chips para sa kanilang magkapatid. At kay Eunice. Kung kailan nila ito kakainin, hindi pa alam ni Jordan.

Lumipas ang field trip. Nakumbinsi ni Eunice na hindi na siya sumama. Mas naging madali ang pagpayag ng kaniyang magulang nang sipunin siya at magkasinat noong araw na magbabayad na kay Misis Magdangal.

Marso at katatapos lang ng fourth periodical test ng mga magtatapos sa elementarya. Maraming araw na halos pumupunta na lang sa paaralan si Jordan kahit wala nang masyadong ginagawa kundi ang magkuwentuhan at mag-ensayo para sa graduation ceremony. Inaya ni Jordan si Eunice na sumama sa field trip nilang mag-iina sa laot kinahapunan sakay ng bangka ni Boss Billy. Si Mang Alonso ang bangkero. Umalis sila bago mag-alas kuwatro at nakarating sa laot, sa mismong lugar kung saan nawala si Mang

Miyas. Sa laot na pamilyar na si Jordan. Wala na ang init ng araw. Banayad na hangin na lamang ng tag-araw ang dumadampi sa kanila habang inuugoy-ugoy ng bangka. Inilabas ni Jordan ang kaniyang baon, mga tsitsirya. Itinanghal ang isang mataas na lata ng potato chips na pinagsaluhan nila sa bangka. Pakiusap ni Jordan, hintayin ang pagdilim bago sila umalis sa laot, bago sila bumalik sa Sapang Tukul. Tinunghayan ni Jordan ang nagliliwanag na lungsod. Itinuro niya kay Eunice ang mga dahilan kung bakit siya nagpapunta sa laot.



# Pag-ibig sa Panahon ng All-out War

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Jack Alvarez

“**B**ayot! Bayot! Bayot!” Naririnig kong panunukso sa akin ng mga kaklase.

Nakaramdam ako ng hiya. Naiyak ako. Tinakbo ko ang isang napakalawak na maisan papalayo sa kanila. Sa di kalayuan, bago ko marating ang daang pakanan sa barangay road, nadaanan ko ang isang barracks. Naririnig ko ang ilang sundalo sa loob ng kanilang kuta. Sumilip ako. At nang makita ako ng isang sundalo, tinawag ako at pinapasok sa loob.

Sa isang solong upuan, nakaupo ang isang kalbong lalaki. Malalaki ang mga braso. Parang iyong nakikita ko sa TV na nagri-wrestling ang kanyang katawan.

“*Oh, naa man diay kitay bisita!*” Pahayag ng katabi ng lalaking nakaupo sa harapan na tila nagulat nang iharap ako bilang isang panauhin.

Nakayuko ako. Tila nangingimi.

Lumapit ang kalbong lalaki sa akin. Naunang nagpakilala ang beer sa kaniyang hininga. Mainit ang kanyang palad na lumapat sa aking batok. Hinimas. Inabot sa akin ang isang baso.

Umiling ako.

“*Mirinda man na.*” Sinipat ko ang hawak niyang baso. Kulay-dalandan ang laman. “*Nganong nakaabot man ka diri sa baraks namo? Layo ra man ang dalan papauli sa inyo.*” Itinanong ng kanyang katabi kung bakit ako napunta sa kampo nila gayong malayo ito sa daan pauwi sa amin at malimit

na dinadaan ng mga taga-baryo.

“Bossing, anak na sa taga-DENR.” Pahayag ng isa tungkol sa trabaho ni Papa.

“Ganun ba? Sino do’n? Yung astig?” Kumunot ang noo nito sa nalaman.

Hindi siya taga-Mindanao. Hindi siya taga-Cagayan de Oro. Nagta-Tagalog. Karamihan kasi sa mga nadestinong sundalo sa amin, lalo na matataas ang ranggo, ay mula sa Maynila.

“Sa Bukidnon man ‘yun na-assign, bossing.” Sumubok mag-Tagalog ang isa. “Pero matagal na yun. Wala nay balita man.”

Tumango-tango ang lalaking kalbo. “Ilang trailer truck ba ang pinahuli nun? Ilan ang pinakulong?”

“Hindi daw yun tumatanggap ng *padanlog*, bossing.” Tila nagsusumbong na sabi nito nakadilat pa ang mga mata. “Ano nga pala sa Tagalog ang *padanlog*?” Dugtong-tanong nito nang maisip na hindi Tagalog ang nabanggit. At naningkit na ang mga mata na pilit hinahanap ang tamang salita.

“Under the table. Pampadulas.” Pagkaklaro ng kasama.

“Saan na pala ang tatay mo?” Tanong ng lalaking kalbo.

Umiling ako. Hindi ko rin alam. Ilang beses ko na ring naitanong kay Mama ang tungkol kay Papa. Inubos ko ang laman ng baso at nagpaalam na ako. Ngunit inabot niya ang isa pang baso. Mapanghi ang laman. Mas mabula sa nauna kong ininom.

Lampas sa aking ulo ang bakod ng kanilang barracks. May patongpatong na sako ng buhangin, mga bato at napapalibutan ng barb wire. Nagbabakasali akong may makakita man lang sa akin, na kakilala o kaklase ko. Naduduwal ako.

“Pila na imong edad?” Ang tanong ng may nakasukbit na .45 sa beywang kung ilang taon na ako.

Napayuko lang ako.

“Siguro, sweet sixteen!” At naghalakhakan ang nakapalibot.

“Tuli ka na ba?” Tanong uli ng lalaki.

Nakaramdam ako ng hiya. Isa iyan sa mga hindi ko nais marinig na tanong. Pag supot raw, hindi lang mapanghi. Kundi bakla.

“Dili tuli. Pisot diay.” Diin ng lalaking laging nakabuntot sa kalbo. Muli, narinig ko ang tawanan.

“Gusto pa nimo?” Ang alok ng may hawak ng beer.

Napaluha na ako. Ilan ba sila? Siguro anim, pito, walo o sampu. Hindi ko mabilang. Hindi ko kayang iangat ang aking mukha. Hindi ko sila mat-ingnan nang mata sa mata.

“Siguro, natatakot lang yan sa *imo*, bossing.” Tukso ng isang pilit mag-Tagalog. At nagtawanan sila.

Dali-dali kong tinakbo ang pinto. Tumakbo ako papalayo. Iyong takot ng isang ibong pipit na nang makawala sa hawla’y nagsikhay lumipad. Tila hinahabol ako ng kanilang halakhakan. Nang maramdaman ko ang abot-hiningang hingal ko, tumigil ako.

“Pssst... Pssst... Pssst...” Mahina ngunit sunod-sunod na sitsit mula sa likuran.

Nilingon ko. Unipormadong lalaki. Naka-camouflage. Hindi ako sigurado kung kasama siya sa grupo kanina. Sandali akong tumigil sa lakad-takbo. Inakbayan ako ng lalaki. Hinila niya ako. Para akong ibong nadagit ng mas malaking ibon. Doon ko na naramdaman ang kanyang lakas. Kung papalag ako, mababali ang aking braso. O kaya basag ang aking bungo, hindi sa tigas ng kanyang kamao kundi sa kanyang armas. Amoy-pulbura ang palad niyang nakatakip sa aking bunganga. Hindi ko sinubukang sumigaw. O umungol o magmakaawa kung saan man akong hawla isadlak. Nalaglag ang bitbit kong bag, at naibaba niya ang aking pantalon. Dali-dali niyang hinubad ang kanyang camouflage sa gitna ng talahiban. Napakapit ako sa nakalapag niyang M16 sa gilid. Sintigas iyon sa labas-pasok sa aking kalamnan. At tuluyan siyang nag-anyong aso habang umalulong sa aking likuran.

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Napagkamalan akong dalagita sa panahong iyon. Ngunit hindi ako iniwan ng sundalo pagkatapos niyang magpunas sa kakahugot lang niyang armas sa aking likuran. Nagbihis siya ng kanyang fatigue uniform. Pagkatapos, tinulungan niya akong bumangon. Naaamoy ko pa ang beer sa kanyang hininga, sa kanyang bawat buntong-hininga. Nakadapa ako’t nakayuko. Tulad ng mga damong ligaw sa palibot na nadaganan ng combat shoes. Ayoko

nang bihisan ang aking kahubdan. Nais kong lamunin na lang ng talahiban.

“Halika na...” Pabulong niyang wika.

Nagta-Tagalog siya. Naisip ko. Taga-saan kaya ang sundalong ito. Isa yata ito sa mga ipinadala ni Erap nang magdeklara siya ng all-out war sa MILF at Abu Sayyaf. Karamihan sa mga nadestinong army sa aming lugar ay hindi mga taga-Mindanao.

“Huwag kang matakot.” Iyon ang lagi kong naririnig na wika nila, ng mga tulad niya.

Hindi ko pa rin tiningnan ang kausap. Nakatitig lang ako sa aking bag na naging kakampi ko’t yakap ko nang mahigpit. Parang nais kong isilid doon ang aking pagkatao. Pagkatapos idadako ko ang mga mata sa aking mga palad na nakakuyom, ibubuka ko nang ilang sandali. Nais kong magbilang para patayin ang paglipas pa ng ilang oras. At nais kong tubuan ng matutulis na kuko upang kahigin ang lupa’t doon maghukay nang maghukay hanggang sa lamunin ako ng mga ugat, ng mga uod sa ilalim ng lupa. Sa aking mga paang nangalambre na parang buntot ng tutubing binalian ng pakpak na walang humpay sa pagkawag kanina, ngayo’y di ko na magawang igo. Pinunasan niya ang aking mukha, leeg, siko at tuhod. Kumapit roon ang lupa na tila kakabungal lang ng aking mga kuko sa daliri. Lumitaw ang gasgas sa aking tuhod. Binuksan niya ang nakasukbit na canteen sa kanyang tagiliran. Binuhusan ng tubig ang aking sugat. Napangiwi ako. Hinaplos niya ang aking buhok. Naramdaman ko uli ang kanyang mainit na palad.

“Sandali lang ‘to.” Pabulong niyang wika uli.

Kumuha siya ng dahon ng hagonoy. Iyong luntian na halaman na kaniwang tumutubo kasama ang mga talahib. Sabi ng titser namin, maraming pangalan ang hagonoy. Ilan sa mga katawagan ay Siam weed. Siam na dating pangalan ng Thailand. Christmas bush na hindi naman pwedeng gawing Christmas décor. Camphur grass. Common floss flower. At devil weed, baka ito ang mas angkop, naisip ko. Ni hindi nga ito kayang ngasabin ng hayop. Nakakalason. Pero nakakagamot ng sugat.

Nagdidilim na ang paligid. Lumalambong sa damuhan ang anino ng dapithapon. Nagsimula nang dumapo ang mga lamok sa akin. Isa-isa kong pinapatay. Hanggang sa sunud-sunod na pagtampal ko sa aking braso, pisngi, sa paa, at sa kung saan ko nais idapo ang aking mga palad. Pinigilan niya ako.

“Umuwi na tayo.” Mahinahon pa rin niyang wika habang pinipigilan ang aking dalawang kamay. Hinubad niya ang kanyang jacket. Ipinatong sa aking balikat. Iginiya niya akong humakbang papalayo sa damuhan. Inihatid niya ako sa bahay. Naroon si Mama. Sinalubong ako at nagtataka kung bakit ginabi ako ng uwi. Niyaya niya sa loob ang sundalo. Hindi ito tumanggi. Nang maupo na ito sa sala, inabot ko sa may-ari ang kanyang jacket.

“Sir, salamat kaayo.” Si Mama.

“Walang anuman po.”

“Ay, Tagalog ka pala.” Nasa kusina ang aking ina na nagmamadaling nagtimpla ng kape. “Kailan ka lang dito nadestino?” Usisa ni Mama.

Naupo ako sa kama. Pinagmumunihan ang mga galos sa kamay, tuhod at paa. Nais kong tanungin si Mama na di man lang ako tinanong kung okay lang ako sa mga oras na iyon.

At pagkalapag ng tasa sa lamiseta sumunod noon ay in-offer na ni Mama ang kanyang services mula manicure, pedicure, footspa at gupit. May discount pa nga raw lalo na sa mga sundalo na nadestino sa aming barangay. Package agad ang inalok ni Mama. Nagpa-schedule naman ang sundalo, bukas ng umaga.

Hindi ko na hinintay ang sundalo na magpaalam o wala akong pakialam kung basta na lang siya aalis. Naupo ako sa toilet bowl. Pinipilit kong ilabas, pinipiga ang kung anong merong madulas, parang lunaw sa loob ng aking puwet. Dahan-dahan kong hinugasan ng tubig. Para akong nagdidilig ng isang bubot na bulaklak. O ng isang kasisibol lang na halaman. Dahan-dahan ang pagbinyag. Natatakot akong maluluoy. Natatakot akong malalanta.

“*Nanamilit na siya.*” Narinig kong sabi ni Mama na nagpaalam na raw ang sundalo. Kasunod ang pagkalansing ng binanlawang plato, baso, kutsara’t tinidor sa banggerahan.

Tumingala ako at kagat-labing pumikit. Nais kong pakawalan ang nararamdaman kong nakakapit sa akin. Gusto kong baklasin ang malagkit na likidong tila nanunuot sa aking laman. Binuksan ko ang gripo. Hinayaan kong umapaw ang balde. At nang bumuhos ang tubig sa sementadong sahirg ng banyo, pumatak ang dugo sa inidoro. Sinabayan ko ng ilang malalalim na buntong-hininga. At pinakawalan ko ang isang tahimik na pagluha.

*“Tan-awa kinsa’y nanuktok.”* Utos ni Mama na tingnan ko raw kung sino ang kumakatok nang umagang iyon. Abala siya sa paglilinis ng kanyang mga gamit, pagbababad ng pushers at nipper sa mainit na tubig na may hinalong alcohol, pagpapatuyo ng towel at iba pang gamit pang-foots-pa. Katatapos lang niyang mag-mani-pedi sa kanyang unang kliyente.

Tulad ng paghihintay ko sa pag-uwi ni Papa. Agad akong sisilip sa bintana. Dudungaw. Patay na ang ingay ng makina ng 4x4 truck na malamang ay sinakyan ng dumating. Nakaparada ito sa tapat.

Ang mga katok na iyon ay tila pamilyar sa akin. Dahil ang mga katok na iyon ay tila katok sa aking dibdib. Binuksan ko. Hindi nga ako maaaring magkamali.

Isang matikas, matangkad at matipunong sundalo ang bumungad sa akin sa pinto. Bago siya naupo, inabot niya sa akin ang isang supot ng plastic bag. *“Hetong gamot para sa ‘yo.”*

Halos di ko maiangat ang aking kamay upang abutin ang hawak niya. *“May binili na rin si Mama. Pero salamat.”* Naroon ang isang set ng first aid kit, may mefenamic at antibiotic ointment, betadine at iba pang gamot. Hindi naman malaki ang sugat ko, siguro kung tatanungin niya ako, may mas mahapdi pa. Kahit sa aking simpleng pag-upo at paglakad ay nararamdaman ko ang kirot sa loob.

*“Kumusta ka na?”* Napalingingon ako sa bandang kusina. Papalabas na si Mama.

*“Okey lang ako.”*

Pinisil niya ang aking balikat bago ako tumalikod para tulungan si Mama sa pagbitbit ng mga gamit.

Inalok ni Mama ng kape ang bisita. Agad naman akong tumungo sa kusina para magtimpla. Hindi ko kinuha ang pinakamakintab ng tasa na nakareserba sa mga bisita tulad ng aming nakasanayan. Inabot ko ang nakabalot sa plastic. Iyon ang tasa ni Papa. Iyon ang pinakaiingatan ko sa lahat ng kubyertos sa aming bahay. Isa iyon sa pinakamamahal ko. Maingat kong binuksan ang balot. Para akong nagbukas ng isang regalo. Pinunasan ko nang maayos. Pinaikot ko ang puting towel sa gilid ng bunganga ng mug, sa pakurbang hugis na hawakan nito hanggang sa dulo. Isinunod ko ang sau-

cer. Inangat ko't itinapat sa silaw ng araw na sumuot sa siwang ng dingding. Sinigurado kong walang alikabok na nakakapit roon. Tinitigan ko, animo'y may mga kwento akong nais silipin sa bawat kurba at guhit. Pumapailanlang sa banggera ang alimuom ng kumukulong tubig sa takure. Sinidlan ko ng tatlong kutsaritang kape at isa't kalahating takal ng asukal ang tasa. Pagkatapos, kumalansing ang malungkot na taginting ng kutsarita habang tinitimpla ang mga sandali ng una naming pagkakakilala.

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Nalalanghap ko ang aroma ng kape. Mas masarap at mas nakaka-relax kaysa foot conditioner na kasalukuyang ibinubudbod ni Mama sa foot-spa machine. Inabot ko sa bisita ang tasa. Habang matiyagang pinupunasan ni Mama ang kanyang mga paa. Napansin ko ang kanyang combat shoes sa gilid. Umiikot-ikot si Nora. Ikinikiskis ang mabalahibong katawan nito. Kinikilala ang may-ari ng sapatos. Nilapitan ko ang aming alaga. Binuhat ko at sabay binitbit ko na rin ang sapatos. Alam kong sinundan ako ng tingin ng may-ari ng combat shoes.

Muli, may kumatok sa pinto. Narinig ko na lang ang malambing na boses ni Mama. Tiyak ko na kung sino ang dumating. Ang kanyang pinakapaboritong customer, ang pulis. Na alam ko ring may iba pang serbisyong inaalok si Mama. Inabot ko ang shoe polish, ang brush at pamunas. Naroon din ang dalawang pares ng sapatos ni Papa sa ilalim ng kama. Makikintab pa rin ito. Walang alikabok. Ngunit parang mga tuod pala ang sapatos na matagal nang walang nagsusuot. Pumuwesto ako sa bangkito at sinimulan kong pakintabin ang sapatos ng sundalo.

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Bakla nga siguro ako't di ko kayang panindigan ang aking sarili para ipamukha ko sa pulis na 'yun na hindi ko siya gustong maging boyfriend ng Mama ko. Hindi pa ako nakaranas magkuyom. Hindi ko pa nasusubukang itiklop ang aking mga palad at iangat ang aking kamao.

Ang naalala kong gamit ng palad, ng kamao na kasukat ng ating puso ay nang turuan ako ng sundalo sa pagmu-multiply gamit ang mga daliri.

Six, ang hinliliit. Seven, palasinsingan. Eight, ang hinlalato. Nine, hintuturo. At pagtatagpuin mo ang magkabilang daliri batay sa numero na katumbas nito.

“Ilan na ang napatay mo?” Tanong ko habang abala sa pagbibilang at mina-master ang itinuro niyang teknik sa matematika.

Tahimik siyang pinagmamasdan ang galaw ng aking mga daliri. “Bakit mo naitanong?” Pahayag niya pagkalipas ng ilang sandali.

“6 times 8. 8 times 9. 9 times 6.” Pagmu-multiply ko.”Gusto ko lang malaman.”

Sinapo niya ang aking magkabilang palad. Iginuhit niya roon ang bilog.

Tanaw namin sa di kalayuan ang nagsisiuwang mga mambubukid. Papalubog na ang araw. Oras na ng pagpapahinga. At malalayo pa ang kani-kanilang bahay. Hindi lang ang pag-aagaw-dilim ang hudyat na dapat sila’y makauwi na, na dapat sila’y nasa kani-kanilang tahanan na. Kundi ang mahigpit na implementasyon ng curfew.

Naikuwento ko sa kanya, iyong isang matandang magsasaka. Mga nasa singkwenta anyos na. Hinarang at ininspeksyon ng mga sundalo sa kasagsagan ng curfew. Nakasukbit ang itak sa kanyang beywang, pasan-pasan ang isang sako.

“Sir, sir, sir...” nginig na boses ng magsasaka.

Bulag na saksi ang malamlam na liwanag ng buwan. Hindi makatarungan ang karimlan ng gabi. At mapanghusga ang mga mata ng ilaw ng flashlight. Parang kislap ng dugo ang naghalong pawis at luha na nagbahid sa kanyang marusing na damit. At dahil sa takot, lalong nanginig ang matanda. Ni hindi ito makasagot kahit pangalan niya.

“Duguan ka! Duguan ka!” Sigaw ng sundalong nakatutok ang rifle nito sa mukha ng kausap. Paniniguro sa hinihinalang nagmantsa sa kasuotan ng matanda. “Ano ‘to? Ano ‘to?” Habang sinisipa nito’t pinabubuksan ang nakahandusay na sako sa gilid.

“Sir, sir, sir...” Tanging nasasambit lang niya.

Pinayuko. Pinaluhod. Nasa batok ang magkabilang kamay. At nang sabihan siyang itaas ang mga braso, itinaas rin niya ang kanyang itak.

Nadatnan ng umaga ang naghalong dugo at ang malagkit na dagta ng isang sakong saging sa suot na mantsadong t-shirt at kupas na pantalon ng



matandang magsasaka.

Nakahimlay ang bangkay sa harap ng barangay hall. Bilang pagdadalamhati at pakikiisa ng mga baranggay opisyal, sila ang gumastos sa punerarya at sa pagpapalibing. May mga nakaposteng sundalo sa lamay. May mga dumalaw na mahihinuhang opisyal ng militar dahil unipormado ito't kumikinang ang nameplate sa dibdib. Nag-alay ng koronang may nakalalay na pangalan nila at ng kanilang pamilya. Isang karaniwang magsasaka ang nasa kabaong ngunit pinuno ang buong plasa ng mga taga-baryo. Kahit wala ni isang nagtanong kung kaninong bala ang bumaon sa katawan ng napatay. Parang bulong iyon ng hangin. Sapat nang senyales para sa kanila. Tikom ang bibig ng mga kamag-anak. Dahil hindi lang biskwit at kape ang inabot ni Barangay Kapitan kundi may isang puting sobre at limang araw na pakikiramay.

Pagsapit uli ng dilim, tila hiyaw ng halimaw ang pag-alingawngaw ng sirena ng patrol. Nakakapangilabot ang hudyat ng curfew. Sana wala nang susunod pang lamay ng isang magsasaka, iyon lamang ang kanilang panalangin. At sana, manatiling ang mga bahid sa kanilang damit, sa kanilang katawan ay mantsa lamang ng saging at ng kanilang mga pananim.

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Muli, binabato ako ng panunukso ng ilan sa aking mga kaklase. Uwan noon. Hindi ko iniwasan ang kanilang grupo. Tuluy-tuloy lang ako sa paglalakad.

*"Bayot! Bayot! Bayot!"* Mas masakit pa sa pukol ng bato ang mga katagang iyon.

Huminto ako sa paglalakad. Sa di kalayuan, naririnig ko ang papalapit na chant at mga yabag ng mga nagjo-jogging na mga sundalo. At sa likuran ang papalapit na sigaw ng isa sa pinakahambog sa aming klase.

Ito na ba ang kamao? Ito na ba ang hudyat ng paglaban?

Sinagi niya ang aking balikat. At sinundan ko iyon ng suntok. Nakailag siya. Mabilis ang kanyang galaw. Naririnig ko pa ang tawanan ng mga nakapalibot sa amin. Nanginig ako. At sinapo ko na lamang ang aking mukha. Sunud-sunod ang kanyang suntok. Parang mga batong ipinukol sa akin sabay ng sigawan. Napaluhod ako. Karamay ko uli ang aking bag. Nag-

takbuhan na sila palayo sa akin.

Naupo ako sa nakausling ugat ng santol. Inayos ko ang aking sarili. Nagkunwari akong nangunguha ng mga nangalaglag na prutas. Nilingon ko ang platoon na dadaan. Nakita ko siya sa unahan. Ang sundalo na nagbigay lakas sa aking hindi mapangiwi. At magkunwaring hindi ako nasuntok sa mukha. Bumagal ang pag-inog ng aking mundo. Sa suot niyang camouflage muscle shirt na nananalaytay ang pawis mula noo hanggang paa. Napadako ang paningin ko sa kanyang shorts. Sa nakaumbok doon. Sinlaki ng hawak kong hinog na santol. At sa naramdamang hiya sa sarili, bahagya kong iniyuko ang aking ulo. Nagnakaw siya ng tingin bago tuluyang lumagpas ang kanilang grupo. Nagtatanong ang mga mata sa nakitang isang talunan. Naramdaman ko ang hapdi nang umihip ang hangin sa aking mukha. Nang kapain ko, may galos ang aking pisngi. Mas lalo akong yumuko upang itago ang aking mukha. At ikinubli ko ang aking sarili sa likod ng puno. Ayo-kong umuwing luhaan at magsusumbong kay Mama. Minabuti kong hindi mapansin niya. Panakaw akong pumasok ng bahay. Ngunit wala roon si Mama. Siguro, may home service. Dumiretso ako sa banyo para maligo at mahugasan ang ilang galos sa mukha't kamay at ang natuyong luha kanina. Nakakamanhid ang lamig ng tubig. Isang ligo lang, parang naglaho na ang naramdamang takot kanina. Ngunit naroon pa rin ang kimkim na poot. Hindi ko man isiping maghiganti dahil alam kong hindi ko kayang labanan ang aking kalaban. Sapat na sa aking humarap ako sa kanilang panunukso. At sigurado akong mauulit pa iyon.

Tumapat ang ugong ng makina ng sasakyan sa aming bahay. Narito siya. Ang sundalo.

Bukas ang pinto. Parang alam rin nitong may darating. Parang umaasas rin na papasok ang bisitang inaasahan.

“Kumusta?” Nakatuon ang mga mata nito sa nababakas na pula sa aking pisngi.

Hindi ako kumibo. Naramdaman ko pa rin ang hiya. Hiya na alam kong alam niyang nakipag-away ako.

“Normal lang yan sa kabataan na tulad mo.” Nagbibigay katatagan ang kanyang boses.

Hindi pa rin ako kumibo. Naisip ko, normal lang din bang tawagin akong bayot? Na sigaw-sigawan akong bakla at pagtawanan?

Nakalimutan kong itimpla siya ng kape. Naupo lang ako sa tabi niya.

Naaamoy ko pa ang natitirang pawis sa kanyang katawan. Hinaplos niya ang aking mukha. Parang pagpapatahan ng kirot. Hindi ko napigilang umiyak. Nakaramdam ako ng kakampi. Gusto ko nga rin itanong sana kung nandoon siya sa mga sandaling iyon ay ipagtatanggol ba niya ako. Ngunit parang napakaduwig ko na. Talunan na nga't tinatawag pang bakla ay duwig pa. Mas kahiya-hiya iyon. Naikuwento na rin niyang mahilig din siyang makipag-away noon sa kapwa bata, sa kanyang mga kaklase. Ipinakita pa nga niya ang kanyang pilat sa kaliwang braso. Kaya nga raw noon gustong-gusto niyang magsundalo para raw ipagtatanggol niya ang kaniyang sarili. Sinundan niya iyon ng seryosong tawa. Hindi pala. Ibang pagtatanggol pala ang papasukan niya. At mas mabigat sa naisip niyang dahilan noon.

“Hindi lang sa pagkukuwenta nagagamit ang kamay. Ngayon, nasubukan mo na ang iyong kamao. Marami pang gamit ang mga kamay,” wika niya.

At naramdaman ko na lang nasa kandungan na niya ang aking palad na nagpapatotoo sa kanyang huling pahayag.

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Iyon ding mga panahong nakikita kong nakadantay ang mga kamay ni Mama sa hita ng pulis. Minsan sinilip ko sila sa kwarto. Kung hindi footspa at masahe, ano pa kaya ang kanilang gagawin? Matiyaga kong binutasan ang manipis na plywood na siyang nakaharang sa maliit naming sala at nagiisang silid-tulugan. Nang nasa likod-bahay ako, naririnig ko pa ang buo nilang boses. Hanggang sa halinghing. Hanggang sa pabulong. Hanggang sa ungol. Naglakad akong parang pusa nang pumasok sa sala. Hinawi ang kurtina at ang butas na madadaan lamang ng langgam ay tila telebisyon na nagbukas sa isang palabas. Naramdaman ko ang pagkalat ng init sa aking buong katawan. Bumilis ang sikdo ng aking dibdib. Nanlagkit ang aking laway. Sinlagkit iyon ng natapon na cutex sa aking palad nang subukan kong lagyan ng kulay ang aking mga kuko. At kapag mahantad sa init o kaya mahanginan, agad natutuyo. Tikom-bibig akong sumubaybay sa nagaganap sa kuwarto. Para silang mga sawa na naghuhunos. Parang maruruming damit na hinayaang mangalaglag sa sahig ang saplot nila sa katawan.

Tinalikuran ko ang nakikita nang marinig ang pagngiyaw ni Nora. Nilawayan ng pusa ang kanyang sarili. Lumabas ako ng bahay. Naglakad

ako nang naglakad hanggang sa marating ko ang barracks. Nasaan kaya siya? Nasaan kaya ang sundalo. Pumuwesto ako sa damuhang nakaharap sa labahan at banyo ng barracks. Natatanaw ko ang ilang kasamahan niyang mga sundalo. Iyong iba ay naglalaba samantala iyong iba ay naliligo. Gumapang ako sa nakalatag na carabao grass upang mas malapitan ko ang kinaroonan nila. Hubo't hubad ang ilan sa kanila. Sa bawat haplos ng kanilang mga palad na pinapadulas ng sabon, tila nanunuot ang init ng araw sa aking laman. Mas mainit. Ngunit hindi nakakapaso. Nananalaytay iyon sa aking kaugatan.

Ilang sandali pa, narinig ko ang sigaw. Parang may binubugaw na hayop sa damuhan. At papalapit ito sa aking kinukublihan. Nagsuot ako sa talahiban ngunit mabilis akong sinunggaban ng malalakas na braso. Inangat ang aking mukha. Nakangisi ito. Tinanong kung ano'ng ginagawa ko sa gitna ng damuhan.

*"Salbahis ning bayota ni!"* Pagmumura ng lalaking hawak ang aking braso.

