

**TROPICAL  
PSYCHO:  
TALES OF DARKNESS  
AND TERROR**

*Poetics, Tradition, and Selected Stories*

**TOMÁS**

The Journal of the UST Center  
for Creative Writing and Literary Studies

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## TOMÁS

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# TROPICAL PSYCHO: TALES OF DARKNESS AND TERROR

Poetics, Tradition, and Selected Stories

GEORGE GONZAGA DEOSO

TOMÁS

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# ABSTRACT

*Tropical Psycho's* conception had its roots in the gap the author observed in the tradition of horror storytelling in the country. There had been, for sure, a number of collections and books written in English in this genre. But this number is scant, and even fewer were the collections by individual authors which predominantly embodied the genre for the most part. This book, then, is an effort to contribute to a still-forming genre—an effort to help horror find the place it deserves in the tradition of Filipino short stories in English.

*Keywords:* horror fiction, Philippine short stories in English, dark tales



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# HYPERVIOLENCE, ETC: TAKE AS NEEDED FOR DARK, FOR PAIN

Let it be known that celebrating murders should never go out of style.

Veering from the arc that established him as a fresh voice in Pinoy horror in his first book *The Horseman's Revolt and Other Stories*, George Gonzaga Deoso now attempts to cajole the reader into the life and mind of his murderers' row of anti-heroes with a new collection of short stories.

Here be cannibals, psycho killers, beautiful psychopaths, and badminton-playing extraterrestrials all marked in varying degrees by deficient emotional responses, lack of empathy, and poor behavioral controls.

Any or, sometimes, all of the above resulting in persistent antisocial and criminal behavior.

With creative killings and tortures as the depraved bread and butter of his new collection, Deoso takes us behind the tranquility of Filipino suburban walls, dog-walking titos and titas of Manila, and well-tended gardens to bring forth explanations for the darkness that inhabits the hearts of his characters. "How could anyone do such things?!" might be the first gut reaction while reading the bloody good parts. But with Deoso anchoring his stories to personal life experiences to "highlight depravity," from his early days of scribbling tall tales of the dark and getting the kind of feedback he wanted from his classmates ("gross and gruesome," they said), to the unexpected viscerality of his formative years growing up in Quezon City's suburbia, there's a surprising realism—clear attempts at reader connection—in these fictional slays.

Deoso pulls from various genre sources as his well of inspiration. From Western movies like *Wrong Turn*, *Final Destination*, *Human Centipede*, and *Saw*; authors like RL Stine, Clive Barker, and the classics of Stephen King, as well as modern mainstream literature. Those works with a big L.

Alongside his self-reflections in the making of these tales, especially revolving around mortality when he was afflicted with COVID-19, a confession of his attempt at suicide by hanging, and how he almost “died in the middle of the road,” Deoso has graduated from his previous book’s premise of asking questions. We can read now how he has embraced the questions as themselves a process. Inquiry as pathway up the dark mountain, past the clouds and the broken terrain, to a well-earned suspicion that the very act of confrontation, the mission to climb, itself might just be the whole catastrophe, as well the beauty of our human condition.

In stories that jump from sparse yet lyrical prose, sometimes employing Chanderlesque staccato-paced noir, and a fitting finale charged with erotic themes well-executed, sans periods, to evoke the breakneck pace of a vehicle with brakes intentionally severed, the reader is taken to a country where psychopathy, whether narcissistic, borderline sadistic, or antisocial, is given a pulpit.

Deoso takes on the unholy cape for this thrill kill cult, a celebration of murders, preaching the hyperviolence gospel to query: who among you shall listen to the madman? Children of night, raise thy hands.

**KARL R. DE MESA**  
SEPTEMBER 2023

CHAPTER 1:  
POETICS/POLITICS



# ONCE, WHEN I WAS A CHILD: POETICS

This might be a dream, or a made-up memory. A yellow L300 used to pick me up from home to school, school to home. It took about a third of an hour, to an hour, for every round trip, as I wasn't the only student. I'd board the vehicle at around five in the morning. I was always the first one because the driver lived in a neighborhood close by. I remember feeling cold; yes, mornings at 5:00 a.m. were cold those days. But the wheels would move. Kids get picked up.

I sometimes sat in the front seat, but I prefer settling on the one behind the driver's. His name was Andy. Manong Andy hired a series of conductors, not-so-old men we'd call "kuya" who would pick up our bags as we left the house, haul the huge, wheeled ones up to the roof of the vehicle, sit at the other end of the vehicle, and the first one to open and close the door when a kid had to board or depart. In the mornings the air was cold and I'd hug myself as I sat behind the driver.

As the wheels moved kids got picked up and began taking their places. It took me some time to get used to the L300 snaking from one subdivision to another, a neighborhood to another, one cramped street to another. I'd lean my head on the back of the driver's head rest, sometimes falling asleep. I got used to it though. And when I got used to it, I'd look around the places where the other students lived. The vehicle had windows tinted with magenta, some portions missing a handle, so if you happened to sit beside one you had to push the window with the same effort it took to unscrew the cap off a jar of something you had long stashed in a cupboard,

not knowing if the jar's contents would kill you with a whiff of whatever rot it had inside.

I liked the feeling of the wind through the grilled, tinted windows when we drove into the neighborhood of some of the better-off students. Clean air, green leaves caught at a corner of the window as the school service passed by a house from whose lawn emerged a bougainvillea plant, out into the street, brushing at cars passing by. There was hardly any noise around except for the creaking of the vehicle as it disturbed the peace of the neighborhood, Manong Andy stopping and honking by the gate of the student about to be picked up. They'd usually have a good house, of two or more stories, a *yaya* or a made-up mother standing beside the kid as they send him or her off to school. The conductor would hop off the vehicle, take the bag from the *yaya* or the parent, trailing behind the kid who would board the service to settle on a random seat. After fixing the kid's trolley bag up on the roof, the conductor would sit again by the door and close it, before the driver floored the gas again. Minutes trickled by. More stops, kids boarding, the vehicle filling up. The sun would be up by then and whatever cold I felt was replaced by the sweltering heat making my undershirt stick to my back.

Before we reached the school, we had to pass through the house of another kid who lived in a neighborhood whose clotheslines were tied to light posts, exposing frayed underpants and sad looking shirts for cars to belch smoke on. By then all the kids—girls and guys—were settled in the way that would recall a brimming jeepney. Smaller ones squeezed between hulking little Buddhas, unassertive ones sitting with just the edge of their asses touching the seat, and some like myself, retreating further back to whatever space I could, unnoticed and unbothered. The conductor would be outside then, hanging from the back of the vehicle, to ease the sardine-can situation.

The morning had been cold, but we'd end up sweating by the time the vehicle swerved into the narrow street leading to the dead end of a barangay where a school had existed since the Freedom Constitution was ratified. We didn't care much about national laws back then, sweltering children in uniforms with cream and brown motif. What we cared for: getting off the vehicle as soon as it wheeled into the school grounds. Manong Andy would kill the engine, the conductor would open the metal doors, and out we jumped off, thankful for the chance to breathe once more. We'd wait for the kuya to haul the bags off the vehicle's roof and hand them to their respective owners. I'd wait for mine, and as soon as I got it, I would go straight to the classroom where I would sit for half the day, listen to lessons, be quizzed for, pray before the start of each subject and at the end too. And when we ate lunch. We prayed.

We even had months when, instead of staying in the room, we'd all stay out on the corridors to recite the rosary, students hunched on the floor while the adviser waved a woven fan to ward off the heat. Before we went home: we prayed *The Angelus. And the Word was made Flesh: And dwelt among us.*

One day, something happened on the way back home. Manong Andy had wheeled in as usual and we all boarded to be taken back to our houses. Then there was the usual midday heat, humidity at a full throttle as we squeezed inside the vehicle. It moved and snaked its way out of the narrow streets of the barangay, conductor still standing at the back of the vehicle like the sun was nothing. Jun. That might be his name. He must have been in his early twenties that time, with spiked hair always up, perhaps because of the wind when the school service did a 60 on the highway. Pudgy, pockmarked, with a couple of missing front teeth. He always had patience with the kids trying to open the door while he hung at the back, perhaps trying to make

him fall as we sped on Commonwealth. Kids being kids. I didn't think I had the same impulses at that time. I hardly minded them. I sat in my usual corner, at the back of the driver's seat, observing. I had it in me to observe since day one, I guess. Observing.

I guess I was the first one to see what happened on the road. We had just turned to the bend beside Batoda terminal; I was watching tricycles trickle out of it, groan on the road carrying passengers cramped in sidecars and behind the driver, the same way we were cramped inside. Nothing new. Except that that day, as we passed by Sandiganbayan—and the mouth of the underpass—where those who wanted to get off the IBP road to get on to the country's killer highway enter—as we passed all these on the way to the student's house whose neighborhood was draped with clotheslines tied to light posts, where the air took on the quality of dog shit and gutter fluids, something happened.

Through the grilled window of the vehicle, I saw how a couple of figures suddenly sprang out of the street adjacent to the mouth of the underpass. These figures, when my child eyes finally made sense of what was happening, were two women in tank tops and microshorts, both heavysset, one larger than the other, and both holding cleavers. Just to be specific: they had knives and they were aiming to bury their weapons on each other. They sprang from the entrance to the street and onto the threshold of the underpass, where they continued the struggle, two wobbling fighters aiming for the kill. I observed them. The school service was moving farther and farther from the site of the brawl. I could imagine the fury in their eyes. One on top of the other, each holding the other's hand holding the weapon. I didn't need to be near enough to know how intent each of them was at burying a cleaver on the other's neck. One of them had hair tied in a bun, and the other, the one on the asphalt, had hers spilling like wet black knitting wool down her back. Cars swerved around them. The other kids knelt before



the windows to watch the spectacle. As our vehicle drove further away, other people were approaching the two women. Some men and women with arms held out to stop the traffic, and perhaps to stop the women from a midday bloodbath.

I didn't know what happened to them after that. We had turned off to a road where we couldn't see them. When the first student to hop off the vehicle had gone, the conductor sat with us inside. Outside, the 1:00 p.m. sun burned on. The conductor's forehead gleamed with sweat. But he was smiling at us, and we were looking at him. Us, the children looking at him, expecting him to fill us in. He flashed a smile with his missing teeth.

"You saw that too?" he asked, his voice music to our ears. He looked back at the magenta window of the metal door that matched the sliding windows at the left and right side of the school service. Then he looked back at us. Still smiling, he said, "My bet is they love the same guy. Yes, yes, they love the same guy and they just have to kill the other to prove themselves worthy."

I mulled about his story of the women the rest of the ride home. Up until this moment, as I write the last few sentences for this possibly made-up memory, I haven't got the slightest notion of how the fight ended. What I know is we were all brought to the safety of our home by Manong Andy, and that we were quite satisfied by the story concocted for us by the conductor that sweltering afternoon.

# SOME SOURCES OF DARKNESS: POETICS

My father, a former soldier turned bodyguard, had the habit of watching war films when he was home. He'd park himself on the sofa, downing bottles of Pilsen, one after the other, sitting before a film where soldiers kill and tried not to get killed. One movie, in particular, had seared a scene in my brain when I was kid. I forget what the title was. One soldier got too close to the enemies, was revealed to be a spy, and was captured. An interrogation scene. This soldier sitting on a chair before a table, flanked by men in camouflage. Seething stares. One of the men brought out a nail and a hammer. One of them asked questions, a series of questions, but the captive refused to answer.

I couldn't remember the title of the film, but I could recall how a man gripped the spy's hand, pinning it to the surface of the wooden table. I also remember how the other man settled the tip of the huge nail at the back of the captive's hand and, upon the signal from the interrogator who failed to get anything out of the spy, slammed the head of the nail with the hammer. The effort was such that the nail slid through the skin, muscle, and bones the way you could slide a teaspoon through a flan. Blood around the nail, spilling on the table where the spy's hand was kebabbed. The scream and the way the captive's face contorted in pain was impossible to wipe from the slate of a small child's memory.

My father watched all these like a trip to his own memory lane. I, on the other hand, had trouble sleeping the next few nights. I'd settle on the bed feeling my palm, trying to imagine myself as a lousy spy. I think I even had nightmares about it later on. It was, I think, what I consider my first touch with the feeling of horror. It didn't appeal to me the first time. Men blown to

pieces, missing a limb, halved before they could shout into a radio. *Mayday, mayday!* The walls shaking as the cannons boomed through the gargantuan speakers of the home theater.

When I was a kid all I wanted was to watch the reruns of *Ranma ½* and *Ragnarok: The Animation*. I didn't imagine myself to be too crazy about all the blood and gore I first watched during my dad's days off. Even certain episodes of *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* gave me the heebie-jeebies. I haven't got the slightest clue about the specifics of when I got the hang of the macabre. It may have been a slow accretion, perhaps the same sort you get from constant exposure to the Elephant's Foot in Chernobyl. One moment you're good, and the next, you've grown radioactive enough to give all the people you know some type of degenerative disease. Could have been the weekly war films with my dad, or televised Tagalized horror films, or those late night SOCO episodes, or perhaps the movie nights with the kids in our block.

We'd go to a friend's house, sometimes, and the host would put on a DVD film. Titles suitable for people twice our age, but we didn't care, neither did our mothers, who were out on the street buzzing like flies with the latest gossip to feast on. In a kid's house someone would put on a movie. *Wrong Turn*. Not sure which iteration, but I remember a woman being halved. Deformed cannibal holding an ax, swinging it at a crying blonde. Cut to an angle between the woman's feet in sneakers. The cannibal had raised the ax and brought it down. Squelching sounds, then the guts of the woman on the foreground, each half of her falling in opposite directions. The guts looked a lot like raw *tocino*. I remember turning away from the TV, not watching the rest of the film. But we watched other films later. All blood and guts and weapons buried in every imaginable part of the body. I guess that was it.

Once, a spy nailed on a table had made me queasy, but a few more years and I could observe the anatomy of a man, in bits and pieces, via

splatterpunk cinema. What a fascination—the blood and gore and death on the screen. I was not the sort who screams at the sudden death of a character. More like an observer, wondering if the entrails on the asphalt were close to my own guts. But that was only part of it.

True, I've seen *Final Destination*, *Human Centipede*, *Saw*, and the sequels that followed. True, they have shaped my notion of “horror,” in ways that I am realizing only now, in retrospect. Horror for me then was more of the violent sort, more about revealing what should be kept within that flimsy human organ called skin. I've developed an aversion to films involving ghosts, because I would miss half of the story, hands over my eyes, expecting a jump scare. Jump scares suck. I still think they do. Suffice it to say that I was sucked into the world of darkness through the most extreme examples of human depravity. But, again, that was only part of it.

I soon discovered that cinema wouldn't be my passion. In high school, after being tasked to do a book report for a novel of our choice, I discovered my love for reading. Books are films in your head, as the cliché goes. I would pick up a fantasy novel and for a week I'd be hooked, imagining myself riding dragons and wooing fairies and battling with knights. Sooner still I would be swept along the craze of young adult literature. *The Hunger Games*, *The Twilight Saga*, *The Mortal Instruments*. And then, popular fiction by Dan Brown and Nicholas Sparks. These were quick reads, and as such they grew old rather swiftly for me. I craved for something beyond lovestruck girls in dystopic societies, or some romantic storylines stretched to breaking point, or action-packed thrillers about treasures I really didn't care about. What I craved for was blood and guts. I wanted to read the films I had seen before. Thus, I ventured into the realm of dark literature, guided by the Fear Street novels of R.L. Stine, and then, much later, the tomes of Stephen King. I stopped going to mainstream bookstores for the current bestsellers, moving

on to scourge secondhand shops for battered copies of Stephen King's older paperbacks.

It was a shift comparable to the movement of tectonic plates. I had merely sought blood and guts, but what I was given was an oeuvre of narratives with characters I cared about and horrors so unexpected that I literally had to close a book just to let myself breathe. A turning point: the discovery of how printed words could be so powerful they could make you shudder, not simply laugh or cry. I still went on watching horror films, but I think by then I had a better understanding of how plots and stories are supposed to work. My appreciation of darkness had been confined to scenes handpicked to highlight depravity, but after my discovery of the power of the written word, I learned how every part of a narrative works to make an organic whole. Of course, I didn't have the vocabulary back then to articulate this thought. What I was certain of, though, was I wanted to become a storyteller. I wanted to do what R.L. Stine did, what Stephen King did. Scare the living daylights out of clueless readers.

I tried doing that. In high school, around third year, fourth year. I'd type up dozens of pages of a story, print and staple them. Had my closest friends read them. "They're gross," I'd be told. "They're gruesome." They'd hand back the folder where I had stapled the story, but I was quite satisfied myself. I was aiming for gruesome. I didn't know how bad my own stories were until college, when I at last decided to take the obsession further up a notch. I took Literature.

In college I got the hang of reading beyond the intent of getting entertained, getting scared or terrified. Bombarded with theories and slow-paced stories in the classroom, I learned to take my time when faced with a piece of writing, dismantle certain aspects of it and, in the process of sticking the elements together again, think of an insight the writer could possibly have for the story. Or poem. Or play. But it has always been fiction, the form

I'd always orbit around. Outside of the required readings, I branched out into more complex pieces. "A Rose for Emily" got me on the threshold of *Light in August*, for instance. I began reading doorstoppers without fully understanding them. I was eighteen, bordering on nineteen. I thought it was wise to read "high Literature," exclusively. I read Byatt, Hagedorn, Faulkner, Gordimer, Ishiguro, Ondaatje, among many others. It was good at first, until I realized that on top of missing a lot of whatever it was they were trying to say in their novels, I grew bored, and reading became a chore.

But the uppercase "L" in Literature was something I took to heart, so I went on reading, branching out to other authors, most of them contemporary "classics." Or works by dead white men. It had a payoff: I slowly began to form my own definition of what good prose is supposed to be. I also learned that for a story to be considered a classic, to be worth its salt with scholars, it must have a serious subject matter, one that is socially relevant, anchored in history, groundbreaking in its approach to language and the human psyche, or even blatantly political. This is the reason why, as I further sharpened my sense of what good "Literature" was, and as I began to take writing more seriously, I developed a disdain for the thing that led me to Literature in the first place. I came to the point when I believed that horror was a superficial undertaking, that to zero in on monsters and the supernatural, and to want to scare the hell out of readers was a waste of precious time for both readers and writers. "There are more pressing matters to write about," I was telling myself. Why do these authors continue to belch out all this nonsense about telekinetic teenagers or haunted houses or vampires? My answer was: is there any other reason?

A lot liked what they wrote so far, so the next logical step was to further milk the cow. I was *that* idealistic. Blinded, one might say. But not for long. 2016 came, bringing with it a despot with a taste for war. My father was a blatant supporter of this so-called leader, and he was happy that he

was part of the 16 million who installed the man who promised to fatten the fishes of Manila Bay with the bodies of the dead in this war he was waging. No wonder: my father had been in a war himself somewhere in the south. He had a wound at the flesh above his ankle. He said it had caught a bullet. He also was loyal to that president whose regime got activists tortured in the 80s, typical Ilocano that he was. When the new leader stepped into power with a promise for change, my father couldn't stop gushing out praise for him, watching reruns of press conferences replete with obscenities. I have a mother and a sister, and they both jumped into the bandwagon. When I talked about repercussions, one or both of them would ask if I planned to rebel myself, or simply told me that he is the best around. I never shared my opinions after that, else I'd feel all the more like a lamb among wolves. They'd all just devour me in an argument.