Tinawag ang ilang kasama. Nagsilapitan sila. Nandidiri ang halakhakan na iyon. Nandidiri ang pagtawag sa aking bayot. Bahagyang itinaas ang aking t-shirt. Lumitaw ang aking katawan. "Walay bra man!" Habang nilalamas ang aking dibdib.

Kinukult naman ng isa ang aking shorts. Ibinababa.

"Ano'ng kulay ng panty?" Tukso ng isa nilang kasama. At sinundan iyon ng tawanan.

"Bitawan mo siya." Saway ng papalapit na sundalo.

Nagpumiglas ako nang marinig ang boses. Pamilyar na boses. Hinanap ko ang pinaggalingan ng boses na iyon. Ipagtatanggol ba ako? Ito na yata ang napapanood ko sa betamax na pelikula ni FPJ. Naghahalakhakan ang mga lalaking nakapalibot sa isang babaeng sumasayaw sa ledge. Sumasabay sa giling ang disco ball. Naglalandian ang makukulay na ilaw na gumagapang sa hubo't hubad na katawan ng mananayaw. Patay-sinding mga bombilya. Parang kumukurap-kurap sa nasasaksihan. Darating si Fernando Poe Jr. Huhubarin ang suot na jacket. Ibabalabal sa nakaladlad na katawan ng kanyang minamahal. Aakayin pababa ng stage ang babae. Magrereklamo't magsisigaw ang karamihang manonood. Masasakal ang hawak na bote ng beer, ingungod sa ashtray ang hinihit na yosi ng ilang kalalakihan. Magmumura ang mga manyakis. Pagkatapos...

Hinablod ng papalapit na sundalo ang kamaong pumipigil sa akin. Nakawala ako. Sinundan iyon ng sunud-sunod na palitan ng suntok. Narinig ko na lang ang sigawan ng mga nakapalibot sa dalawa. Parang may sabong. Sandali kong nilingon at tuluyan na akong tumakbo palayo. Hindi ko alintana ang pagkatusok ng aking balat sa matutulis na tinik ng halamang makahiya. Nangungutya ang palahaw ng mga uwak sa himpapawid. Tirik ang araw na nakamasid sa akin at tila galit na galit. Mahahapdi ang kapit ng mga kogon sa aking kamay at braso. Pinunit ng nakausling sanga ng bayabas ang aking damit. Tumakbo ako nang tumakbo palayo.

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Alam niya kung saan ako pupuntahan pagkatapos ng pangyayari. Alam kong susundan niya ako. Naupo ako sa lilim ng isang kubo. Tuyo na ang luha ko nang makarating siya. Mas mabuti na rin iyong hindi niya ako nadatnang umiiyak. Bakla lang ang umiiyak, sabi nila. Pero mali raw iyon, sabi niya.

“Puwede ba akong sumama sa ‘yo?’” tanong ko na kahit alam kong sasagutin niya akong hindi.

“Marami ka pang kakaining bigas.” Isang napakakaraniwang sagot ng mga mas matatanda sa kausap na akala nilang kailangan munang magpalaki ang tulad ko. Hindi lang naman sa pisikal, alam ko iyon. Kundi sa karanasan.

“Puwede rin ba akong maging sundalo kahit...” hindi ko na itinuloy sa halip sinagot na niya ang tanong ko ‘kahit tinatawag akong bakla.’

“Kahit sino naman ah, maaaring maging sundalo.”

“Bakit ka nga ba naging sundalo?” Ang tanong na iyon ang naghatid ng kanyang tingin sa malayo.

“Dahil sa tatay ko.”

At ang sagot na iyon ang tumangay naman upang sundan ang paningin niyang tinatanaw ang kalaparan ng bukid.

Tila isang prusisyon kasama ng kanilang mga alagang kalabaw na hila-hila ang guyuran, habang nakasakay ang inaantok na paslit. Buhat-buhat ng kalalakihan ang ilang basket ng saging, sako-sakong mais at iba pang ani mula sa bukid. Ang ilan ay may bitbit na panggatong, iyong mga nanay, may

dala-dalang buslo na may prutas at gulay.

“Hindi ba sila iyong parang painting sa libro ng Araling Panlipunan?”  
Naitanong kong tila humihingi ng opinyon sa katabing sundalo.

Nakamasid lang siya. Siguro ganoon talaga kapag laking-siyudad. Kung laking-Maynila. Siguro sa pelikula lang niya napapanood ang grupo ng mga magsasaka na sabay-sabay tumatawid sa makipot at palikong-likong daan pauwi sa kani-kanilang mga tahanan bago madatnan ng curfew.

Tumayo siya. Binati ang dumadaang mga tao sa kubo. May nagbigay ng pagbati. May nagbigay ng ngiti. Ngunit karamihan ay tuluy-tuloy lang ang paglalakad ni hindi umimik hanggang sa makalayo.

Dito namin madalas pinagmamasdan ang mga mambubukid na pauwi tuwing dapithapon. Magkasinkulay ang lupa at kanilang mga balat sa buong maghapon ibinilad sa gitna ng sakahan. Nakasukbit sa beywang ang kanilang sundang. Kailan kaya nila itataas upang masilip ng papalubog na araw bago ito tuluyang maglaho sa kanluran?

Muli kong nabanggit sa kanya ang sunud-sunod na pamimintang ng mga sundalo sa taga-baryo. Rebelde ang tawag sa sinumang mahuhuli sa curfew, sa mga pagpupulong sa gitna ng sakahan, sa mga itinatatag na samahan ng mga magsasaka. Ilan sa mga hinaing ng mga taga-baryo, wala na silang maramdamang katahimikan dahil sa patuloy na pananakot sa kanilang *yutang kabilin* o ang kanilang lupang minana. Ang karamihan sa kanilang mga lupang ninuno ay pinasok ng plantasyon, pagla-logging, minahan, pagtatayo ng subdibisyon, golf course at iba pang sinasabing pagpa-paunlad sa aming baranggay. Ngunit ang lahat nang ito ay naging dahilan ng pang-aabuso sa karapatan at pagpapawalang-bisa sa pamamahala bilang gahum o kapangyarihan nila sa kanilang tribu.

“Nitibo ang minsang tawag sa kanila. Sila ang mga lumad.”

“Ikaw? Lumad ka rin ba?”

Sinundan ko uli ang kanyang tingin. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang isasagot o kung tama nga ba ang nasa aking isipan. “Hindi kasi kami taal na taga-rito. Lumad man ako o hindi, ang mahalaga namumuhay kami sa iisang baryo. Parang lahat tayo Pilipino na bumubuo sa bansang Pilipinas.”

Napangiti siya.

“May isang kanta ang mga taga-Mindanao.” Pahayag ko at pinakawalan ang liriko.

Mindanao, Mindanao,/ dili angay sa mga langyaw/ Mindanao, Mindanao,/ ang bahandi ayaw ipakawhaw...

Nakamasid lang siya sa aking mga mata. Napalitan ng isang palaisipan ang pagkamangha nang makita ang mga dumaang lumad kanina sa nais pakahulugan ng kanta.

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Iyong mga sundalo sa AFP ay sumailalim kaya sa isang awareness program? Upang hindi lang giyera ang nasa isip nila kundi ang kapakanan din ng kapwa Pilipino. Ilan kaya ang gusto nilang patayin? May mga nakalista ba kayong mga pangalan? Naitanong ko ito minsan sa kanya.

Humarap ang sundalo sa akin. Napangiti siya bago nagsimulang magsalaysay. Iyong ngiti na parang magbubukas ng paboritong libro o kaya nobela. Mas mahaba pa kahit pagsama-samahin ang anim na ilog mula Pulangi hanggang Cotabato at mas malawak pa sa natatanaw naming sakahan ang kaguluhan dito sa Mindanao. Binalikan niya sa panahon ni Marcos. At isa rin ito sa problemang hinarap ng administrasyong Aquino ang pagkalat ng vigilante groups lalo na sa Visayas at Mindanao. At hanggang ngayon sa panahon ni Erap.

“Sanggol ka pa yata nang bumagsak ang diktaduryang Marcos sa makasaysayang 1986 People Power Revolution?” Baling niya sa akin.

“Isang buwan pa lang ako noon.” Tugon ko na naghihintay pa ng ilang detalye sa kanyang ikukuwento.

Ang nakakalungkot nga lang sa sinasabing “vigilante justice”, naging biktima nito ang mga inosenteng sibilyan, mga magsasaka, human rights advocates, mga pari at madre, mambabatas, mga nasa media, peryodista, at iba pang kinatawan o grupo na ipinaglalaman ang land reform at pagtuligsa sa pagkakaroon ng American base sa teritoryo sa Pinas.

Kasagsagan ng negosasyon sa pagitan ng ating gobyerno at NPA, isa sa gumalantang na retrato sa mga pahayagan noong Abril 1987, ang isang grupo ng mga Pilipino na may hawak na bolo. Sa larawan, hawak nila ang pugot na ulo. Ayon sa balita, miyembro ng NPA ang pinugutan. Ang grupong ito ay tinatawag na Tadtad, sila ang mga anti-communist vigilante.

“Alam mo ba kung sino-sino ang nag-aaway-away rito sa Mindanao?” Parang nais niyang ilebel sa aking edad ang pagtatanong.

“Wala namang nag-aaway-away rito, nanggugulo siguro.” Direktang sagot ko.

Tila nagtilad siya ng isang librong pangkasaysaysan. Ang mga Muslim na karamihan sa komunidad ay matatagpuan sa pinakatimog na bahagi ng Kamindanawan partikular ang lalawigan ng Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Sulu, at Tawi-tawi. Sumunod naman ang mga immigrant settlers mula sa ibang isla ng Pinas, ang mga Kristiyano na nakabili ng malalawak na lupain, o sabihin na nating silang mga mayayaman na kabilang sa mga maykayang pamilya at lalo na mga politiko at ang huli, ang mga Lumad. Dahil sa malawakang kahirapan, pagkakaiba-iba ng relihiyon, ng pinaninindigan, umusbong ang NPA, ang MNLF ni Mur Misuari, ang MILF at iba pa kasama na ang mga vigilante groups. At kadalasan, sa gitna ng kaguluhuan kundi man pinapanigan ng AFP ang mga Kristiyano at may-kapang-yarihang politiko, naiipit ang ibang grupo sa giyera tulad ng mga Lumad.

“Sino ang kaaway?” Naguluhan ako.

Napabuntong-hininga na lang ang sundalo na tila hinamon ang ihip ng dumaang hangin sa kubo. “Bakit ka nga ba napadaan sa barracks kahapon?” Muli niya akong inusisa.

“May itatanong lang sana.”

“Ano yun?”

“Kung ilan na ang napatay mo.”

Napailing ang kausap kong sundalo.

“Bakit ba pag sundalo, pumapatay agad ng tao?”

“May baril ka eh. Para sa’n nga ba ang baril?”

“Proteksiyon. Sa mga sibilyan. Sa iyo.” Pumungay ang kanyang mga mata nang banggitin ang huling kataga.

Kunwari hindi ko siya tinitingnan. “Parang isang mapa. Parang mga isla.” Abala ang hintuturo ko sa pagsuyod sa bawat kurba at linya sa kanyang fatigue uniform. Hulaan mo kung ano ang isusulat ko.” Gumapang uli ang aking daliri.

“M...?” Nag-isip siya.

Itinuloy ko pa.



“I...”

Napangiti ako.

“N. Mindanao.”

Umiling ako.

“E, ano. Ituloy mo,” pangungulit niya.

Binilisan ko ang paglalaro ng aking hintuturo sa kanyang uniform.  
“Parang alon ng dagat. Parang palutang-lutang na ulap. Parang puso.”

“Napakalawak ng imahinasyon mo.” Nakatitig na siya sa aking mga mata.

“O parang bakas ng dugo.”

Pinigilan niya ang aking mga kamay. Niyakap niya ako.

“Pwede ba akong sumama sa iyo, maging sundalo?”

“Ayan ka na naman... Isang mahabang usapan na naman ito.”

“Bakit? Dahil ba...”

“Tama na...” Tila nakutuban na niya ang kasunod na salita. Iyong pati sarili ko, pinandirihan ko kapag binabanggit ko iyon. Isa sa mga salitang isinusumpa ko. “Basta sa susunod wag ka na lang dumaan sa barracks. Papasyalan na lang kita sa inyo o kaya magkikita tayo uli dito.”

Idinikit ko pa ang aking katawan sa kanyang braso. Nagyayayang yakapin pa ako ng sundalo. Nasamyong aking pisngi ang kanyang mabalahibong dibdib. Ang init ng kanyang mga bisig na sintigas ng M16. Kumapit ako ng mas mariin. Na tila may nais akong imapa sa kanyang katawan, nais ikubli at nais pakawalan. Kasinggaspang man ng talahib ang suot niyang fatigue. Ngunit naibabalangkas ko roon ang tinatawag nilang pag-ibig.

## ***Excerpt mula sa Diksiyonaryo-Gabay sa mga Gawa ni Berry Manansala, mulang “Cabron, Ara” hanggang “Cultext”***

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U Z. Eliserio

### **CABRON, ARA**

Sa QUEZON CITY ng taong 2666, na pinasadahan ng Katipunan sa *Ang Kaharian ng mga Engkantado*, natagpuan ni KALI ESCRIBA ang isang post-it na nakadikit sa monitor ng huling computer sa mundo. Sabi rito, “Binabangungot mo ang isang babaeng nasa Laguna. Ang pangalan n’ya ay Ara.” Tatalon pa ulit sa panahon ang Katipunan bago nila maengkwentro ang clone na ito, na sa taong 2766 ay isa nang bangkay. Sa nobelang *Pahayag* ni BERRY MANANSALA, inilarawan kung paanong ikinasal si Ara Cabron sa siyentistang si RANDY MUGTO. Sa pagbabasa ng mga flashback, flashforward, at sideways flash, matatanto ng mambabasa na likha ni Dr. Mugto si Ara, isang test tube baby ang orihinal na kopya. Lumaki ito nang itinuturing na ama si Dr. Mugto, hanggang isang araw ay bumukod na rin at nagsarili. Pagkatapos ng isang dekada ng pagkakahiwalay, bumalik si Ara sa Laguna, kung saan ikinumpisal niya ang kanyang pagmamahal sa kanyang lumikha. Tumanda at namatay si Ara, at sa kanyang lungkot at pangungulila, lumikha si Dr. Mugto ng clone ng asawa. Isa lang ang bilin niya sa ikalang Ara, na wag nitong pupuntahan ang musoleo sa kanilang basement. Nasa DNA ang curiosidad, sa unang pagkakataon pumuslit si Ara sa muselo, kung saan niya natagpuan ang bangkay ng kanyang pinagmulan. Hindi matanggap na clone siya, nabaliw ang pangalawang Ara at mabilis ding namatay. Hindi makaya ang dalamhati, muli na namang gumawa ng kopya si Dr. Mugto. Paulit-ulit ang nangyayari sa mga Ara. Makakatakas ang isa sa kanila, at ang Ara na ito ang magtatayo ng KULTO NG GULO.

Sa *Melon Drama*, matutuklasan ng mambabasa na isa lamang sa mga posibleng maging kinabukasan ng mundo ni Patricio ang mundo ni Ara. Ang sakit na kumalat sa mundo mula sa KARTERO, kapitolyo ng LUPAIN NG MGA LAMANLUPA, at tumama sa Pilipinas ay papakalat pa lang sa panahon ni Ara. Sila Patricio mismo, sa kanilang pagliligtas sa iba't ibang myembro ng ANGKAN NI KRISTO na bumubura at nagsusulat sa mga PAHINA ng AKLAT NG SANSINUKOB.

### **CAFE CHOG**

Isa sa mga legal na negosyo ng lider-sindikatong si MARIO ORLANDO. Kalat ang mga branch sa BAYANG MALAYO. Itinanghal na pinakamalinis ang sa CALOOCAN. May local branch nito sa LUPAIN NG MGA LAMANLUPA.

### **CAFETERIA**

Kainan sa loob ng dambuhalang headquarters ng COMPANIA DE MERCADO. Dito madalas magkita ang mga myembro ng DEMONYO NG COMPANIA.

### **CAGAYAN DE ORO**

Isa sa pinakamaunlad na lungsod sa Mindanao. Kontrolado ng mga death squad ni MARIO ORLANDO.

### **CAGAYAN VALLEY**

Bayan kung saan maraming PAWIS, dito naligaw si KRAMER KRAMER. Naging minero dito si CLARO RECTO ESPEJO.

### **CAIN, LINO**

Ang bunso ng MAGKAKAPATID NA CAIN. Ang nagtaksil kay JOKER CAMUA, gamit ang CAMERAT. Isa sa kanyang mga kapatid ang pumatay sa kanya sa pamamagitan ng paglibing ng punyal sa kanyang likod. Naubusan siya ng dugo sa kalagitnaan ng QUEZON AVENUE. Isa sa mga saksi ng kanyang kamatayan (pero hindi ang pagsaksak sa kanya) si JULIA MADIOGA.

## CAMERAT

Espesyal na uri ng BIOROBOT. Hindi kailangang daga para maging Camerat, pero lahat ng Camerat, nagiging espiya.

## CAMP JOHN THE BASSIST

Ubod ng sosyal na Camp sa BAGUIO, paboritong bakasyunan ng mga burukrata-kapitalista at panginoong may lupa, at PANGINOONG LAMANLUPA. Mababa ang pasahod dito, at wala ngang unyon ang mga trabahador hanggang iorganisa sila ni CLARO RECTO ESPEJO.

Magkasamang sinunog ni Gabby at ng kanyang dating karibal na si KANTA SUN ang Camp.

## CAMUA, JOKER

Kilala rin bilang Jaker (dahil sa kanyang mga “jakes”), si Joker ang bunsong kapatid ni Paul Camua. Drug addict at patapon, minsan nang sinubukan ni Joker na maging vigilante. Mala-ROBIN HOOD ang kanyang napiling persona, nagnanakaw mula sa mga hari at reyna ng BAYANG MALAYO para ibigay sa mga mahirap. Sa *Melon Drama*, inilarawan kung paano siya nag-training sa SECOND THOMAS SHOAL, kasama ang Ate nila ni Paul na si MARIAN CAMUA. Samantalang bumalik sa Bayang Malayo si Joker, nagpaiwan naman si Marian sa Shoal at nag-asawa ng PUTI.

Maingat sa gamit si Joker, lalo na sa mga sapatos.

Nagkunwari si MARIO ORLANDO na papatayin niya si Joker pag hindi sinabi ni Paul ang lahat nang nalalaman tungkol sa AKLAT NG SAN-SINUKOB, pero nang aminin ni Paul na wala siyang pakialam sa kapatid, inilahad ni Mario na ilang araw nang patay si Joker. Sa nobelang *Sampung mga Daliri*, nag-showdown ang vigilante at ang goons ni Mario sa MRT - BUENDIA STATION, kung saan nahuli si Joker. Sa *Korporasyon* inilarawan kung paano tinorture si Joker. Paulit-ulit na nilublob ang ulo niya sa BUTAS NA MALAKI.

Sa Shoal, naging guro ni Joker si LUKE TALYER, na sa simula’y ayaw pa siyang turuan. Habol nang habol si Joker sa mga misyon ni Luke, madalas pa nga siyang sagabal. Pero nang minsang makatulong si Joker sa pag-disarm ng bomba ng LA BAMBANG (initsa niya ito sa malayo nang magkamali si Luke sa pagputol ng wire), tinanggap na rin ni Luke na mas kaunt-

ing pinsala ang maidudulot ni Joker kung opisyal niya itong estudyante. Idineklara ni Luke na tapos na ang training ni Joker nang nagkamali ulit ito sa pagputol ng wire ng bomba sa DAKWEBA, isang motel kung saan madalas dinadala ng mga puti ang mga TAGASIRA, at nasabugan silang pareho. Naputulan ng binti si Luke, samantalang sunog naman ang kaliwang pisngi ni Joker.

Bago piliing maging vigilante, at bago maging addict sa droga, sinubukan munang maging propesyunal na mananayaw ni Joker nang bumalik siya sa Bayang Malayo. Partner niya sa tango ang babaeng kilala lang bilang BOWLA, platonic friend, at lahat halos ng kompetisyon sa pagsasayaw ay sinasalihan nila. Ang kaso, nakakalaban lagi nila ang kapatid ni Luke na si GEORGE TALYER at ang fiancee nitong si IMA LAYER. Bagaman mas magaling si Joker at Ima, sa hindi maipaliwanag na dahilan, laging nanalo sina George at Bowla. Dahil dito, nalulong sa droga ang magpartner sa tango. Pero isang araw ay dumating ang isang email mula kay Marian. Iniwan pala ito ng asawang puti, at ikinuwento kay Joker kung paanong wala itong pambili ng gatas para sa kambal na anak. Puno ng galit dahil sa pang-aapi ng mga makapangyarihan sa kapatid, at sa pang-aapi ng mga makapangyarihan sa mga maliit, may syringe pang nakaturok sa braso, nagdesisyon si Joker na maging vigilante.

Halos limot na lahat ng itinuro sa kanya ni Luke, nagpunta si Joker sa SAGADA, sa HAGDANG-HAGDANG PALAYAN. Doon siya nag-training sa ilalim ni KAPITAN EDMUND DANTE, na nakilala niya sa Shoal. Bukod sa pagiging fitness trainer, si Dante rin ang supplier ng protein powder ni Joker. Dahil kay Dante, lumaki ang glamour muscles ni Joker. Sa isang inuman, inilahad ni Joker na inabuso siya noong bata siya, at hindi niya alam kung ang kuya niyang si Paul o ang ibang barkada nito ang maysala. Inilahad naman ni Dante na kaya siya umalis sa Shoal at nagretiro mula sa militar ay dahil ginahasa siya ng isang admiral. Kinaumagahan, binawi ng dalawa ang kwento nila sa isa't isa, sinabing pawang kasinungalingan ang kanilang mga kumpisal. Sumumpa sila sa isa't isa na hindi na gagamitin nang padalos-dalos ang panggagahasa, dahil “hindi ito joke.”

Ilan sa mga nakaharap ni Joker na supervillain, sa loob at labas ng Bayang Malayo, ay sina MAL SALVAGE, BOSE SHLEK, at BUKTOT DIABLO.

Sa kanyang pakikipaglaban sa pang-aapi, naging kasangga ni Joker

ang MAGKAKAPATID NA CAIN, sina Barry, John, Lino, Abel, Eva, at Georgia. Pero habang sumisikat si Joker sa social media, at nagsisimulang magbenta ng t-shirt na may mukha niya, at nagkaroon siya ng fans at co-splayers, walang pumansin sa kontribusyon ng magkakapatid. Si LINO CAIN ang nakipag-deal kay Mario Orlando para mabitag si Joker sa MRT - Buendia Station.

Ang hindi alam ni Paul, kinidnap pala ni Mario ang nanay at tatay nila: sina G. AT GNG. CAMUA. Pinanood ni Joker ihulog sa bulkan ang kanyang mga magulang sa pamamagitan ng Butas na Malaki. Ang bulkang iyon din ang huling hantungan ni Joker, bagaman pinatay na siya bago siya ihulog sa lava. Alam ni Gabby Lamang ang lahat nang ito, dahil nagpapanggap siya noon bilang GUHO DIMAGIBA, deep uncover sa sindikato ni Mario. Hindi sinasabi ni Gabby ang katotohanan kay Paul, dahil alam niyang madudurog ang puso nito.

### **CAMUA, MARIAN**

Ang huling nabubuhay na kamag-anak ni PAUL CAMUA. May anak na kambal. Niloko, binuntis, pinaasa, saka iniwan ng isang PUTI.

### **CAMUA, PAUL**

Isang bisexual, kuya ni JOKER CAMUA. Asawa-ama ni JACQUELINE KAWABATA. Sa kanilang unang monthsary, nag-date si Paul at Jacqueline sa HOTEL PORNIA.

Minsan nang naka-mexican stand off ni Gabby dahil sa pagturing sa kanya bilang “panakip butas.” Lagi niyang ginagamit ang kapangyarihang humigop ng TAWAG para kidlatan ang kanyang mga kaaway, estratehiyang tinawag ni Gabby bilang “predictable.” Nang matutunan ni Paul mula kay TREJO BIKINI kung paano tawagin ang MOTORSIKLO NI HUDAS, nagdesisyon siyang agawin ang pagiging Supremo ng Katipunan mula sa kaibigan. Isa sa mga naging manipestasyon ng kanyang pagtatangka ay ang pagtulak na gawing myembro ng Katipunan si SERGIO BUHO habang may quorum pero wala si Gabby. Natalo ang kanyang mosyon.

Ilang beses ding naaresto sa INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION - DESNAY dahil overpriced ang mga binebentang pills. Madalas nababalian ng buto dahil sa hilig sa iba't ibang uri ng tradisyonal na laro, tu-

lad ng sepak takraw. Mahilig sa adventure, mangilang beses nang tumakbo si Paul sa PAPLONA, kung saan siya hinabol ng mga KABAYONG SEKRETARYA.

Hindi niya alam na pinatay ni MARIO ORLANDO ang kanyang mga magulang, akala niya’y ang patapon niyang kapatid lang na si JOKER CAMUA ang naging biktima ng lider-sindikato. Iniligtas ni Paul ang buhay ng halos wala nang dugong si HOMBRE LECHE, na natagpuan niya sa ABU ROAD. Dinala niya ito sa ospital kahit wala siyang motibasyon.

Nakipag-threesome minsan kina JULIA MADIOGA at KALI ESCRIBA. Gusto niyang ulitin ang experience.

## **CANNIBAL**

Halos lahat ng bayan, sa LUPAIN man o sa ITAAS, mayroong komunidad ng cannibal.

## **CANTA, ALTHEA**

Niyaya ni Althea na sumayaw si HAPON KAWABATA sa piging sa BAGUIO, na kinaasar ng Reynang si MIKA P. ROSTRO.

## **CENSOR**

Binabaybay din bilang “Cencor,” grupo ito ng mga indibidwal na walang ibang nais kundi ang pagsakop sa bawat lungsod sa daigdig ng tao, sa paniniwalang kailangan ito para sa paparating na digmaan sa pagitian ng mga tao at ng LUPAIN NG MGA LAMANLUPA. Bata pa lamang ang HARI NG KAMAO ay gusto na nila siyang patayin. Dalawa sa mga kilalang myembro nito’y si YEWUN at si GEMMA RED, parehong sinunog nang buhay ni Gabby. Noong huling bahagi ng 2019, sinakop ng mga pwersa ng Censor ang bayan ng KATAYAN nang walang putukang nagaganap.

## **CENTAUR**

Mga nilalang na kabayo ang pambaba at tao ang pangtaas.

## **CESAR BINATA EMERGENCY ROOM**

Ang pinakasosyal na kwarto sa OSPITAL SIPILIS. Dito natipuhan

ni ALIEN 12 ang pagong na ginawa niyang BIOROBOT.

### **CHAIN SAW**

Sa kanyang utos sa mga alipores, specific na binanggit ni NINANG DONYA na ang sandatang ito ang gamitin para pugutan ng ulo si DEGREE CALVIN.

### **CHARLIE**

Lungsod na ipinangalan sa dakilang bayaning si CHARLIE IBA, mistulang war zone ang Charlie dahil sa pambobomba ng mga clone sa lahat ng itinuturing nilang mababang uri ng nilalang, i.e. lahat ng hindi clone. Dahil sa genocide na ito, halos dalawang Palestino na lamang ang natitira sa Charlie.

### **CHAVANNES, SKEAT**

Aktor. Katulad ng kasa-kasamang si TIMOTHY COANGCO, tinitis niyang gumamit ng isang salita lamang bilang pangalan, kahit usong-uso ito.

### **CLARK**

Isa sa mga lugar kung saan nag-tryst si MARIO ORLANDO at KALI ESCRIBA. Dito nagtago ang teroristang mag-amang sina DAISY DAGA at CERES DAGA, ang dalawang huling nakakaalam ng tunay na identidad ng PILANDOK. Vibrant ang art scene sa Clark, lalo na para sa mga mananayaw.

Nagkaroon ng ZOMBIE infestation sa Clark, pero ipinagtanggol ni BENIGNO DAGUNDONG ang mga mamamayan sa pamamagitan ng kanyang kapangyarihan ng kulog.

Pira-pirasong ikinuwento ang pag-besiege at pagsakop sa lungsod na ito ng hukbo ng CENSOR sa mga nobelang *Feasting Yawa*, *Melon Drama*, *Korporasyon*, at *Ang Kaharian ng mga Engkanto*. Eksaktong alas otso ng umaga itinaas ng mayor ng Clark ang puting bandali na nagsi-signify ng pagsuko niya sa lungsod.

Bilang lider ng hukbo ng Censor nang sakupin ang bayan, si JUAN



MAKINA ang nagsisilbing gobernador-heneral ng Clark, bago ito binomba ni KRISTINA JAYA mula sa langit. Crater lang ang natira, at mga refugee na walang matakbuhan dahil naroon ang gera, saan man sila magpunta.

Sa kinabukasang malayo, sa sosyalistang utopia, muling bubuuin ang lungsod ng Clark bilang pagpapaalala na mas mabuti ang pag-ibig kaysa karahasan.

## COANGCO, TIMOTHY

Isang aktor, gumanap siya bilang Bwakaw sa dulang *Spoiled!* ni JORDAN NICOLAS. Naaresto ang buong troupe sa unang guerrilla performance nila sa NATIONAL MUSEUM. Nanlaban silang lahat bilang protesta sa pasistang gobyerno. Nahataw ng batuta sa mukha si Timothy, pero mas lalo lang siyang gumwapo sa sanhi nitong pagkabali ng kanyang ilong.

Ang hindi alam ng mga kasama niya sa teatro, CANNIBAL si Timothy. Sinisirekto niya ito, at hindi siya kumakain ng tao pag nasa QUEZON CITY. Pero kada taon, nagsa-summer vacation siya sa MUNTING RUSYA, at doon siya naglalantak sa laman ng kapwa. Sa kanyang pagpapahinga lagi niyang kasama ang kapwa aktor na si SKEAT CHAVANNES, na kapwa cannibal din.