I understood what horror was then. What true horror was. It wasn't a war film, no, it wasn't a nail hammered through the back of a hand, or an axe splitting a woman into two, or the sight of blood and guts on the TV screen, shining and looking like undercooked *tocino*. I understood Sethé's pain when she had to slam her own baby to death on a wall in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, why Jack Torrance in *The Shining* was the quintessential monster, even why games in *The Hunger Games* were something to be shuddered at. The realization came late, I guess. But it came anyway: that horror is not about blood or death. It is what underlies every drop of blood spilled and every death lined up in the future. It isn't just about the fantastic, the ghosts jumping on the screen aiming to make the viewer scream. Horror is the reason, not the outcome. My reason for becoming frightened by horror films and literature was displaced for good. The nailed hand wasn't horror. It was what made the men torture the spy; the spoils of war. Sethé's child haunting her later in the novel wasn't horror; what I should have been horrified with was the extent to which racism destroys the lives of its victims. Jack Torrance

chasing Wendy with an axe isn't horror, not per se. *The Shining* is all about the claustrophobic possibilities brought about by this societal unit called "family." How things could possibly go wrong when they seemed to be right on the surface.

No, horror for me wasn't the fantastic. It was the everyday. It was what we struggle within, and without, ourselves. Horror was horrifying because we had been, or we are, or we could be living in them in one way or another. Nothing was wasted to me then. All the things I had watched and read as a middle school kid, through high school and college, all of these helped me understand my reason for seeking the refuge of darkness. And all of these would shape every piece of fiction I'd be brave enough to write in the future.



# A QUICK WORD ABOUT DEATH: POETICS

When I was in high school, my parents found it cost-effective not to have me ride the rattling L300 anymore. They gave me enough money for tricycle rides instead. Four, in total: two rides in the morning and a couple in the afternoon. Because I had wanted to save up for books, I would skip the trike ride from school to the footbridge leading to Batoda terminal and just walk. Sometimes, I'd be with friends on the way home. One day, there were five of us walking up at the main drag of Brgy. Holy Spirit where most of the sidewalks weren't meant for pedestrians anymore. Small businesses and stalls for market goods ate up most of the space. So, for much of the walk we had to tread between the sewage-strewn pavement gutters and the onslaught of the afternoon barangay traffic. That day the five of us were walking as we walked days before: bags slung on our backs, the weight of textbooks and the rising slope of the road making us lean forward like hikers. We liked talking. Anime, nasty jokes about a classmate or a teacher, complaining about how we caught the cafeteria lady plucking out the used straws from the empty soft drink bottles, washing them by the sink, and cutting the tip to snip off the chewed-up part. Or how the plastic sporks had spaghetti stains on them as they were handed to us at the counter, or how a server's long dirty nail would dip in a bowl of *sopas* we paid twenty pesos for. As we walked up to Commonwealth Ave. and relived these pleasant cafeteria memories, I guess I exaggerated something to a point that made one of my friends guffaw, stop in his tracks, and then push me just hard enough to take me out of that unofficial divide between the cars and the side of the road where the foot traffic was. In his delight at what I could imagine as my joke, I was shoved to the middle of the street. There was a loud horn. A long, hard beep. Time

slowed. I registered at once the look of shock on the faces of my four friends. I knew I was smiling still. One of them had his hands over his mouth. All their eyes widened. Finally, I turned my head to the source of the loud sound. I found myself standing in front of a tricycle sidecar. The vehicle must have been doing 60, and the effort of hitting the brakes had rocked the sidecar, almost touching my shin. The driver was a bald man who promptly screamed, “Magpapakamatay ka ba?”

I felt numb. My friends pulled me out of the middle of the road when they realized that I had frozen, saying sorry to the driver who had backed and swerved around me, glaring at us. We mostly stayed silent after that. Some of us crossed the bridge to the other side of the highway, while the others turned off to another street.

“Muntik ka nang masagasaan,” one of my friends told me before the group dispersed. Thinking about it now, it was my first close call. I remember thinking about how things would have turned out if I had been a bit less lucky. What if the trike driver had been looking in the wrong direction? Would the sidecar hit me with a force just enough for me to fly meters away from where I stood, enough that when I land, I would land headfirst on a shit-scented gutter? Or would I have been suddenly tossed in another direction, to be finished off by a speeding truck, to have my entrails smear the road, my eyeball popping out and rolling off for some poor young girl to scream at? It was my first taste of the notion that I am a mortal. That the body I have is but a shell as fragile as the ones torn apart in the movies I’ve watched and the novels I’ve consumed.

Later on, I would be reminded of this, in more ways than I ever expected. My first plane ride. The first time I tried to hang myself. Or that time when I woke up with so much pain, to be diagnosed much later with COVID-19. Death. So much of it I’ve seen and read, and yet nothing would ever seem to prepare me for it.

# WRITING (I): POETICS AND POLITICS

In college, I went on to write more. I had spent so much time drafting stories and poems that I'd sometimes lose the chance to sleep or finish homework. No matter. I had decided early on that it was what I wanted to do. At first, I thought I was going to be a poet. I've enjoyed the works of Ruth Elynia Mabanglo, Rebecca Añonuevo, and Michael Coroza. I read foreign poets too: Milosz, Atwood, Walcott, and Heaney. The sonnets that comprised Derek Walcott's *White Egrets* in particular spurred me to write poems of my own. Whenever I joined any national writers' workshop, I was always a poetry fellow.

When I began working in a call center, I would quickly eat my lunch in the pantry, and have a walk outside to either read a collection of poems or jot down some lines under the moonlight while I lounged in a gazebo. I thought I would be a poet. And then I didn't. I realized this in graduate school, after taking up courses for poetry writing where I found that I was all the more intimidated by the form. That writing down a line had become excruciating, after all the theories, history, and all this attention to word and punctuation and images and meaning. It has been years now since I wrote a poem, I truly enjoyed writing.

It was a different case with prose, though. While I dabbled in all seriousness with poetry, I would also find the time to write stories, just because I wanted to and not to prove the point that I somehow have a certain hold on language. My short fiction was the outcome of my wildest imagining, deeply influenced by all the filmic, literary, and actual violence that I was surrounded with as a young man growing up in a country led by a

war-waging fossil. I wrote poems to distil beauty out of language. But I wrote prose in anger, in rage, in bafflement. I never saw fiction writing as an escape from reality. It was *my* escape *into* reality, a magnification of all the things that went awry because we have not been careful. I didn't care much about language when I wrote in prose, not when I was in college, though I also realized that having dabbled with poetry had inevitably marred my fiction with this subconscious awareness of how the words would sound when read aloud. So, even if I barely paid attention to every word as a unit that wouldn't sound right when placed beside a certain word, I still found myself writing with an ear cocked to that side of myself that had wished to become a poet. But enough of all this talk of language.

From day one, I have believed that fiction is all about story. Fiction is *storytelling*. There has to be plot. Navel-gazing was something I detested; I have found works whose plots barely moved to be boring. A character must move, quite literally, from one point to another. A character must fight, must battle, must encounter violence to get from the beginning to the end. This has been my philosophy in writing. And it made writing more bearable because I was doing so out of a belief that I have formed for myself, not a theory imposed by some rigid instructor.

While our fiction classes were helpful, I have nonetheless formed my own ways of reading and assessing literary works. With fiction, I was free from the shackles of poetry—the rigid structures and the line-by-line nitpicking. I wrote stories the way I wanted them to be written. I was both careless and carefree. My first published story, “The Short, Curious Life of Mr. Clockman,” is what I'd say the most bonkers of my works. It involved a rehash of Holden Caulfield, but one who encountered a Clockman—a monster of my creation: a bloated body of a man with the head of a wall clock. It had violent dream sequences and an even more violent and almost implausible ending. But—what do you know—it earned “Best Entry for

Prose Category” in the folio where it was featured. This recognition gave me the belief in myself as a storyteller. Somewhere, someone thought it was worth the read, perhaps a bit better than another’s short fiction.

So, I wrote some more. I read some more. As I gained a deeper understanding of Nadine Gordimer’s perspective on the South African apartheid through her short stories, as I better saw how our language and daily lives are fractured by progress, capitalism, and the mob mentality in Don DeLillo’s novels, as I experienced the self-inflicted pain of Erika Kohut in Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher*, thus I saw Literature’s potential to condense all that ails the world, through characters, who are, in most cases, in the same worlds their respective authors are living in.

The more I read, the deeper the insights and the wider the possibilities. First to fourth year college, I wrote stories as my way of interrogating myself, both as a citizen and as a writer who happened to be a citizen of a country that suffers a host of ailments. Correction: as someone who wanted to write. Not a writer, not yet. I had no discipline. I wrote when I could, without schedules. I wrote on the computer, my school notebooks, on my phone. I wrote while on a commute, or when I should have been asleep. Paragraphs, sentences, phrases. Most of which would find a way to the stories I would later write. I wrote observations, musings, or plain BS. Out of all these I would form a story. Bleak ones, hyperviolent, badly in need of someone to point out how dark and relentless and juvenile they could be. I wrote about zombies as an allegory to the on-going drug war, for instance. I wrote about a young man named George who kidnapped another writer to retaliate after some bad, bad comments he received in a workshop. I didn’t expect for my stories to gain any sort of traction. It was enough that I wrote them, a bonus that they got published somewhere, and a miracle if they even clinched an award.

There wasn't any plan then. I wrote, frustrated at what was happening around me, at my own limits, cowardice, and futility. I'd stay up late, I'd lack sleep, but I was happy to have fiction to turn to when I had something to say. After graduating from college, there came a point when I looked back at everything I wrote and realized that I had penned enough for a collection. But it wasn't a simple matter of gathering everything I've ever written. The hard part was knowing which ones to include. This was the inception of my first book, initially titled *Revolt and Other Horrors*, which the publisher and I later agreed to change into *The Horseman's Revolt and Other Horrors*. An unplanned offspring. I didn't write my stories with the idea that they would one day form a book. On the contrary, my mindset was that I'll write a piece, then simply move on to another without even a glance above my shoulder.

The idea of the collection only hit me while I was trudging through a local writer's collection of stories. I found that I was sorely dissatisfied by the books I'd been recently reading, Philippine "Literature" in particular. This could be better, I had told myself, going through stories that only succeeded at making me cringe, eventually dropping the book. So, I chose to collect my own short fiction, have a book of my own. I didn't intend to collect all the stories I ever wrote. In fact, I am certain that it only contained under 20% of all the pieces I stayed up late to finish. I was a foolish, clueless young man then, but even so, I understood how some of my own writings didn't deserve to see the light of day. I know a hopelessly bad story when I read one, especially if it is my own.

As I sorted out my stories—some of which I had the luck of earning an award for, some were previously published, one being translated into English, and another one newly written—I noticed their resemblance to each other, either in form or content. Most protagonists were young men trying to negotiate within the horrors of living in the current times, struggling to beat a deadline, to survive the city, to get through a plague further complicated

by skewed political leanings, or to simply deal with nasty heartbreak. A semblance of personality had begun to surface in my writings, all the while kowtowing to my earlier philosophy of what fiction was. The characters, in their movement from point A to B, from naivete to a shattering awareness, had to commit, witness, or enable violence themselves. One of them had to witness zombie kids devouring a young man the same age as himself, one man had to participate in the carnage of his superior officer, one had to contend with a hulking monster, and one only had a single recourse to escape his captor – death. Every single piece in the collection is essentially my stab at writing a horror story, the kind that hoped to reflect the things that went wrong in the current times through a hyperviolent plot. Even the most realist pieces had undercurrents of internal strife, distorted psychological perspectives about life and the world.

I have long eschewed the art of poetry, channeling what I learned about language from it and into my prose. I wrote prose to interrogate the world around us. I wrote stories to pose questions. I was deeply suspicious of any fictionist who supposes that his works hold the solution to what ails the society; I am profoundly annoyed when a story attempts to present an answer. To write fiction is to question the powers that be. Emphasis on *question*. And so, the conceit of my first book: I didn't have the answers, but as a young man I was plagued by this desire to scrutinize the beliefs held by the people close to me. To ask, for instance, for their reasons to enable violence, to kiss the feet of that person, that family, responsible for the deaths and debts the country is still paying for. Their reason to support a regime that enables the killing of the innocent. This is the source of my horror: to be surrounded with people who crave for blood, for death.

At one point, I was fascinated to see gore on the screen. It is a different matter, though, to be with people who seemed to take for granted the lives lost just so their idols would remain in power. I think about my own death.

I think about that day I almost died in the middle of the road, the day when I tied the hangman's noose around my neck, the weeks when I had no choice but to remain in bed because of a virus. These are close calls. Brushes with the unknown, shoulder to shoulder with that cloaked skeleton, just waiting for the right moment to scoop my soul with his scythe. I feared for my life, and I feared that bridge between life and death, the pain it all involved. That, too, was horror. The unknown was a common motif for horror connoisseurs.

A character's death reminds us of our own mortality, another's torture makes us imagine what the character must be going through, try to approximate the pain ourselves. We identify with Wendy and with Sethe because they remind us of our own vulnerability, as well as the measures we take given the mousetrap of a world we were shoved into. But beyond identifying with characters, I read and write horror to question and to be questioned about this world as we know it, or as certain powers attempt to distort it for their gain. *The Horseman's Revolt and Other Horrors* was a book of questions. Not only for others though. No. It wasn't a simple excuse to interrogate the world and the people in it; it is also my way of interrogating myself and the role that I play in this mad, mad world. Why horror? Simple: it is a roundtrip to hell without the inconvenience of dying. My belief is that we need to go through hell and fire and darkness to know how much of it was already present in our lives. I did this through my writing in the hopes that once we emerge, unscathed and unharmed, from a piece of fiction, we would understand as well the measures we must take to keep the tiniest light of hope from the torrents attempting to snuff it out.



## WRITING (II): POETICS AND POLITICS

In the same way that a person could become the aggregate of all the people he ever encountered, so does the writer can become the sum total of all the other writers he has read before. At least this was the case for *The Horseman's Revolt and Other Horrors*. Every single book I've read at that point in my life had served as an influence for my own collection, bar none. There were stories where I tried to channel the blurring of linguistic boundaries the same way that William Faulkner and Toni Morrison did in their fiction. There were also times when I attempted to write in the sparse manner that Yasunari Kawabata had in *Snow Country*. In terms of the horror genre, both Stephen King at his most outlandish and Shirley Jackson at her subtlest had lent something to my own fiction. Even Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* was an important inspiration. Don DeLillo's language. The political commitment of Nadine Gordimer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Rogelio Braga. The dense, kilometeric sentences of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The sprawling landscapes in the novels of Louis de Bernieres and Barbara Kingsolver. The list could go on. Suffice to say that I had a hodgepodge of influences, and so my first collection may have suffered from the lack of any stylistic preference, and this is not because of the conscious choice to variegate each story. Far from it: I was simply unequipped to control my own writing at that level. I was like a sponge that merely absorbed all that I thought was good in all the works I've read. And like a sponge, I wrung all I had learned towards whatever story I happened to be tinkering with at that time. I only realized this after the book was published.

When I did realize it, I came to the conclusion that I should be past that time for casting the net out wide. I must narrow the types of things I read and write. I had just read books on the craft of fiction, in particular John

Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* and Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to the Narrative Craft*. Through these handbooks I became sharply aware of the role that form and style plays in the art of the narrative. The first thing I did was to look back at all the works I had read and see which among them I had liked and for what reason. It was mostly a process of elimination. For instance, because my patience thinned out on the maximalist tendencies of Faulkner and Garcia Marquez, I would then have to steer clear from their works for the time being. The same went when I assessed the works of Gordimer, Morrison, and even James Joyce. This went on and on, until I concluded that what I needed to seek to read moving forward were the minimalists.

I went on with caution though, because I was bored by Hemingway's stories; I didn't want to end up writing like him. Thus, I sought other authors, and was not disappointed to learn that pointedly emotive fiction could be written without compromising my desire to be concise. I discovered writers like Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, Kawabata in the *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*, Jack Alvarez, Alan Derain, Rene O. Villanueva, and, most especially, Edgardo M. Reyes, whom I regard as the foremost writer in the Filipino language. I was deeply inspired by his artistry in novels such as *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* and *Mga Uod at Rosas*, so much so that I decided to venture into writing short fiction in Filipino. I had already finished my bachelor's degree at that time and was working as a call center agent. I would say then that this marked what I'd consider as another era in my journey as an aspiring writer.

I wrote short stories in Filipino, setting aside my partiality towards the speculative genre to produce fiction that would reflect my personal struggles as a newly minted part of the work force. If back then my stories could extend to more than seven thousand words, in this new juncture of my writing path my stories were redacted to just around a thousand words,

following the examples in Hempel's *Reasons to Live* and Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* This was 2018-2019. In some ways these have been my most productive years so far, in terms of the number of stories I was able to write. I wrote one or two stories per month, amassing a cycle of stories composed of more than twenty pieces. As these were written in Filipino, I sent them to *Liwayway Magazine* to be considered for publication. I was fortunate then that the editor found most of them worthy of being printed. I wrote in the realist mode, about young men who had to go to work, ride jeepneys, pursue some enigmatic woman or man, get destroyed by heartbreak or the sheer absurdity of the milieu in which the stories were set. All in the subdued style I've come to learn from reading American short fiction masters, in conjunction with the politically-charged stories written in Filipino, collected in Edgardo M Reyes' own book *Rosas, Mga Agos sa Disyerto* and *Sigwa* (1992) anthologies, as well as Abdon M. Balde, Jr.'s *Calvary Road*, JIE Teodoro's *Hasang: Mga Kuwento ng Pag-ibig*, and Allan Derain's experimentation in *Iskrabuk*. I wrote more than twenty short fiction pieces for both the *Maikling Kuwento* section as well as the *Dagli* section of *Liwayway Magazine*. I wrote my last *Liwayway* story before the pandemic happened, and my final (as of yet) short fiction written in Filipino—titled “Nang Walang Nakakarinig”—made an appearance in a literary journal, all in 2020.

Later that year, I found myself collecting my stories again, this time with less difficulty, since what I wrote was a series of interlinked short fiction that I had planned to turn into a book, which in turn would attempt to replicate what James Joyce did in *Dubliners* or Cecilia Manguerra Brainard in her *Woman with Horns and Other Stories*. Besides my certainty of style (minimalism), what made this second collection more coherent is the fact that many of the stories were set in an island I called Isla Soledad, a microcosm of the country, with a city and countryside, all providing a backdrop for the

seemingly mundane conflicts of melancholic square johns. I called it quits after the publication of the “Nang Walang Nakakarinig.” I sensed that I had written enough about Isla Soledad, so I would either leave this world of my creation without looking back, or later return to it for another manuscript in the far future. I had a plan. Since I had released a book of short stories in English, and had finished a book of stories in Filipino, the next logical step would then be to work on a manuscript in English once more. I believed that since I have been gifted with two languages, I should make an effort to contribute to both of their respective literary traditions.

Sounds pompous, now that I’m thinking about it, but as a defense to my own rebuttal: it’s the least any Filipino writer could try to do, given the diverse languages we have across the archipelago. So, this was what I attempted to do. After making adjustments to my collection in Filipino, which I eventually gave the title *Minsan Lang Magawi: Mga Kuwento*, and after sending it (without much hope) to a publisher, I promptly steered my mind away from this latter collection to focus on a new one. Thus, the beginnings of *Tropical Psycho*. A sort of follow-up to *The Horseman’s Revolt*. But the aim was to further magnify all the questions and terrors I attempted to raise in my first book. I also aimed for this book to be my conscious attempt at experimenting with the various styles possible in fiction. If I was clueless about style in my first book of dark short fiction, I must say that I at least have a notion of the ways to tell my stories in the second book. The ways to tell a story, the reason for telling them that way. Both of these things I considered as I trundled on through the subsequent months, amidst a pandemic, composing tales of terror one after another.

Perhaps it was worth noting that at this point, I had gone back to reading maximalist writers. This time, I read, with a patience richly rewarded in the end, the works of Thomas Pynchon (*Vineland*, *Inherent Vice*, and *The*

*Crying of Lot 49*), the stories of Nick Joaquin, and Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, among many others. Equally important was my continuous exploration of the possibilities of dark short fiction, through Yoko Ogawa's *Revenge*, Mariana Enriquez's *Things We Lost in the Fire*, and Clive Barker's *Books of Blood*. I was also further inspired by the novels of Eka Kurniawan and Lualhati Bautista.

However, what I consider to be the turning point in my reading journey was taking up a crime fiction class in the graduate school. In this class, we were made to study the history of the genre, from its earliest inception, to its golden age, to the hardboiled era, and to its various iterations within this century. We were exposed to certain writers and books I wouldn't have cared for had I not taken the class: Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler, and Dashiell Hammett among them. The latter two had been particularly influential on a number of my own stories.

I came to a sharp turn though upon exploring the genre further and stumbling on the great works of 3 'J's: James M. Cain, Jim Thompson, and the "Demon Dog" of American crime fiction, James Ellroy. Ellroy would prove to have the most profound impact in my prose thereafter. He gave me a glimpse of how to bridge the gulf between a dense and complex plot and a prose that strictly observes concision. This has been one of the main principles that I tried to follow whilst writing some of the pieces in *Tropical Psycho*. More than this, I further learned how style should be a conscious decision on the side of the writer, and this decision must be based on the type of project he is working on. Ergo: the work's intention. Ergo: the experimentation. Ergo: the range of voices I attempted to capture in the said collection.

In one story, I employed the sparse and lyrical style of Amy Hempel and Lydia Davis, to slowly uncover the trauma of a young man coming to terms with an Oedipal nightmare. In another, I copied the hardboiled pace

and patois of Raymond Chandler to tell the story of a father's revenge for a dead son. The last story, titled "The Guard," is a horror story of the current times, where characters were shoved in a Pynchon-esque city where they must live through the paranoia and the panoptic powers of the government. In order to better portray the chaos and the intrusive power of certain establishments, I chose to tell this more than 30,000-word story in a single sentence, with only commas and semi-colons for punctuation, to capture the choking hold and the breathlessness caused by the State; my own stab at doing what Garcia Marquez did in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, pushed to the extreme. Meanwhile, my goal in "Tropical Psycho" is for the readers to be deeply embedded in the mind of the anti-hero without losing them in a labyrinthine stream of consciousness a la *Finnegan's Wake*. Despite my desire to experiment, it is always the readers that I have in mind. No matter what boundary I was trying to break, the work must be accessible and enjoyable for them. This gave me the idea to interpose the single paragraph form of Joyce and Garcia Marquez to the telegraphic prose of the American demon dog. My justification for this: we think and talk in sentences, in phrases. But not chopped up paragraphs. I have aimed to immerse the reader in the mind of a man digging up his past while dining in a restaurant with terrible secrets, thus all the action happened inside his head; a string of volatile memories detonated by a burger the protagonist likened to the madeleine in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Many of these stories, as in my first collection, led to a violent climax or a noir-tinged dénouement. As I mentioned though, *Tropical Psycho* magnified all the themes and motifs and questions of my very first book. On top of these, alas, is the tinkering with form in order to present the story in a way that would closely abide by the manner in which the human consciousness works. If I wanted the reader to slowly build an impression of

the protagonist, then the lyrical and minimalist style would be my recourse, even to the point of isolating each vignette or single micro-chapter of the narrative to a page (as in the case of the second story, “My Old Man”), the white spaces serving as a chance for the reader to reflect on the seemingly simple narratives, which were, in fact, written the way they were so that they wouldn’t merit just a single interpretation.

This then begs the question: do I really think this way? If such is the form that we have on the page, and if such is the author’s intention, how should the reader trust that this isn’t a madman’s roundabout way of saying that he is mad? My answer: writing is a kind of madness.

Reading what someone else wrote is a way of knowing the kind of madness one would like to subscribe to. Madness as in: a perspective of the world derailed from what others would think as normal. Madness as in: the belief that to be “normal” is to admit one’s willingness to remain in stasis. Madness as in: that itch to say something and a staunch resistance to answers. I am circling back to my intent of asking questions. This is still the essence of third book, and I suspect that I would carry on with this intent for my fourth book, or tenth, or twentieth, if—God forbid—I became mad enough to accumulate an arsenal of questions, enough to fill a bookcase. Or a case against myself. Madness. So: yes and no. I may not be mad, but I may also be, given that I insist on writing the way I write.

Think about it though: a man’s madness can often be caused by the pressure and influence of the people he is surrounded by, or a hostile system, or an epiphany he landed by crashing against the thoughts of the other mad men and women that preceded him. We form an idea of ourselves through our connections with other people. How we speak and how we act are possibly determined by certain experiences we’ve had in the past. But by claiming this as the sole determinant of one’s identity, one would deny

himself the faculty of making choices, of filtering out the encounters he would do good by doing away with so that he doesn't simply become the latter half of "cause and effect." So: a writer isn't simply a pestle for the other writers he chose to read. I now write the way I write because I chose certain aspects of an author's work and mangled them to fit the purposes of my own projects. I am no longer a sponge. I am a madman when I write. And I became one because of my conscious decision to inherit the madness of the writers whom I believe had forged their own unique process of conveying all the questions they wanted to ask to themselves and every other person in this mad, mad world.



# WHO DO I WRITE FOR? (I)

My answer: whoever's willing to listen to a madman.

## WHO DO I WRITE FOR? (II)

Let me try again: suppose that I am busking, say, in a side street of P. Noval at 6:00 in the afternoon, just in time for the rush hour, before the pandemic. People rushing to ride a bus, a jeepney, trying their luck to spot a cab without a passenger. I am standing on a sidewalk with a guitar and my voice, singing a song composed right on the spot, freewheeling, letting out my observations of my surroundings through what I know about composing. My guitar case is open, on the ground, in front of me. But it is empty. No matter. There are students, professors, blue-collars, white collars. The streetlamps flicker on and I am under one: a sort of spotlight. I sing and sing. I can feel my throat begging for rest and water. But I continue to strum, to hum, and to let my voice be heard on a footpath where no one so far had stopped to listen. My voice is drowned out by the horn of a truck. Or by the gaggle of passing pedestrians. But I will sing. That's how I feel when I write. I will continue to write, with blind expectations about who will stop to read my works.

There is a slippery slope when you are confronted with the question "Who do you write for?" Answer this way, and a group of people will tag you as something; answer the other way, and another group will give you the evil eye. It seems there is no way to answer this question without ruffling the feathers of those who expect you to write for the audiences they claimed to write for. But I cannot claim to write *for* any specific reader. I am hesitant to say for instance that I am writing for the underprivileged, because, after all, who am I to claim to have the capacity to know, to fully understand, and to finally articulate in the best way possible all the things that had been wrong in their life? What kind of writer will suppose that his fictions will solve

the grim realities of other people? They have their own, unique voices, and I cannot, in my conscience, steal them for the purposes of my own art. I am a madman, but I am not a predator. But I also cannot truthfully say that I am just writing for myself, for art, for self-expression. If this is the case, then why should I even write? I am a madman but I do not hope to be a narcissist.

The best that I can do then is to write out of my own experiences and wild imaginings, and hope that in the process of interrogating myself, of throwing out questions about the world, the readers—whomever they are—will also begin to question the beliefs they held for so long with a steadfast grip. I will write in an attempt to understand why the two women by the underpass, when I was in middle school, had tried to kill each other. I will write in an attempt to understand why the people I am surrounded by had enabled the violence encouraged by their tyrant leader. I will write to understand my curious affair with death. I will write, and continue to write, to articulate the horrors that I am living in. I will write in the hopes of bringing to the readers some sort of light after I plunge them into the abyss. Perhaps that is the reason why no one is stopping to listen as I busk in P. Noval at 6:00 in the evening. Because I am singing about myself, but my “self,” I’d like to believe, isn’t far from the others’ sense of self. Life had squeezed some of us to exhaustion, numbed us to the point of failing to have interest in what others would have to say about the world’s darkest realities.

But I will always believe that someone will come, will pass by and stop, someone will take the time to listen to my songs. I am not sure who or what the person would be like. Maybe a madman like myself, or someone who claims to have a grip on their life, or a dog or an alien being. The fact is that I simply don’t know who this listener would be. What I know is there will always be one. And even if I only have an audience of a single person, even if this listener wouldn’t as much as toss a single coin in my opened guitar case, I would be happy with the thought that this being, or person,

after listening to my own song, will later walk away, back into his own life, carrying with him some of my own lyrics. Perhaps he would hum these notes himself. Or if not, he may eventually sing his own song for others to hear.

CHAPTER 2:  
THE TRADITION



# PHILIPPINE HORROR SHORT FICTION IN ENGLISH: THE TRADITION

The following pages are not intended to present a comprehensive look into the horror genre (its mutating definitions, dimensions, etc.), nor would they be an exhaustive look into the said genre in the context of Philippine Literature. Let the limits thus be clear: the definitions utilized in this portion are selected for the simple purpose of delineating “horror” (or “art-horror”) from other genres, and the selected literature is by no means a complete survey. The following pages then are, at best, a cursory look into horror, specifically, the tradition of Philippine horror short fiction written in English, which will help the author approximate his work’s position within an ongoing literary history.

## **Defining Horror**

As scores of books have already been written in an attempt to encapsulate what the genre is, this section will thus be a brief glossing-over of a handful of writers’ definitions. The intent is to gain an overview, in contrast to a deeper and more complex rumination on this subset of speculative fiction.

We begin then, with a dictionary definition. J.A. Cuddon, in the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, defines the horror story as a narrative “which shocks, or even frightens the reader, and or perhaps induces a feeling of repulsion or loathing” (Cuddon 388). Etymology: *horrere*, that Latin term which means “to make the hair stand on end, tremble, or shudder” (388). Cuddon’s entry involved a decent history of the genre; its roots and the various permutations it appeared in through the works of later writers. He asserted that the need for telling tales of darkness had existed

even as far back as the time of the Classical epics, such as *The Aeneid*, and later, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Horror came to life in ancient literature through the depiction of violence in epics and long poems of this distant time in the world's literary history. Then in the Middle Ages, horror continued on through Chaucer (in particular "The Pardoner's Tale") and Dante's *Inferno*. Coming from Dante, works that predated our notion of horror literature were later mostly graced (or rather, haunted) by the presence of the Devil, as exemplified in Goethe's *Faust*, or images of Hell, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Evil thus has been a staple motif in the works that followed, which in turn would greatly influence the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century idea of horror fiction (i.e., Beckford's *Vathek*). And then from the rather specific image and character of the Devil, it appeared that this malignant being mutated itself in various forms as the history of literature pushed forward: from the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, Shelley, the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ambrose Bierce, and Edgar Allan Poe; Cuddon even mentioned novels by Thomas Pynchon (*The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*) and Anthony Burgess.

What perhaps distinguishes Cuddon's manner of defining the horror story is its insistence on the literary merit the story was supposed to have, giving the implication that works without this so-called "literary merit" do not belong in the discussion of the genre. Thus, the emphasis on themes, allegories, and an implied relevance to the history concurrent to the time that a particular work was published. One could glimpse his disapproval of the modern horror stories as exemplified by "another generation of contrivers of horror and peddlers of nightmares": "some neo-horror literature is poor stuff, reminding one not of the 'worst excesses of the French Revolution,' but rather, of the lurid sensationalism of old-fashioned pulp" (400).

He then singled out the works by Clive Barker, Peter Straub, John Saul, and Stephen King.



Before we further proceed: we must note at this point that for Cuddon, the horror story must be Literature, with a capital “L.” Despite his discourse on the iterations of the Devil in horror fiction as the doppelganger, the ghost, the vampire, etc., what really is more important is how the history of fiction has been shaped by the genre (and not how the genre itself is shaped by certain, specific conventions), and so he cast the net wide in an attempt to explain what horror is. As such, the emphasis is on the question of the selected literature’s literary merit, on the development of the form, and not much on defining and diving into the specifics of what makes horror fiction horror.

This is where Stephen King’s own discourse on the genre could be useful. In *Danse Macabre* (1981), King provided his view on the inner working of the genre, both as a consumer of cinematic and literary horror, and as a writer himself. Note: “literature,” in small caps. This is because King has been more concerned in dissecting horror fiction (both in film and magazine and books) as cultural objects that follow specific, evolving conventions and not as individual works that drastically changed the landscape of fiction altogether. Cuddon had cast the net so wide that defining what horror was has become a matter of picking out the more “Literary” stuff. I personally believe that some would doubt that Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* in any way represents the genre; Cuddon had stretched the limits of horror to cater to the implicit need to discriminate between what is good and what is bad “literature,” as is the project of any good old-fashioned literary critic.

Now on to King: one particular interesting aspect of his book on horror is how he explained the genre by distinguishing it from other emotions. Horror fiction, after all, is a body of literature that sets out to elicit a certain emotion from the reader. But what is horror? King seemed to have figured it out in *Danse Macabre*, claiming that horror is the emotion that underlies “terror.” Thus, horror is “. . . an emotion which is slightly less fine,

because it is entirely of the mind. Horror also invites a physical reaction by showing us something which is physically wrong” (King 22).

It is thus two-fold : terror and horror. The former being the more refined one as it relies on the implied, what wasn't shown but causes the viewer/reader to shudder anyway. King gave the beating heart in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" as an example. Horror on the other hand requires the manifestation of an actual thing that is "physically wrong."

But what is this "physically wrong" thing or being? King had a number of examples: slimes, aliens, freaks, science fiction grotesqueries.

In short: monsters.

This then is the common denominator in the definitions offered by Cuddon and King: horror fiction features monsters in them. Or monstrosities in any form or shape. The Devil could be one of them, or ghosts, or freaks, or serial killers. Monsters are those which violate our laws of what is deemed as normal. They deviate from expectations, invite the idea of danger and dread around them, which is the reason why the reader is horrified upon encountering them on the page. Or at least the character on the page is.

Cuddon and King certainly had more interesting things to say about the genre, but there is this one book which has been able to streamline the conventions of the horror genre, which we will now turn to to further whatever definitions we have gathered thus far.

Published in 1990, Noel Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* is a landmark and influential work in the field of genre studies; I'd like to believe that it is the first work of such length to really dissect the workings of the horror conventions. More than that, it is also a work that attempted to present a philosophy of horror: why it exists, why people continually read them, and what paradoxes abound the consumption of horror literature or horror cinema? While *Danse Macabre* is King's attempt at doing

this, I found that Carroll's is a more organized, thorough, encompassing, borderline academic, and yet an undeniably profound study. This is not to say that Carroll's definition of horror is without its limitations (I would, in fact, argue a bit later that something was amiss in his discourse; but that's for later). Though despite the limits, Carroll's definitions and structures for horror and monstrosities present a more comprehensive glimpse into the multifaceted possibilities of the genre. Here, then, is a crude attempt at encapsulating "The Nature of Horror": According to Carroll, there are certain conditions that a work must meet in order to be called horror, or, as he'd call it "art-horror." Preliminary to these conditions, Carroll discussed the importance of his preference for calling the genre "art-horror." This is to separate "horror"—that raw emotion we feel at real-life situations or upon encountering certain horrific narratives—from that feeling elicited by books or shows we perceive as creations that follow a particular set of conventions. To call it "art-horror" is to recognize that there is indeed a subset of the arts that is created for the purpose of horrifying the reader. As an example: *The Shake, Rattle, and Roll* franchise falls under art-horror because we understand it as a series of films created for the purpose of scaring the viewers through episodes that more or less deal with the supernatural. On the other hand, we may be tempted to say that we feel horror when we see the mountains of burning Jews in *Schindler's List* (1993). But if we are to follow Carroll's logic, this film isn't art-horror because, while we may have felt a semblance of the horror we may have had in Peque Gallaga's *Manananggal* (1984) while watching the mountain burn, *Schindler's List* doesn't follow the conventions and conditions of the genre (at least as purported by Carroll). Thus, it is not a simple matter of feeling horrified at a story, as opposed to the implication of Cuddon's dictionary entry. Instead, it had much to do with the manner by which the emotion was elicited from the reader.

Here, then, are the two major conditions: (1) There must be a monster in it, and (2) the monster must be perceived as horrifying by a character, in most cases the protagonist.

The first condition has been implied in Cuddon's and King's excursions into the horror genre: monsters and monstrosities indeed are essential to any work of horror fiction. What sets Carroll's definition apart, though, is the second condition—the emphasis on the way that this monster is being perceived by the central character. For the second condition to be further understood, one must define first what monsters are. Let us not further deviate and utilize one of the many features that Carroll pointed out for a fictional construct to be a monster. Monsters are: “[...] threats to common knowledge. Undoubtedly, it is in virtue of this cognitive threat that not only horrific monsters referred to as impossible, but also that they tend to render those who encounter them insane, mad, deranged, and so on. For such monsters are, in a certain sense, challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking” (Carroll, 34).

Let us note: “challenges to the foundations of a culture's way of thinking.” This is what divides horror from that umbrella of speculative fiction genre that it falls under—fantasy. In fantasy stories, monsters abound. The orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*. The centaurs in *Narnia*. All these monsters exist in a fictional world where their presence is understood as a given. The ogre Shrek's existence doesn't challenge the reality of the realm where he belongs. The culture of the world they inhabit is one where they are naturally a part of.

This is in direct contrast to the aberrations of science and the supernatural that exists in works of horror fiction. For example, Frankenstein's monster, or the Count Dracula. They inspire fear and loathing, pose a danger to those they encounter. Monsters in fact often are dangerous beings. Not only in that they have the capacity to kill or to hurt, but because of their

very existence—the very fact that they were created in a world, a culture, or fictional reality, where they were not supposed to exist. Characters who encounter them may be rendered mad. Horror and madness. The close ties between these had been seamlessly explained by Carroll in his work. Beings that cannot be explained by contemporary science violate the laws of what we consider as normal. And so, in a work of art-horror we have this awareness that a certain creature is a monster, is an aberration, by the way that the other characters perceive it. We understand for example, that the deformed creature in the “LRT” episode of *Shake, Rattle and Roll 8* (2006) is a “horrific monster” because of the way it was seen as horrifying by the stranded train passengers. The look in their eyes, the screams, and all the running that happened thereafter. They fled for their lives. The monster posed a danger, dug a clean hole in one of them, presumably to feast on his innards.

As an aside, this episode of the well-known Filipino franchise is starkly reminiscent (to the point of directly deriving its elements and themes, I’d like to believe) of a story by a British horror writer named Clive Barker, “Midnight Meat Train” (published as part of the *Books of Blood*, 1984). We could use one of the stories by Barker himself to exemplify what Carroll purported about monsters. Here is an extract from another *Books of Blood* story, called “In the Hills, The Cities”:

“Popolac blotted the sky utterly. It was for the moment, the whole world, heaven and earth, its presence filled the senses to overflowing. At this proximity one look could not encompass it, the eye had to range backwards and forwards, over its mass to take it all in, and even then the mind refuse to accept the whole truth” (Barker, 287).