Isang tag-araw, habang naglalakad ang dalawa sa pinakamagandang dalampasigan ng Munting Rusya, nakakita sila ng sanggol. Uha ito nang uha. “Ako dapat ang makakain nito kasi ako ang unang nakatanaw,” sabi ni Timothy.

“Ako ang dapat kasi ako ang unang nakarinig sa mga iyak niya,” sagot naman ni Skeat. Nagtalo nang nagtalo ang dalawa hanggang sa tumigil sa pag-uha ang sanggol. Nang usisain nila, natuklasan nilang wala na pala itong buhay.

“Ako ang dapat na makakain sa kanya kasi ako ang unang nakapansin na hindi na siya umiiyak,” sabi ni Timothy.

“Ako dapat, kasi ako ang unang nakaamoy.” Nagpatuloy sila sa pagtatalo hanggang may dumating na malakas na alon. Isang saglit lang at nawala ang bangkay. Magbabati na sana sila at magpapatuloy sa paglalakad nang ibinalik ng dagat ang sanggol.

“O, ayon, ako na ang may hawak,” sabi ni Timothy. Isinayaw-sayaw niya ito. “Dibs!”

“Alam mo, mas mabuti pa maghanap tayo ng mas matalino sa atin para magdesisyon kung ano ang dapat nating gawin.” Ito na lang ang naisip ni Skeat, kasi alam niyang hindi niya maaagaw kay Timothy ang sanggol. Mula nang mabatuta ay nagwo-work out na kasi ito sa gym, naging spor-nosexual na.

“Sige, sabi nila may Hari daw dito sa Rusya.” Nagtanong sila sa ilang matandang Rusyan at itinuro naman sila ng mga ito sa isang isla na kailangan pang mang-arkila ng bangka para lang marating. “Munting Rusya” din daw ang pangalan nito, sabi ng matandang mangingisda na naghatid sa kanila. Sa isang kubo sa gitna ng isla natagpuan nila si ANRIL SOLOMON, na may hawak na bolo at suot-suot na korona. Mabilis na ipinaliwanag ni Timothy ang sitwasyon nila.

“Ako po talaga ang unang nakakita,” sabi ni Skeat.

“Ako po ang may hawak,” sabi ni Timothy.

“Mabuti at nagpunta kayo rito. Tunay nga akong patas at walang kinikilingan. Kaya nga ako hari.” Nagtinga si Anril Solomon gamit ang bolo. “Bueno, magdedesisyon ako para sa inyong dalawa, sa isang kundisyon. Kailangan, kahit sa tingin n’yo, lugi, susunod kayo sa magiging desisyon ko.”

Pumayag ang dalawa.

“Isa lang ang solusyon,” sabi ni Anril Solomon, “hahatiin ko ang bata sa gitna para magkakuha kayo ng pantay na piraso.”

Nagsimulang umiyak ang sanggol. Ibang sanggol pala ang ibinalik sa kanila ng dagat, iba sa sanggol na namatay sa dalampasigan at kinuha ng alon.

Ibinaba ni Anril Solomon ang bolo, pero hindi pantay na pantay ang pagkakahati niya sa sanggol.

“Akin ang kaliwang bahagi!” sigaw ni Timothy. Malakas ang kumpyansa niya sa kanyang sarili, dahil alam niyang siya ang nasa tama. Hula niya, sinadya ng hari ang maling pagtagpas.

“Madaya, halatang mas malaki o, dibdib pa lang halata na.” Nagsimulang magdabog si Skeat.

“Para kayong mga bata,” sabi ni Anril Solomon. Tinapyasan niya ang bangkay. “O ayan, pantay na.”

“E, hindi,” sabi ni Timothy, “ngayon sa kanya naman ang mas malaki.”

Tumapyas ulit si Anril Solomon at paulit-ulit ang naging pagtatalo ng dalawa. Sa huli, naubos lang din ni Anril Solomon ang katawan ng sanggol. “At least,” sabi ng hari, “ang kinalabasan, patas.”

## **COMPANIA DE FAGIN**

Gumagamit ng child laborers, mga hypnotist ang mayorya ng Board of Directors ng Compania de Fagin. Sa popular na pananalita, alam ng mga ordinaryong mamamayan ng BAYANG MALAYO na pag sinabing “Compania,” ang tinutukoy ay ang COMPANIA DE MERCADO, na mas malaki at mas makapangyarihan sa Compania de Fagin, na pag tinutukoy ng isang nagsasalita’y kailangang tawagin nang buong pangalan. Tradisyon sa mga CEO ng Compania de Fagin na mag-order ng TAGASIRA sa kanilang opisina, kahit di naman sila nakikipagtalik dito. Para i-solidify ang mga monopolyo nito, balak ng Compania de Fagin na i-hostile takeover ang ORLANDO AND FRIENDS CORPORATION.

## **COMPANIA DE HALAMAN**

Multinational conglomerate na nag-eeksperimento sa mga “taong gawa sa laman.” Kahit ganito ang pangalan nila, marami silang empleyado at VP na hindi naman TAONG HALAMAN.

## **COMPANIA DE MERCADO**

Ang Compania de Mercado ay mass media empire na birtwal na nag-monopolya sa pamamahayag, kultura, at sining ng BAYANG MALAYO mula pang kabataan hanggang tumanda si Gabby Lamang. Maraming subsidiary sa ibang industriya. Isang conglomerate, mayroon din silang commercial logging at mining activities sa iba’t ibang bansa, kasama na ang BRAZIL at INDIA. Gumagamit ng shell companies para magtago ng pera. Illegal na ini-x-ray ng Compania ang sinomang pumapasok sa kanilang headquarters.

Binomba ng teroristang grupong LA BAMBANG sa pamumuno ni BEN ZAYB ang headquarters ng Compania noong Hunyo 12, 2020.

Malaki ang naging papel ng Compania sa nobelang *Ang Kaharian ng mga Engkanto*. Inilarawan dito ang pagtatangka ni Gabby na ma-produce ang pelikulang *Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag, Part 2: Resbak sa Chinatown*, na

tungkol sa pagsugod ng angkan Madiaga sa mga tambay sa iskinita na pumatay kay Julio. Para magkaroon ng hype, ikinalat ni Gabby sa social media ang tsismis na si F. Sionil Jose, pambansang alagad ng sining, ang di-umano'y nagsulat ng screenplay.

Pagkatapos mabomba ang headquarters, nagsimula ang Compania ng root and branch na pagdidistrungka sa unyon ng mga mamamahayag, artista, at iba pang cultural worker na itinuturing nilang front ng La Bamba. Katakot-takot ang sinesante, hinarass, nakatanggap ng death threat, finorce leave without pay, finorce retirement, at, sa kaso ng tatlong lider-union, pinapaslang. Bagaman hindi miyembro ng unyon, sinubukan ni Gabby na itago si HAPON KAWABATA, lider-union at kanyang kababata, mula sa goons ng Compania. Sa isang madugong labanan na naganap sa PALACIO DE MALACANANG sa pagitan ng goons ng Compania at ng nirentahang PRIVATE ARMY FOR HIRE ni Hapon, at iba pang hukbong namumuhi sa Compania, pinanood ni Gabby, mula sa isang panic room, kung paanong sumuko pero binaril pa rin ang kanyang kaibigan. Dalawang taon pagkatapos, pumutok ang isang insider trading scandal na nagpabagsak ng status at nagpahina ng monopolyo ng Compania. Nadawit ang pangalan ni Hapon at iginiit ng mga testigo na isa siya sa mga lider-union na tumatanggap ng suhol mula sa management. Nag-imbestiga si Gabby para linisin ang pangalan ng kaibigan, pero natuklasan niyang totoo pala ang mga paratang. Puno ng hinanakit at sama ng loob ang puso, ibinenta ni Gabby ang screenplay ng *Resbak sa Chinatown*, na siya naman talaga ang sumulat, sa halagang 10,000 piso, na noong ikalawang dekada ng ika-21 siglo'y malaki-laki na rin. Dumaan ito sa dalawang rewrites bago naluwal bilang pelikulang direct to DVD. Ibinenta rin ito VOD sa Internet, at may di-kilalang pirata ang nag-upload ng kabuuan nito sa YouTube.

Ilan sa mga naging CEO ng Compania ay si HEROD KANTA, na namatay di-umano dahil sa atake sa puso, at si ULAN LAMANG, na huling namataang nakikipaglaban kay CHARLIE IBA sa VINLUAN HIGH.

## **CORN GOD**

Bagaman sinasabing ubos na ang ANGKAN NI KRISTO, inubos di-umano ng nilalang na kilala lamang bilang PILANDOK, sa totoo'y marami pa ring miyembro ng Angkan ang buhay. Iyon nga lang, buang na ang karamihan sa kanila, at ang iba nama'y masyadong malungkot o galit

o takot para maging epektibong diyos. Isa na rito ang Corn God, na hindi umaalis sa teritoryo niyang MAIS MAZE sa DUBLIN. Malungkot ang Corn God, laging lonely, at sinomang mabitag sa kanyang Maze ay hindi makakawala nang hindi nagbibigay ng alay... alay ng buhay.

## **CULTEXT**

Binaggit nang pahapyaw sa *Basagulero* at *Ang Awit ng Pag-ibig*, ang Cultext ay maliit na komunidad kung saan di-umano'y libre ang pagkain at tirahan sa lahat ng payag magbungkal ng lupa nito. Matatagpuan ang kanilang lupa sa hilaga ng SUBIC.

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# Mga Alitaptap sa North Avenue

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Rijel Reyes

**S**inilip ko ang alitaptap sa pagitan ng mga palad.  
*Liliwanag.*  
*Didilim.*

Unang beses ko siyang nakita sa malaking bukid sa dulo ng Mindanao Avenue Extension. Nadadaan kapag galing o papuntang Quezon City Memorial Circle at Monumento. Halos katapat lang ‘to ng SM North na mas kilala pa dati bilang SM West. Nakatalikod sa amin ang mga billboard ng mga pelikula nina Bong Revilla Jr., Cindy Rothrock, Machete na ginagampanan ni Gardo Versoza, action film ni Robin Padilla, at iilang pelikulang bomba. Halos nakaguhit pa lahat ng billboard tulad ng karamihang poster sa mga independent theaters.

Pasaglit-saglit tinatakpan ng mga ulap ang hugis-ngiting buwan. Kumikindat-kindat ang mga bituin. Gusto na kaming pauwiin ng mga kuliglig. May mga asong tumatahol sa kalauyan.

Dumating ang iba pang bata. May dalang sari-sariling garapon.

Umihip ang isang malamig na hangin. Sumayaw ang mga kumpol ng kawayan. Nakisali ang eucalyptus. Nasuklay ang mga talahib.

*Liliwanag.*

*Didilim.*

“Tulungan mo naman ako manghuli ng alitaptap,” sabi ng batang bae.

Pinanood ko siyang hulihin ang isang alitaptap gamit ang dalawang kamay. Inuulit-ulit niya ang ginagawa. Unti-unting lumalayo ang mga kislap.

“Wag ka kasi maingay. Paisa-isa lang. Panoorin mo muna sila.”

Tumingin siya sa ‘kin. Huminto siya sa ginagawa. Saka siya mabagal na naglakad palayo, papunta sa mas maraming kislap.

“Gamitin mo ‘yung isa mong kamay saka ‘yung garapon.”

“Gagamitin ko ‘yung isa kong kamay saka garapon. Tama!”

May alitaptap. Tahimik siyang nagmasid. Naghabol siya ng tingin. Si-nusubukan niyang hulaan kung saan lalabas ang susunod na kislap.

Huli.

Sinara niya ang garapon.

“Gusto ko pa ng isa.”

Inulit niya ... at inulit ... at inulit.

“Salamat,” sabi ng batang babae.

Nag-aalikabok ang lupa sa pagtakbo niya papunta sa mga bahay-bahay na barong-barong.

Kung ako man ‘yung nilingon niya bago siya maglaho sa dilim, hindi ko na nalaman.

*Liliwanag.*

*Didilim.*

Magtatakip-silim. Isa’t kalahating dekada na ang lumipas. Kung saan ulit kami nagtagpo, ni hindi ko matandaan kung bakit at kung paano ako nakatulog. Basta may bigla na lang mga yabag ng paakyat at pababa ng hagdan. Pagsampal ng tsinelas sa talampakan at sakong. Paglabas ng hangin pagpreno ng tren. Tunog na naghuhudyat ng pagbukas ng pinto ng mga bagon. Takbuhan. Pag-ikot ng roller ng makinang lumulunok ng ticket. Pagsupot ng biniling doughnut. Pagkalukot ng isang plastic cup. Malakas na pag-ubo.

*Last station. North Avenue Station.*

Pagtili ng isang babaeng muntikan madulas. Pag-iyak ng isang bata. Kaskas ng gitara ng gitaristang bulag sa may overpass. Pagsigaw ng Mandalay, Novaliches Bayan, ng mga kundoktor. Businahan ng mga sasakyan.

Businahan. Businahan. At marami pang businahan.

“Okay ka lang? Namumutla ka.”

Kaming dalawa lang ang nakaupo sa bench katapat ng pintuan ng tren. Hawak niya ang cellphone sa isang kamay at may kendi naman sa kabila na akmang ibibigay sa ‘kin.

Naka-navy blue na palda at puting blouse na may lambda. Kaeskuwela ko. Morena. Mas mababa lang nang kaunti sa braso ang buhok. Hinawi niya ang buhok kaya nakita kong may tatlong hikaw siya sa kanang tenga. Nasa pagitan ng pango at matangos ang kanyang iling. May maliliit na balahibong pusa sa itaas ng labi.

Tinanong niya kung kumain na ‘ko. Hindi pa ‘ka ko kahit almusal. Tumanggi ako nang ayain niya ‘kong kumain sa may mobile mamihan sa baba ng istasyon. Una, pamasaha na lang ang meron ako, at pangalawa, nakakahiya. Kakakilala ko lang sa kanya. *Ulit.*

Sa huli, napilit niya rin akong sumama sa kanya. Kung bakit siya desididong ilibre ako, papangunahan ko na ‘tong kuwento kung sasabihin ko na kaagad sa inyo.

Dalisay Daya ang pangalan niya. Isay na lang daw ang itawag ko sa kanya.

Kakaibang kaming dalawa pa lang ang nasa mamihan. ‘Yung mga tao, sa tusok-tusok sa malapit dumidiskarte. Pagkatapos kami hainan ni manong mami, matagal niya ring tinitigan si Isay. Tinitigan ang mami sa tapat namin na parang hindi ‘to makapaniwalang may kasama siyang ulikbang matangkad.

“Saan ka umuuwi?” tanong niya, mahina ang boses, pagkatapos niyang lagyan ng hot sauce at magtaktak ng paminta sa mami.

Humihigop na ‘ko ng sabaw. Tinuro ko ang gawing likuran ng Trinoma, katapat ng Landmark, kung saan tinatayo ang ilang bagong gusali ng Avida. Agad ko ring binawi.

“Ay sa ano pala, sa Nayong Kanluran. Sa may West Ave, malapit sa Delta.”

Ngumiti siya. “Bakit parang hindi ka sure?” Hindi siya tumitingin sa ‘kin.

Pinaliwanag ko kay Isay na nakasanayan kong ituro kung saan ang dating haybol. Naikuwento kong kasama kami sa maraming pamilyang na-



dislocate nang ma-demolish ang squatters area na pinagtitirikan na ngayon ng mga bagong gusali para maging condo unit ng mga maykaya.

“Taga-squatters na nag-aaral sa private university?” pabiro niyang tanong. Nakatingin sa lanyard at ID na nakasabit sa ‘kin.

“Stereotype,” sabi ko. “Ilan kaming iskolar ni congressman. ‘Yung mga medyo matataas na grade nu’ng hayskul, kinukuha niyang iskolar basta mamimintena ‘yung mga grade.”

“Ta’s ‘pag nakatapos kayo, kukunin kayong alila,” tumawa siya. Sumubo ng noodles.

Ilang ulit pang subo bago siya magtanong ulit.

“Nanghuhuli ka ba ng alitaptap dati du’n? tinuro niya ang nasa likuran ng TriNoma. Alam ko ‘yun, malamang. Bukid pa dati bago gawing open parking ng mall. Katapat ng Veteran’s Golf Club. Kaso ngayon, wala na ring parking. Binubungkal na ang lupa para patayuan ng bagong gusali, o extension ata ng TriNoma.

Tumango ako. “Lahat naman ata kami sa looban trip ‘yun dati.”

“Taga du’n din ako dati. Pero isang beses lang ako nanghuli ng alitaptap. Hindi kasi ‘ko pinapayagan lumabas pag gabi na. Tumakas lang ako nu’n. Pag-uwi ko nga, pinagpapalo pa ‘ko ng mama ng walis,” hinawakan niya ng dalawang kamay ang mangkok at hinigop ang natitirang sabaw. “Namumukhaan kita, eh. Kaya lumapit din ako sa ‘yo kanina.”

Nagpalagay pa siya ng sabaw kay manong mami.

“Ikaw saan ka umuwi?” tanong ko.

“Magkalapit lang tayo. Sa may Baler lang ako. Du’n sa may Shell. Stoplight.”

“Sabay na tayo niyan?”

“Ubusin ko muna ‘to, okay lang?”

Nagpanggap lang pala na may pera. Nilibre ako ng mami pero wala na siyang pang-uwi. Sabi ko, sumakay na kami ng pa-Quiapo na jeep at sagot ko na ang bayad niya. Sasabit na lang ako pero ayaw. Maglakad na lang daw kami hanggang Baler. Saka na lang ako sumakay mula ru’n. Bahala na ‘ka ko. Lakad kung lakad. Pambawi ko na rin sa kanya para sa meryenda.

Tulad ko, third year college na si Isay. Journalism sa Unibersidad Sa Tubig. Ako, CommArts. Mantakin niyong hindi kami nagkita kahit isang beses sa loob ng halos tatlong taon?

Galing siyang Taft Avenue, sa Visprint Publishing, dahil du'n ginanap ang isang session ng Fiction Writing Clinic sa ilalim ng nobelistang si Oreo Ayala. Kung minsan daw sa UST, kung minsan sa Mang Inasal, kung minsan sa KFC, kung minsan kung saan man abutan.

Ako raw, saan galing. Galing 'ka kong Makati. Nag-walk-in sa mga BPO companies para mag-apply bilang CSR o TSR. Bakit aniya. Mawawala na 'ka ko 'yung scholarship ko. Hindi ako nakaabot sa required grade ng scho-program ni cong. Matagal na kung tutuusin. Nadadaan ko lang sa pakiusap. Ito, natuluyan na.

Tatal nakatapos naman ng hayskul at nakapagkolehiyo, babatakin ko na lang ang katawan para sa paspasang trabaho at aral nang sabay. Sastre ang tatay, modista ang nanay, ayaw nila ng mananahing anak.

Medyo ilang pa 'ko kaya hindi ako gaano matanong tungkol sa kanya.

“So, anong gusto mo mangyari sa life?” bigla niyang naitanong.

“Gusto ko lang maging maykaya. ‘Yung makaraos. Kapag nakaraos na, saka ko na pag-iisipan kung ano ulit gusto kong mangyari.”

“Good answer,” nagbuntong hininga si Isay. “Ako, I want to be a writer. Obviously. Pero naglalakad pa 'ko sa pagitan ng dalawang bangin.”

Gusto ko sanang tanungin kung anong ibig niya sabihin pero nagkusa rin siya na parang nababasa kung anong nasa isip ko.

“Dito, as a fictionist,” tinuro niya ang dinadaan ko. “Dito as an essayist. O CNF. Creative Non-Fictionist,” tinuro niya ang nilalakaran niya. “The reason, boring. Next time na lang.”

Hindi pa rin siya tumitingin sa 'kin nang diretso. May pasulyap-sulyap pero parang may tinitingnan siyang iba sa likuran ko kapag nagagawi ang mukha niya sa direksyon ko. Parang may hinahanap. Parang nag-iingat.

Pareho kaming hindi nagsalita pag'tapos nu'n.

Mahabang patlang.

“Uy, dito na 'ko, ha?” kumanan siya sa may Shell, pababa ng Baler. Sumulyap siya saglit at tumingin sa mga mata ko. Ngumiti at nagpasalamat. Ganu'n din ako.

Sumigaw ako. “Gusto mo ihatid kita hanggang sa inyo?”

Lumungon ulit siya. Tumingin sa paligid. Umiling at naglakad palayo na parang hindi kami nag-usap tungkol sa mga kurot ng parte ng kabataan at pagsilip nang kaunti sa kinabukasan.

Ilang jeep na biyaheng pa-Quiapo, Kalaw, Pier ang lumampas pero hindi ako sumakay. Hindi ko rin alam kung bakit. Naglakad ako. Naglakad nang naglakad.

Alam niyo ‘yung pakiramdam na may mali? Lagi naman, di ba? Madalas alam nating may mali. Pero hindi natin alam kung ano.

Ito, alam ko. At atin-atin lang ‘to. Marami-rami rin akong nalalaman tungkol kay Isay sa tuwing nagkakasama kami. Minsan hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit kailangang kaming dalawa lang palagi, okay rin namang kasama si Isay. Good okay o bad okay? Medyo nasa good side naman.

Isa pang napansin ko tuwing magkikita kami, para akong laging second option. Ang first choice, pag-aaral. Pero siya na lang nagsabi nu’n. Madalas pagkatapos ng research papers, ng write-ups para sa major subjects, projects ng minor subjects, o kaya wala siyang makasamang mga kaklase, saka lang niya ‘ko inaaya. Hindi ko rin naman mahindian.

Balik tayo sa nasabi kong kaming dalawa lang palagi. Nagawa niyang dalhin ako sa paborito niyang mga kanto at eski-eskinita. Sampol, sa Maynila, tuwing natataon na pareho kaming ginabi, nagpapasama siya lagi sa ‘kin sa madidilim at madalas walang taong lugar sa palibot ng UST.

Sa kanto ng Alfredo, sa Dapitan, kunwari. Hindi naman sa walang tao pero mangilan-ngilan lang ang nagagawi sa kalye magmula nang mag-sara ang Almer’s na may unlimited gravy kapag umorder ka ng prito o sizzling ulam. Gabi. Requirement ata ‘yun. Kailangan gabi. Mga bandang a las otso hanggang a las nuebe. Sa ilalim ng malasapot ng gagambang mga kable ng kuryente ng Alfredo, naikuwento niya sa ‘kin ang tungkol sa mga lalaking nakasama niya sa kama.

“Virgin ka ba?” tanong niya sa ‘kin. “Mas gusto ko ‘yung virgin. Alam mo kung bakit? Kasi gusto ko mas dominante ako. I want control. Kapag kasi marunong na, well, paano kung sadista pala? Tapos ayaw mo nu’n? At saka mas intense ‘yung mga amateur, don’t you think?”

“Pa’no mo nasabi?” kinuha ko ang sigarilyo kay Isay at huminitit.

Nang malaman kong gusto na palang tumigil ni Isay manigarilyo. Pero nahihirapan siyang bitawan ang bisyo sa tuwing lalabas na ng UST.

Nagboluntaryo akong tulungan siya. Wag ‘ka ko siyang sisindi hangga’t wala ako. At kapag kasama na niya ‘ko, magsasalitan kami ng hitit. Kahit papaano, makakalahati ko ang sanang isang stick ng yosi, o higit pa, na uupusin niya.

“Experience,” kinuha niya sa ‘kin ang sigarilyo at kumindat. “Apat na beses pa lang naman. ‘Yung una ko, Indian, eh. 5-6. Si Fah Tush. May utang kasi ‘yung nanay ko du’n. E, araw-araw na kaming ginugulo, tinatakot na kukunin ‘yung paninda niya sa palengke, kinausap ko. Sabi ko ‘My pussy as payment.’ Tumawa. They don’t accept stale fish daw. Sabi ko. ‘I’m a virgin.’ Nag-iba bigla ‘yung mukha. Nakipagbulungan muna kay Singh Taba, kasama niya. Tapos biglang sila na raw bahala sa lugar. Papakilala daw niya ‘ko kay Gandhi. Pagdating du’n sa tinutuluyan nila, na mukhang hindi kanila, nakigamit lang, ayos din naman. Biglang sabay silang nagbaba ng pantalon. So, ayun. Nakilala ko si Gandhi... saka si Nehru.”

“Hindi ka nagsumbong?”

Tumawa si Isay.

“Why? Tell me. After that, hindi na nila kami ginulo. Ang simple-simple ng kapalit. Nagdudugong kiki lang naman at puwit.”

“Eh, ‘yung iba?”

“Si Petrob Supot. Virgin. Kalbo na taga sa ‘min du’n sa Project 7. Bagong lipat dati. Niligawan ako. Eh, ayoko ng boyfriend. Kung sex, sex lang. Ayoko na ng kaartehan. Saka may kailangan siya sa ‘kin, may kailangan ako sa kanya. Bigyan niya ‘ko. Pera, relos, bahala siya. Basta bigay muna... ‘Yung huli si Baldo. Kababata ko. Baka kilala mo pa. Siya ‘yung laging nakikipag-away sa looban?”

“Pamilyar. ‘Yung mataba? Kamukha ni Damulag sa Doraemon?”

“Oo. Parang kabayo sa laki pero sobrang bilis naman lumabas ng dila. Fucker ‘yun, eh. Nilasing lang ako nu’n.”

Huling hitit na ng sigarilyo. Sinagad niya hanggang filter. Humarap siya sa ‘kin at nilapit ang mukha.

“Ano? Virgin ka ba?” ngumiti si Isay. Dahan-dahang binuga ang usok sa pagitan ng mga mukha namin. “Sagot.”

Tumango ako. Marahan akong hinalikan.

Mula nu’n, gusto ko na lang siyang laging samahan.

“Samahan mo na ‘ko! Kailangan ko ng setting. Kailangan kong mag-ocular!” Madalas niyang dahilan kapag gusto na naman niyang pumunta sa mga lugar na hindi naman talaga niya madalas puntahan. Pina-panood ni Isay kung anong ginagawa ng mga tao. Pinapakinggan kung anong mga tunog ang meron du’n. Inaamoy kung ano mang nakahalo sa hangin.

Linggo ng gabi. Dinala niya ‘ko sa Paramount—bungad ng West Ave, kanto ng EDSA, isang overpass ang distansya sa SM North at TriNoma, nandu’n ‘yung office ng isang istasyon ng radyo.

Malapit na ang Semana Santa. Bawas na ang tindero’t tindera—ng mga pantali ng buhok, cellphone protector, peke at nakaw na cellphone, dirty chicken, pantalon, t-shirt, jersey, sigarilyo, candy—sa sidewalk at overpass. Nakababa na ang steeldoors ng mga sanglaan. May iilang bumaba at umaakyat ng overpass. May iilang nag-aabang ng bus. May iilang taxi ang hanap. May iilang parang hindi alam kung saan sisibat.

“Bakit ba dito?”

“North Avenue is my setting,” hindi na naman siya tumitingin sa ‘kin.

“Bakit?”

“Roots. Ugat. Kahit anong gawin ko, lumaki ako sa looban. Naging masaya rin naman ako du’n kahit pa’no. May naalala tuloy ako,” humithit si Isay.

Bigla akong kinabahan.

“Nu’ng nasa looban ako, ang nagbabantay talaga sa ‘kin, ‘yung lola ko. Kasi tulog hanggang tanghali si nanay. You know... ‘yun. Tapos ayaw na ayaw akong palabasin ni lola, as in, hatid-sundo ako sa eskuwelahan. Pinaga-aaral lang talaga ako sa loob ng bahay. Pero kapag Friday naman o kaya weekends, pinapayagan ako mag-piko o agawan base, 7-Up, mga ganu’n, di ba? Okay naman pero mas madalas nga ako mag-isa. Kaya naglalaro rin akong mag-isa.

“Sinabi ko kay nanay na gusto ko ng kapatid. Hindi raw puwede. Nagpumilit. Di raw talaga. Siyempre hindi ko pa naiintindihan nu’ng panahon na ‘yun ‘yung gravity ng request ko. Hanggang sa prep ata nu’n? Oo, prep. Nagkaroon ako ng imaginary friend na babae. Kalaro ko magbahay-bahayan, luto-lutuan, etc., etc... Hanggang sa masanay na ‘ko. Feeling ko

may kausap talaga ‘ko. Hanggang sa feeling ko totoo ‘yung mga sagot niya. Madalas na kami mag-usap. Minsan hanggang pagtulog. Nakikita ko siya. Believe me. Tootoo siya,” natigilan siya sa pagsasalita. Tiningnan niya ang sigarilyo sa pagitan ng mga daliri. Mas mahaba na ang upos kesa sa natitirang mahihitit. Pinitik niya ang filter. Humalo sa hangin ang upos. Gumulong ang filter sa sidewalk at tuluyang nalaglag sa gutter.

“Grade school. Nasa may Project 7 na kami. Nakatira na kami kay manong. Du’n sa lalaking madalas dumalaw kay nanay dati. Nakakausap ko pa rin ‘yung imaginary friend ko. Lumala nang lumala ‘yung pag-i-imagine ko na umabot sa point na nakakakita na ako ng maliliit na tao. Duwende? Ewan ko kung duwende ‘yun. Punong-puno ‘yung buong katawan nila ng buhok. Mas mukha silang lumang tao. Java Man, Cave Man, ganu’n. Basta sa bakuran, I used to play with them. Binubungkal ko ‘yung lupa. Nilalagyan ko ‘yung butas ng bigas tapos tinatakpan ng mga dahon. Para daw sa mga alila nilang langgam. ‘Yung mga langgam daw kasi ‘yung nagdadala sa kanila ng bigas.

“Then nagkasakit ako a day pagkatapos ko maligo sa ulan. Hindi ako nakapasok sa school. Tapos nagalit ‘yung mga duwende kasi hindi ako nakapagbigay ng pagkain. Nakikita ko silang nilalagyan nila ng parang paminta ‘yung lugaw na sinusubo sa ‘kin ni nanay. Hindi naman bitter. Hindi rin naman nabago ‘yung lasa. Pero pagkatapos kong maubos, isusuka ko rin lahat. Tapos nagigising ako minsan parang may nananakit sa ‘kin. Pagkakit ko, may mga pasa na ‘ko. Fast forward... pinatawas ako ni lola. Hindi ko na nakita ulit ‘yung mga duwende. Hindi ko na rin nakita ‘yung imaginary friend ko.