Popolac killed one of the protagonists, Judd, while his partner, Mick was rendered mad at the end of the story, subsumed into the being of this monster:

“He screamed and howled and swung on the ropes, drinking up his triumphs. Below, far below, he glimpsed Judd’s body, curled up pale on the dark ground, irretrievable. Love and life and sanity were gone, gone like the memory of his name, or his sex or his ambition” (288).

Such is the effect of a monster. Beyond posing a physical danger, it could also take the sanity out of a character.

Carroll even went as far as enumerating the many ways by which writers have created their own iterations of a monster. I will touch on this later in the second chapter, where the framework for the monsters I’ve created and the inception of the stories in *Tropical Psycho* will be discussed.

In the meantime, I’d like to raise the limitation of Noel Carroll’s belief of what horror fiction should be, which is something that he himself admitted:

“[...]my theory of art-horror is what might be called entity-based. That is, my definition of horror involves essential reference to an entity, a monster, which then serves as the particular object of the emotion of an art-horror. Notice in other words, that I have not taken events to be among the primary objects of art-horror” (Carroll, 41).

Thus, the reason why the burning mass of bodies could not be used to usher *Schindler's List* into the art-horror category, despite any form of negative emotion one might have experienced while viewing the film. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the world wars, the genocides, the ethnic cleansings—all these are occasions, in real life, that evoke horror. But Noel Carroll discounts such events for the sake of streamlining what art-horror is all about.

I find this reasonable, albeit it is something that I would not fully agree with, especially for the sake of the thesis and creative writing output to be presented. Moreover, Carroll had seemed to imply that monsters should only be supernatural in nature (i.e., they must not exist in our plane of explainable reality). Thus, he excluded the anti-heroes of Edgar Allan Poe's stories and Norman Bates from *Psycho* (1960) from the long list of literary and cinematic monsters, relegating the stories they were featured in as tales of "terror," and not horror.

I am thus using Carroll's definition for the sake of presenting a *possible* structure and not as the be-all and end-all of horror's definition. King and Cuddon themselves have made a case of how E. A. Poe's stories have been crucial to the development of the horror genre, and so this thesis shall follow the thread of horror wherein psychological terrors are not only included, but are integral to defining the genre.

In a speech delivered by Filipino fictionist Karl R. De Mesa at the University of Santo Tomas titled "My Transcendental Knife: a manifesto for horror stories as psychic defense" (later published in his nonfiction book *Report from the Abyss*, 2013), he remarked how horror as a genre of short fiction could become our way of coping from the horrors that we encounter in real life. I'd like to say, first, that while I find this to be a reasonable insight, I on the other hand do not completely agree with it. At least, I believe that horror does not exist as a coping mechanism. To some, it might, but for

myself, it is in fact a way of diving deeper into our fears. I do not read or write to cope. I consume horror to magnify all that I fear in the real world. We create fictional monsters to allegorize the actual monsters we are living with, and in the process of reading or writing about them, we are in some ways moving closer within the proximity of the dangers we have in real life. To examine, to better understand. All at a safer distance.

But all the same, I would like to end this section with a remarkable part of De Mesa's speech, which speaks volumes about the nature of horror fiction:

“Many of my colleagues say journalism is a gun. If Journalism is a gun, then horror is the serrated knife that can be used as surgically precise as a scalpel or as brutal as a butcher's hack. Horror is the only genre that is named after an emotion. Horror is an attempt to keep us from forgetting sensation, to enshrine all that intensity in memory before the wind blows it away” (De Mesa, 30).

To keep us from forgetting. This might be the core of all fictions, and horror fiction, in particular, could serve as a testament to a part of our history, culture, and overall madness as a people. In our own literature, for instance, what are the monsters our writers have stitched together out of the madness of the previous and current century? How have they used the transcendental knife of horror to interrogate the grim realities in our country? Or have they done this at all? I'll attempt to answer these questions in the next part of this thesis, in the hopes of gaining even the slightest idea on how far we have gone in terms of horror fiction writing in the Philippines.



# TRADITION: THE WORKS

The fact of the matter is we haven't gone that far. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me first reiterate the limits of the body of works that we'll be touching on in the subsequent pages. First, my primary concern is to trace the possible beginnings and development of the horror fiction genre in the Philippines, and this I intend do by looking at short fiction pieces or collections by Filipino writers, written in English. Why English? Though it need not be said, let it still be noted that the decision to focus on the body of works in this language stems from the fact that my collection is written in English. Thus, the tradition of writing where *Tropical Psycho* might be more appropriate to relegate to is in this language. There is, definitely, a longer and more complex tradition of horror story writing in Filipino as well as in the other languages in the Philippines, but for the sake of brevity and cohesion, I am going to restrict the "tradition" that I'll be writing about to just this single, miniscule, aspect, of our rich literary history.

We might do good by beginning with one of the foremost Filipino writers in English during the American colonial period, Manuel Arguilla. In 1935, the *Literary Apprentice* published "Seven Bedtime Stories," a suite of seven short fiction that read like cautionary tales about supernatural creatures and their intrusion in the lives of men and women. Here is the second story, "The Fat Woman," in its entirety:

"A small boy slept before a crooked post and his mother failed to move him away. In the night he dreamed that a huge fat woman was coming into

the room, filling the doorway with her bulk. She laid herself over the small boy so that he could not breathe and was becoming suffocated. He tried to call his mother but no sound came out of his mouth for the fat woman pressed down on him heavily. He was dying for lack of breath.

Then in his dream, the boy remembered what his mother once told him of the *batibat* that lived in crooked posts and killed people who slept before its abode. He struggled to bring his hand to his mouth and bit his thumb with all his might. He awoke gasping, sweat streaming all over his body. His thumb was bloody where he had bitten it, but soon healed and the small boy never again slept before a crooked post” (Arguilla, 214).

*Batibat* as the monster figure. The boy as the protagonist who perceives this supernatural creature as a being that poses threat, causes demise. The rest of the suite follows the same pattern: a pregnant woman hunted by an *asuang* trying to eat her baby, young men lured by beautiful women who turned out to be *manananggals*, a carpenter injured by an old dwarf (explicitly called in the narrative as a “monster” and a “devil”), a beautiful girl who fell prey to the spell of a *mangkukulam*, a farmer tricked by a *tikbalang*, and a girl tempted by a *matanda sa punso* with jewels.

There’s an irony to the title “Seven Bedtime Stories,” and I could agree that from this irony we could glimpse the beginnings of the horror fiction genre in our country. But all the same, I would be wary against calling these as works of art-horror. I have used the word “cautionary tale” earlier for a reason. Despite the possible fear and dread that one might feel while

reading these flash fiction pieces, the intent had more to do with depicting the measures folks should take when confronted by these supernatural beings, or even the possible scenarios through which we could encounter these creatures. As Jose Dalisay, Jr. noted in “Celebrating Arguilla,” the suite is a “dramatic rendering in vignettes of such Filipino supernatural characters as the *aswang*, the *manananggal*, the *tianak*, and the *tikbalang*” (qtd. in Arguilla, 9).

Thus, the intent was not to scare readers per se. Furthermore, the stories in this suite rarely had characters to whom the reader could identify the feeling of horror. The characters often encounter the creatures almost akin to the way the hobbits might perceive Smaug—perhaps with awe and fear—not exactly with horror. In the same way that a dragon is expected to exist in a world like Middle Earth, so do the characters in “Seven Bedtime Stories” perceive the supernatural creatures, or monsters, almost as a natural part of the world they were living in. There is the element of fear, but what I’d like to point out is the manner by which the monsters were not perceived as threats to the laws that govern the characters’ lives. In fact, it seems to me that *tiyanaks*, *manananggals*, and *asuangs* are readily accepted as a given in the culture of the people that Arguilla was writing about, where explanations and logical ways on how to combat them exist.

Arguilla’s tales are of course rooted in our country’s lower mythologies; mythologies that somehow shaped our perception of reality (I am quite certain that, even now, some individuals would still have faith in the existence of *dwendes* and *tiyanaks*). *Albularyos* could be our best link to this part of our reality. Thus, the reason why Arguilla’s stories do not strike me as art-horror: the creatures he was writing about, or at least in the way they were written about, were not aberrations to the Filipino people’s reality. Because to some of us, they are part of reality. They could be explained, could be seen, could be fought against.

I've belabored my point. We must now move on to another significant writer who may have left an indelible mark in our tradition of horror story writing: Nick Joaquin.

Joaquin wrote a number of stories in the Gothic mode. As is known in the field of genre studies, horror fiction, as we now understand it, also has its roots in the Gothic tradition as exemplified by the works of Horace Walpole (*The Castle of Otranto*), William Beckford (*Vathek*) and the "romances" of Ann Radcliffe. I believe that in the same fashion, our own tradition of horror story writing also owes certain elements to Gothic literature, as exemplified by Joaquin's stories such as "The Summer Solstice," "Candido's Apocalypse," "May Day Eve," and "The Legend of the Dying Wanton." The latter, in particular, was a piece that one may find as truly horrifying, with its graphic description of the titular wanton's remains:

"But its body was bloated, its face horribly mutilated, and the entire carcass, from head to foot, a single enormous, grayly gaping, hotly odorous wound, swarming with flies and oozing pus and a foul oil and so thickly matted with worms you could scoop them out by the fistful, as the moist flesh seemed to have scooped out indeed, having fallen away from the bones in so many places the skeleton already glittered triumphant through the last decayed rags of mortality" (Joaquin, 28).

I'd say this could be a turning point in that tiny tradition within the history of Philippine literature in English. This graphic description of a corpse gives the readers a taste of repulsion. Repulsion, on top of the sense of danger and the violation against the realm of what we consider as normal,

is one of the most important qualities that a fictionist can inscribe on the monster s/he is creating, according to Carrol.

But mistake not: the wanton is not a monster figure. In fact, the story isn't even a piece of horror fiction. What I'd like to raise though is the fact that we already have passages written as early as Nick Joaquin's time where we could glimpse at the possibilities of art-horror in the country. Joaquin's Gothic mode (or horrifying imagery) are far from being the point of his stories. As Gina Apostol has noted, "It is especially through his women that Joaquin diagnoses the spiritual horror of impassioned but truncated lives—his existential theme" (qtd. in Joaquin, x).

Horror imagery as a means of arriving at a deeper theme and purpose. Fiction shooting beyond the intent of scaring the readers through monsters. Though he is undeniably brilliant and influential, Nick Joaquin is by no means a writer of art-horror stories. This is simply because his intentions and methods are far different from, say, Robert Bloch (who happened to have the same birth year as Joaquin) or Richard Matheson.

Having made this uncalled-for comparison, it may now be the best time to point out the differences between the tradition of "art-horror" in the West versus the one we are trying to claw at in the present. In the West, the Gothic tradition has existed as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century; horrifying works written in English has been shaping their literature for hundreds of years before finally being sharpened and streamlined by later writers to produce works such as *Dracula* or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Thus, on top of the fact that Filipino writers such as Arguilla and Joaquin are writing in a borrowed (or one might say, imposed) language, they do not have any other precursors besides, most likely, the literature in English brought to our shores by the colonizers. Prior to the American period, "Literature" in the country is written in other languages (I must emphasize, again, that horror fiction in Filipino languages has a tradition of its own, be it oral, written, or

even in the cinema, and thus it deserves a different, and more dedicated study than the present one).

There is also the possibility of horror being deemed unworthy of exploring at all, being (misconstrued simply as) a body of literature that focuses on eliciting a specific emotion, rather than being a complex statement about the turbulent times, or a work of “art” (which is what “Literature” with capital “L” is all about). Corollary to this is the lack of publishers and imprints dedicated to the genre which could have fostered the growth of art-horror fiction in the country. Even the works of some Filipino writers are unfortunately out of print despite their value as “Literature.” Despite these excuses and limitations, our writers in English still managed to make deeper stabs at the genre much later.

In 1988, New Day Publishing released a collection of short stories that may have been unprecedented as a work of speculative fiction: Leoncio P. Deriada’s *Night Mares and Other Stories of Fantasy and Horror*. I believe that, within the realm of Philippine Fiction in English, this stands out as an exemplary collection that could best represent the genre in question. This shouldn’t come as a surprise because Deriada, being a well-known writer by the time of the book’s publication (having beforehand reaped awards for his short fiction and plays), tellingly noted in his preface for *Night Mares*:

“Filipinos have a rich tradition of fantasy and horror stories. Surprisingly, not many, aside from a few anthropologists and folklorists and *komiks* writers, have given this type of literature enough attention. This collection is my attempt at popularizing the genre” (Deriada, vi).

In light of my remark about Joaquin and Arguilla being writers who did not essentially produce art-horror, it is also worth noting how Deriada seemed to imply that in the field of short fiction, he doesn't have any direct precursor. And so, *Night Mares*, until any other collection of short fiction published before 1988 will suddenly emerge out of obscurity, is the very first collection of "art-horror" short stories in English in the country, both by the virtue of Deriada's admission ("my attempt at popularizing the genre" and the very fact that the stories in this collection closely follow the conventions we have earlier derived from Carroll, King, and Cuddon.)

The subtitle, *and Other Stories of Fantasy and Horror*, lives up to its name for the entirety of the book. We begin with this chilling story called "Wood." The story details the happenings in Funeraria Tablan, describing the type of people working in it and its owners. One may concede: this is not a supernatural tale in the strictest sense. But here we would also have a very telling description of what the reader has in store for the rest of the collection, told from the perspective of one of the characters:

"[...] he felt a strange repulsion a hatred and a fear of something so ugly and gaping in the dark like some uncovered grave in a crowded cemetery. He looked at the morbid inhabitants of the funeraria: how ugly they were, both in their happiness, and sorrow" (9).

Fear, hatred. Ugliness and repulsion. Such common themes for horror fiction, and for the rest of Deriada's collection. "Wood" was then followed up by the "'Twas Brillig," a comic fantasy story, and then horrifying supernatural stories like "Mother and Child," "Prophecy," "The Invitation," and the "Tree of Terror." "The Phone Pal from Padre Selga Street," the sixth story, is a masterclass in psychological terror.

What I find remarkable in Deriada's collection is that it is an almost solid example of what art-horror is in the context of Philippine literature. There is no question about his skills in terms of writing fiction (*The Road to Mawab* may be representative of his apex as a fictionist), but what we have in *Night Mares* are truly horrifying stories which could indeed elicit shudders and terror from the reader. Here is an exemplary scene from the seventh story, "The Confession":

"Bless me father for I have sinned," he said. "My last confession was—"

He stopped. Like a million feelers, the hair on his arms and legs stood and a chill ran through his body. He opened his eyes and looked through the grille.

He screamed.

Through the grill he saw a face that embodied all the horrors he could ever imagine. Staring at him was a pair of burning eyes, set in a face crowned with a pair of glowing horns.

The peaked face laughed soundlessly, baring fangs that gleamed sinisterly as the embers in its eyes" (89).

The protagonist, quite simply, was just about to confess to the Devil himself! And we, the readers, identify with Rene, the protagonist, thus we feel horrified as well. Such is the power of Deriada's narrative.

*Night Mares* is a collection of psychological and supernatural horror short fiction. It may have also used creatures of our lower myths (like in



Arguilla's "Bedtime Stories"), but what distinguishes his fiction is the way they were written about. When we read about the *kapre* or the *tikbalang* in *Night Mares*, we read about them as aberration of the realities where these monsters existed. They are monsters, which a protagonist must behead ("Twas Brillig") or which triggered a character's insanity ("Night Mares").

In this regard, Deriada's collection is unsurpassed as a collection of art-horror stories. On the one hand, no other volume could be considered as its precursor. On the other hand, no later collection of horror stories has ever delivered such a solid stab in the genre. Not even anthologies that claimed to collect works of horror fiction (which I won't discuss anymore, as we are focusing on collections by a single author; my project is a collection, and not an anthology).

Let's have a rundown of later collections of horror stories and attempt to assess what our writers had achieved since the publication Deriada's volume.

No other work or collection of short fiction by a single author would claim to be "horror" until the year 2005, when Visprint released a trilogy of novellas collectively known as *The Penumbra Novellas* by David Hontiveros (to the best of my knowledge). The novellas, titled "Takod," "Craving," and "Parman," were published separately in the same year. At the back of each book was the tag, "Fiction" and under this word was "Horror/Dark Fantasy." To a certain extent, there certainly are horrifying scenes in each of these novellas, and each abound in supernatural creatures one may consider as monsters. Most of these stories though lean more towards the "Dark Fantasy" genre, as the lore in them presupposes the existence of the supernatural beings as natural to each of the worlds built. I'm talking specifically about "Takod" and "Parman." It is "Craving," though, with its deft depiction of the mounting fear of a couple awaiting the birth of their child, reminiscent of *Rosemary's Baby* but touched with Southeast Asian folklore, which would prove to be

the closest job of Hontiveros on the horror genre through the short fiction format (in this case, the novella form).

The following year, Karl R. De Mesa's *Damaged People: Tales of the Gothic Punk* was released by the University of the Philippines Press. *Damaged People* (like *News of the Shaman*, De Mesa's second volume of short fiction which was published by Visprint) is mostly written in the same vein as Hontiveros' *Penumbra* novellas in that while the collection, as a whole, deals with dark themes and premises ("Gothic") with a focus on downtrodden men or other beings ("Punk"), there is much focus on establishing the existence of creatures such as angels and vampires as a natural part of the world they inhabit. Either this, or we are simply placed in the perspective of the supernatural being, thus denying the reader of the chance to think that these characters' existence is an aberration. There is much violence and darkness, true, but the monsters, at least most of them, were created not to be loathed, but to be sympathized with.

We also see this trend in Marivi Soliven Blanco's *Spooky Mo: Horror Stories* (Milflores Publishing, 2008). The author's introduction is very telling of her project that I feel hesitant to expound further on the monsters she has created. Let Soliven Blanco's words suffice:

"In case you haven't noticed yet, most of my lovely sinners are women. Spooky Mo makes a pun that crude Pinoy epithet men hurl—more often out of droll affection than malice—at female friends. I've returned the favor with tales that demonstrate how we members of the gentler sex can, when provoked, turn into genuinely scary bitches.

Consider yourself warned." (Soliven Blanco, iv)

*Manananggals*, *bangungot* (recall: Arguilla's *Batibat*), *mambabarangs*, a woman who cuts her husband's penis off to be fed to the *querida*, and a vengeful vagina. These are NOT the monsters in Soliven's tales. The monsters were the men these women had to put up with: a cheating husband, a violent father, an American man who loathes Filipino cuisine, and the horrors of living with a bum who had nothing better to do than to beat the wife. These are the true monsters in *Spooky Mo*. The most striking stories in this collection are: (1) "Penitence," in which a woman craves for her partner to be at the receiving end of her bloody penitential lashings, and (2) "Consumption," a fictional account of the story of the snake woman living in a mall waiting to consume shoppers (the author couldn't have been more blunt with that title—the reader would of course think that it is a critique on consumerism even before reaching the end of the story.)

There are striking and graphic imagery, but again they are not essentially horror. The twists were written in such a way that the reader would not feel horror but amusement. At best, the pieces are more satirical than horrifying.

From then on, collections would be published with only a small fraction of genuinely horrifying stories in them. For instance, Yvette Tan's *Waking the Dead and Other Horror Stories* (Anvil, 2009) doesn't live up to the latter half of its title, with only four or five stories out of ten following the conventions (i.e., existence of a monster which, by the virtue of it being an aberration of the explainable reality, brings fear and loathing to the main character/s). The rest were either science fiction, dark fantasy, or a ghost story (the existence of ghosts doesn't automatically relegate it to the realm of horror, dear reader).

In Ian Rosales Casocot's *Heartbreak and Magic: Stories of Fantasy and Horror* (Anvil, 2011), we have three stories ("How Sarah Broke Up

with Me,” “The Painted Lady,” and—the most disturbing of them all— “The Flicker”) sandwiched in between five other fantasy stories.

Eliza Victoria’s *A Bottle of Storm Clouds* (2012) works mostly as a collection of science fiction and fantasy stories, with only a handful as well dabbling with horror (the best one being the opening story, “Salot”; other noteworthy stories are: “Monsters,” and the closing story, “Once in a Small Town”).

Siege Malvar’s *Wakasang Wasak* (Visprint, 2013), an interesting collection of novellas, has one story worth including in this cursory survey: “Ang Kama ni Stella,” a Lovecraftian tale of a man-eating bed, curiously written in English. The next story, “Ang Mutya ng San Isidro,” written in Filipino, is an amusing and more graphic rehash of Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” while the last story is another dark fantasy tale of angels and witches, called “Where Angels Fear to Tread.”

Perhaps the collection that would come close to what Deriada did in *Night Mares* is Jose Miguel Arguelles’ *Our Darkest Hours* (Visprint 2015). This volume doesn’t claim to be a book of horror fiction (its subtitle simply being “A Collection of Short Fiction”), but Rosario Cruz-Lucero, in her introduction for the volume, gave a rather apt overview of what the reader has in store between its covers:

“Mr. Arguelles derives his fictive raw material from the myths and legends of his own province of Zamboanga and of his present residence, Manila. In his stories, zombies and *manananggals* jostle for the center space with the mythical python in the basement of Robinson’s Galleria, as metaphors of Philippine social illness” (qtd. in Arguelles, 7).

Arguelles did all these with a nihilistic flair which characterized the darkest of noir fiction. In “Lucky,” the first story, a young man was trapped with the “mythical python” in a mall’s basement after having been detained by a guard. The story developed in the way any decent work of horror fiction might proceed: a protagonist waiting in darkness, and then the monster finally emerging out of the darkness, culminating in a violent showdown of will to survive. The twist though came when the young man managed to escape the dark room, freeing the python in the process and making this monster devour the guard who detained him in the first place. What was more interesting is he named the monster as “Lucky,” and used her for his own selfish gain in the end.

Such was the depth of darkness you’ll be plunging yourself into when reading Arguelles’ fiction (he has another volume *Ordinary World*, released by Visprint in 2018). While monsters existed in his stories, it is, ultimately, the men, or a cult, or circumstances, which haunts and places the characters in danger. This has been done before in the volumes I’d mentioned earlier (in *De Mesa*, *Soliven Blanco*, *Tan*, and *Casocot*), but I find that *Our Darkest Hours* had been a more solid and successful excursion into that dark terrain of a skewed psychological make up, which usually is the best quality one could find in the tales of “terror” of Edgar Allan Poe or the thrillers of Stephen King. It isn’t simply monsters and men. It is: monsters are men (cue Sartre saying, “Hell is other people”). The same motif could be seen in the best stories contained in Augusto Antonio Aguila’s 2016 collection released by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House (USTPH), *Carnival of Hate* (in the title story, as well as “The Shop,” and the “The Prankster”) as well as Jenny Ortuoste’s concise, dark pieces in *Fictionary* (USTPH, 2016), published as well in 2016. Ortuoste excelled in the art of understated horror, running parallel to Arguelles’ dark perspective on humanity and its fate, especially in stories like “Intoximication,” “Stitch,” and “The Cups.”

This is also the thread that stitches together the stories in Kristine Ong Muslim's *Age of Blight* (The Unnamed Press, 2016). Whereas the monsters in the aforementioned volume are men, Muslim's collection proposes that it is men (scientists, mostly) *and* their creations. Many of the stories are science fiction in nature, but they are nonetheless horrifying in that the implied message of each story is: "Mindless freedom of experimentation in the name of science sucks. We slowly kill the world, bringing us closer to A-bombs, or if not, to an utterly bonkers world barely resembling the one we just destroyed."

Perhaps one of the most disturbing scenes in Philippine fiction in English could be found in *Age of Blight's* final story "History of the World," which ended with the following paragraph:

"Justin's body attracts the vultures. One swoops down. Then another follows. The grisly carrion birds touch down beside the body, fold their wings as if in supplication, the unique pose of the defeated. The vultures bend their necks, bow their heads, begin to peck away at the dead, take what they can before moving. The long, long age of blight rambles forth" (Muslim, 103).

I would've ended this cursory survey with that profoundly horrifying paragraph, but I couldn't, because in 2021, Small Beers Press released a collection of short stories by Isabel Yap entitled *Never Have I Ever*. Many of the stories in this volume are reminiscent of Eliza Victoria's efforts in *A Bottle of Storm Clouds* (sharing the focus on myth and world-building), but what makes Yap's stories distinct is their exploration of queerness and diaspora through a select few horrifying, and mostly fantastical, speculative

tales. A *manananggal*, a “Jello Blob,” the *bakunawa*, and a murderous “shadow” are among the characters featured in Yap’s collection of spec fic stories.

Here then are some preliminary conclusions we could safely draw out from the cursory survey we have just undertaken: (1) there *is* a tradition of horror short fiction writing in English in the Philippines, and (2) this tradition deviates, rather sharply, from the Western tradition of horror story writing. Different in terms of breadth, sources, and just the sheer fact that ours is a fairly young tradition. As we may have noticed, though a number of collections of short stories have already been published under the horror genre, less than a handful of these collections are written for the purpose of eliciting a certain emotion, that of “art-horror.” Granted: collections like *Spooky Mo*, *Damaged People*, and *Age of Blight* all have horrifying things to say about the world around us. The insights we can glean from all of the books I have mentioned are in fact invaluable to our culture or to the way that we are living now. These are commentaries on our society and all of them are worth reading because of what they have to say. However, except for *Night Mares* and much of *Our Darkest Hours*, the stories in these books circle around their supposed allegories or insight in a manner that is not entirely parallel to the conventions of “art-horror.” Horrifying insights doesn’t make a story “art-horror.” If the case is otherwise, then there is no point in picking out the collections I have earlier mentioned; we may as well just claim that *every* book is horror, that Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* or Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters* are works of horror fiction because at some point in their narratives, the horrors of our politics, past and present haunts the characters.

“Art-horror” presupposes that a writer is working under a set of conventions. This might sound prescriptive (and I do believe that Carroll’s definition of the genre is indeed a prescriptive one), but I’d argue that for us to move forward in a particular field, we must first identify the objects of our study, differentiate them from the rest of the lot—perhaps in the same way that gold must be extracted from the ore. I am not suggesting that we

must have an absolute delineation in our search for horror fiction; on the contrary, I'd like to suggest that whatever definitions we have gathered thus far about the genre could be applied to works that do not apparently subject themselves to its conventions, perhaps much later in a different project by a more enthusiastic scholar. There is still value, for example, in proposing that Rizal's novels are in their own way works of horror fiction.

Perhaps all I want to say is for us to get a good grasp of this tiny part of our tradition, we must take pains for now to separate the valuable minerals (valuable, at least, for "art-horror") from the huge blocks of sediment that we have. I have attempted to do that in the preceding pages, and I'd like to believe that my conclusions are at least half-correct.

The fact of the matter is that, indeed, we haven't gone that far. But in so far as the extraction of valuable minerals are concerned, we now know that we at least have a certain amount of metal to scrutinize. Let us then take the time to look more closely into the aspect that makes these stories valuable to "art-horror."

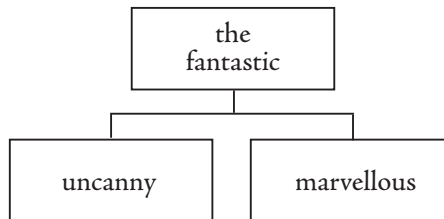
The time has come for us to talk about the monsters.



# TRADITION: THE MONSTERS

We have established that for a work of fiction to be considered as “art-horror,” there must be a monster, and this monster must be seen by a character (with which the reader will identify) as an entity that is dangerous, revolting, and a violation of the culture and/or explainable reality of the world where the story is set. But what exactly are monsters? And how are they created?

To answer this, we may benefit from looking at the concept of Tzvetan Todorov’s “fantastic” before elaborating on the ways by which horror writers create their monsters, in accordance to Carroll’s study. Todorov is a standard fare in the field of genre studies and it is only appropriate to hark back to the framework he laid out in *The Fantastic*.



Above is an overly simplified translation of Todorov’s concept of “the fantastic,” which in a way is the progenitor for later definitions of “horror.” According to Todorov, the heart of the fantastic is “an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (Todorov 14). The “same familiar world” being *our* reality. Todorov asserted that the fantastic happens at the moment of uncertainty. If we encounter a phenomenon, for example, that we do not initially understand because it has violated the laws

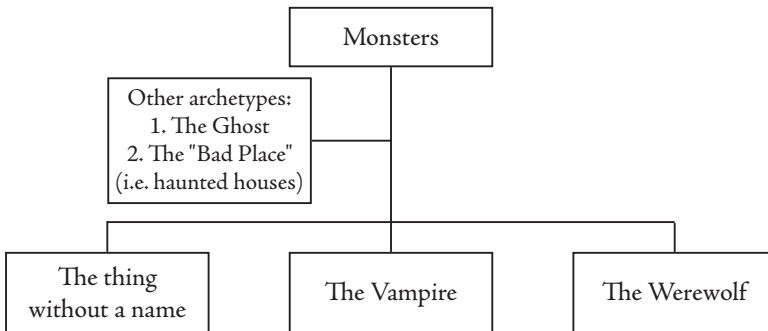
of our given reality, we are experiencing the fantastic, which in itself is just a crossroads that forks into other paths. There will come a point when the reader/character will have to move along and face the nature of this fantastic, or simply put, “an apparently supernatural event” (15). Thus, if we find that the phenomenon is the product of the character’s imagination or madness, we are within “the uncanny” territory. But if the supernatural phenomenon was portrayed in the text without benefitting from a psychological explanation of this event, if the event is just a given within the world where the text is set, then we are within the “fantastic-marvelous” territory.

What feeds most of the works of art-horror is the concept of the “uncanny.” Horror stems from the unknown, from a character’s struggle to understand and later, the discovery of a truth that disturbs the mind or is a product of a disturbed mind (best exemplified by the stories of Lovecraft and Poe).

Monsters then, as implicit in Todorov’s definition, must stand within the realm of the uncanny to be truly horrifying. Monsters in the fantastic-marvelous works don’t count as horrifying, given that they are embedded in the world they inhabit and thus do not disturb what was deemed as normal in the fictive creation of the writer.

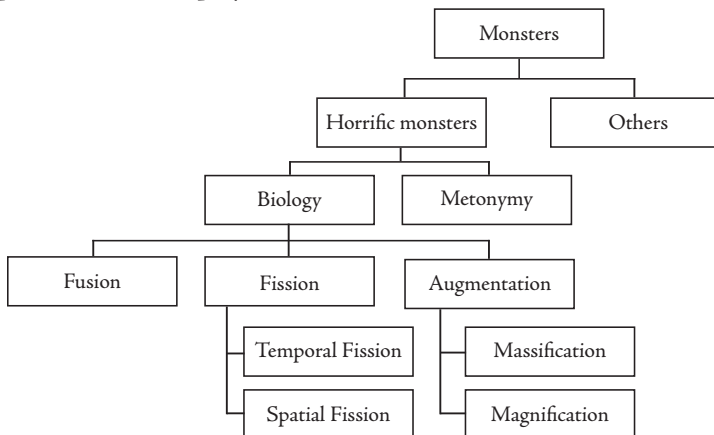
With this understanding of monsters, let us now dive into the various typification that monsters have in horror fiction.

In *Danse Macabre*, King generalized monsters into three types:



King's categorization of monsters is simplistic yet useful. "The thing without a name," is the kind of monster that is off-identified due to the strangeness of their existence, their almost unprecedented nature. Examples of these are Frankenstein's monster, and King's "It." In fact, the thing without a name is often called "it" due to our (both readers and characters') failure to determine its exact nature, a failure that in itself elicits a feeling of the uncanny. "The Vampire" is King's umbrella term for monsters who sow terror through their expressed tendency to harm human characters, often through the consumption of blood and body parts, in the way predators do. Vampires of course are included in this lot, and so are zombies, cannibals, and other predatory monsters. The last category, "The Werewolf," elicits horror by virtue of their shapeshifting nature, which is a violation of the known laws we have in this reality. Humans, for instance, are not expected to turn into wolves by the light of a full moon, or into giant flies or other aberrations. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are also prime examples. We could also interpret psycho killers, like Norman Bates and Joe Goldberg, as belonging to this lot, because like a werewolf, while they may have human and even charming qualities on the surface, they could on the flipside possess a distorted view of the world and an almost demented taste for violence.

Noël Carrol provided a more in-depth classification of monsters, perhaps best summed up by the outline below:



Now that we have laid a visual representation of the process of monster creation, we can now discuss how these are relevant in Philippine horror short fiction and explore the nature of monsters our local writers have produced thus far.

According to Carrol, monsters could be either “horrific” (those that are present in the art-horror genre) or otherwise (which is parallel to the “fantastic-marvelous” definition of Todorov). Horrific monsters are created either through biology (the physical nature of the monster itself) and metonymy (what surrounds or is alluded by the monster).

The creation of monsters through biology is further divided into “fusion,” “fission,” and “augmentation.”

A monster created through fusion blurs the line that distinguishes dualities such as living and dead, man and machine, man and animal, “inside/outside,” and so forth. The monsters that fall under this category are zombies, ghosts, the Elm Street monster, and the like. Vampires are also included in this category.

In Philippine short fiction, the ghosts in Eliza Victoria’s “Salot,” Kristine Ong Muslim’s “Playground,” and Leoncio P. Deriada’s “Tartanilya” are the best examples of monsters created through biological fusion. Other examples would be the zombies in Victoria’s “Once in a Small Town,” Yvette Tan’s “Waking the Dead,” Dean Francis Alfar’s “Brother & Sister,” Kristine Ong Muslim’s “Zombie Sister,” and Jose Miguel Arguelles’ “No One Else but Us.”

Biological fission on the other hand occurs when two (or more) supposedly separate entities inhabit a single body. “Temporal fission ... divides characters in time—while spatial fission ... multiplies character in space” (47).

Examples of temporal fission monsters are werewolves and Dr. Jekyll and Hyde, entities that make an appearance at a different time from the other, but are basically occupying a singular body. Isabel Yap's interpretation of the *bakunawa* in "How to Swallow the Moon" is an example, as well as the owl creatures in David Hontiveros' "Craving." I am also going to violate Carrol's assertion that tales of terror are not art-horror, to give us the space to include psychologically complex monsters in this categorization. As Norman Bates is, in a way, a "werewolf," so could the following monsters be considered as monsters born out of temporal fission: the family in "How Sarah Broke Up with Me" by Ian Rosales Casocot, the anti-hero in "Delivering the Goods" by Tan, and Socorro in "Talunang Manok" by Marivi Soliven Blanco.

Spatial fission monsters on the other hand are best exemplified by creatures that manifest themselves at the same time in a single body, as well as doppelgangers. Here we could include such monsters as the *kapre* (a composite of man and giants living in trees) as envisioned by Deriada ("'Twas Brillig") and Tan ("Kulog"), the *manananggal* (in Arguelles' "The Outsiders," Yap's "Good Girls" and Soliven Blanco's "Manananggrrrrl"), the woman-python in the mall (in Soliven Blanco's "Consumption" and Arguelles' "Lucky"), the *kappa* in Yap's "A Cup of Small Tears," and the mermaids in Victoria's "Siren Song." Doppelgangers are also a common motif among writers of horror short fiction, as we can observe in Derriada's "The Invitation," Victoria's "Parallel," and Muslim's "Dominic and Dominic."

Another way of creating a monster is through augmentation, and writers do this via magnification and massification. The former happens when a creature, or a part of a creature, is enlarged to the point that it would elicit feelings of terror and danger to the character/reader perceiving them. The enormousness of the *batibat* in Manuel Arguilla's bedtime story, "The Fat Woman," could be an example. The horrific giant blob in Isabel Yap's "Hurricane Heels (We Go Dancing)" is also noteworthy in this regard.

Massification on the other hand happens when a single, often harmless, creature is multiplied to the extent that it poses a danger to those who would be surrounded by them, as in Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Wall," and Stephen King's "Graveyard Shift." I am yet to read a story by a Filipino writer which uses this technique of monster creation.

The other structure in Carrol's categorization of monsters is "metonymy." As earlier implied, this is the creation of monsters that doesn't rely on the characteristics (biological makeup) of the monster itself, but on the events that this monster could bring about. In talking about Dracula, for instance, we can shift our focus from his physical features as a vampire, to his ability to command rats for his own gain. Stephen King's characters could also fall under this, for instance, Carrie and her telekinesis, as well as Charlie McGee and her pyrokinesis. This could also be envisaged in films, where an antagonist with supernatural powers would usually appear bearing with him storms or darkness. In this case, the concept of horror is what surrounds the monster itself and the capacity of this monster to disturb the environment around it. Metonymy is best exemplified in the dark fantasy novellas of David Hontiveros, "Takod," and "Parman," both of which employed cinematic (almost comic book) style of describing the environs where the violent clashes between two forces, good and evil, often happen.

## CONCLUDING NOTES

In attempting to trace the tradition of Filipino horror short fiction writing in English, we have thus observed how we already have quite a number of works that subject themselves to art-horror conventions, despite this number being a relatively sparse one. Filipino writers in English have been able to draw from sources that ranged from our own mythologies to the more contemporary concerns that plague the country (consumerism, toxic masculinity, or the political hysteria manifested within “werewolf” or temporal fission type of characters). The monsters featured in each of their books, whether of supernatural origins or not, are the ultimate manifestations of each of the writers’ concerns about what ails the country. The stories of Nick Joaquin encapsulating the horrors of colonial rule through a gothic lens, the mundane and supernatural terrors highlighting our culture and individual madness in Deriada’s *Night Mares*, the “genuinely scary bitches” of Soliven Blanco, the monsters that would result from the ruthless pace of progress in the name of science as seen in the stories of Eliza Victoria and Kristine Ong Muslim, or the monsters that would emerge from each of us as we dive deeper into the dark recesses of modernity and capitalism, best witnessed in Jose Miguel Arguelles’ and Karl R. De Mesa’s fictions.

The genre is still young, but what we have so far is an invaluable amount of mineral which future writers could help further shape and solidify. *Tropical Psycho* is my own contribution to this effort.





CHAPTER 3:  
THE CONCEPT  
OF THE COLLECTION



The stories in *Tropical Psycho*, if I am to be frank, were initially my effort at exploring the limits and possibilities of fiction as a form. I have earlier mentioned my lack of stylistic awareness when I conceived my first book, *The Horseman's Revolt and Other Horrors*. After writing my second book of short stories (written in Filipino, where I first had the real, solid idea of how form and style is important in fiction (a time when I appreciated the art of understatement through writers such as Raymond Carver and Edgardo M. Reyes), I thought of writing another book of short fiction in English. This time though, I want my book to be some sort of sequel volume to my first collection, as well as a violent reaction against it.