“Iyak ako nang iyak nang iyak. Hanggang sa nakaisip ng pakulo si manong. Niregaluhan ako ng manika. Pinakaunang manika na natanggap ko. Medyo kumalma ‘yung batang ako. Hindi na tulad dati pero umiiyak-iyak pa rin minsan. Nalampasan ko rin ‘yun. Hanggang bago mag-high school, kinakausap ko pa rin ‘yung manika.

“Medyo maykaya si manong kaya meron silang sariling kuwarto ni nanay. Ako rin meron. Si lola, nasa kapatid na ni nanay. Ayaw isama ni manong. Medyo kinalungkot ko rin ‘yun. Pero ayun. One night, biglang bumukas ‘yung pinto ko sa kuwarto. Sinilip ko pero hindi ko makita sa dilim pero parang may nakita akong gumagapang papunta sa kama. Hindi ako makasigaw. Parang may bara sa lalamunan ko. Takot na takot ako nu’n.

Hanggang lumubog na ‘yung mga kamay niya sa dulo ng kama. Dahan-dahan. Hanggang sa pati mga tuhod. Hanggang sa takpan ‘yung bibig ko. Hanggang sa umibabaw bigla sa ‘kin.

Walang nagsalita sa ‘ming dalawa. Nakatingin lang sa mga dumadaan na mga sasakyan si Isay.

“So ‘yung kay Gandhi...”

“Hindi ko una ‘yun. I lied. Nagsumbong ako kay nanay pero hindi siya naniwala. Parang ‘yung tungkol lang sa mga duwende.”

Tahimik ulit kami.

“Naulit ‘yun nang naulit. Nu’ng mga panahong nangyayari pa ‘yun, sinabit ko ‘yung regalo sa akin na manika sa likuran ng pinto. Nakabigti sa doorknob. I don’t know. Siguro para may nakakaalam bukod sa ‘kin.”

Mahabang patlang.

“Hanggang ngayon nakabigti pa rin ‘yung manika sa doorknob,” bumunot uli si Isay ng sigarilyo. “Wag ka mag-alala. Wala na si manong. Nakakuha ng trabaho sa ibang bansa. Pinapadalhan na lang kami. Minsan.”

“Bakit ba nauwi sa ganito ‘yung usapan?” pabiro kong tanong.

“Roots. Ugat. My point is, simula nang umalis ako sa looban tapos tumira sa ibang lugar, nawala ‘yung happiness ko dati in the form of imagination. Blah, blah... I’m grateful... and contented... na alam ko na kung anong gusto kong gawin talaga. Every time na nagsusulat ako, parang bumabalik ‘yung feeling nu’ng may imaginary friend pa ‘ko. There comes a point sa pagsusulat na habang tuloy-tuloy ako sa pagbuo ng istorya, hindi na nasusunod ‘yung plano talaga. Bigla na lang nagkakabuhay ‘yung character. Bigla na lang, ‘Ay ito na lang mangyayari.’ Pero actually hindi mo nga ‘yun maiisip. Habang nasa writing process ka, bigla na lang malayo na pala sa draft mo ‘yung kinahihinatnan. Hindi na pala character ang ginagawa mo pero totoong tao na. Well... siguro sa ‘kin lang,” ngumiti si Isay, humitit at inabot sa ‘kin ang yosi pagkatapos.

Pagkatapos ng ilang linggo, hindi ko alam kung bakit ako hinatak ni Isay para ipakilala kay Woody Chua. Matangkad, maputi, chinito, nakasalamin, naka-braces, at may nakasabit na susi sa suksukan ng belt kapag naglalakad. Tatlo kami sa loob ng Fortuner. Sa lakas ng hanging habagat, at

naghihimutok na pantog ng mga alien, tinangay ang Manila Bay at napunta sa Sampaloc.

Palipat-lipat sila ng istasyon sa radyo hanggang sa patayin na lang ni Woody dahil nagtatalo sila sa kung sinong dapat masunod. Control freak. Mapera. Nakuwento sa 'kin ni Isay. Kung sakaling sila nga raw ang magkakatuluyan, malamang sa malamang, hindi niya na kailangang magtrabaho dahil well-secured na kaagad siya. Kailangan niya na lang tumulong sa pag-aasikaso ng isa sa mga ipapamanang hardware at fire station kay Woody Chua.

Halos kalahati ng gulong ng Fortuner ang nakalubog sa baha. 'Yung kasunod naming Civic sa likuran, malamang sa malamang, pinasok na ng tubig. Napapreno si Woody nang biglang tumigil ang nasa harap naming jeep.

"Ready ka na ba?" tumawa si Isay. "Like a Virgin..." Madonna.

Bumusina nang malakas ang Civic. Lumingon si Isay sa 'kin at ngumiti.

Naikuwento rin sa 'kin ni Isay na donselya pa si Woody. Hindi marunong mangarinyo. Minsang nasa sinehan silang dalawa, ni hindi siya mayakap o mahalikan. Nanlalamig ang palad nang maghawak sila ng kamay.

Gumanti si Woody. "Stop, look, and listen, baby..." Elvis.

Si Isay. "'Wag kang mag-alala, hindi ako iiyak..." The Flippers.

"I'll make love to you. Like you want me to..." BoyzIIMen

"I'm gonna fuck you. You already know..." Akon.

"Nobody wanna see us together..." Akon.

"I don't care what they say, I don't care what they do..." Hale.

Sa bandang Pantranco sa Quezon Avenue, kumanan kami sa Roces. Pinigilan ni Isay si Woody sa gagawin. Baka raw may mga kakilala siya diyan. Marami sa mga kaklase niya, diyan ang takbuan.

Nagsinungaling si Isay. May isa kaming kababata, mas matanda sa 'min, receptionist dito sa Sogo Quezon Ave. Naikuwento niya sa 'kin.

Sa Sogo MRT North Avenue Station kami napadpad.

Sa lobby, pinagtripan ni Isay si Woody. Siya raw ang kumuha ng kuwerto para matuto. Katabi si Isay, binulungan ko siyang hindi puwede sa motel ang tatlong tao sa isang kuwerto na may isang kama. Hindi siya tum-



ingin sa ‘kin.

“Keri ‘yan.”

Hindi ko alam kung tanga o marunong mang-spoil. Regency 2 ang kinuhang kuwarto ni Woody. Pinakamahal na kuwarto kung hindi kasama ang themed rooms.

Salamin ang tatlong pader ng elevator. Nakasandal ang likuran ko sa pinakalikod habang nakasandal naman si Isay sa harapan ni Woody na nakayakap sa kanya. Walang hanggang Isay at Woody sa magkatapat na mga salamin. Ni hindi ko makita ang sarili ko sa eksena.

Pagkatapos isuksok ang keycard sa ilalim ng doorknob, bumukas ang pinto. Sinuksok ni Isay ang keycard sa isang holder malapit sa main switch ng kuryente ng kuwarto. Pagpasok ko sa loob, mabagal niyang sinara ang pinto.

“Bumili ka muna ng pagkain natin, ha? Mag-shower pa naman ako, eh.”

“Nakita ko sa baba puwedeng umorder, ah!”

“Eh! Ayoko dito! Dali na. Maraming pagkain. Basta di galing dito. Ready na ‘ko pagdating mo,” dahan-dahang sinara ni Isay ang pinto. Paunti nang paunti hanggang sa isang guhit na lang sa sahig ang liwanag galing sa pasilyo.

Hindi tumutol si Woody Chua. Narinig ko pa ang mga yabag niya sa labas.

Amoy pinaghalong kalamansi at sigarilyo ang kuwarto. Kulay pula ang malamlam na ilaw ng wall light. Umuugong at kitang-kita ang paglabas ng malamig na hangin sa split type na aircon. Puti ang kobrekama, unan, at kumot. May dalawang pares ng tsinelas sa sahig. May nakaplastik na pares ng tuwalya sa drawer sa tapat ng closet. Napapalibutan ng salamin ang kuwarto. Pati kisame sa taas ng kama, may salamin.

Umupo si Isay sa dulo ng kama. Hindi niya inaalís ang tingin sa ‘kin.

Umupo ako sa tabi niya, nakapatong ang isang binti sa kama para nakaharap sa kanya. Tinanggal niya ang suot na blouse. Tinanggal ang hook ng kulay rosas na bra. Nagtanggap ako ng pantaas. Binaba niya ang zipper sa gilid ng skirt, nilaglag sa sahig. Humiga siya sa kama. Pumasok siya sa loob ng kumot.

“Halika na dito,” yakag ni Isay. Nakangiti.

Tumabi ako sa kanya.

Naligaw ako sa piling ni Isay. Hinayaan niya akong pasukin siya pero hindi ako makapasok. Parang lagi siyang umuusad, tumatakbo, lumilipad habang nananatili akong nakapirmi.

Sa bawat yapos, sa bawat pagdampi ng kanyang mga labi, sa bawat paghawak namin sa isa't isa, sa bawat indak ng aming katawan, sa bawat paglubog at pag-angat ng kutson, sa bawat salitan ng aming paghinga, sa bawat pagkurap ng aming mga mata, bigo akong makita't maramdaman siya.

Nagduda pa ako. Nandito ba ako dahil gusto ko, o nandito ba ako dahil kailangan ko 'tong gustuhin?

At kahit nang makaraos, walang kahit anong emosyon, bakas man ng ligaya o tinta ng lungkot, na nag-enkapsula sa naranasan ko sa piling niya.

Kawalan. Kawalan, na sana ako lang ang nakaramdam.

May doorbell. Sumunod ang isang pamilyar na boses.

Napahinto siya. Naghabol ng hininga.

“Open ‘yan!” sigaw ni Isay.

Para akong hinihigop bigla. At biglang nagdilim ang lahat.

Nagising ako na parang nawalan ng pakiramdam sa oras. May liwanag na nanggagaling sa labas. Bukas ang pinto. May isang bellboy na nagwawalis ng sahig. Hindi tumitingin sa direksyon ko. Madali akong nagbihis at lumabas ng kuwarto. Pagdating sa elevator, hindi gumagana kahit anong pindot ang gawin ko.

Nakabukas ang pinto sa may staircase. Bago bumaba, tumingin ako sa cellphone. Si Isay. Hindi na raw niya 'ko ginising dahil tulog na tulog ako. Saka ko naisip si Woody Chua. Kung anong ginawa nila at ano pang nangyari sa mga oras na nakapaikit ang aking mga mata.

Magre-reply sana ako pero may text na naman galing kay Isay. See you soon.

Susunod ako. Sabi ko sa kanya. Isang Sabado ng gabi, tinanong ako ni Isay kung puwede ko ba siyang samahan. Ipapakilala niya 'ko kay Sir Oreo Ayala. Pumayag ako kahit a las nuebe na ang tapos ng workshop nila. May after workshop daw. Mag-iinuman silang mga anak-anakan ng propesor sa

Tapsi, sa may Asturias sa Dapitan. Sumunod na lang daw ako sa may i-Chill Theater Café sa Dos Castillas kung saan sila magpapababa.

Si Sir Oreo, Isay, at ang dalawang crew na lang ang nasa loob. Mahinang tumutugtog ang *Much Has Been Said* ni Bamboo sa mga speaker. Tumayo ang mga balahibo ko dahil sa lamig ng aircon.

Abala sa hawak na Samsung Tablet si Sir Oreo. Nagpipipindot at pasaglit-saglit na inaayos ang salamin sa mata. Hindi ko alam kung bakit pero panda ang naisip ko nang makita 'to. Itim na itim ang maayos na gupit na buhok, nasa maputing side ng pagiging moreno, nakaitim na polo, at kulay dark green na khaki. Nasa chubby side ng pagiging mataba, at halos kadikit na ng baba ang dibdib kapag nakatuon sa tablet. Hihinto. Titingin-tingin sa kawalan na parang may iniisip bago bumalik sa pagpipipindot.

“Sir, ito pala ‘yung sinasabi ko sa inyo...” tinuro ako ni Isay.

“Nasaan?” kumunot ang noo nito saglit. Gusto atang palabasin na kasing dilim ko ang gabi.

“Ah...” uminom ng kape si Sir Oreo. “Kilala mo si Henrik Ibsen?” tanong nito kay Isay.

Ngumiti lang siya. Umiling.

“Playwright. Magaling ‘yun. Sabi nila kapag gumagawa ‘yun ng character, pumunta ‘yun ng park tapos magpi-picnic mag-isa. Du’n niya iniin-terbyu ‘yung character niya. Pareho kayo.”

Ngumiti lang ulit si Isay.

“Tungkol saan ba ‘yung kuwento mo?”

“Yung tittle, *Mga Alitaptap sa North Avenue...* tungkol po sa isang lalaki na lumaki sa looban. Squatters sa may bukid sa TriNoma dati nu’ng hindi pa tapos ‘yung MRT. Bali... nu’ng na-demolish ‘yung lugar...”

“So ‘yung mga tao du’n sana ‘yung alitaptap?” sapat ni Sir Oreo. Nakangiti.

Tumango si Isay.

“Hahanapin nu’ng lalaki ‘yung mga tao du’n? Magninilay-nilay siya. Existentialist chorva. Malalaman niya na nasa kung saan-saang lugar na sila tapos may punch line siya sa gitna o wakas ng istorya. Parang quote ganu’n, *what happens, happens*. Mga ganu’ng drama?” tumawa nang malakas si Sir Oreo pagkatapos.

“Pa’no niyo nalaman, Sir?”

“Sa isang kuwento mo. Kutob lang. Saka madalas ‘yan sa henerasyon niyo ng mga batang kuwentista. Napansin ko lang.”

“Yung character naman...”

“Anong problema sa character mo?” tumingin si Oreo sa relos sa kanang kamay.

“Parang...”

“Ano na alam mo sa character mo?”

“Kaunti lang...”

“Pa’ngong kaunti?” sumandal si Sir Oreo nang maayos sa upuan. Nag-salubong ang kilay nito. “Pagkuwentuhin mo siya.”

Tumingin sa ‘kin si Isay.

“Magpakilala dapat ‘yang character mo.”

Hindi naalis ang tingin ni Isay. May awa sa mga mata na parang gusto na lang akong pauwiin. May pagsisisi sa mga mata na sana hindi na lang ako tumuloy. Bumunot ng papel si Isay. Nilabas ang bolpen at nagsimulang magsulat. Sinimulan ko naman ang kuwento ko kay sir Oreo ng tungkol sa looban.

Ang tagal ko sa du’n pero halos wala na ‘kong maalala bigla. 2012 lang kami nalipat mula nang ipa-demolish ng Ayala Land at NHA ang looban. Vague. Parang may fog sa loob ng utak ko.

Kulang. Kulang. Kulang.

Ah! May naalala ako. ‘Yung amoy ng 3 in 1 na kape na hinahalo sa mainit na tubig sa isang maliit na baso. Halo. Halo. Halo. Tapos isasalin sa thermos na halos puno ng mainit na tubig. Hati-hati kami kasama ng kapit-bahay. Dadamihan na lang ng asukal pagkasalin sa kanya-kanyang tasa.

Meron pa. ‘Yung isang lata ng Ligo at kalahating kilo ng sayote. Tuwing nagbubukas ng lata, lagi kong inaabangan kung ilang sardinas meron sa loob. Madalas apat lang. Kapag lima, tinatago ko ‘yung isa para sa ‘kin. Gagayatin nang gagayatin ang sayote. Maninipis para mas lalong mukhang marami. Bawang at sibuyas sa kaldero. Ilalagay ang sardinas. Dudurugin ang mga isda para walang lamangan sa hatian. Lalagyan ng tatlong tasang tubig. Ilalagay ang sayote. Hihintaying maluto.

Ano pa ba? Ano pa ba?

‘Yung pila sa poso. ‘Yung mga kulungan ng kalapati sa mga bubong. ‘Yung tahimik na tanghalian dahil may seremonya ang mga mag-asawa. Kaming mga batang amoy alimuom.

Ito lang? Bakit ito lang? Ang dami pang kulang.

“Parang kulang,” inabot ni Isay ang papel na pinagsulatan kay Sir Oreo. “Sorry.”

“Ito lang alam mo sa kanya? Sa looban? Pero taga du’n ka rin dati, di ba?”

Tumango si Isay. “Saglit lang po. Lumipat din kami nu’ng grade 2 ako.”

Nagkamot si Sir Oreo ng likuran ng tenga. Nilapag nito ang papel sa mesa. Malapit sa kamay ni Isay.

“Milieu. Dapat alam mo ‘yung social environment ng sinusulat mo. Dapat alam mo ‘yung kinakain, hinihinga, nadidinig, naaamoy, nararamdaman ng character mo. For example, anong mga pinapakinggan niyang kanta? Paano siya magsalita? Seksuwalidad. Kailan ba ‘tong setting ng kuwento mo?”

“Ngayon po.”

“Nadadaan ba siya ng North Avenue? Ng TriNoma? SM North? Anong nararamdaman o naiisip niya kapag nasa ganu’ng lugar siya knowing na ... ah ... ” tumingala si Sir Oreo na parang may hinahanap sa kisame. Nagpatuloy ‘tong nagsalita kahit nakatingala. “Ang nagmamay-ari ng mga lugar na pinupuntahan niya ay ‘yung mga mismong taong nagpalayas sa kanila? Anong ideology niya sa buhay assuming na medyo nakaraos sila at may means na siya para hanapin ‘yung mga kababata o kakilala? Madami kang kailangan ikonsidera. Pero ito lang ‘yan ...” umayos sa pagkakaupo si Sir Oreo at nilapat ang mga kamay sa mesa, pumapagitan sa mga kamay ang tasa ng kape. “Isulat mo lang ‘yung kaya mong isulat. Isulat mo ‘yung kuwentong ikaw lang ang nakakaalam. Humugot ka sa nakalipas mo kung kailangan pero isipin mong character mo ‘yun, hindi ikaw ‘yun.”

“Ang hirap po kasi. Struggle na paghiwalayin ‘yung totoo sa hindi kapag nagsusulat. ‘Yung feeling na gusto mong magdamot sa kung sino mang magbabasa ng kapisaso ng sarili mo. Well, hindi naman nila malalaman without knowing you personally pero nandu’n kasi ‘yung konsensya at knowledge mo po as a writer na, ‘Hoy, hindi ‘to ‘yung character. Ikaw ‘to.

Hindi na ‘to fiction.’ Well... medyo ganu’n.”

“Ito ba ‘yung dahilan na sinabi mo dati nu’ng hindi mo pa alam kung fictionist o essayist?” tanong ko kay Isay.

Hindi man lang siya tumingin sa ‘kin.

“Ibig sabihin,” sagot ni Sir Oreo kay Isay, “Kailangan mo pa ng research. Immersion kung kailangan. Ganu’n talaga. Doble kayod. Merong nagbabaryo-baryo pa talaga para sa materyal niya sa mga aswang-aswang saka mito. Meron naging spirit questor talaga. Kapag gusto mo talagang full-time magsulat, kailangan mo talaga ng tiyaga. Pero oras talaga...” tumingin si Sir Oreo sa relos. “Mauuna na ako. May labada pa ‘ko.”

“Ay sige po, Sir. Thank you.”

“Mag-taxi ka na pauwi. Anong oras na. Ingat ka, ah. Ay teka pala... bakit mga alitaptap? Anong meron sa mga alitaptap? Mahilig ka ba sa National Geographic?”

Akmang sasagot si Isay pero sinuklian niya na lang ang tanong ng isa pang iling. Ilang minuto lang, tumayo na rin si Isay. Nag-ayos ng gamit at lumabas. Sinundan ko siya pero hindi siya lumilingon sa ‘kin. Pinanood ko siyang maglakad palayo. Hanggang sa tuluyan siyang mawala sa paningin ko.

Nakikita mo ‘yang espasyong ‘yan sa taas nitong binabasa mo? Hu- laan mo kung gaano katagal ‘yang break na ‘yan.

Hindi lang ‘yan araw, hindi linggo, hindi lang isang buwan. Diyan sa pagitan ng dalawang talata, medyo pumuti na ang balat niya, naka-salamin na ang mga mata, may kolorete na ang buhok, napalitan na ng blusang pula sa ilalim ng itim na blazer ang unipormeng may lambda.

Nasa TriNoma ‘ko, sa outdoor area ng Gerry’s Grill, sa third floor, kung saan puwedeng manigarilyo. Nakadungaw ako sa baba. At sa bandang overpass papunta sa dating carpark na tinatayuan na ngayon ng bagong gu- sali, nakatanaw sa ‘kin si Dalisay. Hindi kumaway o hindi tumawag pero sigurado akong siya.

Bumaba ako at tumungo sa kanya.

Nakapuwesto siya malapit sa sulok. May usok na lumabas mula sa nakatalikod niyang mukha. Bahagyang nakatuwad habang nakapatong ang mga siko sa railings ng overpass. Nakatuon ang pansin sa construction site.

“Dalisay.”

Hindi siya lumingon. “Hey.”

“Ang tagal na, ah?”

“Yah. It’s been a while. You want to know how long? Hindi naman talaga ganu’n katagal. Almost a year pa lang. May trabaho na ‘ko sa newspaper under Lifestyle.”

“Ah. Tinuloy mo talaga? Nice,” sinandal ko ang likuran sa railings sa gilid niya. Nilagay ko ang mga kamay sa kilikili. Mas naaaninag ko na ang mukha ni Isay.

“Actually...” lumiwanag ang baga ng sigarilyo. Sumunod ang makapal na usok. “Pinag-isipan ko talaga kung ano bang gusto kong gawin. Just when I started working, na-realize na puwede ko pa lang ‘tong gawin nang *sabay*.”

Hindi ako sumagot.

“Tapos na ‘yung workshop kay Sir Oreo. Ibang kuwento ‘yung pinasa ko. Pure fiction. Nagustuhan naman ng iba. ‘Yung iba pa, indifferent. But since then, hindi na ‘ko nakapagsulat ulit ng kuwento. Anyway... di ba dati torn ako kung pure fiction o creative non-fictionist? Well, ngayon, wala naman na talaga ‘kong choice. Writer na ‘ko sa dyaryo. Pero gusto ko pa rin ng katha. So...”

“Kaya ba ‘ko nandito?” tanong ko.

Nangiti siya. “Kumusta sa call center?”

“Hanggang ngayon ba kailangan pa kitang diretsuhin para magkuwento ka? Kaya pumalpak ako kasi sarili mo ‘yung inuungkat mo. Imbis na ako,” hindi ako tunog galit. O tunog galit ako? Pero sa dinig ko sa sarili, para ko lang sinabi kung anong sobrang halata.

Dumiretso sa pagkakatayo si Isay at humitit ulit ng sigarilyo.

“Dalawang taon na ‘kong nagyoyosi,” simula niya. Bumunot uli siya ng sigarilyo mula sa pakete galing sa balsa ng blazer. “Yung friend kong nagturo sa ‘kin, nag-quit na. Pati ‘yung iba kong friends simula magtrabaho, tumigil na rin. Pati ‘yung mga katrabaho kong dating nagsisigarilyo,

tumigil na rin. Looking back sa buhay ko, wala akong maalalang nag-quit ako sa mga bagay na sinimulan kong gustuhin.”

Sa loob-loob ko, gusto kong tumawa. Hindi ko alam kung bakit.

“So ‘yun ‘yung dahilan kung bakit ka nandi... kung bakit ako nandito?”

Hindi siya sumagot. Mahabang patlang sa pagitan naming dalawa. Parang ganito rin nu’ng magkita ulit kami sa MRT dati. Tahimik lang ako nu’n, businahan nang businahan ang mga sasakyan, maingay ang ugong ng mga makina, naghahalo ang timbre ng mga boses ng mga tao na papunta kung saan man. Lahat ‘to. Lahat sila. Sumisimbolo sa tuloy-tuloy na paggalaw ng paligid. Habang ako. Nandu’n. Nakatengga. At biglang dumating si Dalisay. At nagsalita. At si Dalisay na lang nang si Dalisay. Hanggang sa wala akong kaalam-alam nu’ng una na nakasalalay na pala sa iba ang sarili kong pag-usad. At iniwan. At binalikan. At... mapapangunahan ko na naman ‘tong kuwento.

Humarap si Dalisay pero hindi sa ‘kin. Humarap siya sa kabilang dulo ng walang katao-tao, walang kaluluwang overpass. Ni hindi siya nag-aksaya ng panahon na daplisian ako ng tingin.

“Don’t quit,” umiling-iling siya habang nakangiti. “I was on the verge though. Pero hindi. Buti na lang hindi. Buti na lang I remembered nu’ng nandu’n tayo sa may Paramount. ‘Yung mga sinabi ko sa ‘yo, why I write fiction,” tumingin siya sa sahig. Nilagay rin ang mga kamay sa kilikili.

“You are not real. You are just a narrator na kinukuwento ‘yung mga naganap nang hindi kailangan sabihin pero ipakita. Look at you. Wala ka ngang mukha. Ang ginawa mo lang buong istorya, ikuwento ‘yung mga nangyayari sa ‘kin. Sa ‘tin, fine. Wala kang ibang description bukod sa ulik-ba. Lumulutang kang kulay itim na hugis tao. Isa kang palpak na streamline.”

Napatingin na lang ako sa sahig.

“Bakit mo ‘ko binalikan kung palpak pala ako?” sabi ko.

“Kasi...” pinipili niya ‘kung anong tamang salitang gagamitin. “I made you like this. And I’ll take responsibility.”

“Sagutin mo muna ‘yung mga tanong ko.”

“Sure.”



“Bakit kapag may importante kang gawain na natapos o naalala, sa ‘kin ka lumalapit?”

“Hindi ako lumalapit sa ‘yo, baliw. Binabalik-balikan lang kita. Gets? Hindi kita priority nu’n. Hanggang ngayon. Kung priority kita, matagal ko na ‘tong tinapos. May mga fireworks, may mga bulaklak, may lumilipad na mga paruparo and all that cliché shit. Hindi kita tinatapos kasi hindi kita priority. Somehow... come to think of it. You should be grateful.”

“Yung looban gusto mo silang isulat, di ba? Bakit hindi ka muna mag-research? Para masulat mo akong matino?”

“Saka na ‘yun. Ibang istorya na ‘yun. Let this story be a failure as it is. ‘Yung mga nasa looban...” bumuntong-hininga si Isay. “Alam mo ba kung bakit wala ng mga alitaptap dito?”

Hindi ako sumagot. Matagal siyang tumahimik.

“Kapag malinis ‘yung hangin, saka lang nandu’n ‘yung mga alitaptap. So it means, once ma-contaminate ang air beyond their tolerance level, off they go. Some of them seek habitable places. Some, die. At once na umalis na sila, hindi na sila bumabalik sa lugar na ‘yun,” tumingin sa ‘kin si Isay. Matagal. Hindi tumatagos na mga tingin tulad nang dati.

“Isn’t that nice? The idea na hindi mo na kailangan bumalik?” tuloy niya. “‘Yung idea na abante ka lang nang abante? Sure, lilingon-lingon ka. Makakaalala. Pero hindi mo na nanaising bumalik para maramdaman ulit ‘yung nalampasan mo na. Lalo na kung ayaw mo naman talagang balikan. Pero hindi tayo tulad *nila*,” umiling si Isay. “Kung sana mga alitaptap lang tayo na permanenteng lumilisan kapag hindi na malinis ang hangin. Pero hindi, eh. Hindi.”

Tumahimik kaming dalawa. Bumunot ulit si Isay ng sigarilyo at nagsindi. Hitit. Dahan-dahang buga. Pinagmamasdan niya kung paanong umikot-ikot ang ulap ng usok habang mabagal ‘tong humahalo sa hangin. Hinawi-hawi niya gamit ang kamay na may yosi sa pagitan ng dalawang daliri. Kumalas ang isang alipato mula sa baga ng sigarilyo. Tuluyan ding naglaho sa dilim.

Nawala ang usok.

“Malinaw na ba? Naiintindihan mo na ba ‘yung mangyayari?” tanong sa ‘kin.

“Hindi sa ‘yo... baliw,” biglang sabi ni Isay. Nginitian ako.  
Sa ‘yo.

Hawak-kamay, niyakag niya ‘ko tungo sa site kahit may mga konstru pang tuloy sa construction. Mistulang naglalakad kami sa entablado, spotlight ang malakas na ilaw ng mga poste galing sa labas ng gusali. May smoke effects galing sa alikabok at sako-sakong buhanging binabagsak ng mga piyon at hinahalo’t sinasala ng mga mason. Background music namin ang pasigaw na utos ng mga foreman, pag-glug-kush-glug-kush ng mixer, pagbanggaan ng mga bakal, paghakot ng pala sa graba, at pag-rebolusyon ng mga hindi ko kilalang makina.

Hindi kami pinapansin ng mga tao sa site. Maging ang dalawang lalaking nakasalubong namin na may hawak na blueprint, hindi kami nilingon. Umakyat kami sa hagdan. Pataas nang pataas. Paikot-ikot. Mabagal na tumungo sa pinakatuktok na gawang palapag.

May crane sa pinakatuktok. Parito-paroon, kaliwa-kanan, baba-taas ang nguso sa pagdampot at paglipat ng mga bakal. Abala ang mga trabahador sa kani-kanilang trabaho.

“Punta tayo, du’n,” tinuro ni Isay ang walang harang na dulo ng palapag malapit sa haligi. Walang tao du’n. Wala rin gaanong materyales na nakalat.

Nakasunod sa kanya, nagtanong ako, “Bakit parang hindi nila tayo nakikita?”

Lumingon si Isay. Ngumiti. “Kasi gusto ko.”

Hindi siya huminto sa paglalakad, iniawasan ang ilang nakausling bakal at tambak ng tabla.