At the risk of sounding as unnecessarily apologetic as Thomas Pynchon in his introductory piece for *Slow Learner* (where he collected his early stories, most of which were written at an early phase of his career), I now have to admit my awareness of all that I did wrong in *The Horseman's Revolt*. My first book—and there is no way of better saying it—is a collection of juvenilia. There are flaws in each of the stories, but I simply had no way of detecting them while in the heat of writing, between the age of eighteen to twenty-one. Chief among these flaws is the fact that my hold on language was stilted, or crude, at best. Another thing was the motifs I kept circling back to in almost all of the stories. The protagonists seemed to be the same people with the same voice, telling the stories with angst and unfiltered anger. I was, admittedly, an angry young man. More than this though, the most glaring flaw that I noticed upon the book's release was how limited I had been in terms of form, content, perspective, insights, and just about every element of fiction you can name.

This is not to say that I would like to wash my hands of any trace of my first collection. On the contrary, I feel a certain fondness for the person who wrote it. Granted: I am the same person who wrote *The Horseman's Revolt*. But at the same time, I am no longer that person. Things changed, unsurprisingly, and whether for the better or for the worse, I am yet to see. I guess all I want to say is that I look at this book as a letter written by a younger, more foolish person who believed he could write and who believed he had some things to say. And I have fondness for this person, as well as the right amount of patience to listen to his tirades. I also would like to believe that at some point in his ranting, he actually had something to say about the time and place and political climate he was writing about. The fact is that he stumbled along the way, his speeches are clunky, and his ways of making himself heard were not deliberate, only incidental to what he knew about the mechanics of screaming.

So, the project of *Tropical Psycho* is, really, to give a deliberate structure to all that screaming. I am still an angry person, a bit older, not necessarily mature. Perhaps even angrier, given all that had happened in the country as of this writing, and all that I have gone through personally. My second book of horror stories is a continuation of my aim to ask questions, even to yell them out, but now in a more structured way. All the while using, just as I had before, certain conventions of horror fiction.

I am not going to go into the specifics of the questions I'm trying to ask in this collection, or in any story that I would write or have written. If I am to do that, then I might as well not churn them out as stories at all. Also, I have found that these "questions" I am talking about cannot be fully articulated without the framework of a fictive world, a world which in turn is based on the real one where I am existing.

What I'll do here is provide a peek at the roots of all the fictive worlds I created. Moreover, I am going to attempt to look at the monsters

that haunted these worlds, in almost the same way that I did for certain stories in the previous chapter. Perhaps an important thing to note is that I started writing the stories in *Tropical Psycho* without any conscious effort to create a “horrific monster.” I must admit that I didn’t get the chance to read Noël Carrol’s book before subjecting myself to the pain and pleasure of producing the manuscript. But one would also suspect that neither had the writers we have discussed earlier done this. I am quite certain that not all of them dove into writing a story telling themselves, “Okay, I’m going to write a horror story, and there must be a monster in it.”

First of all, this is absurd. Second, I’d like to believe that a fictionist who believes s/he is writing a horror story would end up writing about monsters anyway, even without fully intending to do so. Fear is always anchored onto something, whether it be an entity or event.

So, I guess we better begin. Here, then, are some brief notes about the sources and monsters in some of the selected stories in *Tropical Psycho*.

### **Story #1: Tropical Psycho**

There is something serendipitous about opening a collection with the latest story. This may have been a part of my violent reaction against my first book: whereas I began *The Horseman’s Revolt* with my first published story (the most bonkers of that lot, “The Short, Curious Life of Mr. Clockman”), I am now opening this volume with the youngest of my latest litter of dark tales.

“Tropical Psycho,” was conceived around a bunch of ideas that had long been percolating at the back of my head until they found the light of day in a crime fiction class. I have always wanted to write what I would consider my response to that wonderfully brutal film called *American Psycho* (2000). I have also been wanting to write a better cannibal story, this time elevating the stakes by adapting the horrible news I read about a man who sold human

burgers on a side street somewhere in Europe, consumed by customers who didn't have any idea about the origin of the meat between the buns, perhaps until the news of the cannibal broke out.

The crime fiction class gave me the chance to better shape the ideas I've had so far. I employed the twists in both the *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Murder at the Orient Express* as a way scaffolding the entire narrative.

In this story, every single character, except for the young men turned into burgers, were monsters in the "werewolf" tradition. So much of what we thought we knew could in fact be wrong and will only bring us closer to the jaws of those we loath.

### **Story #2: The Neighbor**

My take on the "bad place" or haunted house archetype. This time though, it is the neighborhood surrounding the house who are the monsters (in the form of the occult). The twist in the end though would prove that evil could always be out-eviled.

### **Story #3: The Driver**

The second or third most bonkers of the lot (up to the reader to decide). Really, I like my collections to be the sort that doesn't take itself too seriously. I have found that any piece of fiction that doesn't even attempt to find humor in anything to be a bore.

What "The Driver" is all about is what you would expect from any story titled as "The Driver." A psycho killer, revenge, some driving, yada yada. More than being my vehicle (pun intended) to return to the hypervolent tendencies of my first book, I have also intended for it to be my way of

exploring the limits to which the crazy, crazy world we live in could subject us (the essence, I believe, of any psychological horror fiction).

#### **Story #4: Donald and the Kill**

I have always been fond of playing badminton with friends. The badminton court is supposed to be a fun, safe place for all sorts of people who wanted some time off from work or other real-life drama. But would it be the same when the body snatchers finally arrive?

The question arose, quite frankly, when I first saw the 1978 remake of this sci-fi horror classic called *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I have borrowed (or stolen? Imitated? Snatched?) the concept though not only to use it for my attempt at a sci-fi horror story alone, but also as a way of asking questions about our existence. For instance: “Who are we? And what do we really want?”

#### **Story #5: The Guard**

There is a reason why this is the final story, and that is not because it is the best story within the collection (though I’d like to believe I’ve done my best for this piece), but because it has the most violent and repulsive monsters I’ve ever created. The monster isn’t just the time and place in which the story was set, nor was it the dystopic government intruding on every aspect of the lives of the characters, but it is also the seemingly harmless one. Even the most beautiful people among us have the potential to tip over the brink of madness. But not without reason. The violence in this story is committed by the monster as a symbolic retaliation to the State that had, over and over again, abused its citizens.

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I have said all I wanted to say on the origins of each of the stories in *Tropical Psycho*. The only thing to be done now is to give the stories a read. It is my hope that the reader, upon being subjected to the darkest recesses of my fictional creations, will emerge in the end with questions to ask themselves for some time, as well as a better appreciation of the light we have yet to lose.



CHAPTER 4:  
SELECTED STORIES  
FROM *TROPICAL PSYCHO*



# TROPICAL PSYCHO



There seemed to be no vacant table that night, typical Tropica Saturday, waiters moving sleek between Formica chairs, trays on the left hand, above the shoulder, burgers, fries and fizzy drinks tracing a path to customers too trusting to inspect the stuff they paid to take a bite of. I am waiting for a man with the MoA for my twenty-fifth book. Whom he worked for thought it wise to print and to keep on printing what I eke out every damn year. Potboilers, some garbage local lit mafiosi waxed poetic about, and for which a good number of the public thought it smart to spend some dough. In fact, here is one at a table near the glass door, sitting cross-legged sipping from a glass of soda. A beautiful woman, potential femme fatale—skirt, gold hoops on the ears, red half-kiss on a high ball—looks too pretty to be three dimensional. She might have leaped out of the paperback in her left hand, while the right one moved to take an onion ring from a bowl. I watched as she bit and was surprised at how deceptive the appearance turned out: she ate with gusto. I didn't know what to feel that she was reading a book of mine. She wouldn't know me, my pseudonym and iron will about skirting around interviews made sure of that. It brought a warm feeling, I guess, seeing such a woman take a sandwich off the plate, sauce and coleslaw dripping, meeting the food halfway with her mouth without tearing her eyes off the novel with my fake name on the cover. *Bloodiest Money* by Juan Apostol. The book was spread 180 degrees in her hands and from where I sat, I saw that cover I chose from a dozen studies the too-eager publishing house emailed years ago. Black layout, glinting knife and blood splatters. I could read from memory,

and from what shapes my eyes could deduce from the space between myself and the girl, the things written in the front and back.

“Sixteenth novel to feature amateur sleuth Guido Dela Cruz!”

“Wildly entertaining as ever! —Starred review from Philippine Herald”

“Juan Apostol has done it again! —Maharlika Journal”

“This book—and perhaps the entire Guido Dela Cruz saga—will surely change the formerly barren landscape of detective fiction! —The Manila Book Club Chronicle”

Yada yada. Pick any book I wrote and buckle up for the same crap, on and between the covers. Everyone seemed to love them anyway. Nothing could stoop so low in this country, eh? Though perhaps, just perhaps, this woman had something to offer besides a poor taste in literature.

She had on a gray blouse without sleeves, revealing not a pair of twigs but toned, solid arms, almost masculine in proportion. She must be an athlete, and the way she sat straight and the severity of her ponytail almost convinced me.

I was brought out of my almost meditative study of the woman when the man I was waiting for came in and blocked my view. He had on a short-sleeved button up and neat slacks that brightly contrasted with my apparel of choice: gray shirt, black shorts. He had a gleaming bald head, and carried an attaché case. He looked around, found my table, and nodded. He walked to me, sat down, and wasted no time for small talk. “You know the drill,” he said, with a business-like smile as he drew from the case a thin sheaf of stapled printouts. “I need you to sign here, here and here.”

My contract, naturally. He didn’t give me much time to read; I long ago implied that it didn’t matter. “It’s easy,” I told this same man long ago. “I know a fair cut when I see one. You folks get rich, I get rich. End of story.” I

signed the papers as I always did. Then the man stood, shook my hand, and went out. I called one of the waiters.

“Yes, Sir Clint?” he asked.

“Just the usual, please,” I said. I leaned back on the seat. The girl still sat there with my book in her hand. A tad bit absorbed. Morsel on one side of her lip. The walls around us were pine, Norman Rockwell and Edward Hopper repros hanging about, some quiet war as the backdrop of hungry customers. Dig: two adjacent walls, one with *Automat*, the other with *After the Prom*. In front of these was a table where a handsome fifty-something, dressed as if for a golf match, wiped his hands on a napkin, having partially finished his portobello. No Amorsolos or Kiukoks.

I opened the menu to find an eclectic survey of Italian and American junk and pineapple refreshments while acid jazz issued from hidden stereos. If you looked hard enough at the clear glass windows on the same side where the joint’s door was you could see between the parked cars a tramp or two walking at the other side of Paseo de Roxas. Faint shapes barely seen from inside. The guard by the door was paid handsomely to ward these elements away.

I turned to the femme fatale and she was as I had first noted. A few minutes passed before the boy got to my table with the Perfect Meat Burger. “Thank you,” I said as he laid the sandwich down with the Cajun fries and water in a goblet. One could mistake the thing for the same trash other joints worldwide call burger, or quarter pounder, but what sets this apart, if not the appearance, is the fact that it simply had the perfect meat. This is the pride of ‘La Tropica Burgers, what built it from the ground, what made this joint the best import of the country for the present millennium. Chains with the red bee or the golden arches couldn’t come close to what Tropica did. A lot of those who came, came in for this. When the stock market took a plunge

those who had shares in 'La Tropica Co. still had enough dividends to call themselves lucky.

I looked at the sandwich and at once all thoughts of dread and decay melted into nothing, even "The Last Minister" fading. I used the fork and moved the knife to reveal its cross section. The bun with black sesame, the slices of Roma tomatoes, onion, zucchini, the soft bed of lettuce, and finally, between these preliminaries, the perfect, pinkish medium-rare meat. I took a forkful, brought it to my mouth. I chewed on the tender meat. The juice oozed onto my tongue. The taste impossible to describe except if you think of it as some bizarre incarnate of the Proustian Madeleine. I was indeed overcome with such pleasure that as the meat traveled inside my mouth, my mind for its part strayed off to a time past when the need for meeting bald men with attaché cases and the impulse to appraise a woman wasn't much of a prospect, a remote time which in a way should explain the reason for my books' being, why I chose to write the things I wrote about. No: it isn't because I intend to write a "reflection of scarred, dark world," or to make a "fine contribution to Philippine fiction," as the paid blurb writers said.

No. I write because of Guido. Not the Guido Dela Cruz in my books, but the Guido Hontiveros after whom I shaped my amateur sleuth. The real thing, my buddy from decades past, who was a friend since birth in San Paulo Heights. I only have kind words for the guy. San Paulo wasn't the sort of neighborhood used in hipster indie films where yuppies wallow in crises, existential and sexual, nor was it an ideal set-up for poverty porn á la Brillante Mendoza. The people in it flirted around the line between middle class and somehow-middle-class. The result? As bland as you can get. It had a gate with a guard who could never seem to properly button his uniform, some sad trees in unclaimed lots, a couple of preschools, streetlights of different colors, a septuagenarian in one out of every four houses, just



enough strays to remind one gently of the hopelessness of everything, but not too much to prompt a call to animal services. Mediocrity seethed everywhere you look.

We grew up with this, Guido and myself, and as boys we roamed the streets at night pretending, along with the other children, that the road was a lake of fire and the sidewalk, the teeny bit of heaven where we could be safe from the kid who's supposed to chase us. I remember names, the other guys in particular. Ben, Thomas, Jojo. They weren't just names now. As I sat, here in my little 'La Tropica spot hacking through the perfect burger, there flashed in my mind's eye some mental panorama, a demented slideshow. Faces, dates. I would've reveled in it in the days when the break of dawn brought, not the usual cock songs or the fading in and out of the *pandesal* vendor's deep voice as he passed by the house, but also the basketball—am not sure whose—dribbling on the asphalt, a sign for the rest to wake up, and I would jump out the bed, look through the slats of my bedroom window, and see them standing on the lot directly in front of my house. Four of them in their jerseys, Ben hunched on all fours, Thomas leaning on the tree, Jojo dribbling, Ben rubbing his face as he held some empty conversation with Guido, who looked as always like the kind of stock character who wasn't hard to look at but had the look of someone who doesn't know much.

Strange to think that mornings when the gravest concern was to score a point against the other was far from the easiest thing to mull over now faced with nostalgia. Some particulars remained intact, like how we would walk out from San Paulo to the gate of PhilTowne Ridges, a neighboring subdivision with a gate guarded 24/7, one pair in the morning and another in the evening, and we would nod to these men in the morning as they allowed us to pass so we could use a court (San Paulo had none; PhilTowne had three). How a 7-11 used to stand in between the street that led to those

two neighborhoods. How at one point it was demolished and new walls and foundations were built. Inconsequential things.

Now, all there ever was to remember was that couple of months in 2005, when I first realized the extent of the things that Guido could know. This is the eye, the center, the floor from where all the disco lights beamed, Guido and those months, thus I'd always like to backtrack as if his was the life I boogied into. It may as well have begun the day we met as usual by the lot in front of my house, sun half rising from behind someone's roof, morning chill on the skin, munia birds racing in the air, flitting with a note from someone's balcony and onto a light post. Ordinary-ass day. Or so it seemed.

We guys walked as usual, elbowing each other, throwing punches in the air, skirting around questions concerning this or that chick we might be screwing or dream of screwing. The neighborhood had the usual smell of a cold morning fog and traces of dog dung. We went out the gate, past the sleeping guard and the perpetually raised steel pole that was supposed to block non-residents and cars without San Paulo windshield stickers. The walk from this gate to PhilTowne's was a mere couple of minutes. After walking past the old 7-11 site where there stood a one-story building with glass walls through which we saw a counter and empty plastic chairs and tables, the five of us went through the gate of PhilTowne with a customary nod to Jim and Noli, the morning guards. They had watched us bridge the gap from snotty, chubby-faced seven-year-olds to our then-present awkward youth.

As we walked past the gate and into the quiet neighborhood of businessmen and minor celebrities, Guido went ahead of us, started walking backwards, hands in the pockets of his shorts. He was seventeen then, the oldest among us by a few months, and naturally, with his sleekness and confidence, took the role of the leader. I looked up to him even then. I was the sort who would be practically blind without specs, had front teeth large

enough to easily pull off saying, “Eh, what’s up Doc?” and get a few decent laughs. I had the worst case of acne among us, and was a hopeless ectomorph. And yes, I was the only one who could brag about having gone through elementary without missing a medal or two every year. But enough of me.

There was Guido, walking backwards, not smart enough it seemed to top what I had for brains, but sleek enough to know when to raise his feet high to avoid tripping on a speed bump. “I have a hunch,” he said, still walking, “it’s the 80s all over again. Were you ever told of the story about white vans roaming around getting kids and leaving their bodies everywhere with missing organs?”

It was all the talk he had for the past few days. There was a glow on his face when broaching on the topic of the missing children from the neighboring settlement, Shelter Lands. It wasn’t on the news, never was, but the stay-out help who did laundry and kitchen stuff for us, Nida, babbled as she went about her chores on how the whole thing scared none of them, how it didn’t scare them for instance that the six-year-old son of her next-door neighbor got lost and was found in a creek without a digestive system. *Serves the bitch right*, she once said as she flipped eggs one morning some weeks prior, not exactly the kind of talk you’d expect before heading to school or work (but Mom and Dad didn’t seem to mind, so I had to be the one to snap at the woman). That kind of talk was out of my league, thank you very much. But I guess I could make exceptions for this friend of mine.

In fact, I’ve been making exceptions for Guido for the past few weeks since the wildfire of gossip started making its rounds in the neighborhood. I have to admit though that Guido’s topic kind of spoiled the pristine atmosphere of PhilTowne Homes, with streets lined with mansions where uniformed gardeners trimmed hedges and drivers in blue uniform washed their bosses’ luxury cars. I bet none of these sophisticates had time to talk about dead babies. They have a life of their own, important lives, decisions to

make. I kept silent as Guido kept on with his tirade and the others nodded in agreement.

“What I’m thinking is,” he continued, “we have here the classic history-repeats-itself motif.” The three guys oohed as if faced with a legit historian cum political analyst.

For my part, I said, “That’s dope.”

We went on with our walk and by the time we reached the empty court the sun had fully risen. The chill gave way to the warmth of a Saturday morning, as the five of us began playing and doing our best not to cripple each other. The covered court was bordered by pines and narras, had tiered bleachers on one side where we left our towels, phones, or shirts, should we be too drenched. The court usually remained empty, and after many years of playing games in it, we never seemed to see any PhilTowne resident use it except for when a morning jog had to be broken with rest.

We had a usual game, Guido and Ben (the one who back then looked like a brown Atlas) versus Thomas, Jojo (both of middling athletic levels) and myself (the least likely to be of use in any physical sports). We had the court for ourselves until around seven o’clock, when the then fifty-ish Mathilda and her Pomeranian would walk in and sit on a bench. Mathilda, as we had learned after snatches of conversation with her throughout the many years, we had been seeing her, was the owner of a chain of cafes in the business district, who liked to walk her dog in the morning but always grew tired, so when the opportunity to sit down and let herself be occupied with something else presented itself, she wouldn’t do much to dissuade herself from doing so. It was either her nails or a romance pocketbook. That day, it was a pocketbook, and she sat in her matching pink jogging outfit flipping through a paperback as the dog wandered around sniffing, leash untethered. Before she stood up again to leave, a maid walked in to sit on another bench as she talked to someone in the province through a battered 3310 she would

later slip in the pocket of her pink uniform, after whatever drawn-out call she made.

There were also recent ones who made it a habit to stay in the court in the morning, not to play but just to inhale the fresh morning air, like this man who introduced himself as Sir John, a well-built thirty-something, who'd jog and do stretching in the court, but would politely decline our invitation to join our game. That day he told us again, "Some business to do, boys," flashing us a good-natured smile before jogging out of the court.