“Ang ganda ng view,” huminto siya sa may dulo na mismo. Isang hakbang paharap, ilang segundo lang ang magiging pagitan niya sa lupa. Siguradong hahalo ang dugo sa graba at buhangin. Humawak siya sa haligi. Hinahangin ang blazer niya, pati ang buhok niyang kulay kalawang na ngayon. “Lapit ka dito, tingnan mo.”

Humakbang ako palapit sa kanya pero likuran lang niya ang kaya kong abutin. Hindi ko siya matatabihan. Sa kaliwa niya, may patong-patong na bakal na mukhang mga metal sheets na nilalagay sa mga kalsadang malalalim ang bako. Tumungo ako sa may kabilang dulo ng bakal, sa isa

pang haligi, at doon sumandal. Mga apat na dipa ang pagitan namin sa isa't isa.

“Bakit ang layo mo?” tanong niya. Sumandal rin si Isay sa haligi at magkaharap na kaming dalawa. Hinahangin ang buhok niya, natatakpan ang mukha, pero hinawi niya ang buhok papunta sa may batok, naipon sa kaliwa niyang balikat. Sinuksok niya ang mga kamay sa bulsa ng blazer. “Galit ka ba?”

Umiling ako.

“Bakit?” si Isay.

“Anong bakit?”

“Ang layo mo?”

“Hindi ako makatabi sa ‘yo. May harang, oh,” ngumuso ako sa mga bakal na namamagitan sa ‘min.

“Tanggalin ko ba?”

“Wag na,” sabi ko. “Okay na ‘yan. Mas nakikita kita nang malinaw kapag ganito,” kanang hintuturo sa kaliwang hinlalaki, kanang hinlalaki sa kaliwang hintuturo, nilapit ko ang parihaba sa tapat ng kaliwa kong mata. “Pag malapit hindi ko makuha ‘yung buong picture.”

Nag-pose siya nang pang-model.

Nagtawanan kami.

“Ayun.”

“Ayun.”

Tumingin ulit si Dalisay sa labas. Inayos ang salamin sa mata.

“Sobrang dami nang nagbago talaga dito, ‘no?”

Medyo oo, medyo hindi. Kita namin ang kutitap ng mga bahay at gusali sa abot-tanaw, mga punong hindi makatangging makipagsayawan sa hangin, ang tayog ng monumento na pinamamahingahan ni Quezon, ang pagkindat ng mga blinker ng mga sasakyan, ang mga nanlilisik na headlights, ang mga kaluluwang lagalag na naghahanap ng kabuluhan sa napakalawak na lupa, at siyempre, kaming mga alitaptap sa North Avenue na malapit na ring sukuan ang nakasususulasok na siyudad.

“Feeling ko, dito sa kinatatayuan ko ‘yung dating puno kung saan ako nanghuli ng alitaptap, sa tingin ko lang naman. ‘Yung distance sa kalsada saka... ewan... ‘yung amoy. Weird,” tumawa siya. “Never mind.”

“Bakit ka pala natagalan?”

“Balikan ka?”

Tumango ako.

“Marami. Busy. Sa buhay. Sa paghahanapbuhay. Well, saka I was in a relationship with Woody. *Was*. I can’t make love to you if he wants to make love with me,” tumawa siya. “Sa ‘kin lang ‘yun. Hindi siguro applicable sa iba. Wala. Nagkasawaan din kami. Actually gusto niya makipagbalikan. Pero masyado akong maraming naaalala. Naaalala ko na masaya kami. Sure. Kaso ‘yung, ano, ‘yung masaya na nakakalunod? Ganu’n. Masaya na umabot sa point na naiwan ko ‘yung panulat ko. Tuwing naaalala ko na nahinto ako sa pagsusulat... naaalala ko kung bakit ako nagsulat,” tumingin sa ‘kin si Isay.

Hindi ako umimik.

Matagal kaming tahimik. Matagal na matagal. Mas matagal pa kaysa sa mga dating blangkong papel na kinailangan pang sulatan para umusad ang istorya nitong, naming dalawa.

“Naisip ko lang,” basag ko sa katahimikan. “Anong naiisip mo kapag nandito ka? Ibig ko sabihin... kapag nakikita mo ‘tong lugar kung sa’n ‘yung kabataan mo, ta’s ganito na ‘yung itsura?”

Tumingin si Dalisay sa ‘kin ng ilang segundo bago sumagot.

“Truthfully... wala. Wala lang. See, sure dito ako lumaki. Sure may mga masayang bagay rin dito. Pero masaya na ‘ko ngayon, eh. Kuntento na. Masama ba ‘pag sinabi kong okay lang? Na wala lang sa ‘kin kahit sagarin nila ‘yung mga bahay ng mga skwater du’n sa may ano...” tinuro niya ang gawing pa-Quezon Ave, sa may gawing likuan ng tren pailalim ng basement parking ng mga bagon. Marami-rami pang barong-barong du’n. “Wala akong paki. Maaawa, oo. Pero may gagawin? Aaksyon? Gusto. Pero mas uunahin ko na lang maghanapbuhay kaysa makibaka. Wala akong kakainin sa kalsada. Sa kakasigaw. Mas hinihingi ng buhay na maghanapbuhay ako para mabuhay. Mean. Pero, totoo. O siguro bata pa ‘ko.”

Muli. Walang imik.

Saka ko nakita. Sa pagitan naming dalawa, sa taas ng mga bakal na naghaharang sa ‘min, mas makinang pa sa mga palamuti ng siyudad. Bigla na lang lumitaw.

Mga alitaptap.

Pasulpot-sulpot ang kislap papalapit sa ‘kin. Tumingin ako kay Isay.

“We’re dragging this too much now.”

“Saglit na lang,” pagsumamo ko.

Bumuntong-hininga siya.

“Nu’ng gabing ‘yun, hindi ko talaga alam na tutulongan mo ‘ko,” simula ulit ni Isay. “Parang... how should I put this... parang ‘Poof!’ you’re there.”

Hinuli ko ang alitaptap na papalapit sa ‘kin. Kanang kamay. Sinilip ko.

*Liliwanag.*

*Didilim.*

“Then bigla ka na lang nagbigay ng instructions.”

May alitaptap na lumalapit kay Isay. Doon na nakabaling ang atensyon niya. Sinubukan niyang hulihin gamit ang dalawang kamay.

“Ano nga ulit ‘yung sabi mo nu’n? Paano ulit?” tumingin-tingin siya sa ‘kin. Hindi naalis ang mga ngiti sa labi. “Wag kang maingay? Panoorin mo muna sila?”

Sinubukan niya ulit hulihin ang mga alitaptap. Hindi umaalis ang mga ‘to sa harapan niya. Mukhang nananadyang magpaangkin.

“Then you said gamitin ko ‘yung kamay ko saka ‘yung garapon. Mas madali kasi ‘yung ganu’n. Well, ngayon, hindi ko na siguro kailangan ng garapon. I’ve grown since. Obviously.”

Nahuli niya ang isa. Inulit pa niya... at inulit... at inulit.

“That was the start of your existence,” nginitian niya ‘ko. “Yun ‘yung first time kong malaman na isa sa pinakamalakas na kapangyarihan ng normal na taong tulad ko, ‘yung batang ako, ‘yung simpleng ako, ay ‘yung mag-imagine. Kumatha...”

Sinilip-silip niya ang alitaptap sa pagitan ng dalawa niyang kamay.

Saka binuksan ang palad.

“... and I’m very grateful for that. Ang mali ko lang, isiniksik ko ‘yung sarili ko sa mundong ‘to. *Ulit*. Nasabi ko na ata lahat. Salamat sa ‘yo.”

Ganu’n lang. Ganu’n ganu’n lang. Lumipad ang dagitab.

Mabilis siyang naglakad palayo. Nag-aalikabok ang dinadaan niya sa bawat paglapat ng talampakan ng sapatos. Hindi tulad ng dati, hindi na

tungo sa mga barong-barong ng looban. Dali-dali siyang lumilisan pauwi kung saan man ang bago niyang tahanan, tunay niyang tahanan.

Sana puwede siyang lumingon tulad dati. Dahil ngayon, alam kong ako na ang lilingunin niya.

“Flashback joke?” malakas niyang sabi habang tuloy sa pag-usad.

Hindi siya lumingon.

Muli, sinilip ko ang nahuli kong alitaptap sa loob ng kamay.

*Liliwanag.*

*Didilim.*

Abril 2016

Sto. Domingo, Quezon City

The background features a complex, layered design of overlapping, semi-transparent leaf-like shapes in various shades of gray. Fine, white, curved lines flow across the composition, creating a sense of movement and depth. Small, dark dots are scattered throughout the design, adding texture and visual interest.

*English*





# ***From Chapter 4 of White Lady/Black Christ: A novel-in-progress***

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Charlson Ong

...Jose Catapang Crenshaw was born in Angeles City on April 2, 1970 according to the National Statistics Office. His mother Andrea Ruiz Catapang was a resident of Tondo, Manila but went to Angeles to work as a bar hostess at seventeen. She was the youngest of five sisters and left home less out of dire need than wanderlust. There she met Lawrence Ernest Crenshaw, an American civilian employee of Clark Airbase. He was an accountant. At eighteen she was pregnant with Crenshaw's child and dreamt of snow and apple trees even as Crenshaw left for home with nary a word. Still, when the child was born, black and curly-haired, she had Crenshaw written down as 'father' on the certificate of birth. She made inquiries with base personnel about Crenshaw's whereabouts but received no reply. She obtained the help of a lawyer to no avail. A year later she brought the child to her parents' home in Tondo.

"You went all the way to Angeles to get knocked up by a baluga?" her mother hissed.

"Ulikba," her father quipped.

"Crenshaw," Andrea said, "his name is Jose Crenshaw."

"You can call him what you like, won't make him worth one centavo more," her mother said.

"I like him," Andrea's elder sister Rhodora who worked at the post office said.

"You can have him," her mother said.

Rhodora took the boy home to Gagalangin a few blocks from her parents' place, where she lived in an apartment block owned by her lesbian partner, one-eyed Gloria, who trucked vegetables from farms in Laguna to Divisoria. Gloria wore a black patch over her left eye that was blinded in a fight inside a gambling den. Gloria Respicio made her fortune trucking vegetables and advancing credit to farmers. The main reason Rhodora's parents accepted the relationship was because her father, Luis, once asked Gloria for a loan he never repaid. But as much as she made in business, Gloria lost huge sums in gambling tables. She nearly died from the fight that half blinded her at 28. An irate gambler who accused Gloria of cheating in mahjong had stabbed her in the face and neck. When Gloria awoke from her weeklong coma she became a devotee of the child Christ—the Sto. Nino. And when Rhodora brought home baby Jose, the couple doted on their ward as if he were their own Sto. Nino despite neighbors who preferred the Holy Infant Jesus porcelain-hued with golden tresses.

Still, every year, on the feast day of the Sto. Nino, January 7, Jose would be at the head of a throng of children who paraded with the statue of the Christ child from the church through the streets of Tondo. Gloria was the church's main patron and head of the *cofradia* of the Sto. Nino.

Meanwhile, Andrea returned to the Pink Eden in Angeles City where she met more Americans, none of whom remembered Lawrence Crenshaw, but every afternoon, before work, she would hang out by the gate of the Clark Airbase hoping to spy her child's father.

As a child, Jose disliked his name, Crenshaw. He thought it clashed with his blackness and made him even more the target of nasty jokes. He had heard it said that he turned out as he did for being the child of 'tom-boys,' although his classmates often wondered about his foreign-sounding name.

Even as a boy he knew things would've been worse if not for the fact that half the neighborhood owed his 'papa' Gloria money, and that the Catholic school only allowed him in after his 'mama' Rhodora paid for a new classroom.

At five he knew his aunt Andrea was his 'other' mother who lived in Angeles and who visited occasionally and hugged him so tight it often hurt, and that his 'other' papa was a black man in America who would send for him one day. He never said any of this to neighborhood kids or classmates

unsure whether being ‘overcooked’ by the incubator after birth or having a mother who hunkered over black chicken was better or worse than being a black man’s spawn.

At twelve he was a head taller than his classmates and made center of the class basketball team but he couldn’t play for his life and was all the more despised by his mates for failing at the only thing he was supposed to be good for. His grades were middling, though he managed to pass sometimes with help from Gloria’s loans to his teachers.

At thirteen he ran away to his other mother in Angeles, taking the bus, but she bawled him out and brought him back to Tondo. She was now with a white man, Uncle Tim, who was sixty and did not take to black kids. At seventeen he was accepted to the University of Sto. Tomas where he thought he might learn to be an architect—he had always been good with a pencil and sketch pad—but Gloria’s health was failing—she was diabetic—and her debts were mounting; their home was mortgaged and he would have to work part time for his tuition. Again, he was urged to try out for the varsity squad and earn an athletic scholarship—he was a shade over six feet tall—but still couldn’t play.

Jose worked as a police sketch artist to pay his way through school, but a career in architecture seemed remoter by the day, while his height and heft made him a shoo-in for the police force. It was either that or bouncer for strip joints. So, at twenty, Jose Crenshaw took the exams for police recruits and soon became Police Officer (PO) 1 Crenshaw of the Western Manila Police District (WPD), the district’s first black beat cop. It was 1992, and those who liked the rookie called him Michael Jordan when in good cheer, Dennis Rodman when in a funk; while his enemies, in uniform or otherwise, still said ‘*ulikba*’ behind his back.

Jose patrolled Avenida Rizal and Quiapo, places where he grew up, places he knew by heart. His size intimidated petty thieves and fences, but he knew well enough to keep off the cathouses and gambling dens protected by other cops. He would be called on to kick down a felon’s door, or wallop a thug, or even sketch the likeness of a suspect, but he still couldn’t play ball. And this failing deeply dismayed his colleagues at the WPD who thought they would at last win a national police championship.

When Jose turned twenty-five the apartment block where he had lived till then was repossessed by Gloria’s creditor, a rice trader, before she

succumbed to illness.

Rhodora moved back in with her parents but Jose knew better than to join her. He rented bed space from his superior officer Superintendent Alvaro Lumauig who lived close to the police station. Alvaro was a good friend of Gloria and Rhodora and took Jose under his wing. When Lumauig was made head of an anti-kidnapping strike force as the height of the kidnap-for-ransom cases, mostly involving the local Chinese, Jose became a member of the six-man team that worked directly under Lumauig. Jose learned all about surveillance tactics and equipment. He didn't know before then that mobile phones could be tracked and messages intercepted, and was wary of using his own phone for months.

He was astounded by the speed by which the team could identify perpetrators whenever an incident was reported, going by what seemed sketchy information—the make of a getaway car, the accent of a kidnapper, the place of abduction. It didn't take long for him to figure out that there were no more than three major gangs operating in Metro Manila, who used police informers and involved dismissed cops. He figured it would take perhaps a month to neutralize or chase away the gangs if only the police would strike before the criminals did. But the cops often seemed to be playing a waiting game—sometimes even taking bets on who the next victim would be or where the next abduction would occur—until an order came down from higher up and they'd raid some abandoned warehouse stacked with surveillance equipment or even discover some cash.

Jose felt uneasy about how the strike force functioned, but he knew why he'd been tapped: he'd been on the force less than three years, he had no family, he wouldn't be missed. So he kept his peace and did as he was told until that time when the twelve-year old boy was snatched from near his school in San Juan, Metro Manila. Jose was off duty and in street clothes but he had borrowed the service car for an errand when the report came in through the radio.

"I'm in the vicinity," he radioed PO 2 Ricarte, a fellow strike force member.

"You're off duty aren't you?"

"So what? I can cut them off. What are they driving?"

"I don't think that's a good idea Jose. We have procedure. It's dangerous to engage suspects by yourself. The victim's safety is paramount."

“Is it the Ugarte gang? Blue Toyota Corolla, car-napped last week? I see it.”

“Don’t engage.”

He had never defied authority save perhaps for the time he ran off to Angeles at fourteen to see his mother but even then he wasn’t really defying anyone. No one had told him not to go see her; he just decided to go on his own without telling anyone.

“He has the fool’s wind in him, the *ipu-ipo*, the dust devil,” Jose had heard his mother say to his aunt when Andrea brought him back to Tondo. “Like his father, you never know when it blows.”

“You’re the fool, Drea, he’s your son, you have to come see him more often if you don’t want him to stray.”

“*Ipu-ipo*,” Jose had wondered what it was until years later in Pampanaga, after the lahars from Mt. Pinatubo had laid waste much of the province. A gust had raised a cloud of dust and gravel that swirled around him and lashed his skin. “Dust devil,” his father had once called it, according to his mother. His father, who was from the land of terrible tornadoes, said his mother, and Jose understood.

Now he could feel it rising from inside him, from the pit of his gut, as he saw the blue Toyota race across the road. He could taste the dust in his tongue as he tailgated the Toyota. The Toyota signaled for him to pass but he refused and continued to pursue the car that now took evasive action. Jose decided to turn on the siren and the pursuit quickened. Suddenly the Toyota turned into an alley and stopped. Two men got out of the car and shot at Jose but fled towards a narrower lane. Jose scampered towards the Toyota and found the boy crouched in the back seat but unharmed. PO 1 Crenshaw realized he was unarmed and quickly pulled the boy towards himself, shielding the boy with his own body should the kidnapers return. After a while he led the boy back to the police car and brought him home to Greenhills.

The Lim family was ecstatic and confused. The mother said the family chauffeur had just called to report the abduction while the father had just raced home after receiving his wife’s message. Mr. Winston Lim was dumbfounded. He took his son aside and they spoke in Chinese. Then he took Crenshaw aside and handed him a card that read: WINSTON LIM, CEO COMPTREX ENTERPRISES: Makers of industrial grade plastics.

“Is there something we can do for you PO 1 Crenshaw?” he asked. Jose shrugged.

“This is all very strange. I’m not sure what went on exactly but I am just grateful my son is safe. We owe you and please come to me if you ever need any help but I think it is best if you leave now,” Winston said.

Jose brought the car back to HQ and walked home. Nothing was said of the events of the day, but a week later Supt. Lumaug asked Jose to look for other lodgings. “I can’t be perceived to be coddling you,” the officer said.

“What did I do wrong? I rescued the boy.”

“You were lucky. What if things had gone terribly wrong? We follow protocol, Jose, I told you from Day One. You’re part of a team. You don’t act on your own.”

Crenshaw bunked with another bachelor cop and was assigned a desk job. After a month he wondered if he’d ever be back on the beat again. He was in the doghouse and he suspected he’d mess up more than protocol, maybe someone’s big payday.

“I don’t think this is the life for me,” Crenshaw finally said to Lumaug, “I’ll submit my resignation letter.”

“And do what?” Lumaug asked, shaking his head. “You’re a good kid, Jose. You have heart, but you’ve got to use your brains more... See the big picture.”

“I know what’s going on,” Jose whispered.

Lumaug eyed Crenshaw briefly. “You think so? You think you’re better off not being a cop? You think you’ll be safer? We still take care of our own, kid.”

Crenshaw stared at Lumaug, and the older man thought he glimpsed a hint of madness in those dark brown eyes. He swallowed hard. Crenshaw felt a sudden stirring once more in the pit of his gut and struggled to keep it in check.

“Listen,” Lumaug said, “take a week off, take two weeks. It’ll be the Holy Week anyways. Think things over. We’ll talk when you get back. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

Jose sought out Winston Lim at his office in Pasig. “My superiors are pissed with me, I’m thinking of quitting,” he said to Winston.

Winston stroked his chin, frowned, stood up and paced the floor. “Wait,” he said and left his office briefly, to return with a white envelope which he handed to Jose.

“I already have a security officer,” he said to the cop. “I thank you again for what you did for our family, but for both our sakes, don’t come here again.”

Crenshaw saw that Winston Lim had written out a check to him for Php 300,000. He wasn’t sure what to do with it and thought of handing it back but Winston said: “Keep it, you have six months to cash it in.”

During Holy Week, Jose visited his mother in Angeles. She was alone again. Timothy Lowry had relocated to Thailand. There was still no word from his father, Andrea told her son. Jose shrugged. It had never mattered to him.

“I just want to talk to him, to hear his voice, before its too late,” she said. And Jose noticed that his mother had shrunk, was half the woman he had always known. She was ill of ovarian cancer, and there was little more that doctors or faith healers could do.

Jose thought that he should feel shock, pain, or sadness, but he didn’t know where inside him these emotions were kept. He tried to conjure compassion even for a stranger, but fumbled.

“Promise me, son, when I’m gone, you will seek him out. Don’t give up, let him know who you are: Jose Crenshaw.”

Jose went to the adjoining town to seek out Anselmo Dela Cruz, a carpenter who had been crucified every Good Friday for the past ten years after his son was cured of leukemia.

“Does it hurt?” Jose asked Anselmo who was preparing for his annual ordeal. “How much do you love your mother?” Anselmo asked, but Jose had no answer.

“Are you willing to give up your own life for hers? Half your life?”

Jose still had no answer.

“God doesn’t bargain, brother. It’s all or nothing. You have to be willing to lay it all on the line every time.”

Jose went home. He knew his time had not come, but he returned on Good Friday to watch Anselmo and four other men and a woman crucified. Then helped tend their wounds.

Andrea died that June. Her son was beside her at the end. He never returned to the WPD, never handed in his resignation. He buried his mother, cashed in his check; bought himself a modest home in Angeles, and a carpentry shop.

Jose hired Anselmo to train him in carpentry and serve as foreman for projects. When Holy Week came Jose walked to where river and farm were now a desert of gray volcanic ash and glass stretching to the far horizon. He asked for a sign and felt the earth tremble beneath him. A wind borne by many wolves howled and a dark cloud swirled about him. He was whipped by gravel and lashed by sand, pilloried against rocks and dragged through winds. When it was over, Jose was covered in blood and ash.

He found Anselmo who gazed at Jose in awe.

“How long were you in the wilderness?” Anselmo asked. Jose shrugged. “You were gone for three days and nights. What did you see?”

“A child, the boy I rescued borne by an eagle and three angels with wings aflame. Then a black man appeared. I remember thinking he was my father. ‘Father,’ I said to him, ‘it is I, your son, Jose Crenshaw.’ ‘Why do you seek me?’ he asked. ‘Because I am your son.’ ‘Fool,’ the man said, ‘you seek your own darkness.’”

The first time he was crucified Jose felt his heart being stabbed as nails were pounded into his palm. He was certain his heart was torn and bleeding even as the sun baked his skin. “Father, father, why have you forsaken me?” He wailed to the sky but hearing the mockery from below: *Itim na Nazareno*, the Black Christ.

The following season, a TV crew arrived and interviewed Jose as he was about to be nailed to his cross. Was he doing this in order to find his father? They wanted to know. Did he have a message for his old man? Did he want to go to America? What was all of this for?

In truth, finding his father was now the farthest thing from Jose’s mind. He knew now, more than ever, that he was of dust and would return to dust. But the dust of him was an angry cloud that would be a storm; that would flay the unjust and mark the unclean.

“It is my Father who has found me,” he said to the interviewer in English. “I am his will. I am the hour.”

His words made the evening news and upset the Cardinal who had



heard crazier claims but somehow the words of this black man with scraggly beard nipped him in the gut.

“Judas,” the seventy year-old priest whispered to no one. He was just reminded of the actor who played Judas in the movie version of Jesus Christ Superstar that he had seen many years ago as a seminarian.

**Notes:**

*Baluga/Aeta*: Indigenous people who occupy remote parts of the Philippines, often hunter-gatherers.

*Ulikba*: black chicken

*Cofradia*: Co-fraternity, a religious organization of lay people who support the activities of a Parish.

# An Errand

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Angelo R. Lacuesta

It was the sense of hearing that came to him first, bringing with it a low, insistent, a drone rising and dipping like the waves he grew up with on Samal Island. Skimming above the waves was a girl's voice, saying *ser, ser, ser*.

Moroy swung his arm up and opened his eyes to look at his watch: 3 a.m. It was also his way of checking if it hadn't been stolen. Behind the luminous hands and the starry black dial, delivering that girl's voice, was a boy who looked like he was still in high school. *Pebrero*—said the patch on his security guard's uniform—lightly rapped his knuckles on his arm as though he were a timid night janitor knocking on the door to the ladies' CR.

There were seven other men in the room, drivers and minders, a couple of them he knew by face and name. The sound of the sea was the sound of their snoring, their breaths coming hard and stale through all that fat in their throats. He was not on Samal Island. He felt an ache in his own throat and he knew he must have been snoring, too.

Whoever thought of putting *Pebrero* on the night shift must be pulling an inside job, Moroy thought, as he put on his shirt-jack. What could Sir possibly want at this hour?

He inhaled audibly as he walked past the boy, who was texting on his phone. He was the only staff at the drivers' dormitory. His only real job, it seemed, besides picking up the rare landline call and turning away late

check-ins, was to switch on the low-watt evening light in the entrance and switch off everything else, the TV and the aircon in the lobby. He couldn't possibly keep the drunks and the girls away.

Outside, the air had dipped into the further cold of dawn. Moroy put a hand in his pants and squeezed the button on the car key. He pressed another button and the engine started, making a sound softer than the faint sound of snoring that still hung in the air.

The hotel was a five-minute drive from the drivers' dormitories. His windshield was wet. His headlights probed the fog. His wipers were on full. When he drove up to the entrance, Sir was already there, shuffling on the top step, the lobby guard by his arm. He was dressed in the golf t-shirt and shorts he had worn that morning when they drove up from Manila.

Moroy pressed the window switch. Sir spoke into the gap as soon as it appeared.

"Kunin mo yung t-shirt kong Givenchy, yung may Mona Lisa na design sa harap," he said. "Alam mo 'yung Mona Lisa? Yung painting. Sa Louvre 'yun, 'yung museum sa Paris. Isang araw dalhin kita dun. Basta babae, naka-smile." He smiled without showing his teeth when he said *smile*. "I mean, hindi mo alam kung naka-smile o hinde, kunin mo 'yun, dalhin mo dito."<sup>1</sup>

"Sa kotse ba sir?"<sup>2</sup>

"Hindi. Sa bahay."<sup>3</sup>

"Sa bahay—sa Maynila, sir?"

"Oo. Sa Maynila."

"Yes sir." Moroy blinked as he said it, perhaps a little bit longer than he should have.

"Ayos. Nga pala, isama mo na rin yung medicine pouch ko, yung maliit, sa loob ng drawer dun sa tabi ng kama. Sa side ko, ha, hindi yung kay Norma."<sup>4</sup>

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1 "Get my Givenchy t-shirt, the one with the Mona Lisa design on the front," sir said. "Do you know the Mona Lisa? The painting. It's in the Louvre, that museum in Paris. One day I'll bring you there. It's a girl, smiling." He showed his teeth when he said *smile*. "I mean, you don't know if she's smiling or not, get it, bring it here."

2 "Is it in the car?"

3 "No, it's at home."

4 "Great. By the way, bring along my medicine pouch, the small one in the bedside table. My side, not Norma's."

It was time-consuming, it was expensive, and it all seemed completely unnecessary, but by the time Sir had finished his sentence Moroy had completely accepted the project.

“Yessir.”

He knew that shirt. He knew what meant: Brenda. The girl that gave him that shirt. The girl he often took home personally from his office every night, speaking to her loudly so the security guards and the other drivers could hear that her place was conveniently on the way to theirs. Which was a complete lie. Brenda lived with her mother and her grandmother on 10<sup>th</sup> street in Cubao, which was, on mostly any given hour of the day, a good two or three hours away from Legaspi Village. If they were lucky. Sometimes there was dinner, or a few drinks, on the way to dropping her off, but Moroy never really thought anything of these occasions.

Brenda was easily the prettiest one in the office. She had a little fat on her, but Moroy was OK with a little bit of fat. He liked some fat on them sometimes. He found it sexy that a girl would allow herself to let go a little bit. She would not be a thin woman on the way to being fat, or even vice versa; she would be a woman who didn't care, or acted like she didn't.

Brenda had something like that. From behind he saw a little valley and a lump, low on her hips, right where she wore the waistline of her pants and her skirts, like she was made of soft, flesh-colored clay and someone took another lump of clay, rolled it into his hands, and slapped it around her little body, massaging it half-heartedly until it only partly melted into her flesh. It made her look a little clumsy, a little careless. But it was more than just fuck-what-the-boys-think fat. This was teen fat. Growing-up fat. She had just graduated from college and this was her first job. Moroy figured that she was too young to know why she took it in the first place, but also at just the right age to trust her instincts.

He held Sir's gaze as the car window closed. He was wide awake. He'd never slept. She was probably in his room, playing in a bathtub full of heated water, playing with the bubbles, brushing them off with her breath when they threatened to grow larger.

Baguio was still very dark at a little past 3 a.m., and the glare of the hotel's overdone lighting in the mirror made everything else even darker. The fog had grown thicker. If he was going to make it fast he was going to have to take Kennon Road, which was full of twists and banks, but it was

going to be a real thrill.

The hotel lights disappeared and there was nothing but fog ahead of him and behind him. Moroy couldn't really tell what Brenda looked like from the driver's seat. She had ridden along dozens of times—even alone, on those times she needed to go somewhere for work and she didn't feel like taking a cab that day. But she always sat behind him. The right passenger's seat was always Sir's place. He couldn't even smell her perfume, the way he smelled the other staff's whenever they rode with Sir to a meeting. Brenda was too young for perfume. Knowing it was Brenda made her gift of the t-shirt especially touching. He kind of knew how much those t-shirts must have cost. He'd made it an unconscious habit to sneak a look at the receipts stapled to the shopping bags Sir and Ma'am left in the car. Those Givenchy shirts—he couldn't even pronounce it—most probably cost more than a thousand.

Brenda was a college graduate, sure, and it was a B.S. in business, but she didn't graduate from Ateneo, or La Salle, or UP, or abroad, like Sir's friends did. She had graduated from the rival school of Moroy's own college. A school with something like 70,000 students. He himself had never graduated, and the reasons had softened and blended into each other over the many years until what remained was his own self-resentment. There surely must have been a pretty good reason for it, and money was really the only reason he could think of.

She obviously didn't make very much; he was sure even he made more money than she did, but her family could obviously afford for her to graduate. And although her credentials and her transcript were enough to get her hired by someone like Sir, from here on, it would be her looks that would take care of the rest. “Ang kagandahan ay puhunan<sup>5</sup>,” they would say at the office.

That didn't subtract from her strong points, or from Sir's. He was a businessman. Though Moroy couldn't really put a finger on what he did for a living, he figured out that he was pretty good at what he did, and well respected in his field. That accounted for his money and his powerful connections. But it was mostly luck that Moroy could count on to explain the fact that this fine looking chick would allow him to get near her.

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5 “Beauty is capital”

He was on Kennon now, barreling through the zigzag like he was riding a motorcycle instead of a Land Cruiser. The bulletproof cladding made it heavier and faster. If this was a test, he was going to pass it.

“Sinusubukan niyo ba ako?”<sup>6</sup> was his trademark line. He had picked it up from President Erap back in the day. Moroy remembered the time Sir had left 77,800 in cash in a tightly rubber-banded envelope in the glove compartment. When he returned it to him the next morning these were the very words he used on his employer, in half-jest: “ser, sinusubukan niyo ba ako?” It was his turn to test him. He wanted to know if he could tell him that to his face. Sir laughed, but Moroy thought he had laughed a little too hard. There was something else there.

unhealthy, and he was beginning to get a little worried about his speed and his strength, but maybe it gave him a kind of stability, like a spinning top.

He thought about money on the stretch between Kennon to Pangasinan, right before the roads gave way to the new expressway that skipped the rest of the slog of small towns, with their churches and their municipal halls, their student crossings and their tricycles. That new expressway certainly cost a lot of money, too. He thought about Mona Lisa and the medicine box, and the money inside it, and before he knew it he had chewed up the entirety of EDSA and was in front of the house, buoyed by the euphoria that came with missed sleep.

Moroy barked at the mayor doma to get the t-shirt from the laundry. He didn’t need to ask about Ma’am. He knew she was out at the Eleuterios for mahjongg. He went up the stairs, feeling his weight and his breath with every step. He entered Sir’s room and took a moment to appreciate it, the bright light, the vast space, the rich, woody smell, the sudden quiet. The floor was freshly polished and the bed was made. He felt his steps were too loud as he walked over to the night stand opened the drawer: envelopes, USB sticks, a 9mm in its holster. He reached into the space and came upon the medicine box, a little tin can repurposed from its previous life as a candy container, smaller than he had expected it to be.

Before he could open it, the mayor doma entered the room, holding up the t-shirt by a hanger: the woman called Mona Lisa, smiling without smiling, her arms folded as though she were waiting impatiently.

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6 “Are you putting me to the test?”

The first real bottleneck between Makati and Balintawak was the last left turn on EDSA, where the entire avenue changed course by the SM City Mall. In the lull Moroy suddenly felt his missed sleep, and his hunger.

There was a Pancake House just across the entrance to Congressional Village. A boy tapped on the flank of the SUV until he settled into the parking space. He felt the pit of his stomach burn as he waited for his rice meal. Must be hunger, must be old age. It must be genetic. He had heard Sir and Ma'am talk about "genetic" all the time. It was the reason for many things: cancer, idiocy, political appointments.

He tried to guess how old Sir could be. He assumed he was much older, even though he looked so youthful. Genetic. Or plastic surgery. *Sinusubukan mo ba ako?* He remembered Sir's face, the thing that flashed when he said it. Fear, or guilt, or nothing, really. He was overthinking again.

"Thinking it over? Or overthinking?" he had heard Brenda tell Sir one time, her little voice carrying from the back seat, she had a clever little voice, and she used it as effectively in person and on the phone, when she was speaking to Sir. They were on the way to a meeting in Valenzuela, Bulacan. What was going to be an hour's drive had stretched into three. She said it after they'd been sitting silent for a long time. Overthinking. He knew what thinking it over meant, but it was the first time he had heard that word, overthinking.

"Overthinking?" Sir said, the top of his head suddenly flitting to the side in his rearview. "What does that mean?" he repeated: "Overthinking?" Sir obviously knew what it meant.

Brenda used the very same friendly, accommodating tone she used on their most difficult clients. "You know, when you're worry too much about something it becomes something else already. Like distrust. Or fear."

"Fear?" Sir said, as though he suddenly didn't know what that meant, either. Nothing was said after that; by that time they had finally arrived at their client's sardine canning factory.

Brenda—he had never really seen her face because it had been so ingrained in him to avert his eyes, but he was so sure now that she looked special, beyond just being pale-skinned, well-scrubbed, and well-dressed like the rest of them. She had "right manners and good conduct." She paid the right compliments, never intruded on privacy, and pretended to be amused, even delighted, when Sir told her something about his family life.

Ma'am was an interior decorator who had her own set of difficult clients, and their child went to Ateneo Grade School. Brenda was English-speaking like the rest of them, but whenever she spoke, Moroy knew she wasn't quite in the league of Sir and his close circle of old friends. He couldn't really put a finger on it, but he knew that was exactly how Sir wanted it.

A billboard advertising a family-owned resort straddled a boundary dike between two ricefields burned pale by the sun. The amenities were in bullet points: world-class swimming pool and water park, luxurious rooms and suites, family restaurant.

The radio had been tuned to DZBB "*sais treynnta.*" He'd been following the senate hearings on the latest budget scam. He knew exactly what some of those people looked like, he knew their voices from the way they spoke to their drivers and their minders. They all knew what they were up to even before the senate hearings. He turned the radio down and brought the SUV to a stop on the shoulder. Cars blasted their horns as they drove past. He allowed himself to think of taking the detour. Although it wasn't even midmorning he felt hungry again.

He saw the shirt hanging by its hanger in the rear and he remembered his errand. The canister had cradled itself in a crevice in the passenger seat. He took the lid off and saw no cash inside—an ATM card would have fit pretty nicely. Instead there was a little pool of blue pills, a dozen or so, that had settled gently on the bottom, edge to edge. He knew what they were from stories told by other folks like himself—drivers, minders, bodyguards, handlers. A great blue-colored mixture of a sense of pity and a feeling of great responsibility washed over him and into the cabin.

This was not just an errand; this was another test. Sir had laid on Moroy's shoulders an uncommon trust. In the quieted cabin he remembered Brenda's voice, talking to Sir, telling him things about work, about her mother. Though he couldn't understand most of what they talked about, he heard in Sir's voice a tone of gentle desperation. She would laugh, like a high exhale, a laugh she barely suppressed, a laugh at the game he was trying so hard to play. He felt an irrational hatred come over him: like he wanted to screw her out of spite.

Moroy dropped his window as he passed the country club guardhouse, making sure the window opened just enough for the lady guard to be seen by him through his mirrored shades, and that she could see the



crocodile patch on his chest. Sir had given him that shirt at their staff Christmas party, all wrapped in a big stiff paper bag that announced “Lacoste.” Its gartered cuffs lightly, but precisely, embraced his upper arms, its brazen, multicolored vertical stripes going against every instinct of his to wear. He brought his hand up and perched it on the top of the steering wheel to make sure she saw his Submariner. It was fake, of course, but it was a real class-A knockoff Sir had bought for him on one of his trips to Bangkok. He had never told anyone, not that the people around him knew what a Rolex was, though more than once or twice he had been surprised. His regular massage therapist at his favorite chop-chop joint, for example, had exclaimed “Uy! Rolex!” when she saw it sitting on the sidetable. “That’s fake,” he said, firmly and with finality, but the girl was on to him and did a double take and said “Weh! Hindi nga?”<sup>7</sup> The lady guard didn’t look up from her cellphone. If she only knew who he really was, how close he was to the very top. He was listened to. He had some bearing on things. He was one of the good guys.

He didn’t know how long he had been away. Sir had texted him twice already, at around 7 a.m. and right as he was entered Kennon again. And then nothing. He remembered the way he shifted and sighed in the backseat after they’d brought Brenda home on one of those nights she agreed to come out with him. He’d be pretending he was worried about work, about home, about money. He would tell him to hurry home, hurry home, take this road, take that turn, as if he needed to be told, as if he didn’t know the way.

Moroy fixed the hotel valet with a stare through his sunglasses as he stepped out of the SUV, leaving the door open as he walked into the lobby. It was 11 a.m.

He went up the elevator and knocked on his door, “Sir, sir, sir,” remembering to tighten the I’s. It opened a crack and a hand reached out, fingers stretched upward like a cup, ready to receive the delivery. Moroy put on a poker face and deposited the canister into Sir’s hand, its insides making a clicking sound. The hand withdrew, and came out again, frozen upward in a signal to wait.

Moroy tried to see into the room but it was dark inside. He strained to hear her voice but heard nothing. The hand darted out, holding up one

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<sup>7</sup> “C’mon! You’re kidding, right?”

of the blue pills in the middle of an OK sign. Moroy felt like he had been found out. He had made a mental note to himself to filch one but he had forgotten. He cupped his hand under his master's to receive the parting tip.

When the valet brought the SUV up the driveway Moroy could see, even through the double-tinted windows, the Mona Lisa swinging on its hanger in the back seat. He smiled, half at the girl, half at himself, knowing he had accomplished his mission.

*Angelo R. Lacuesta has won numerous awards for his fiction, among them two Philippine National Book Awards, the Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book Award and several Palanca and Philippines Graphic Awards. He was literary editor of the Philippines Free Press and is currently editor-at-large at Esquire Philippines*

# ***Better Than Sex***

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Maria L. M. Fres-Felix

I hate to repeat myself, but my sons are dead wrong. Alma is really good for me. She makes me feel not only young, but alive. So alive that sometimes I catch myself bouncing on my feet like a little boy when she walks into a room. And I must admit, with a little guilt, more alive than I have ever felt, even when Conching, God bless her kind soul, was still around.

Alma. Just thinking of her makes me tingly with expectation. I wonder if my sons ever feel that way about their wives. They both look like overdressed skeletons, while Alma, all curves and sweet softness, looks good in anything she wears (or doesn't wear). My daughters-in-law remind me of Catrina Dolls from Mexico. Alma bought several of those laughing skeleton dolls dressed in fancy gowns when we visited Mexico City last year. Except that instead of laughing like those Catrinas, my daughters-in-law seem to be forever put off. At least, that's how they act whenever they are in the same room with Alma. As if being high-powered career women gave them the license to look down on Alma. I know they begrudge her that well-deserved vacation. It was our third anniversary, and she was so understanding when I told her I could not marry her, at least not yet, because my sons would surely raise hell.

Besides, people already address her as Mrs. Garcia. Even my business associates refer to her as my wife. My sons don't call her anything. They refer to her as "she", or "that woman." It was as if her name were a pill so bitter they could not bear for it to touch their lips. Chay, my only daughter,

used to call her Tita. She and her husband Obet were the only ones who invited us to their home for lunches or dinners. But not anymore. Not after I asked them to relocate to Laoag, after her husband lost their used car dealership to gambling. I gave him some start-up capital yet again, but only if they stayed in Laoag where I own some land planted to dragon fruit. My sons said I was throwing away money, that Obet was shitting on my head. But what do they know? All they have is gossip. I don't say anything. I love my children and all I want is peace in our family. They still visit me, but only when they know that Alma is out with friends, at the spa, or shopping.

Since I was diagnosed with diabetes a few months earlier, my sons, on their rare visits, keep bringing me ampalaya tea and those vile-tasting juices. Only Alma lets me have leche flan and chocolate cake to indulge my sweet tooth. In moderation, of course.

"Don't you just love it?" She would say, then daintily bring a forkful of the moist brown cake to her mouth. "It's better than sex," she would coo and wink.

Any other man would have been offended, but not me. I know she just wants to reassure me that everything is okay. We have not been active lately, because my diabetes has temporarily disabled me. Though Alma is so limber and bent on pleasuring me, I've had a lot of difficulty. Well, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Lately, she had thoughtfully bought some Viagra for me. Would my sons' wives have been that considerate? I don't think so. Why, one of them even hinted that Viagra is harmful for someone my age. Something about heart complications or whatnot. She's such a know-it-all. A testy know-it-all.

Alma is the epitome of patience. I myself have been feeling so frustrated lately. I could never have the release I crave so much. I kick myself, thinking why I could not even respond to someone like her. Was I turning gay in my old age? If only I could find something else that could satisfy me, like Alma and her chocolate cake. Something that is better than sex. Of course, I keep these things from Alma. I'm sure she is also feeling bad. After all, a woman her age has needs. I want to satisfy those needs.

So, this morning, I will surprise her. While I am supposed to be at the office, I head home, after taking a pill. I read that Viagra takes effect an hour after ingestion. Good. Time enough. I unlock the garage and quietly open the main door. I know the maids and the driver are doing grocery

shopping. So far so good. The pill should be working soon.

As I expected, when I open the Masters' Bedroom, the curtains are closed, and the room is in shadows. Alma likes sleeping late. I catch a glimpse of her bare shoulders and thighs. I close my eyes, savouring the hardening in my groin. Slowly, I open my eyes. They have gotten accustomed to the dark, and I see another man in bed with her. I blink to make sure. A wounded animal growl escapes from my throat. The man jumps off the bed, scoops his clothes from the floor, and rushes out, but hesitates, eyes darting to the man purse on the wing chair. I lunge at him, but he is too fast for me. I turn my eyes to Alma, my intestines twisting.

She rises from the bed, the crumpled linen like waves to her Venus.

"I'm so sorry, Love," she says, voice husky.

She drapes soft arms around my neck and opens her plump lips invitingly. Her fragrance envelopes me and I give her a long, intense kiss. I let her pull me down to the bed. Kneeling over her luscious body, I run trembling fingers over her creamy cheeks, which are moist with tears. I slide my tongue over her swanlike neck, down to her ample bosom, and suck her perfect nipples. I look up, her eyes are shut, a smile playing on her swollen lips. I caress her breasts, tracing up her flawless shoulders till my fingers curl around her throat.

She gasps, eyes now wide with disbelief. She claws at my face and I feel my erection throb. The more she trashes about, the harder I become. This, punishing her, this is better than sex. I am breathing faster, growing harder, as I see the light leaving her eyes, and I finally find the release that has eluded me.

The maids will discover her body and call me at the office. From there, I will call the Police, and they will find the man's shoes and his silly man purse. My children will try to console me, yet will not be able to help saying, "We told you so."

But now more than ever, I know for sure. Alma, my sweet Alma, is good for me. Even in death, she is good for me. I wish I could find someone like her. Again.

# *Economies of Scale*

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Francis Paolo Quina

**H**enry was thinking about the way Julie looked last year when she sat across from him and told him it was over. She was wearing a dress they had picked up only a month before, for a work-related dinner that she had to attend. Henry had gone to the dinner with her, also in a new shirt.

The dress was white with blue floral prints. Henry had paid for it gallantly despite her protests, and that gesture, along with his new shirt, nearly maxed out his credit card. He still had the receipts from that night filed away.

Julie did not have make-up that night last year, when she broke up with him. Though to be honest, he could never tell when she did or did not, most of the time anyway. He just always said that she looked beautiful, which he knew always worked with girls, and which she said made her uncomfortable.

There was a candle on the table between them, placed there by the staff not for mood but to drive away a fly that seemed intent on pestering them throughout the night. The light from the candle reflected in her eyes, giving them a fierce glow.

But there was sadness in them too—the way she spoke slowly, the way her hand seemed to swim in the tense, almost solid, air between them to land on top of his hand. *I'm sorry*, she had said, *but I need space*. And in her voice there was also relief.

There was no one sitting across from him in the restaurant, so the recollection of Julie wasn't borne out of a need to compare, simply of one to rehash, to revisit, maybe to pick at an old wound. It had been a year since Julie had broken up with him, and in the words of his friends it was time to get on with his life.

Henry thought he had gotten on with his life. He was focused at work, had even been promoted. He was going to the gym more regularly; he went out with his friends and officemates to have fun. Once in a while, he went out on dates, which his friends, and sometimes, his siblings, set up. He even dated a new girl, Lydia.

Lydia was his sister's friend from college, and according to her, Lydia had a crush on Henry for the longest time. He and Lydia went out almost every single day for two months, until one day she told him that she didn't want to go out with him anymore.

"I thought it was going well," Henry had said, absent-mindedly stirring his coffee. They were in a coffee shop not far from where she lived. This was where they usually met before they headed out to dinner or a movie. He had even come to think of it as *their* coffee shop. Some of the baristas had even remembered his name and that he liked the blended iced mocha in the late afternoon, and the double vanilla tea latte in the evening.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that, maybe I've wanted to go out with you for so long that now that I finally am, I'm not sure if this is what I really need right now."

He looked up at her. He thought about the first date that they had, how she blushed when he put his hand over hers, how that moved him, how that chipped away at the thing inside of him. "Fuck you, bitch," was all Henry said before walking out on her, which he regretted immediately as he was walking to the taxi stand at the corner.

That evening, his sister called him, angry, and told him off over the phone. He said nothing in his defense, not because there was nothing to say, but because he could not be bothered to care about the whole thing anymore. He saw what happened with Lydia as the final, necessary step to getting on with his life, and if the price to pay for it was his sister screaming at him, and not talking to him for a few weeks, then he would gladly pay it.

After his sister hung up, Henry took out his wallet, emptied it of the receipts and theater and concert ticket stubs he had accumulated over the two months he had been going out with Lydia. He spread them out on his small dining table. He picked up one at random; it was the receipt for when they ate at that new Italian bistro near Lydia's office. PhP 1456.75, plus 10% service charge.

He picked up another one. It was from when he bought Lydia that new Nicholas Sparks novel, after she told him she loved *The Notebook*. The movie adaptation, anyway. That was 699 pesos, plus another 40 to get it wrapped.

"Are you ready to order now, sir?" the waiter asked Henry. He looked up at the young man who looked mildly irritated. He had been occupying a table for the last half-hour and still hadn't ordered anything. He ordered the cheapest appetizer they had and a cocktail.

Henry looked at his watch; it was a quarter before eight in the evening. He was still alone. Outside, he could see that there was a slight drizzle. He wondered where Julie was now, what she was doing. Did she get caught in this rain? Or was she also waiting on a blind date? Was her blind date also late?

He was tempted to take out his phone and look at her Facebook wall to see how she was doing, but thought better. He knew how she was doing. She was happy, at least that what she looked like in her photos the last time he looked.

"Excuse me?" the woman who suddenly popped next to his table asked. "Are you Henry?"

He stood up and said yes, holding out his hand. She was surprised by his gesture and gingerly shook it. "Arianne, right?"

She nodded and let go of his hand. Arianne took the seat across from him and laid her clutch bag on the table. She apologized for being late as the waiter arrived with the appetizer and his drink.

"Menu, ma'am?" the waiter asked, his voice less harsh.

"Yes, thank you," she said.

"Please have some," Henry said, pointing to the bread and roasted eggplant and cheese dip. She thanked him and began to explain why she had been late. She said that her best friend, who she had known since grade



school had called her just as she was about to leave the office. She had just broken up with her fiancée, having found out that he had been seeing someone else on the side.

“That’s awful,” Henry offered, though he wondered now if Lydia or maybe even Julie had been seeing other people while he was still going out with them. He thought, *how would I even find that out*. “How did she find out about the other girl?”

Arianne said through a mouthful of bread and dip that an officemate of her friend had seen the two on a date. Henry looked at Arianne as she was talking and tried to imagine what it would be like to be in bed with her. He wondered whether she would be this noisy, or if she would be a mouse like Lydia. He wondered what she really smelled like, without the almost sickening sweetness of her strawberry perfume, and whether or not she waxed or she just trimmed her pubic hair. He brightened at the thought that he might soon find out.

They ordered entrees: Arianne got a chicken dish, he ordered the fish. They talked about Wacky, a common friend. They talked about where they knew Wacky from and the overlap of acquaintances that they apparently had, how strange it was they had never met each other before.

Arianne asked Henry about his work as an accountant. He said it was okay, nothing too exciting, which he said suited him fine. Obligated, he asked about her job. She talked animatedly about how stressful her work in advertising was, how their clients were so unreasonable and demanding, and how her boss was so indecisive.

Dinner arrived and they spent most of it talking about themselves, impressing upon the other their likeability. Henry liked that Arianne was trying so hard. It only meant that she found him worth the trouble of impressing. Henry on the other hand was only marginally interested, giving her a rating of 7/10 in the looks department and a 5/10 in the personality department. He never did like chatty girls.

Julie had been an 8 in terms of looks, and a 9 in personality. Lydia was a double 7, which was still acceptable by his standards; otherwise he wouldn’t have invested so heavily in her. Arianne was good for a lark, but nothing long-term. That suited him fine. He already knew where he might bring her for dates, and where not to, and the kinds of trinkets he might get her. All mid-range, nothing fancy, but thoughtful still.

Previous dating experience told Henry that he'd likely spend around a thousand to a thousand five hundred pesos per date on Arianne, which was reasonable in this day and age. Lydia was about the same range, while Julie was slightly above that. But then Julie had always insisted on paying for her half of the date, which Henry appreciated, even loved.

"What's your favorite movie?" Arianne asked him out of nowhere.

"What's yours?" he asked back, quickly. Henry had figured out that when girls ask you about something, 80% of the time they only want to tell you *their* answer to the question. Besides, Henry didn't really like movies and other made-up things like novels and stories. They were all so predictable.

Arianne said that she loved the last *Star Wars* movie, and talked about how it was her favorite one so far. She went on and on about a robot called BB-8, which she called cute. It was all sound and fury to Henry, in one ear and out the other. He smiled at Arianne and told her he hadn't had the time to catch the movie she was losing her mind to, but that he would be interested to catch it with her some time. Arianne blushed at the suggestion.

It was a calculated move on his part, the suggestion that there was a possibility of a future. He read somewhere that women were more likely to sleep with someone who used the future tense. He didn't know if this was backed-up by firm research numbers or if this was another one of those made-up truisms, but it worked based on his own experience.

"Are we getting dessert here?" Arianne asked. "Or are we going elsewhere?"

Henry smiled, leaned across the table towards her, as if to say something secret. A conspiracy, his body language projected, I want you to be part of a conspiracy. "Depends."

"Depends on what?" she asked leaning in. Her voice low and husky.

"On what you want."

The drive to Arianne's apartment was much faster than Henry expected. He figured that there would be time to fool around in his car during traffic—that was what the tinted windows were for. But traffic was light and Arianne's place was closer than he thought. Arianne was silent during

the ride, but she kept looking at him and smiling in the passenger seat. Henry appreciated that she acted demurely, the shy act worked on him like a charm.

Julie was always like that before they slept together, so unsure, so innocent-looking. Lydia was the same. He didn't get off on it, of course. He wasn't some freak who liked women dressing up as school girls. He merely appreciated such displays of meekness. He could never be with someone who was so totally helpless.

They rode the elevator up to her floor in the same silence. Henry reached out and touched Arianne's hand and she let him. He slips his fingers between hers, so their hands interlocked. He had a line for the exact moment, but he felt using it then was too premature. They emerged in the corridor hand in hand, like a couple. Arianne smiled to herself, her palm sweaty. Henry's was cold, reptilian.

"This is me," Arianne said as they stopped in front a unit door. Down the corridor, a door to another unit opened. A young couple emerged, seemingly headed out to work—a pair of poor call center bastards, Henry thought. Arianne looked away from them as they passed on their way to the elevator.

She fumbled around in her bag for her keys. It took her a while to find them so Henry had to look at the young couple and acknowledge them as they waited for the elevator.

Arianne offered Henry a drink as soon as they got inside her apartment. Henry tried to put his arm around her waist but she turned away and went to the small kitchen area. The apartment was small, definitely smaller than the one Henry had. It was also a mess. There were empty boxes and used plastic bags everywhere. The bed, which he could see from he stood, was unmade. There was a pile of dishes on the kitchen sink, a used saucepan sat on top the burner, crusty with rancid tomato sauce.

He felt his skin crawl at the mess. Julie had been persnickety, which he liked a lot. Lydia was also organized, although could have used a lesson or two from Julie. Henry downgraded Arianne from the average of 6 to 5, which meant that she was no longer a viable option for a possibly long-term relationship. *Hit it and quit it*, he told himself. He was relieved he hadn't use the line about the interlocking fingers in the elevator.

"I'll have what you're having," Henry said as he looked for somewhere to sit. Arianne handed him a glass filled with cold red wine. He sniffed it and could tell that it was on the verge of turning into vinegar. He noticed that Arianne's glass wasn't even the same design as the one she handed him. It was a glass that she got from a fast food promo. He sipped a bit of the wine and smiled at her. *Hit it and quit it.*

Arianne smiled and excused herself, going into the bathroom. Henry looked around and noticed that there were naphthalene balls out on the floor in the kitchen area. In a corner, he saw the waste bin which badly needed emptying. His nose suddenly became aware of the sickly, sweet and sour odor of the room. The prospect of finding himself between Arianne's legs suddenly seemed less and less appealing.

"I don't do this," Arianne told him as she emerged from the bathroom, her hand still damp.

"Do what?"

"Bring guys home after one date," she said, putting down her glass of bad wine on top the breakfast nook, which was the only clean surface in the apartment. She smiled shyly. Henry told her that he didn't think so, and that they didn't have to do anything that she didn't want, which really, he also didn't want now too.

"Do you want to sit on the bed?" she asked. "I have cable. We can watch TV a bit."

Henry looked over Arianne's shoulder, at her messy bed, imagined how long it had been since she had changed the sheets and bit his lip. He told her that he probably should go, that clearly he had pressured her in some way to thinking that he wanted this to happen tonight. *Be the good guy. Girls like that.*

Arianne looked confused, but nodded. Henry thanked her for the wine and opened the door. He stepped out of the hallway and was closing the door when Arianne caught up to him and held the door open.

"Wait," she said. "Was it something I said?"

"I'll call you," Henry said, walking off and leaving the door open and Arianne inside, confused. He walked briskly to the elevator and hit the button. He knew that Arianne had stepped out in the hallway and was looking at him. He could feel her stare.

The indicator on the elevator console said that one of the cars was now coming up for him. He stole a glance at Arianne who was still there in the corridor.

“It’s not you. It’s me,” he told Arianne just as the elevator arrived. The doors slid open and there was Julie about to step off. There was the shock of recognition on her face as she saw Henry standing there.

To Henry, everything and nothing had changed about Julie. Her hair was shorter than when they were together. She had gained a few pounds, he could tell because her face was a bit rounder, her cheeks healthier. But it was Julie, all right. He smiled at her, his teeth showing.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she said as she brushed past him. She was carrying an ecobag filled with groceries, and it swung as she walked briskly. Julie walked towards Arianne’s direction. “I told you to stay away from me.”

Arianne looked at Julie and then at Henry. “You know him?” she asked her. Julie stopped on her tracks and looked as though she hadn’t seen Arianne standing there.

“He’s my creepy ex,” Julie told Arianne. “Is he bothering you? You should call security.”

Henry stood there speechless as Julie disparaged him, called him a creep. Julie told Arianne that he was a sociopath: that he was a liar; that he toyed with people’s emotions; treated them like accounts. Her voice was so loud, almost hysterical, that some of the other tenants were opening their doors and looking out, looking at them, looking at him. Henry hit the elevator button again and mercifully it opened with a ding. He slid in silently, head hanging low and pressed the button for the basement parking.

Henry balled his fist and screamed just as the elevator door closed on him. He was angry, angry that Julie had said those things at him, that she stood there and called him a creep. Especially in front of a slob like Arianne. He paced angrily inside the elevator. He should’ve have known better than to go out with someone who lived in Julie’s building, but the chance of running into her was so tempting.

He had thought that if she saw him with another girl, Julie might come to her senses and come back to him, that she might realize the mistake that she made a year ago when she broke up with him. He had moved

on with his life, but he knew that given the opportunity he was willing to take Julie back.

But he didn't think that Julie would act the way she did. He was angry and confused about the fact that she had called him a creep. He was nothing if not a gentleman, always saying and doing the right thing. If anything, it was Julie who had a problem, not him.

The elevator door opened to the parking area. Henry stepped out just as a security guard approached him. "Good evening, sir," the guard had said. He was holding a walkie-talkie. Henry nodded and walked to where his car was parked. The security guard followed him a few feet away, not close enough to be intrusive, but enough to feel like he was some punk being thrown out of the building.

The guard's walkie squawked. From a distance, Henry could not make out what the person at the other end of the line was saying. But he heard the guard's response loud and clear. "He's going to his car," he had responded.

Henry took out his car keys and unlocked the car remotely. He got into the driver's seat, and slammed the door shut behind him. He put the key in the ignition and turned, the car hummed to life around him, the car stereo turning on and started looking for an FM signal. Henry looked to see if the security guard was still out there watching him. He saw him walking back to the elevators.

For a moment, Henry thought about staying. About climbing back up to Arianne and Julie's floor and figuring out where Julie's unit was and then talking to her. But he knew that building security would be there. That they'd escort him out and throw him out before he could find Julie. Henry put the car on drive and rolled out of the parking slot.

He drove by the elevator area and saw the security guard standing there like a statue. Henry rolled down his window, gave the guard the finger and told him to go fuck himself. He sped away before the guard could react.

Henry's unit was on the 14th floor of a residential building in Quezon City, overlooking his alma mater, which sprawled just across the road. Some mornings, when he would skip work, Henry would stand by his window and look at the line of cars trying to get into the campus. He wondered

what it would be like to drive your child to school every morning, the inconvenience of it, the bother.

Henry opened his door and felt for the light switch. He turned on the lights and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. The unit was big and it seemed bigger because it was almost half-empty. There was a loveseat in the middle of the living area, parked in front of a 40-inch television set. Hooked up to the television was a gaming console, which doubled as his Blu-Ray player. The kitchen area had a small refrigerator and a microwave that sat on the counter. Then there was the big filing cabinet that stood next to the doorway to Henry's bedroom.

He picked up the remote of the small couch and turned the TV on. It was tuned in to an international business channel. The newscaster was talking about the upcoming US presidential election and how that would affect the global economy. Henry dropped the remote back on the loveseat and went into his bedroom. He peeled off his clothes until he was completely naked. He looked at his reflection on the full body mirror he had put at the foot of his bed. He was getting fat despite all the time at the gym, the running, and the swimming.