There was also an old man who liked to sit and smoke as he watched us. We didn't know his name but we had gotten used to his unintrusive presence throughout the weeks. And then this cougar who never made an effort to hide her thoughts about Guido. "Go, cute guy!" she once screamed as she watched one of our games, and then later, after she learned of our names, after having gone to the court with popsicles for the five of us, "GO, Guido my love!" Guido didn't mind so we didn't give much thought to the woman, offering her our smiles and thanks (when she brought gifts), and nothing more.

"I mean," Guido once told us, "we could still play here, right?" And indeed, we could, and we did. And when the pretty MILF finally walked out as well, we settled on the benches and wiped ourselves. The sun was well above the court's roof and the court was empty save for us. Guido talked, as he was wont to do those days, about the missing children with missing organs, or limbs. "Mama told me one was found in a dumpster," he said as the sunlight bounding off the earth brightened his gleaming face. The birds had long stopped chirping and there wasn't much to listen to besides the occasional cars driving to and from PhilTowne Homes' gate. "Not only without the intestines, but an entire leg chopped off," he said.

"Creepy, dude," Ben said.

If anyone would ask me, I'd say that was the last thing I remember Ben saying that day. We went home later, back to San Paulo, and back to the coolness of our house. The next morning, something peculiar happened. I was used to being the last one to arrive at the meeting place, by the tree in front of my house. "Where's Ben?" I asked the four, who had confusion on their faces.

Thomas, a slightly well-built guy, whom we all suspect to have the hots for our friend Ben (though he never verbally hinted at it nor had we ever hinted at our own suspicion), said, "How about we check his house?"

Fair suggestion. He lived a couple of blocks away, and when we reached the squat house where Ben and his mother lived, Tita Connie gave us a puzzled look as she stood there in her duster, broom in her hand in the little garage. She said, "He hasn't been home since yesterday morning. I thought he was with you, guys."

We all told her we went back from the court at twelve o'clock, no sleepover or night out. She said, "Huh." Then something changed in her face, like it was about to crack. "Where could he be?" she said, and we were just too sure that she was about to lose it on the spot.

So, I said, "Could be with a classmate's?"

She said Ben would've told her. She rubbed her temples and leaned on a wall, forgetting the broom and letting it fall beside her feet.

"No worries, Tita," this was Guido, "we'll check with his classmates. I'm sure he's alright." We bade her a quick goodbye and promised to be looking out for her son before her descent into full-blown breakdown.

"Damn it, Ben," Jojo said. He had the worst tendency to say unflattering words aloud, like "where could that son a bitch have gone?"

I retorted with "Tita Connie's no bitch."

He punched me on an arm, which I returned, and then a banter began among the three of us about who had the bitchiest mother. For a while, as we walked through the typical faint-dung atmosphere of San Paulo and then out of it and into the clear chilly air of PhilTowne Homes, pelting enough yo mama jokes to occupy a fifteen-minute stand-up act, Thomas the lovesick boy didn't say anything. We only noticed this when we reached the court, where instead of teaming up with one of us he went straight to one of the benches, and got absorbed in his phone. Guido stopped midway to the hoop and stood dribbling, nodding to the bench where Thomas sat alone. We walked to the gym and Guido asked, "Everything alright?"

Thomas looked up from his phone to us, then back to his phone, which he then brought face-down on his leg, his shoulders slouching. "I'm worried," he said.

"Don't worry about Mr. Muscle," Jojo said, "no one can harm that man. For all we know he's at some chick's house for the past 24 hours."

Thomas didn't say anything for a while, opting to stare at his phone again. And then finally, after some deliberation, he said, "He didn't need a chick. He has me. He comes to my house, but now he isn't even responding to my chat and calls."

There was silence. "Wait, what..." Jojo began, and I elbowed him and threw him a look which shut his mouth. We let the silence go on. This was broken by the footsteps of Mrs. Mathilda, who was then walking to a bench, paying us no heed while the pom walked over to sniff at our ankles. When the dog walked away from our group, after Guido rubbed its head, Guido said, "Man, he's alright. Don't think too much of it." We went on with our game, still sans the loverboy, the usual residents hanging out in a bench of the court.

When Mrs. Mathilda left with the pom, the maid arrived and had again this protracted conversation through her ancient Nokia, at times saying

*“ambot sa imo.”* Then later the old man walked in with a pipe and a cane and a glazed look that seemed to sweep through the court and at the road and slowly brightened by the sun peeking through the thick morning clouds. The wisps of hair remaining around his head was silvery, and his gaunt face had the look of evil and starvation. When he exhaled the upper half of his body would move and the cardigan he had on would for a moment look inflated before the thin frame it hid underneath would return to its stoop. When the old man stood and went out, tapping his cane on the asphalt road and disappearing around a bend, beyond the trees that bordered the court and perhaps onto the direction of his own house, Guido gathered the three of us at a side, out of earshot from Thomas, and spoke to me and Jojo. He said, “The old guy looked suspicious.”

I asked, “How so?”

Guido took a deep breath, looking around as if to check that the old man would not materialize, and said, “He looks bad, I feel like he is bad. I don’t know if you noticed but he stared at Thomas just a while ago, and I swear the way he looked gives me the creeps until now.”

Jojo said, “I saw it too, man. It’s creepy.”

I told them they might be overthinking, imagining things. “Cut the man some slack,” I said.

Later, when Sir John arrived to do his usual push-ups in a corner, after he had several reps and had done his stretching, Guido approached him, with Jojo and I tailing him. Thomas still sat fidgeting on the bench with his phone.

“Sir John,” Guido said after we all greeted the man a good morning, “I know you told us you just moved here, but would you perhaps know something about one of your neighbors?”

Sir John must have been in his late thirties, was taller than any of us,



though he was stocky. And he had the gentle face of someone who wouldn't ever serve time behind bars. He looked at us as if we were his children, who had just asked what was for breakfast, and began to think. He said, "Sure, but that will depend."

Guido looked back at our friend at the other side of the court, lowered his voice, and said, "Would you happen to know the old guy who comes here, smoking pipe? He has a cane, and a stoop, and he doesn't look like he ever is in the mood for talking."

Sir John thought about it, and then his face brightened. "Ah! You must be talking about Mr. Edgardo Benitez."

Guido asked what he knew about the man.

"Well, Mr. Edgar and I had talked once but I think I've learned enough from him."

Sir John plopped himself on the bench and we followed suit, listening intently. He continued: "He was once the Secretary of the Bureau of Highways and Public Works, from late 70s to early 80s. He said he had a lot of friends and in fact he still has some friends, especially in the Defense Bureau."

Guido asked, "What does he do now?"

Sir John chuckled briefly before saying, "Given what he was then, I don't think such a man would need to do anything now."

Guido: "That's true. So, he just roams around and smoke his pipe."

Sir John: "Possibly. But I guess it's safe to say he has other hobbies. Like, I don't know, playing golf, dabbling in stock market or real estate. Whores, perhaps. I didn't ask him yet. Though this reminds me." He then stood and flashed us that warm smile again, "I'll have the soft opening of my small pasta place just outside the gate two days from now. Maybe you boys

would like to come? I'll have some seats reserved for you, just tell me what time you would be there. My treat, to make up for refusing to play with you, guys."

Jojo stood as well, amazement making his face glow, "Whoa. You own Seven Eleven?"

The kind man laughed and said, "What used to be Seven Eleven. Anyway, please do not expect much, I'm just beginning with the venture."

We all said we sure would go in the afternoon. When he left, Thomas and I were beaming at the prospect of free food, but Guido remained sitting with this serious look on his face, as if something bothered him. Which was confirmed when he said, "Something bothers me."

When I asked what it was, he rubbed his chin while staring off at a far end of the court, where Thomas had sat. "Something's really off with that old man," he said.

Jojo sighed. I said, "I guess all of us are thinking about something. Let's call it a day?" They agreed. We walked to Thomas, who was nibbling on his nails.

"You okay?" Guido asked, tapping his back. Thomas said he was alright without looking at us. We picked our things off the bench, walked back out onto the sunlit street, then out of PhilTowne Homes gate, past the one-story glass building, employees setting up tables, moving a balloon standee by the entrance, hanging a banner that screamed "SOFT OPENING!" while by another side of the entrance stood a man with a long-handled mop wiping the store name which in the evening must be lit by some backlight: "Lola's Pasta Place." We walked on and went through the gate of our subdivision, sharply noticing that the guard was awake and a couple of police in camouflage were talking to him. As if prompted by a sixth sense, we went straight to Ben's house to see if he had gone home. Something was

wrong and from afar it seemed like we could smell the tension in the air. We saw people heading toward a street, and then a couple of police cruisers with their lights on. When we reached Ben's street, we were just in time to see another cop, tracing the outline of a body on the ground just in front of Ben's house, around which a small crowd of onlookers were staring, gasping, one of them retching. It was the body of a man, without limbs, and the torso cut open as if in the middle of an unfinished surgery. It was almost emptied though. Not much guts to speak of, just the ribs and spine and some shreds of red and gray matter.

When I looked at the face, I realized it was Ben. One of his cheeks was hollowed out, his teeth peeking from the hole.

The guys beside me howled. I howled with them. Just beside the police, who was then finishing up his notes, stood Tita Connie, restrained by another cop as she screamed. "Ben! My Son!"

The other neighbors came, filling the street with murmurs. There was nothing else to do, really, but to crowd around our friend's body. The cops confiscated the phones of those who tried to snap a photo of the crime scene, some phones even destroyed in front of their stubborn owners. How could anyone think of saving this on a phone? The body was nearly unidentifiable, had it not been left in front of Ben's house and had not certain parts of the face left intact, we wouldn't have known it was him.

A week later, they held a closed-casket funeral. Tita Connie and Thomas were inconsolable. After Ben was buried, we still met in the mornings, trying to make the most out of the remaining weeks before the start of our university classes. But some sort of gray cloud hung over everything those days.

"From what I heard," Guido said, while we were sitting on the bench of the court, "a detective was assigned to the case, supplied by our own police

force. Still no leads though. I'm not surprised."

It was another scorcher of a morning, and we had only played for around ten minutes before sitting, talking, at times just observing the residents walk in and out of the court. When Guido spoke, we all looked at him and said nothing. He and his theories. It was just the three of us, Guido, myself and Jojo. Thomas was, understandably, still telling us he was not well, whenever we stopped by his house. The usual residents who made it a habit to drop by every morning had done so, Mathilda, the maid, the old man, and the MILF.

When Sir John walked in, he sat with us and said, "I heard about your friend, I'm so sorry guys." After doing his stretch and push-ups at the other end of the court, he returned to us and said that we could still "Drop by my restaurant. When you're in the mood."

We nodded, thankful, though in no mood to appreciate the invite.

"Sir John," Guido suddenly said, "would you know where the old man lives? You know, the one I asked you about last time?"

Sir John asked why, and Guido answered, "I'm just curious, that's all."

Sir John then said that the old man lived in the same street as his. "Sparrow Street. Not really far from here, and maybe that's why Mr. Benitez walks here sometimes." They had an exchange about the specifics of the old man's house. What did it look like? And to be more precise, where was it? Guido thanked him and Sir John left.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"I think that old man has something to do with all these murders," he said. Then he launched into one of the longest monologues: "I've been looking him up on the internet since Ben died. He was powerful, all right. And he has a lot of friends. Clean records though, as far as Wiki and official

websites and presses are concerned. But then if you dig deeper, dive into the remotest corner of the web, you'll read threads about powerful men who turned out not to have the clean record we knew them to have. Call them rumors or whatever. But still hear me out. Before that old man became the secretary of his former department, he also had held an office somewhere in Samar. Then in IloIlo. Then in Manila. Now listen to this, everywhere he goes, a string of unsolved, unreported murders happened. Unreported. He had been branded as a cannibal once, although the people who said this aloud were wiped out. Same pattern as here and now. Children and young people missing, children and young people found later with missing organs. These threads even mentioned how he used his influence to eat the victims."

We both stared at him, Jojo and I; and I began processing what I just heard, unsure whether to laugh or to say something serious. I was spared from having to decide when Jojo suddenly laughed beside me. He even slammed a hand on my shoulder, looking like someone just cracked the awfulest joke in humanity's history. "What are you trying to say, that an old man is cannibalizing us?" he said.

I elbowed him and he managed to reduce his laugh to a snicker.

Although I myself said, "That's one hell of a theory though, Guido. I'd believe that, though, if we happened to be characters in some movie."

Guido was crestfallen. He didn't say anything for a while. And then, "How can you explain the murders in Shelter Lands then? How can you explain those, Ben?" His voice sounded defeated.

So, I just conceded. "All right. Suppose that that is the case. Let's pretend that there really is a cannibal—or, why not—an *aswang*. Suppose there is one, what do you plan on doing about it? You plan to be wiped out too?"

Guido's shoulders fell. In a low voice, he said, "I don't know. But at least we could try looking into it. Then see what we can do. Right now, I'm thinking of just surveying his place, just trying to find out how powerful he really is, or if there's any way we can take him down."

A car passed us on the bright road. The trees around the court rustled in the dry wind. An idea hit me. "All right, whatever your plan is, I'm in."

Beside me, Jojo said, "Uh, what?"

I then told the two of them that it wouldn't be a bad idea. "Now that you told us the rumors about this old man, you made me curious. I'd like to see where this will lead us. Maybe we could indeed solve the murders, most likely not, I don't know, but you're my friend, and Ben's my friend. I don't want to sit around waiting for the cops to just say they did their best, because they certainly won't. Count me in your plan. Jojo, you should too. Consider this our last great adventure before going to college."

Jojo reluctantly agreed. I asked Guido what was the plan. He said that today he was just intending to take a walk in Sparrow Street. "Just a walk, or maybe we could stick around, hide somewhere, wait until someone goes out or whatever. Maybe we could have a good peek inside the house if the gates are opened for some reason."

Even back then I had thought this was a dumb plan. But then I didn't tell him that. I just asked, "You want to do it now?"

He said yes.

I looked at my watch and said I had to take care of some school requirements, "Some documents to submit before enrollment. How about we do it in the evening. Less chances of being seen, I'd say."

But Jojo was the one who was hesitant. He said, “Look, you two. If what you’re saying is true, why the fuck would you want to go anywhere near the lion’s den? And at night?”

I said that doing otherwise would be like giving up on our friend. “We’ll be extra careful, of course. Right, Guido?” Our leader nodded, finally seeing some reason to smile and be his usual self.

We walked out of the court then. It would only be later, after passing by the sleeping guard by the gate of San Paulo Subdivision and after settling on the time when we would meet and what to bring just in case, that Jojo finally sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and said, “Fine. We’re really doing this.”

For the rest of the day, I prepared some of the documents required by my school, made and received some phone calls, ate and took a nap. I woke up at around five in the afternoon and read what I had prepared for the school requirement. It was an essay, a sort of diagnostic one, which would be used to evaluate my potential. Evaluate what? And potential for what? Well, back then I was trying to get into this university, but it was a costly one. I passed the entrance exam but when I was emailed the table of fees, I was just sure that Mom and Dad couldn’t afford it without tightening their belts for the next four years.

Fortunately, there were scholarships offered in this school, and one was offered specifically for Creative Writing majors of exceptional talent. The essay I wrote was one of the major requirements, and the whole thing was dependent on this five-paged piece justifying why I should be awarded the scholarship and what I could possibly contribute to the country’s literature. I hunched over my laptop, revising, sipping my afternoon tea, until my phone alarm buzzed.

It was 6:30. I told Mom and Dad that I would just go for a walk, before heading out to meet Jojo and Guido by the lot in front of the house. As expected, Thomas was also there.

“Hey there, bud,” I said, clapping him on the back. Even under the faint streetlight I could see eyes, bloodshot, swollen.

He said, as we began the walk out of San Paulo, “We’ll kill that bastard. I’ll kill that bastard.”

I squeezed his shoulder and said, “Easy, now. We’re not out to kill anyone. We’ll just take a look, for now, but we’ll definitely try to get justice for our friend.”

He just sighed, his eyes still straight on the road.

We had gone out of San Paulo’s gate and were walking, again, to PhilTowne Homes. On the way there we passed Sir John’s restaurant. The sign, “Lola’s Pasta Place,” was now lit with red, green, and white lights above the glass double doors. Behind it were a few customers, just three tables occupied out of a dozen, mostly looking like residents from PhilTowne Homes. These men and women had a way of announcing what kind of people they are by the glow on their skin, the way they moved around, and if you were close enough, the way they talked. It’s like they grew up with some kind of training to distinguish themselves, especially from the likes of those who resided in slums like Shelter Lands. I just knew by looking at them that the panels above the counter in that restaurant contained stuff which would cost us a month’s worth of meals.

When we approached the gate of PhilTowne Homes, the guards, a different duo this time, asked us where we were going. Jojo said, “We’re Sir John’s friends. Just dropping by for a visit.” I was impressed. He looked like he had rehearsed the line quite a few times, and was damn polite while saying it too. The guards said okay, opened the gate for the walkway (usually closed at night) for residents, and tipped their hats to us. As we walked, in the calm silence of the village, almost in the middle of the wide road, where not a single stray must have shat, Guido took me aside and asked, in a hushed voice, “Do you really think it’s a good idea to take him with us?”



He jerked his head discreetly behind him, at Thomas who was walking a few paces behind. I told him to relax. "It's not like we're going to do anything major tonight," I said, "and the guy hasn't gone out of his house for days. This will be good for him."

Guido shrugged, and we went on walking, in a silence heightened by the full bright moon and the buzzing of crickets. It wasn't much of a walk. The court couldn't have been three minutes away from the gate of Phil Towne Homes. And after having checked an online map, we found out that Sparrow Street was indeed the street one turns to upon walking straight to the bend in the road at the left side of the woods that bordered the court. When we passed by the court there weren't lights in it, and it was apparent that no one was there at that time, much less using it to play or anything. Upon turning to Sparrow, the four of us paused for a while to survey the houses to the left and right. Though the street was half the width of the main road in front of the court, the size of the houses reflected words like "modern," "enormous," and "rich."

We walked slowly, surveying the homes, which ranged from Tropical to Bold Massing to downright Minimalist, grassy lots between each well-trimmed, dark green carpets under soft yellow lamplights. Then we reached this house—a monolith, to be precise—which dwarfed the entire neighborhood. One would know by its scale that it was the old man's.

*It's the grandest one in the lot,* Sir John had said earlier that morning, *you'll know what I mean when you see it.* And the four of us saw it, occupying perhaps three lots on that street, three of the beautiful houses we gawked at could fit into this example of pure, unadulterated megalomania. Greek revival. Lighted columns on all four sides, number of floors uncountable from the outside. Double doors that could only be made of heavy wood. A driveway, then a short flight of stairs leading to the house itself. A silver Bentley Continental parked in the driveway. The house looked like a

government office, with a tall iron gate and a guardhouse too. We couldn't see if there was a guard in it.

We had worn black shirts and were fortunate that some cars were parked by the empty lot in front of it. We stood behind one and observed the house. No guards appeared, not one. No activity. In fact, we seemed to be standing before a photograph of an abandoned national bureau. We were standing behind a sedan, and we grew tired of crouching. We just stood in plain sight of anyone who might be at the guard house. No one came to shoo us away. The entire street was quiet, only the trees from neighboring gardens were moving. We stood there for what must have been an hour. Our feet grew numb from standing.

"It's a waste of time," Jojo grumbled, leaning on the car in front of us.

"Cut it out," Guido said, telling him as well to keep off the sedan as the alarm might go off. Thomas just stood there between Guido and myself, his eyebrows knitted; fists ready with veins bulging. He was just looking ahead, at the house, and if looks could kill I'd say that mansion would've been in ruins.