He bundled up his clothes and dropped them in his laundry hamper then stepped into the shower for a quick bath. After he toweled dry and put on his pajamas, Henry went to the filing cabinet, unlocked it with a small key he took out of his wallet. He opened the third drawer and thumbed through the files until he found Julie's folder. He pulled it out and tucked it under his arm. Then he slid open the top drawer and took out a battered ledger, an empty folder, a pad of legal paper and a small plastic case of office supplies.

Henry walked to breakfast nook and laid out his material. First he took out a Sharpie from the plastic case and wrote Arianne's name on the empty folder tab. Then he took out a pen and wrote on the legal pad. In his neat, blocky hand-writing, Henry described Arianne, the date and her apartment. Underneath the description, he put down his rating of Arianne, which had been 6, but had now gone down to 4.

He tore off the paper from the pad and fastened on the empty folder with Arianne's name on it. Henry went back to his bedroom and came back out with a handful of receipts from the day. He picked out the ones he had spent on the date with Arianne and copied the amount on his ledger. Then

he took the receipts and pasted them on another piece of paper he had fastened on the Arianne folder.

Henry looked up and at the television and saw an ad playing for a men's cologne. A famous tennis player was playing at being a spy—running around in a suit, dodging bullets, jumping across buildings. At the end of the ad, the tennis player-cum-endorser opens the door to a room finds a beautiful woman on his bed, waiting for him. Henry shook his head and went back to work.

He set aside Arianne's folder and picked up Julie's. It was battered around the edges and seemed like it would fall apart if he put anything more in it. He opened the folder, and held his breathe. Julie's file was thick; more than a half of it was receipts that Henry had filed away. The last of the receipts was from a flower shop—that was when he had tried to send Julie, flowers on Valentine's Day.

The flower shop had called him and said that they couldn't make the delivery because Julie had left her job. It took Henry a few hours to find out where Julie's new office was, and when he did he had the flowers delivered there. But Julie had not contacted him, liked he asked her to on the note he sent along with the flowers.

Henry leafed through the file—descriptions of dates, receipts so faded they just looked like empty ribbons of thermal paper. He thumbed a small zip lock bag of her hair, which he had gotten that one time he accompanied her to the salon. He leafed through her file going back through time, until he got to the page he was looking for.

The piece of paper was dated more than three years ago. Henry read and recalled the first time he had seen Julie, the first time he knew that she was the One. He was standing on the curb near his office building, waiting for the light to turn red so he could cross the street. It was lunch time, and the business district was busy with foragers.

He saw her across the street, walking towards the convenience store he was heading to. Henry hurriedly crossed the street like a man possessed and got to the store in time to bump into Julie as she headed out. She apologized to him and headed her way. Henry had thought about following her, but thought better of it. That day he got the same lunch as her, a hotdog sandwich and a bottled ice tea.



Henry looked at the pages that followed: days, weeks and months he observed Julie during their lunch break. He read about the day he finally figured out where she worked; the day he finally overheard her name. He read about the day that he finally found her Facebook profile; the day he finally got the courage to talk to her. By then he had seen the movies she said she loved, read the books she said made her cry, ate at the restaurants she went with her friends and family to. He knew her inside and out, perhaps better than she knew herself. He had invested so much time and money on her.

That was the thing that bothered Henry the most. He thought Julie was a great investment. He had done his research, prepared well, and acted the part of a good boyfriend. Her friends had liked him too, until she broke it off with him and started telling them to avoid him. He had always been on point when it came to looking for a great investment, but not with this.

Henry closed the folder and looked up at the television. The US stock market was going to open in a few minutes, just as somewhere in the world another market would close. He weighed Julie's folder in his hands and for a moment thought of closing the books on her, like he should've done a year ago—the way he had closed the books on those other girls, Lydia and now Arianne.

But Henry knew that he still had moves to make; he could save this investment yet. He wasn't going to give up on true love so easily.

# Rice Soldier

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Rina Garcia Chua

“**A** soldier never leaves his comrades behind. You, as their commander, must maneuver them to their barracks so that they can retreat safely from enemy fire. It’s your job to ensure that each and every one of them lives.”

*“What if I leave one behind?”*

*“Then, you just killed him,” I said as gently as I could. Elizabeth twitched her nose, in that unique way that only she could, and grimaced at me. I caught the quivering of her lower lip as she silently began to scrape the edges of her plate, her spoon and fork dragging against the corners and making a clang-clang-clang sound. Within a few seconds, the grains of rice were all in the middle of her plate. It was a difficult feat: our viand was sinigang. I told her that her soldiers were under the power of the enemy and that they were resisting her commands because they had been ‘brainwashed.’*

*This new game we were playing was born from a practical need: ever since I had been left to deal with household matters, one of my pet peeves was washing the plates which contained leftover rice. I had the worst time trying to scrape them out before they reached the drain. Elizabeth had the tendency to eat haphazardly and leave behind scattered grains of rice all over her plate. My daughter was smart, of course, but young and naive. I couldn’t expect her to understand how much of a hassle her leftover rice was causing me, but the new game may be a better (and more fun) way to condition her for my benefit.*

*“There,” she happily announced, breathing a sigh of relief as she pushed her plate towards me for inspection.*

I smiled at her before I looked down at her plate. It seemed all clean, but before I could congratulate Elizabeth, I spotted one grain of rice hanging from the gutter of the plate's golden trimmings. I pointed to it and Elizabeth gasped. Again, her lower lip quivered.

"Papa, did I kill that soldier?" She ran a hand on her cheek and I wondered if she had started crying already. I steeled my heart against this (such was the dilemma of a father: it was so easy to give in and hug her for assurance), and placed a tentative hand on the same cheek she just rubbed. Elizabeth looked up to me guiltily, her black eyes big and wet.

"Elizabeth, the soldier is not giving up on you. Don't give up on him, either."

Elizabeth's chubby round face slowly broke into a wide grin and she went back to her plate once more.

While she is finishing the last of the *adobo* I have cooked for dinner (it's not my best because I put too much soy sauce in it and maybe charred the chicken when I answered a phone call, but hey, still damn better than most *adobos* I've tasted), I clear my throat to break the silence that is overwhelming our table at that very moment. Elizabeth barely looks up from her plate.

"Your Tito Francis, do you remember him?" I pause to give her some time to acknowledge the question.

Elizabeth crinkles her nose. I wince. She shrugs. "I guess."

"Your Tito Francis called me up a while ago to tell me about this new business venture he's going to go into. And guess who *he* wants to manage it for him?" I smirk, thumping my chest for effect.

Elizabeth does not even glance in my direction. I ignore this, since this is really important news, and continue, "He has found a reputable company who could sell him high-quality CCTV cameras for dirt cheap and he's recruited a programmer who'll create a program that will synch all these CCTV cameras together in anyone's computer. Amazing, isn't it?" I do not wait for her reply; I am too excited to care. "This is a great opportunity for smaller businesses and schools to have a CCTV camera system in their premises *without* paying way beyond their budget. See? I'm selling this thing already. I'm a natural!" I laugh, thick and throaty, pushing my plate away from me, still filled with the half-eaten *adobo*, scattered rice,

and ketchup. It clinks against Elizabeth's plate and she lifts her chin up to inspect my food.

"What are you eating, anyway?" she finally says out loud, her voice small but robust, pointing her dirty spoon at my plate.

I wonder what she's talking about. I'm eating what she's eating!

"Adobo and rice; like you, Elizabeth *iha*." I think I catch her rolling her eyes but I'm not entirely sure. My heart is pumping like a drum inside my chest and my head is swirling with streams of thoughts: CCTV cameras, potential customers, Francis, the money I can earn ...

"Papa, *no one* eats adobo with ketchup."

I ignore her remark. "Elizabeth, I think your school needs a CCTV camera system. I can get it cheap for them and I'll do the installation myself!" I can feel my heart pumping faster, excitedly, as I stand up to make gestures showing how I will be installing the cameras myself. I nail on the imaginary wall with my imaginary hammer and tilt my imaginary CCTV camera in Elizabeth's direction. I make a square with my fingers and place Elizabeth's face in the middle of the frame. "Smile! You're on your principal's candid camera!" I wait for her to laugh.

She doesn't. Instead, Elizabeth's lower lip quivers as she stands up from the table. Her plate is pristine compared to mine—not even one single trace of rice is left on any part of it. She gathers her plate close to her chest, picks up her half-empty glass of water, then squints her eyes at me.

"Don't you *dare* go to my school," she threatens, her voice shaking with (what I believe is) raw anger. Afterwards, she leaves me there at the table, with my *adobo* and ketchup concoction. For a moment it frightens me how much I do not care for her threatening or walking out on me, but before these worries can penetrate my heart, I'm already dialing Francis' phone number on my old cell phone.

"Hello, Papa."

*I suddenly was awakened by the small voice that seemed to be hovering over my face. I moved in my sleep and reached out to hold tiny shoulders against me. I sighed heavily and wished for one more minute alone so I could go back to sleep.*

"Papa, you've been sleeping the whole day. Please wake up," Elizabeth pleaded, the fright in her tiny voice was very evident. I unwillingly opened my

eyes and rubbed them to clear away the white spots that were in my line of vision. There she was, my little girl (not so little anymore, actually—she was turning eight the next month), peering at me while I sat up on the couch. I sat up and stretched my muscles, feeling creaks here and there. I think I had been sleeping for the past twelve hours.

“What can I do for you, my dearest little princess Elizabeth?” I opened my arms to her, and she gladly stepped into my embrace. Her head found the space in between my jaw and my shoulder, Elizabeth’s spot (as I had christened it when she needed to be burped as an infant; her tiny head always ended up in that area), while her short arms wrapped themselves around my broad back.

“Papa, today is my recognition day in school, remember? I have two awards. You must be there.” Her voice against my neck was muffled. I felt myself stiffen at her request.

“Elizabeth, I didn’t know that today ...”

“I told you two weeks ago, Papa. You forgot again.”

“I’m sorry,” I said reflexively, hating the way that those words easily rolled off of my tongue. However, this was still not enough guilt for me to be jolted into attending a recognition day. The thought of facing the people in Elizabeth’s school—the nuns, the teachers, the parents I had met and formed superficial relationships with for the sake of the parent-teacher association—frightened me no end. Plus, it would be necessary for me to converse with them, to laugh and kid around, because that was what they expected of me ...

“Elizabeth, why don’t you call up your Mama to ask her to come with you today? I’m sure she would love to spend some time with you.” I also hated pulling out the “Mama” card, ever since Elizabeth’s mother and I had separated bitterly a few years ago. We shuttle Elizabeth back and forth between ourselves, with her staying with me for the week and her mother getting her during weekends because she worked full-time. It wasn’t a comfortable arrangement, but when her mom walked out on me that time, it was the only thing I could do so that Elizabeth could still have both parents in her life.

When these thoughts came, I swallowed hard to suppress the urge to turn my back on my daughter and go back to sleep. I knew that when I did, Elizabeth would leave me alone.

*“Papa, don’t you remember? Mama is in Quezon for a business trip. That’s why she couldn’t pick me up this weekend. You have to go with me, Papa. I got first place in our poster making contest and I’m also getting a medal for the Math Quiz Bee,” she said, and she bit her pink lower lip afterwards to keep it from shaking.*

Oh, my sweet little princess, *I wondered*, how did we get here, anyway? You pleading for me to come with you to your recognition day; and me thinking of anything, everything, to get out of it? When you were born, Elizabeth, I was the happiest man alive. I thought your birth would change me. I thought it would heal this tiredness within me.

*I was exhausted, so damn exhausted. But I couldn’t feel this way when it came to Elizabeth. I had no one else left.*

*“Okay, my little princess. But we’re leaving immediately after the recognition day, huh?” I made my voice a bit sterner than intended to make sure she understood that I meant this. She nodded happily, reached her hand out and I reluctantly reached back, thinking of the bed I was leaving behind.*

So, here I am in Elizabeth’s school and she doesn’t even want to see me. I showed up holding brochures of our CCTV package to show the administrators. Sure, I didn’t set up an appointment time with them but that was okay since they knew me as the president of the PTA. They told me to wait for a few minutes in the principal’s office, and that’s when Elizabeth walked in. In her high school uniform, she seems so womanly—the green checkered pattern complimented the light yellow tints of her skin and her long, jet-black hair swaying with her languid movements. When we came across each other, she was giggling with her best friend, Amanda, and they barely noticed me sitting there in the principal’s office. Tucked under her arm was an envelope full of papers. I wondered what they were. This young lady tells me nothing nowadays.

Elizabeth’s eyes widen when she sees me sitting there. I raise an eyebrow, and say something like, “Are you in trouble, too?” which draws a laugh from Amanda ... but Elizabeth is livid. She turns her back to me and drops the envelope on the secretary’s desk before storming out. Amanda waves back at me politely, before following my daughter.

I am sending her a text message now, after my successful talk with her principal (I’m a hundred percent *positive*), and I compose it while standing under the heat of the sun outside her school’s gate:

## SEE U LATER. ILL PICK U UP.

I wait for her reply, knowing she will be able to send it because it's her lunch break. A few minutes pass, the sun hot on my nape, and I give up waiting. I spot the old sign for a drinking bar across me. I head toward it, wiping the sweat from my brow with the back of my hand. I curse under my breath when I realize that I soaked the CCTV brochures tucked under my arm through and through. As I cross the street, I throw them into the garbage can I pass by.

Inside, the scent of cigarettes and fresh beer assaulted my senses. I felt energized by the sight before me: young boys who (obviously) cut school hanging out in groups around the billiards table, trying so hard to be Efrén "Bata" Reyes while swinging a bottle of *Red Horse* around, or betting on each other. I also enjoy the sensation of triumph within me, knowing that in only a week I can close the deal in on my first CCTV package sale. I can finally get Elizabeth that outfit from *Forever 21* that she pretended not to like when we went to the mall last week. I feel just like these school boys in here – young, careless, wild – and I storm into the bar, raising my voice to announce my presence: "All bets are off, boys! The master is here!"

Every head in the small room rise up to look at me. I stare back at them, but I make sure that I look at the tops of their heads – buzz-cut hair, Catholic-school issued four by four haircuts, bald heads, Mohawks – so that I further intimidate them.

"Well, who wants to try their luck against me?"

No one at first jumps in, but eventually, a short young man wearing the boy's uniform in Elizabeth's school pushes through the crowd. He jerks a thumb into my direction and winks at the other boys behind him. "I know you – you're Elizabeth's *cool* dad." I make a mental note of the way he emphasizes the word "cool," before he turns and directs his next statement to the others, "He can play a mean billiards game. Let's go, I'm betting on *you!*" He turns back to me.

They all cheer. I feel invincible. I am alive.

Within an hour, I have beaten every boy who dared to go against me. I am currently in a game with another boy from Elizabeth's school (he introduced himself to me by saying, "I sit beside Elizabeth during Math. She's smart and cute." I answered back: "Keep your hands to yourself, boy."

Yes, these are but my many ways to intimidate.) I grab powder from the table behind me, rub it in between my palms, snarl at this young boy who nervously unbuttons his collar, grab the stick, and position myself in front of the table to start the first hit of the game. I wink at the boys watching me, wiggle my butt a little, and tell them, “Here’s how a master gets it done, neophytes.”

At the corner of my eye, I see my daughter’s silhouette at the entrance. I see her silhouette laugh with her friend, freeze before stepping into the bar, and exit quickly. I hit the ball, the ball bounces against the other colored balls, and I hear one sinking into the holes at the corners of the table.

They all cheer. I cheer along with them and dart my eyes to where I know Elizabeth has been a while ago. She’s gone.

*She left me. She was gone.*

*I was thinking about my wife as I was cooking pasta that night. I thought about how Elizabeth loved her mom’s pasta primavera and I was making a piss-poor job at mine right now. I wish I could cook better; I wish she would come back home to me.*

*In the master’s bedroom, Elizabeth was busy with Beauty and the Beast. I had never been so thankful for the VHS tape player that her mother had bought before she left us, because it now was my ally in making sure that the house was in order without a seven-year-old hot at my heels, asking me when her mom was coming back.*

*I dropped the noodles into the hot water and I broke some in the process. I berated myself, thinking that my wife never made any mistakes when she cooked this dish and always did it with a smile, too. I was terrible in all aspects: I was a terrible husband, father, and cook. I just couldn’t do anything right. I couldn’t even keep a job.*

*When finally I was able to wrestle the noodles into the deep basin to boil, and the sauce was slowly simmering beside it, I went into the master’s bedroom. Elizabeth sat cross-legged on the edge of the bed, her chin on her hands and her long waist-length hair spread around her body. She seemed so small, so tiny, as she sat there and I wondered how someone so small and tiny could understand the gravity of our situation. How could we survive this together?*

*I plopped heavily beside her on the bed and spread my arms out wide. I closed my eyes and listen to a silly conversation between Belle and the kitchen*



*utensils. I counted the seconds and minutes in my head before I needed to stand up to turn off the gas and serve dinner.*

*Suddenly, there was a small head lying down on my shoulder. I sighed deeply, opening my arms further to accommodate her. Elizabeth's head moved around a bit before settling down on the spot where she belonged. I held her tiny body against mine, wanting nothing but to cry and let her share the dread that was settling in the pit of my stomach, but I held back. I ran my fingers through her hair, felt her hug me tighter, and let myself listen to the sound of the candelabra singing, "Be my Guest." In two minutes, I needed to stand up and serve dinner. In two minutes, I needed to start a new life for both of us.*

I need to play basketball to signal the beginning of my new successful business venture. I do so with a bunch of young boys who do not even hold a candle to my skills. They all falter as I perform my fantastic rebound, and they curse under their breaths as I shoot another one into the basket.

"So, pretty spry for an old guy, eh boys?"

They do not reply. They stare at me with their bodies and second-hand jerseys, standing there in a circle while I swirl the basketball in my fingertips. The adrenaline rushes through me, and I feel it when I throw the ball back at them. They barely catch this and I laugh at how they fumble. I am so much better than them! I may be old but I am so much better!

Then, suddenly, I spot her: Elizabeth is standing across our house, parallel to the basketball court, and there she is... she's talking to someone. She's leaning over and cupping her mouth with her hand. She's talking to someone. She's not only talking... she's conspiring with someone. I know it. I feel it. She leans over once more and I crane my neck to see who she's talking to.

When I see who she's with, it hits me at the same time the basketball hits my face. The boys laugh and I snarl at them. They all take steps back and I leave them there, jumping across the fence of the court toward where I see Elizabeth talking with her mother. They are talking about me, I am sure of this, just as I am sure of them standing there. No wonder Elizabeth went to bed early—she wants to betray me! She invited her mother over so that they could talk about me and betray me!

Wait, I can't go there yet. I can't let them know that I saw them. Let it simmer first; let their evil plan against me simmer for a while. I move away and run. I start running nowhere, everywhere, feeling my shoes pummel the hard concrete as if I was on autopilot. I stifle my breath as I run past the houses, running and not counting time anymore. I run and run, until I reach our street once again and hear our neighbor's fighting cocks crow. It's four in the morning.

I rush into our house and into Elizabeth's room. I open the door, making sure to bang it so she hears, and switch on the lights. Elizabeth sits up from her bed and stares at me with wide, frightened eyes.

I wipe the sweat off my brows and shout, "You traitor! You little bitch!"

Elizabeth raises her eyebrows. She looks surprised but not frightened. She looks tired. I ignore this and began again, "How dare you talk to your mother! How dare you tell her what I have been doing! How dare you conspire against me after all I have done for you! You never even thanked me, Elizabeth, and you now want to tell your mother how evil I am? How dare you, bitch!" I point a finger at her and she whips her head away from me. I want her to cry, I hope she's crying, but I can't see. The sweat keeps dripping from my forehead and I can't concentrate until I let all this anger and adrenaline out of me. My heart can't keep steady. I need to let this all out.

Elizabeth moves her lips, they don't quiver, and she stares back at me. "Papa, its four o'clock in the morning; I have been sleeping here since yesterday when you left. Mama's not in the country, remember? She's in Japan for a business meeting." She calmly pulls her feet from her blanket and hugs herself. She purses her lips towards me. "Have you slept? Or were you out the whole night?"

I don't accept this. She's lying. Just like her mother lied to me years ago when she said she'll never leave me and that we were forever. She's lying to me just like my own mother lied to me when she said she was never going to leave me and she left me when I was just five for another man. She's lying to me like all the women before her did!

Elizabeth studies my face quietly before she says, "I'm not lying to you, Papa. You need to get some sleep."

*"I want to sleep," Elizabeth whined. I ignored her and continued holding*

her hand against the paper. "Papa, I want to sleep. I used to sleep in the afternoon, remember?"

"Ah," I retorted, firmly directing her hand to reach up and trace the printed strokes on the paper. "But sleeping in the afternoon is for babies. Are you still a baby?"

She wrinkled her nose. "No."

"What are you now?"

She huffed proudly. "I'm a big girl."

"So big girls don't sleep in the afternoon; instead, big girls learn their handwriting." I tapped on her cheek and directed her attention back to the paper. We were learning cursive handwriting that afternoon. I wanted Elizabeth to learn how to write properly and not end up like me, someone who had been often asked if I was a doctor because of the way I wrote.

Together, we traced the big and small L's of the page, taking care to follow the rules of the handwriting book: "Light and heavy; light and heavy," I chanted softly. I kissed the top of her head to encourage her as she gripped the pencil tighter.

Just when I thought that she was getting the hang of it, she suddenly dropped the pencil and placed her head in her hands. "I'm sick and tired of this, Papa. Light and heavy; light and heavy; light and heavy!" she shrieked the last phrase. I released her hand.

Elizabeth was gritting her teeth and breathing heavily. She stared up at me with those wet, black eyes and asked, "This is tiring, Papa. Is there no in-between the light and heavy?"

I had to think about that for a while, before I answered: "There's no in-between, Elizabeth: light and heavy only." She received this with a sigh.

Then, she's angry. She's so angry after what I just said that her whole body shakes in the effort to control her anger. She stands up from her bed, plants her feet firmly on the ground, grits her teeth, and points a finger back at me. I wipe the sweat from my brow again, hating the way this is clouding my vision. It's so hot. I want to take a bath.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Papa!" she screams, the thick blue vein on her neck throbbing. "You don't know what you're talking about because you're sick!" Elizabeth's eyes water now and I take note of how this does not give me the satisfaction I thought it would. "Papa,

why do you think grandma and Mama left you, huh? Papa, you're sick! You need to go and see a doctor as soon as possible because I don't know how much more of this I can take!"

What she tells me startles me. I wipe my face again and turn my back to her. "I'm going to take a bath." I leave her behind—the tension and her suggestion—just as they have all left me behind. There's no one else now, no one else except Elizabeth, and I know that it is only a matter of time before she leaves me behind, too.

I strip off my clothes, pooling them beside my feet. I stare at these for a while, noticing how dirty they are, and without any more hesitation, I step into the shower. I let the water run wildly across my heated skin, letting it soak my anger out, letting it wash over me like Elizabeth's words did a few minutes ago.

Then, I feel something hit the back of my head—so sudden, so fast, so painful—that I double over and collapse to the floor.

*"You're the only one I have left, Elizabeth. I wonder if you will ever understand this, because if one day, you choose to walk away from me, I don't know what I'll do. I can't live without you,"* I whispered this into her hair one summer night when she has fallen asleep in the master's bedroom. When I tried to carry her back to her room, I find that I can't anymore. She was almost a teenager now, a few months shy of eleven, and at her new weight, I recognized that I wasn't getting any younger, either. Things were about to change, and that night was my last chance to let her know how much she meant to me – she was my world, this little princess in my arms, my world.

She is my life.

I wake up suddenly, violently. I feel my feet jerking against the unfamiliar covers of the bed; my head whirling from the sudden bright white lights that are overhead my face. I want to scream and shout, to command someone, anyone, to help me out, but I remember Elizabeth, and instead, I panic. I shout out her name until she seems to materialize before me. She is wearing the same pajamas she was wearing the last time I saw her, but this time, she has tied her hair behind her in a thick bun. She looks frazzled, but her face is stoic as she meets me and sits down on a chair beside my bed.

"Where am I?" I demand, then I wonder about my voice—it sounds so garbled, soft. There's something wrong, but I don't know what it is. Elizabeth needs to tell me *now*.

“Papa,” she starts calmly, “you’re in the hospital. The doctor said you suffered a stroke. You’re in the clear now and grandma’s on her way to help us with the bills and other things... but Papa, you need to rest to get your strength back.”

A stroke?

I move around once more. When I lift my left hand, I see that I have a medical bracelet around it. Connected to my right arm is the dextrose. There’s also an oxygen tube in my nose. I feel constrained. I struggle against these.

“Papa, stay put. You’ll be fine. I’m here.” Elizabeth places a tentative hand on mine. I breathe in deeply, trying to calm down my rapidly beating heart. A stroke? Okay, a stroke. I’m fine, I’m safe. I’ll live. I’m in the hospital. I’ll live. Elizabeth’s here. I’ll be fine.

“There’s something else, Papa.” Elizabeth releases my hand and goes to the table beside my bed. There are pills there—so many, I think, and of different colors, too. She picks up a rectangular white mat of pills and shows them to me. I don’t take it. I wave it away and ask, “What are those?”

“I talked to your attending physician and I told him about your problem,” Elizabeth says, diverting her eyes away from me, “Papa, he referred me to a psychiatrist and they think that these pills may help you. Umm, they say that your stroke may have been a direct result of your hyperactivity due to your ...”

A psychiatrist? I flare up at her insinuation. “I’m not crazy, Elizabeth!” I try to shout out, but it comes out more garbled than alarmed.

“No one’s saying you are, Papa,” she patiently answers back. “But we need to face the reality that these changes you go through are not normal. They are not healthy for you *or* me. We need to get help if we want us to get through this ...”

“I’m not crazy, Elizabeth!” I try to scream once again. Elizabeth stands up and throws the pills on the table. She hits the table with her fist and kicks the foot of my bed. She turns her back to me so that I don’t get the pleasure of seeing her frustration. We stay for a while in that terse standoff.

*Once, when Elizabeth was nine, we were walking away from church after Sunday mass. I was in a hurry, struggling to make sure that I didn’t see*

*anyone I wouldn't want to talk to. I tried hiding my face with one hand, while my other gripped Elizabeth's to direct her out of there. It happened fast: before I knew it, Elizabeth's hand slipped away from me and I swirled around to look for her.*

*"Elizabeth?" I cried out, craning my neck to try and catch her top of head. There were so many people all coming out at the same time and I couldn't see her. I called her name out loud again and pushed against the outgoing crowd.*

*I was jolted out of my panic when a small hand found mine. I looked down to see Elizabeth winking at me. She tightened her grip around my hand. "Don't worry, Papa. No one ever gets left behind, right?" She smiled, her teeth pink with the bubblegum I had allowed her to chew during the long mass, and I smiled back, feeling myself calm down.*

She eats beside me after I refuse to take the soup the hospital has served. I don't trust the soup because it may have those crazy pills in them. I don't trust Elizabeth even if she has tasted the soup herself in front of me to prove that it was fine. When I still kept my mouth closed as she waved a spoonful of soup in front of my face, she gritted her teeth, and went back to eat her meal.

An hour has passed and none of us have said anything. We sit in thick silence with Elizabeth finishing her food and me watching CNN. Bored by the newscast, I unintentionally glance back at Elizabeth and her plate catches my eye: as always, it is as pristine as the day she finally learned to keep her rice soldiers together.

I stare longer than intended and Elizabeth sees my face turned towards her. She lifts her head up, catches my eye, and stops moving, with her spoon against the plate and her fork poised atop a turon. We stare at each other. Inside me, I feel the truth catching up with us, the realization drawing in like an anvil in the pit of my stomach, and I take the truth like I should take those pills: a bitter mouthful.

This little princess, now a young lady, has endured so much from me, much more than her grandmother and mother ever had. I wonder how long this will last. I wonder how long she'll stay.

I nudge her hand with my finger for it's the closest to me. "Go home and rest, Elizabeth. I'll just press the nurse's button if I need anything else. Anyway, your grandma's on her way here." I break our eye contact and re-

turn to CNN.

Elizabeth gently places her spoon and fork on the plate, making sure they are aligned, and stands up. She moves towards me and sits carefully at the edge of my bed's cushion. She takes my hand.

I shouldn't, but I let her.

**END<sup>1</sup>**

**(Endnotes)**

1 For Regina Garcia Chua: you have endured more than anyone of us.

# Reenactment

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Glenn Diaz

**L**ike all media junkets, this one needed patience and inevitably birthed an existential crisis or two. Our Airbus had landed at the little airport in Catarman, Northern Samar, 45 minutes ago, but the municipal government's coaster, which the organizers' many earnest emails said would come and take us to our hotel, was still nowhere in sight. Tom—my pro bono photographer for this assignment—had been obsessing over his ponytail, tying up then undoing it, as he would when exasperated.

"Is it their first time?" asked a man whom I recognized as a popular travel blogger. "So unprofessional."

The lifestyle editor of a popular daily (circulation: 500,000) glared at him. "They did Panagbenga and Dinagyang this year," she called out. "They do this sort of thing all the time. Everybody knows that."

"Everybody," agreed a young reporter for a news website, keen on not being lumped together with the blogger. "They also did Sinulog, right?"

"This airport," someone from a fashion magazine observed, "so quaint 'no?" A drop of water fell on her head from the roof gutter, left over from the rain this morning. She looked around if anyone had seen and discreetly ran a hand down her hair.

By "quaint," perhaps she meant that the airport's perimeter was lined with residential houses. Deplaning, you could feel beady eyes watching you from windows and makeshift stoops. As soon as the airport closed at



dusk, the sole runway was opened to wingless vehicles.

The photographers, who always bunched together in one group, were enveloped in a marbled haze of cigarette smoke. Their bulky equipment were in bags either slung around their necks or parked next to them in futuristic-looking suitcases with innumerable compartments.

“You only brought one camera?” a young photographer with one such suitcase asked a well-known wires veteran.

“If you’re really good,” answered the bearded front page regular, “no need for those fancy things.” He let out a long drag in the face of the dazed youngster, like a cockfighter to his prized pugilist.

“Is someone, like, calling them *na*?” a whiny voice from behind the pack asked.

I looked at Tom, who smiled, not missing a beat. The many ways people could toe the line between interesting and annoying had always surprised me. Tom and I, we had formed a friendship in college that was almost hermetic. A year after graduation, we were always shocked at all such strangeness outside, like Japanese guerrilla fighters who had valiantly stayed in the hinterlands, refused to surrender to the Americans, then came out 50 years later to a crowded McDonalds in the foothills of the Sierra Madre.

Some would call it misanthropy.

Our group was conspicuously large, easily more than 30 people now gathered at the narrow drop-off area in front of the airport. The tricycle drivers who had earlier offered us rides to our hotel had since given up, and were now crouched to the ground in a semi-circle for a fresh round of *cara y cruz*.

The organizers for this trip were a PR company based in Manila. The head of the firm had flown ahead of us to Catarman, ostensibly to get acquainted with the place. As publicity people were wont to do, they had been generous with their reminders via text and calls and email, a persistence that had bordered on neurotic, and which now made their MIA status puzzling and irksome.

“Gosh,” the whiny voice slurred, “so *tagal*.”

Making a bunch of media people wait when you want them to write glowing reviews of your event wasn’t a good idea. Lifestyle beat reporters

were notoriously cliquish. Maybe even more cliquish than the high-and-mighty Malacañang press corps or the uppity business reporters with their suits and incomprehensible jargon.

Soon a bus bearing the smiling face of a balding 50-something man appeared near the gate, which was visible from the drop-off area. There were hoots and cheering from the group, and again Tom and I looked at each other. The gratitude that I felt for him—that he was here, that I didn't have to endure this alone like so many gruelling assignments—hit me so that I gave his arm a slight pinch.

“What?” he asked, smiling, but he knew.

The bus stopped in front of us and blocked the sun.

As I expected, there were giveaways on-board to compensate for the delay, to pacify. A loot bag, made of abaca and bearing the town seal, had in it a packet of rice krispies, a couple of pili bars, and bottles of assorted fruit jams. At the hotel, predictably owned too by the mayor, the staff wore *baro't saya* and, one by one, they placed synthetic orchid garlands around our necks. In our rooms, there was a plate of lanzones and rambutan beside the press kit. A personalized welcome note, supposedly from the mayor himself, misspelled my very simple name.

\*

Furious knocking on the door woke me up; my chest sunk even before I opened my eyes.

“It's OK. It's OK,” Tom kept reassuring me as we made our way across the hotel lobby, seconds after I splashed water on my face and grabbed my notebook and pen. “They made us wait earlier remember?”

On the bus, there were polite smiles as we made our way to the back-most part. A veteran of the beat who wrote for a major publication might shrug off the tardiness with a joke, but for someone like me, who wrote for a fledgling *Village Voice*-type weekly (circulation: 10,000) and was new to the group, it was a serious offense. “Ay, sleeping beauty,” piped in a bald effeminate man in a screaming orange shirt, his neck still adorned with the purple synthetic flowers. I gave him a weak smile.

“Tabloid people,” I whispered to Tom, who hadn't stopped fiddling

with his hair.

“OK now that we’re complete” announced a mestiza lady with a pointed look in my direction, “a brief background of what’s going to happen for the next two days. If you’ll look at your press kit—”

I looked at Tom, who started to chuckle. “How do you keep your job?” he asked.

“There is some historical information there which you can use for your articles,” the lady said. There were also quotes from the mayor, but just to be safe we should run all quotes by them before sending to our editors. The governor of Eastern Samar would be there with a short speech before the highlight—an “artistic interpretation of the Balangiga Massacre.”

“This will be followed by,” she went to the next page of the guide in her clipboard, “a street dance competition, a grand fireworks display, then a free concert by Sarah Geronimo.”

“Do we have to stay for the concert?” asked the travel blogger. “I would prefer to go around town to look for interesting tips for my readers.”

“All 34 of them,” someone shouted from the back, drawing laughter from all over.

“You have to stay through the entire thing,” volunteered another from the front row. “It’s how media junkets work.”

“But it’s Sarah Geronimo,” said the blogger.

I yawned as a heartfelt defense of Sarah Geronimo’s vocal prowess commenced.

“How’s Katrina?” I asked Tom.

“She’s OK,” he said. “Experimenting in the kitchen. Last week she made a weird pasta dish with capers and tomatoes and kamias—”

“Preparing for motherhood?”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“Thanks for coming,” I told him.

He shrugged. Tom wrote the script for a major network’s late-night news program, while Katrina was part of the research support team for the country’s top broadsheet. Unlike me, they stayed painstakingly on the path set out for journalism majors.

“This will be fun,” Tom said, as a silver-haired society columnist got

up with some effort to point a bony finger at the blogger. “—and that’s what’s wrong with *your* generation,” he concluded, followed by a spattering of applause.

A discussion on what went wrong with the country after Marcos was about to ensue when the mestiza lady looked at her watch and calmly called out “OK, settle down now. Settle down.” The murmurs not subsiding, she raised her pen then shouted, “Oy!”

Even the driver turned to listen to her.

“The flights we booked for you guys tomorrow are in the late afternoon, so you have the whole morning to explore. Any questions?”

From the back row, someone asked, “Will Sarah hold a presscon after the concert?”

\*

For a first job, lifestyle writer wasn’t so bad.

Sure, it wasn’t the hard-core Woodward and Bernstein stuff we had imagined. None of the gruesome dark alley stabbing and formalin-smelling morgues of the police beat, the scandal-rich material of the senate, the self-importance of op-ed. Thankfully I was absolutely devoid of any delusion of grandeur. I knew I could not change the world.

Not in this manner at least. Not in the four pages of the lifestyle section that I needed to fill weekly. Mondays to Wednesdays were for gathering material and writing. I would turn everything in to my editor by Thursday, and by Friday the issue was put to bed. A few months into the job, I was starting to get the hang of things. There was only so much wisdom you can derive from art exhibits and fashion shows, and I felt I was now ready to do something experimental and possibly even insightful, something un-lifestyle-like. Samar would give me that chance.

Once, in high school, our history teacher asked our class how the revolutionaries won against Spain. Joel Garcia, a lanky math whiz who didn’t know any better, raised his hand and proudly answered, “Because the Americans helped us, Ma’am.”

Mrs. Co, a sophisticated woman whose plump face and shoulder-length bob made her both cute and respectable, stared at him for a few

moments before her expression crumpled as if she had squeezed a calamansi into a cut in her arm. “What?” she screamed. She had long been famous for the shower that had her front row students constantly wishing for an umbrella. That time, a torrential downpour like that year’s Typhoon Rosing sprayed on Joel’s terrified face. We ended up finding out that Mrs. Co had marched in the anti-US bases rallies. “You know what we used to shout then?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she went to the blackboard and wrote “IMPERYALISMO” and started chanting. At this point Joel had started to redden and appear ready to burst into tears, which he did the moment the sound of Mrs. Co’s heels had faded in the hallway.

“Know your history, Joel!” which Mrs. Co had repeated many times throughout the ordeal, would go on to be one of the catchphrases of our batch.

“*Patintero* after class?” he’d ask.

“Know your history, Joel!” we’d chorus.

Mrs. Co had also written “Balangiga” on the board that day, and we witnessed one of the most inspired moments of pedagogy in our young lives—although Mr. Pechardo’s droning algebra lectures and Mrs. Felices’s dull grammar lessons weren’t exactly worthy competition. That the Balangiga church bells remained in American hands infuriated her and, later, us.

It was why I had been excited about this assignment. My editor told me a PR company emailed her about a “cultural event” in Samar centered on the Balangiga Massacre. “Well, this looks promising,” she had said with a torturous chuckle. “Mind if I go anyway?” I asked, to which she gave one of her indifferent shrugs. “If you can find a pro-bono photographer again, sure.” I called Tom, who said yes.

“We’re almost there,” the mestiza lady announced now. Tom was sleeping against the window, an open paperback on his lap. Outside, the commercial establishments in the town proper of Catarman had given way to an open highway surrounded by fields and, farther still, verdant mountainside, the same hinterlands, I could imagine, where Filipino troops sought refuge following the massacre after orders were given to turn Samar into a “howling wilderness.”

Like a mirage, a huge structure emerged in the horizon. Cars and tricycles were making a beeline to the stadium entrance, while a couple of uniformed cops lazily directed traffic. Seeing our bus and the grinning face

of their mayor, the people on the roadside threw our vehicle vague glances. “Built just last year,” the mestiza lady said. “Wow ‘no?’” I’d like to think that behind her creased forehead was the same question that was on my mind; namely, how could one of the poorest provinces in the country afford a monstrosity like this?

In an unpaved lot behind the stadium, our bus maneuvered through sloppily parked red plates and found a spot. “OK, people,” the lady announced, as the engine died and Tom yawned awake. “We’re here.”

“Game?” I asked Tom.

“Game,” he answered.

Beside the parking lot were small tents and stalls that sold everything from shawarma and rice cakes to vegetarian burgers. One booth had counterfeit Adidas and Nike jackets displayed up front, beside shirts with the word “Balangiga” in atrocious red font printed on them. I thought of getting one for Katrina.

\*

The governor’s speech must have just passed the 30-minute mark when we realized with the requisite horror that it was not going to end soon, and we were trapped. Why am I here? I wondered, my mind swirling with delirious thoughts of teleportation and parallel universes, fantasies involving my bed at home, a bag of Lays, and an episode of *Survivor*.

Some of us in the covered bleachers were fanning themselves senseless. The others in the crowd were cramped in wooden benches in the upper section, while some kids were slumped on the surrounding fields, like fish laid out to dry.

“You OK?” I asked Tom, who, in his boredom, must have taken a photo of every angle of the sweaty governor. The official was making his speech from a podium in a makeshift stage across the bleachers; in between, a concrete basketball court where much of the program, we assumed, would take place.

“Sorry it’s taking so long,” I told him.

“Nah, it’s OK,” he lied. In his mind, he was probably re-evaluating his idea of what a lifestyle reporter did.

“Our province,” the governor was saying, “is a modest place with a rich history of heroism. And with the help of our stakeholders—”

“Jesus Christ,” groaned the lifestyle section editor. “I’m not prepared for this.”

Sensing the toll this was taking on the media people, the organizers produced paper plates of pancit from somewhere and started passing them around. I was nearly finished eating when the governor coughed—“Excuse me, excuse me”—followed by a prolonged coughing fit. As feedback issued from the mic, the audience held their breaths, no doubt praying for something along the lines of a non-fatal choking accident.

Alas, an aide managed to produce a glass of water and after a few energetic gulps the governor’s baritone—“Thank you, Mila, thank you”—sounded invigorated, as if ready for another hour of meaningless rhetoric on the nation. The crowd groaned as Mila, the aide, smiled from the sidelines. I’m sure at least 1,341 people—official gate attendance as of last checking—hated fucking Mila in varying degrees.

More droning minutes passed.

“The program says he has 15 minutes,” said the mestiza lady, looking nonplussed herself. In a much lower voice, she added, “But let’s see anyone try to stop him. See that security detail?”

The governor continued, “We have a lot of problems, they say. Why do this program of celebrating Balangiga and not focus on education? Health? But history is also important to us. Because without it, where would we be?”

“In my office in Salcedo,” the editor said, “actually getting some work done.”

“I hope the street dance competition is better than this,” said the blogger.

“Anything is better than this,” someone remarked.

“I hate my life,” yawned another.

The aged columnist had fallen asleep on the shoulder of the poor magazine intern.

“So without further ado—” the governor said, and the words seemed to hang in the air. The reporters tentatively sat up in attention while the photographers all stood up, except for Tom, whom I had to nudge from his

seat-bound stupor. He quickly joined the phalanx that had started to walk toward courtside.

Applause interrupted the confused governor in mid-sentence and didn't stop until he was back in his seat, basking in the thunderous ovation, no doubt congratulating himself for the great, great job.

A group of men then entered the basketball court carrying to the center a long wooden table, around which more than 20 Caucasian men in fatigues took their places. Someone who was probably the event director gave the sound booth in front of the audience area the go signal. A minute or so later, however, there were still no sound emanating from the huge amplifiers placed equidistantly around the stage.

"Jesus Christ," someone said.

I looked for Tom in the throng of photographers and found him dangerously near one of the speakers.

The director was on his way to the sound booth when the shrill and unbearably loud recording of a clanging bell surprised everyone and had hands frantically covering astonished ears. I saw Tom jerk back, scratch his head and, when he had recovered, fix his ponytail.

Through a wince, locals dressed in either dirtied shirts and cotton pants entered the court brandishing bolos and daggers, mouths open in a soundless scream. With contrived elegance, they began hacking the unmoving American soldiers one by one.

"Camo uniforms wouldn't be used until World War II," the columnist said, "so clearly there was time travel involved here. Brilliant."

"It's an *artistic* interpretation," someone noted.

The group murmured their assent.

Soon all the Caucasian actors were on the ground, their coats splashed with dye that was more purple than red, more pesky ink stain than oozing blood. The Filipinos were still raising their weapons in glorious victory when some of the dead Americans started getting up, eliciting some laughter from the crowd. Realizing their mistake, some lay back down while others completed their exit to courtside, where the furious director awaited them.

The applause was lazy, unsure. The reenactment gave way to a modern dance number featuring the same actors. By the tenth minute of



the medley, the governor was seen trying to leave discreetly, but he was mobbed by a dozen people or so, a moving whirlpool through the crowd.

After the performance, a children's choir entered the stage and began singing something sad and unintelligible.

"There was this festival in Isabela," one of the photographers said. "It rained and all the kid performers were soaked. You know what the governor there said? 'Don't worry. We will distribute Biogesic after the show.'"

"You think Sarah Geronimo's already here?" someone wanted to know.

I sent a text message to Tom, telling him to meet me by the stadium gate.

\*

The waitress had taken our orders and had been on her way to the kitchen when I told Tom, finally, a moment, a moment unsullied by any murderous thought.

Booze joints were the same throughout the archipelago, he said. This one, a block away from our hotel, was as accommodating and cozy as they came. An always-occupied videoke machine made conversation difficult, but that was part of the deal.

"Are you sure this is OK?" he asked.

"What?" I shouted. "That we escaped? I already have a story. Don't worry."

He smiled, perhaps, like me, recalling how we sneaked out of the stadium and paid 300 pesos to a bewildered stranger idling by a parked motorcycle to take us back to the town proper.

"You know those articles," I said, "that are supposed to be about one thing then somehow always end up being about the author."

"I hate those," he snapped, just as I said, "I'll write something like that."

"Those articles annoy the hell out of me," Tom added.

I told him, well, I felt I was now ready to annoy my readers—"All seven of them," he interrupted, laughing—and my high school history teacher

would join me in the task.

I'd do a good job, I thought, maybe even better than the rest of the junket who had stayed in the stadium and were now probably asking themselves why there had to be suffering in the world, in general, and, in particular, why they had to sit there and watch all the "festivities."

"What's your story about?" he asked.

Something about the past, I said, our constant attempts to relive it, to negotiate with its being done. Something about reenactments, how they were always destined to fail anyway. "Something like that," I told him.

"Promising," he said gravely, eyes narrowed as if in deep thought.

"Fuck you," I said, and we laughed so hard that the waitress bearing our beer bucket stepped back, slightly afraid. *Manileños*. She opened two bottles and gave us a nervous smile.

As what typically filled vacant moments, he rattled off names of vaguely familiar people from college, one or two still in touch, approached when in need of special favors, thrown a smiling nicety in the chance encounter at the mall. What time did to relationships, and quickly. Years ago, these people occupied prime positions in our lives and phonebooks. They were a text message away. We drank on birthdays and when somebody was heartbroken. We toasted to graduation, to the great beyond. Today, they were recalled only through tremendous effort.

"Tom," I said.

"Yes, Alvin."

"When did you realize we'd be, you know, like this?"

"What?"

"You know." I smiled, wanting desperately to say, "Like this."

He looked perplexed. Once, in Baguio, where he grew up, he had told me he sometimes thought that, maybe, we were together in a past life. "Maybe 'no?" he had asked, his eyes mere slits in his reddened face. Absolutely drunk in the middle of Session Road, he had then slurred, "If you were a girl, we would probably be fucking right about now." That night, we slept on his childhood bed. His pillows smelled fervently of detergent.

I took a long swig of my beer. His face was awash with red and green psychedelic lights, blinking in step with the 80s ballad blaring from the tireless videoke machine.

“Do you think,” I said, “things would have been different if Katrina didn’t come along?”

“Alvin,” he said. He opened my next bottle for me. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

\*

Outside the beer joint, we heard a distant crackling sound and saw fireworks in the outlying horizon.

It had been such a joy to be away from the junket that I could now imagine our bus with some amusement, as it now probably awaited everyone’s tired, heavy-footed return. Even the indefatigable mestiza lady must be running low on energy, having to endure the six-hour program while catering to the needs of the restless, always spoiled members of the Fourth Estate.

“We’re thinking of naming him after you,” Tom said.

“It’s a boring name,” I told him. “Don’t punish the kid.”

“I like boring sometimes.”

“Anyway,” I said, blinking away the subject, “what do you want to do now?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “What can we do here?”

“I think I saw a pool hall somewhere.”

“Not in the mood.”

“Hungry?” I asked.

“Not really.”

In every out-of-town assignment, I would always plan to explore the new surroundings, take long, leisurely walks along acacia-lined boulevards and unfamiliar streets. Constantly, I’d imagine relishing the anonymity; the overheard, unintelligible conversations. But once work was over and I had the night to myself, something would creep in. Laziness, maybe. Fear. Most of the time, I would end up ensconced in my hotel room, safe and bored and hating myself for never being brave enough.

“How about a nice walk?” I asked.

“Shit,” he said. “I was supposed to call Katrina at 8.”

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, walking away.

It was only half past 9 but this part of town was all but ready to call it a night. A jeep or tricycle would pass by every now and then. There were parked tricycles in a far-away corner, lit by a lone streetlamp.

A few moments later, I spotted a small convenience store and entered it. I made my way to the coolers and got myself an ice cream cone. When I got to the counter, a Caucasian man was paying for a bag of Lays.

"Are you going to finish all of that?" I asked him.

He turned around and looked at me, and I noticed that he was wearing a soiled camo coat. "Yeah, I think so," he said, the beginning of a smile tentative in his lips. He took his change.

"You're one of the performers!" I cried. I paid for my ice cream cone and tore off the wrapper. It was cold and sweet, a swift comfort to the bitter remnants of the beer in my mouth. "This is so good. You want some?"

"No thanks," he said, "see you 'round." He began to walk away, hands inside his freshly opened bag of chips.

"Wait, where are you going?" I called out, catching up and putting a hand on his shoulder.

He turned around, dislodging my hand. "Excuse me?"

"Where are you going?" I touched him on the side of his arm, gave it a little squeeze.

He looked at me, then at his arm.

I squeezed again.

"Are you messing with me?" he said. His face moved a few inches away from my own and I could smell that he'd had a little to drink, too. He was so close that I could note the burst of freckles on one side of his nose, on his flushed cheeks. He lingered for a few seconds, his eyes never leaving mine. I blinked after a while, before he walked away.

I couldn't move for a minute or two, until I heard a squeak from the counter. "Are you OK, sir?" the teller asked. I tried to smile at him, then ordered my legs to move, move, move. I spotted a trash bin, into which I tossed the ice cream cone, half-melted and sticky in my hand.

Outside, another man who looked like a local stood by the door, his face with a pompous expression that was his attempt, I supposed, to look older than he really was, which was probably 20, give or take a year. The

next thing I knew, wind was hitting my face in a cold, almost painful up-draft. We were on a scooter, my hands were on the stranger's shoulders, and we were traversing the empty streets of Catarman at what must have been 100 miles per hour. He slowed down after a while then parked in front of a spacious open-air drinking place. Inside were plastic tables and white monobloc chairs that for some mysterious reason had been painted black. We took one near the gate so he could keep an eye on his scooter.

"You always do this?" he asked, and I nodded even if I wasn't sure what "this" was.

The alcohol did its job and our conversation, a bottle or so later, achieved a certain level of regularity. He asked about my job. I asked about Catarman. He asked if I had a boyfriend. I lied and said yes, he was in the hotel, sleeping.

After a while I asked him if he knew a place, and he nodded. My hand had been up, requesting for the bill when I heard a loud rumble of an engine that sent a strange sensation in my tummy. "Is there another way out?" I asked. He shook his head.

And so in the sluggish frame-by-frame manner in which all dreadful things transpired, members of the junket started pouring into the place. Still leading the pack was the mestiza lady. I wasn't sure if she had seen me, but any attempt to duck or hide would probably be silly so I looked at her, expecting a wave or a teasing smile. Her glance seemed to linger over our table for a few moments, before she faced the group and started counting. The rest were probably too tired to even look around.

"There's 28 of us all in all," I heard the lady shout to the waitress. Her arms were spread vigorously, which must have been her gesture for "big room." She repeated it many times, as if the waitress were deaf or dumb.

"Videoke!" someone shouted, prompting acquiescent cheering. Soon they were out of sight, led away by the waiter down a stone pathway to a cottage behind the bar. My companion was finishing the last of his beer.

\*

Aboard the plane the following day, I had offered Tom the window seat; he said no. Now he was telling me to move my body so he could see this spectacular show that the heavens, in this last-minute explosion of dying light, was throwing. The horizon was bleeding a cascade of colors, bluish hues on top then the shades descended into red and vermillion. The bed of reed-thin clouds looked aflame, the sun making quite an exit.

The mestiza lady beamed at us from across the aisle, a sharp change from the cold shoulder she had given me this morning when we rejoined the group for breakfast. “Hey,” she had said, her voice coarse, pointedly scooping the last of the bacon. “Ay, *wala na*. Sorry.”

But a photograph of Tom’s had landed on the front page—above the fold—thanks to Katrina, making all of this a huge PR success, thanks to our team. There was no accompanying story save for a one-sentence caption, but that was good enough. Tom and I sat back, basking in the endless stream of congratulations, including profuse hosannas from the mestiza lady.

“How late were you out last night?” Tom asked, flipping through the in-flight magazine.

“Oh I just got myself a nice ice cream cone,” I said. “Helped me sober up.”

The place the stranger knew was a drive-by motel tucked in a secluded little street. A garage room cost around the same as a bucket of beer, although the attendant seemed peeved at the interruption of his sleep. The walls were pink, and a sign taped on the wall said, “Bed stains. Fine: P100.”

In the endless shifting on the bed to find more and more pleasurable positions, I had found my face buried in a pillow, and my nose was confronted with the familiar scent of detergent. I untangled myself from his arms and sat up on the bed. Confused, he asked what was wrong. I shook my head and lay down. “Tired,” I said, “that’s all,” pulling the filmy blanket over my body. “Sorry.” There was a pained deliberation in the way he lay down beside me and, like a child, wrapped a tentative arm around my torso.

“You seem a little out of sorts,” Tom said now.

“Just thinking about stuff,” I said.

“Always thinking,” he said.

“It’s OK.”

“What?”

“You can name him after me,” I said.

The newspaper bearing Tom’s photo was being passed around our section of the plane. Around the country people passing by newsstands would only see the close-up of a blonde, blue-eyed man in excruciating, obviously contrived pain. In the bleachers, unseen in the photo, hundreds were laughing at the silliness of the attempt to reenact, the imperfection, I decided, of memory.

## ***The Contributors***

Si **Jack A. Alvarez** ay nagkamit ng National Book Award ng Manila Critics' Circle para sa Best Book of Non-Fiction Prose in Filipino para sa kaniyang unang librong *Ang Autobiografia ng Ibang Lady Gaga* (Visprint, 2015). Nailathala ang ilan sa kaniyang dagli sa *Lidayway*. Isa siyang OFW na nakabase sa Saudi Arabia. Siya ang kasalukuyang Coordinator ng Kataga Online, isang sangay ng grupong Kataga Samahan Ng Mga Manunulat Sa Pilipinas at Honorary Member ng NAGMAC (Nagkahiusang Magsusulat sa Cagayan de Oro). Naging fellow sa creative writing workshops ng UST, Palihang Rogelio Sicut, Unibersidad ng Pilipinas, Ateneo de Manila, at Iligan. Kabilang sa kaniyang mga proyekto ang *Saan Man, Mga Kuwento sa Biyahe, Bagahe at Balikbayan Box* na ilalathala ng PageJump ngayong 2017. Ang *Biyaheng Rainbow, Mga Kuwentong Pangkabataang LGBT* ay kolaborasyon naman nila ni Eugene Y. Evasco bilang mga editor.

**Rina Garcia Chua** is taking up her MA and PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. She is the editor of the first anthology of Philippine ecopoetry, *Sustaining the Archipelago*, forthcoming, UST. She obtained her MA in Language and Literature, major in Literature, from De La Salle University, where her thesis was awarded the gold medal for Outstanding Thesis. Chua has been a fellow of several national writers' workshops and has been published in various books, literary magazines, and journals like *Green Letters Studies in Ecocriticism*; *Akda: The Asian Journal of Literature, Culture, and Performance*; *Kritika Kultura*; *Tomás Literary Journal*.

Bukod sa pagtuturo sa Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas, Resident Fellow din si Asst. Prof. **Joselito D. Delos Reyes** sa UST CCWLS at Research Fellow naman sa UST RCCAH. Nagkamit ng National Book Award para sa katagoryang Essay in Filipino ang mga akda niyang *iStatus Nation* (Visprint, Inc.) at *Titser Pangkalawakan* (Visprint, Inc.) Siya rin ang awtor ng *Pau-baya* (UST Publishing House). Kasapi siya ng LIRA, Museo Valenzuela



Foundation, at Lucban Historical Society. Siya ang 2013 Makata ng Taon ng Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino at recipient ng 2013 NCCA Writers' Prize para sa maikling kuwento.

**Glenn Diaz** is an instructor at the Department of English at the Ateneo de Manila University. He has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of the Philippines. He is the 2013 recipient of the M Literary Residency in Bangalore, India, where he worked on his first novel, and winner of the F. Sionil Jose Short Story Award for Young Writers in 2017.

Si **U Z. Eliserio** ay nagtuturo ng popular na kultura sa Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas as UP Diliman. Awtor siya ng *Kami sa Lahat ng Mataba* (UST), koleksiyon ng mga kritikal na sanaysay. Bisitahin siya sa [ueliserio.net](http://ueliserio.net).

**Maria L. M. Fres-Felix** is a US-educated economist-turned-fictionist. She has written four books. Her first book, “*Sup?*” won the Grand Prize in the Pilar Perez Medallion for Teen Writing. Her third book, *Boy in the Platinum Palace* was a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award. Her fourth book, *Crimetime* has just been released by Anvil Publishing. She has won several Palanca Awards and *Philippines Free Press* Awards.

**Angelo “Sarge” R. Lacuesta** has won numerous awards for his fiction, among them two Philippine National Book Awards, the Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book Award, the NVM Gonzalez Award, and several Palanca and Philippines Graphic Awards. He was literary editor of the *Philippines Free Press* and is currently editor-at-large at *Esquire* Philippines. He has two short story collections, and two forthcoming publications this year: *A Waiting Room Companion* (Ateneo de Manila University Press) and *Sustainable Strategies* (UST).

**Charlson Ong** has published four collections of short fiction—*Men of the East and other Stories*, *Woman of Amkaw and other stories*, *Conversion and other fictions*, *Of that other country we now speak and other stories* as well as three novels—*An Embarrassment of Riches*, *Banyaga: A Song of War*, *Blue Angel/White Shadows*. He has received the National Book Award for

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**Francis Paolo Quina** teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at the Department of English and Comparative Literature in UP Diliman. His fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction have been published in the Philippines and internationally, most recently in *Trash: A Southeast Asian Urban Anthology* (Buku Fixi, Malaysia, 2016) and *this is how you walk on the moon* (Ethos Books, Singapore, 2016).

Ipinanganak at lumaki si **Rijel Ricafort Reyes** sa Novaliches, Quezon City. Nagtapos ng AB Journalism sa University of Santo Tomas kung saan niya natutuhang mahalín ang mundo ng mga salita. Naging fellow ng unang batch ng Eros Atalia Fiction Writing Workshop noong 2013 at UST National Writers Workshop noong 2015.

Si **Edgar Calabia Samar** ang may-akda ng mga aklat ng seryeng *Janus Silang* at ng nobelang *Sa Kasunod ng 909* na pawang pinarangalan ng National Book Award bilang pinakamahuhusay na nobela noong 2013, 2015, at 2016. Associate Professor siya sa Ateneo de Manila University at kasalukuyan ding Visiting Professor sa Osaka University sa Japan. Kasapi siya ng Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo (LIRA) at Filipinas Institute of Translation (FIT).

## ***The Editors***

**Augusto Antonio A. Aguila**, CCWLS Resident Fellow, is a fictionist. He is the author of *The Heart of Need and Other Stories* (UST) and *Carnival of Hate: Stories* (UST). He is Executive Secretary to the UST Rector Magnificus, Professor of Literature at the UST Graduate School and the Faculty of Arts and Letters, and Academic Consultant of ABS-CBN, the largest media conglomerate in the Philippines. His short stories and literary essays have been included in various books, like *Fast Food Fiction Delivery 2* (Anvil), *Mercy and Compassion: Pope Francis Blesses the Philippines* (Anvil), *Esquire* magazine, *Philippiniana Sacra*, and *Leap Plus* magazine.

**Chuckberry J. Pascual**, CCWLS Resident Fellow, is a fictionist, essayist, critic and scholar. He is the author of *Kumpisal: mga kuwento* (UST), *Pagpasok sa Eksena: Ang Sinehan sa Panitikan at Pag-aaral ng Piling Sinehan sa Recto* (UP), and *Ang Nawawala* (Visprint). He has also authored one-act plays staged in the Virgin Labfest, and short stories and critical essays published in various anthologies and journals. He is an Assistant Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at the UST Graduate School and the Faculty of Arts and Letters.