Guido gave me a look that said *help me, what're we going to do now?* So, I said, "At least we now know where the man lives. Maybe we could drop by some other time?"

Guido sighed, and said, "Clint's right. We have enough time ahead of us, how about we go now?"

"Damn right we should go now," Jojo said. "This is giving me the creeps."

We decided to go then, though first we had to shake Thomas by the arm as he seemed to be rooted to the road.

Later, walking down the street, he said, "That bastard. I'll kill him." Then he was crying and leaning on Jojo. Jojo consoled him and let Thomas

cry on his shoulder. When we were nearing the entrance to Sparrow Street, I asked if they want to stop by the court first, “You know,” I said with a subtle nod at Thomas, “just to chill before going home.”

No one objected. I told Jojo to bring out the flashlight we had agreed to put in his sling bag, and it guided us in the dark court by the light. The court had fluorescent lights by the ceiling but to turn them on, one had to consult the homeowners’ association. I shone the light at the court, and we walked through semi darkness, to one of the tiered seats. Once the four of us were settled we just sat there, thinking, letting Thomas sob and cry. Suddenly I thought it was a good time to start smoking. I didn’t know where the impulse came from, but it just came. I made a mental note as we sat there, on a bench of a basketball court in the middle of a dark subdivision woods, that I’d buy my first stick sometime soon. I realized that the four of us, really, the five of us, had no vices. There were occasional fistfights and talks about screwing. We liked computer games, but not enough. None of us smoked.

It struck me how boring we all were. The thought was too funny, and before I could stop myself, I began laughing, slapping my hand on my knee. I had turned off the flashlight and had handed it back to Jojo. Moonlight slipped through the foggy woods and through this I could see the guys looking at me, incredulous even Thomas had stopped sobbing and was giving me a puzzled look. I stopped.

Guido asked, “What’s funny?”

I said nothing. I sat in silence and assessed the whole situation. Crazy, I thought, this whole thing’s demented, and we didn’t know. Haha! Fools. Us. I was deep in my thoughts, sitting there on a steel bench, when suddenly there was a sound from the woods. The sound of someone running, a sound padded by the earth and dry leaves. And from a corner of my eye, I saw a silhouette, an outline, someone hiding from a tree close to where I was. The other guys heard it too.

Guido said, “Who’s there?” he had half yelled, fully alert. We all saw it, the outline of a man between trees. We couldn’t see its face. And it walked towards us, quickly, surefooted, certain. We had about half a court’s distance from the shadow, but it was too quick. All the four of us could do was to bolt upright and stand transfixed by the approaching shadow.

Then by some miracle, Jojo managed to bring the flashlight to life and aim it at the shadow. We sighed with relief. The man was about five meters away from us and he couldn’t do us harm from that distance. Anyway, why would he do us harm? When the light trained on him, we realized who it was and Thomas and Jojo sat down again even before the man reached us. The shadow was Sir John.

“Hello, you guys,” he said, his patently handsome smile on his face. He had on the usual fitted shirt and jogging pants, as if he had been running even at this time of the night.

“You scared us, man,” Guido said. They did a bro handshake and returned to their former positions. “What do you think was approaching you?” He laughed. No one said anything for quite some time and then he got it. “Oh...Oh...yeah I’m sorry.”

“What are you doing here anyway?” I asked, appearing annoyed.

“Running. I have to stay fit, you know.”

He and Guido talked for some time about exercise, and then their conversation strayed off again to the subject of the old man, Mr. Benitez. I didn’t listen anymore. I’ve had enough talk of the old man that day, so I just half-lay there, resting my head on the second-tier bench. I focused on the sound of the crickets, below the low droning of the men’s voices. I must have dozed off for a while, and when I came to everyone was quiet, at peace with the night. I looked at my watch, quarter to ten. “You okay now, Thom?” I looked at him and he nodded. I said, “I guess we better go now, Sir John.”

I stood and stretched. Guido and the others stood as well.

Sir John stood and looked at the four of us, hands on his hips. "You guys sure you're all right?" he asked.

Guido said, "We'll be better, Sir."

The man looked at us the way a loving father would. At times like this, I felt that we had some sort of bond with the man, like he really was related to us or something. He just looked so kind. He stood beside me, and I was looking up at him the way I must have looked at my own father, perhaps with even more affection. Sir John was taller than me. In the darkness now made partial by the intense moonlight I could see his features. His face clean-shaved, a clean haircut, and at his sturdy physique.

"In that case," he said. Suddenly, as if a button was pushed somewhere inside him, something in his eyes changed, and then he grabbed one of my shoulders.

He did it so quickly that I didn't realize what was happening. He had grabbed me and then in the next moment I was slammed against his massive body, one of his huge arms across my chest. And then I felt something cold under my chin. I heard a clicking and realized he had cocked a gun at me. It was under my chin, I could feel its icy cold barrel. "You're not going anywhere, you guys." His words felt hot on my ears.

Guido gasped, surprise and terror contorting his features. Thomas and Jojo stood transfixed behind Guido, just staring.

I said, "What...what's happening, Sir John?" I couldn't see Sir John's face, but when he answered I could imagine how he looked.

Gun pointing at my head, face close to my scalp, his body outlined by the night. He asked, all of us, "What do you think am I doing?"

I just knew he was grinning. I smelled alcohol in his breath. Everyone else seemed to be holding their breaths, trying to make sense of what was happening. So, I took it upon myself to do the talking, “Whatever you’re planning to do, Sir John, please spare me, please spare all of us.” I made a point of sounding helpless.

Then, as if finding strength in my words, Guido suddenly sprang to life, saying with a shaking voice, “Please, Sir John. Let our friend go. Let go of Clint. Put the gun down, please.”

The huge man asked why he would do that. “You’re here now, and you’re all mine.” Then he laughed. A low-pitched laugh that seemed to be drawn straight from the inmost pit of his stomach. “Flesh, flesh, flesh,” he said, still laughing, “young, lovely delicious flesh. Yum yum.”

It dawned on Guido then. It dawned on him and with a force of a fifty-pound weight smashed his head. He actually wobbled like he was about to faint. “You...you...killed...” He couldn’t continue. He was choked with disbelief. But from behind him came a growl and a yell. “You bastard! You killed Ben! You fucking killed our friend!” It was Thomas. He was shaking. I was certain he would spring at Sir John. Never mind that he had a gun. In a matter of seconds, this would turn into the final tableau of Mike De Leon’s *Kisapmata*: blood and dead people everywhere. Behind him I saw Jojo moving. He was silently drawing out something from his sling bag. I had suggested he bring a knife and rope besides the flashlight. *Just in case*, I had said on the phone. Thank God for hindsight. Jojo had drawn the kitchen knife from his bag. I saw the glint of its edge barely perceptible in the faint moonlight. Thomas was about to take a step. And then Jojo grabbed the neck of his shirt. I heard the sound of cloth ripping. In a flash, Jojo had Thomas in his grip, the way Sir John had me in his.

“Easy there, tiger,” Jojo said, pointing the tip of the knife at our friend’s throat.

“What is this all about?” Thomas hissed, unable now to move. “Just business. Nothing personal, faggot.” I could see Jojo’s grin, and then the shock in the eyes of Thomas. The shock made him look like a petrified mannequin. Guido just stared at them, at all of us, speechless. No one was moving, just the fog by the woods, the unseen crickets.

Then Jojo moved again. He buried his knife in the fag’s jugular, made a deep line from one side of our friend’s throat to the other. Blood sprayed from the slash. Mostly on Guido, who finally screamed, uncontrollably. Thomas stood there in Jojo’s grip. For a while he sputtered blood, and then life escaped from his eyes. The eyes were still open but vacant. Jojo let him go, and he lolled in front of us, as if reluctant to go, before falling flat on his face, blood splattering on the floor. I could smell it. Soon as the body fell Jojo trained the knife at Guido.

“What’s happening? What is this?” Guido asked. I knew he had more questions, but he was stunned into cretinism. I couldn’t blame the man.

“Help me, Guido, help me,” I said, still trying to sound in need of help. I moved my head from side to side, tried to appear struggling at the mercy of the man of steel. Sir John held the pistol under my jaw, but I could feel it losing pressure.

He said, “You’re all mine now, Guido. You and your friends.” Then he laughed again.

I said, “Help me Guido, help me.”

Jojo for his part was inching to Guido with the bloody knife. It was a moment worth remembering. My sleek friend trembling, not knowing what to do. You see, he was cool, and he was not supposed to be smart. He had these waves in his hair, the stance and countenance of a healthy and confident young man. But he wasn’t supposed to be the type who thinks. If God wasn’t taking a day off, and if He was just, He’d make it difficult for people as pretty as Guido to think.

But Nietzsche might be right after all about the big Old Man, and the world being a wee bit more complicated now. Time to take matters in our own hands. Especially after this pretty boy proved to be too smart and nosy for his own good. I should've snapped a photo of the guy that night, mouth agape, round eyes, shaking hands.

"Help me, Guido," I said again.

He looked at me, then at Sir John, to whom he said: "Please let him go, Sir John. We won't say anything, promise, I promise!"

Jojo advanced toward him, smiling, still holding out the knife. I could see that Guido was torn between running and staying so he could at least try to save me. He would make this jerking movements like he was preparing to bolt from the scene, but then he would look at me and wring his hands. I suddenly laughed, still in the grip of Sir John, who then let me go and let me laugh right there in front of my scared friend, filling the court with so much laughter my stomach hurt and my eyes teared up. I laughed and laughed. I only stopped laughing when we heard a car pull over by the walkway to the court. We all turned to it. The silver Bentley Continental. The driver stepped out and I waved at her.

"Ms. Mathilda! Just in time! Give us a sec." The woman nodded at us, tapping a foot on the pavement.

"Time to work, Jojo," I said.

Jojo, in a flash, slugged Guido, making the guy land on the solid floor face first. But he was as bulky as Jojo, and he was putting up a good fight, so I looked at Sir John and said, "May I borrow that gun of yours, good Sir?"

He chuckled, ruffled my hair, and handed me the pistol. "I'll go ahead," he said, kneeling before the bloody mess of Thomas. He pulled the body up, slung it over his shoulder, the neck still dripping, and walked toward the parked car. Meanwhile there was Guido. I trained the gun on the



guy's head. He saw me stand before him with Sir John's gun, then he stopped struggling under Jojo's weight. He looked at me, baffled, and then said "Help me, Clint. Let me go, please."

I said: "Help me, oh dear Clint. Let me go, please. Pooh!" Then I kicked him hard on the face. That did him good. He stopped talking, lost consciousness. Jojo tied the guy's hands and feet with the rope I told him to bring. This being done, I took Guido by the hair and dragged him from the court and through the walkway as Jojo and I headed to the car.

"You really want to damage the goods, boy," Sir John said when we reached them.

I said, "Just a bit, Boss." He then rode shotgun while Jojo and I sat in the back, the knocked-out Guido between us. Thomas had been shoved earlier into the trunk.

The GT roared down the street, swerved to Sparrow, and headed straight to the house the four of us have been observing earlier. The gates were now opened, and the maid in pink uniform was standing by them. Jim and Noli, in their pajamas now, one of them scratching his eyes and the other yawning, were at the driveway, waiting for us. When we stepped out of the car, they took out the dead meat that was Thomas and the limp body of Guido. Elissa, the maid, had closed the gate and was now looking at our catch, one on each shoulder of the subdivision's morning guards.

"Took you some time, Ser," she said, looking at either Jojo or myself as we stood beside the other.

I said "I'd say we're a bit early. Right, Sir John?"

Our boss briefly looked at me and then at the opened backseat, "Yeah, yeah. Look, kid, can you be careful next time? There's a spot here, o."

Jojo and I apologized to the Boss but he wasn't really in a bad mood. He then closed the door to the backseat, walked over to us, and slung his

arms on our shoulders. He said, “Yes, Manang Elissa. It’s a bit early, but I don’t think it’ll make a difference. My observation is that the taste will be better if the meat’s neither too young nor too old. But the boys are just a few months from being eighteen so I don’t think it will make a difference.”

I interrupted, “What will make a difference is if we let Guido go on with his sleuthing. Anyway, how’s your family in the province, Manang?”

We all walked up the staircase and then through the large oak double doors, making small talk.

The house, of course, was as grand inside as it was outside. Old varnished wooden staircases, heavy antique chairs, paintings and portraits on walls, curtains that ran from floor to ceiling, chandeliers, the works. After all the months of going through this same house bringing Sir John his fix of meat, the only thing that never failed to strike me was this portrait on the wall at the staircase landing that led to a mezzanine. It was a picture of a beautiful young woman, dressed in a gown with butterfly sleeves, hair pinned-up in a bouffant. The woman had the sort of beauty which also suggested cunning intelligence in her eyes.

*That’s my lola*, Sir John had said when Jojo and I were first invited to the house. Under the portrait was a metal plate: “Tropica Benitez. Business woman extraordinaire.” That portrait in the bronze frame still aroused both awe and fear in me. We tailed Jim and Noli into this doorway where we knew they’d prepare the bodies for storing, and later butchering. The rest of us, Jojo, and Miss Mathilda were led by Sir John to the dining hall.

“Take your seat, guys.” He motioned with a flourish towards the long mahogany dining table, his voice echoing in the high-ceilinged room. “Elissa, can you please call Lolo and Ate Nora now?” Sir John said, before himself walking into a door that led to the kitchen. We took our places among the highbacked chairs.

While waiting for the rest I called my dad to tell him I was at Sir John's and that I might be late. He and Mom had no problem since they knew everything. A few minutes later the others came in: Miss Nora, the one we call the MILE, or the cougar, behind her back. She and Miss Mathilda were Sir John's older sisters. Miss Nora walked in, dressed in this skimpy pink evening dress, nodded to the three of us already seated, before settling beside Jojo. The old man—husband to Tropica and grandfather to John, Mathilda, and Nora—walked into the dining hall with his cane and pipe, still grim-faced. He sat at the far end of the table, eyes glazed with the usual indifference.

"So," Nora said, "I heard you got the cute guy now?" Her voice sounded excited as she addressed Jojo. Jojo nodded.

I said, "I knocked him down. He's going to be meat in a matter of hours."

The woman said, "Awww, that's too bad. Or is it great?" She giggled. "Is he dead already?"

I said I doubted it.

At that she screamed, "Noliiii!" When the guard came Nora told him to bring Guido to the table. "What?" she said when the rest of us threw her inquiring looks. "He deserves it. Let him have a nice meal before he becomes a meal."

Noli went out and came back minutes later with our friend, Guido, now walking, hands bound by a zip tie. His eyes were swollen, a trail of blood from his nose down to his mouth. He was looking around, at everything, as if he was dreaming and he could make neither heads nor tails of the extravagance that assaulted his sight. When his sight landed on me and Jojo, seated just in front of the other, there came this fear and rage in his eyes. He looked like he was going to scream and kill either of us, but then good old

Noli slammed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him forward, seated him beside Nora.

“Rough night, darling?” she beamed at Guido. Then she touched his lips with a finger, smearing the tip with his blood. She took this finger to her mouth, her eyes showing then their whites while she groaned, “Yum yum!”

In a little while, Sir John walked into the dining hall followed by Elissa wheeling a service cart with dishes. Sir John noticed Guido at the table and blinked. But before he could ask, Nora told his brother to let the guy go for now: “Please?”

Sir John sighed, conceded, and said, “You’re lucky I’ve one extra.”

Elissa set the covered plates in front of everyone, including Sir John, who sat opposite his grandfather. Once all the plates were settled and the covers removed, we all stared at what we had in front of us. Each of us had this huge-ass burger the size of a quarter pounder.

“Everyone, can I have your attention please,” Sir John said after the maid had wheeled out the service cart. He stood up and began his speech. “Tonight is historic for everyone in this house. Half a century ago, our good old matriarch, Lola Tropica, came up with a recipe for what she would call the perfect burger. She had a humble beginning, as everyone here knows, selling her food in her small stall in her old province. From this she provided for her family, her earnings enough to send her own siblings to college. Her business branched out later and found more success when she met her husband, our grandfather.” He nodded to the old man who didn’t seem to have moved an inch.

“She dominated the restaurant industry with the help of her husband, until her unfortunate death twenty years ago. Her franchise continued, under different names, but no one else could replicate the success of her humble beginnings. Not until tonight, two generations later.

What you have in front of you now is the patent Tropica perfect-meat burger, handed down from a recipe she wrote long ago which was only recently discovered. There had been challenges, of course. We've made mistakes, taking the wrong meat, the dirty ones, the too young ones or even the too old. But," at this point the man looked at me and Jojo with what I'd like to believe to be love, "with the help of our young friends, we are now bringing to life the legacy that started it all, and will take our business to even greater heights!"

Everyone around the table clapped, except for Guido.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, let's feast!"

We grabbed what we had on each of our plates. We took a bite, all of us, Misses Nora and Mathilda, Jojo and I, Sir John, and even the old man. No one could talk, all were too intent on chewing. That was the first time I had a taste of it, the perfect version, and words wouldn't suffice for the meat between the buns and sauce and vegetables. Now you had read testimonies, something along the lines of how it tastes like chicken, or like beef, or pork.

To me it was close to well-done veal, tender to soft in texture, pinkish. None of the aftertaste of all the meat we had been used to. And then there was this warm sensation, like booze in cold weather. I was close to tears. I ate and chewed until nothing remained on my plate. Licked everything touched by the meat. When I finished, I realized the others too were in the same state of ecstatic feeding, and everyone looked with wonder at Sir John. He was wiping his mouth with a napkin, smiling at us from the head of the table.

"How was it?" he asked.

Miss Nora said, squealing, "You did it, baby brother, you finally did it!"

There was a murmur of ascent from the table; then, congratulations for our Boss. His previous burger meats weren't exactly disasters, but the

quality of our catch wasn't at par with what we just had earlier. There was another round of congratulations, then some clapping.

We were about to retire from the dining hall when Miss Nora said, "Oh, Guido. You don't like your food?" Guido was looking at the burger set in front of him. It hadn't been touched, and not because his hands were ziptied. We just knew by the look on his face that he had no plans of touching it.

"That's rude, P're," I said. "Sir John was nothing but a good host to you. Is this your way of thanking him?"

He glared at me then, indignant. He asked, although I bet he knew the answer: "What is this? What's this thing you want me to eat?"

Silence around the table. We could hear Guido's nervous breathing, the echoes of his unanswered questions. "You know the answer to that, Pare."

I stood from my chair and walked over to where he sat, because no one seemed to have thought of doing it, so I did. "I'll answer his question," I said, when I was beside him. "You know what this is. *Who* this is?" I nodded at the food he hadn't touched. Then I looked again at Guido, my dear sweet and stupid Guido, and because I just felt like it, I began laughing manically. I laughed and laughed. I was still laughing when I picked up the knife beside his plate and poked his chin with it and said, "You're going to eat, my dear friend. You're going to show some respect to the Boss. Right, Boss?"

Sir John nodded at me after popping a bottle of chardonnay, pouring himself a glass and raising it in my direction. "You're going to show some respect, now," I said. He trembled then, not saying anything, just exhaling loudly.

"Miss Nora. Can you please do the honors and open the hatch for us?"

She told me, "Sure thing, sweetie." Then she moved her chair close to Guido, and with her fingers, nails painted pink, grabbed the upper and lower

parts of his mouth, her hands working like a reverse bear trap. I could see the insides of his mouth, portal to his digestive system. He was struggling, but he couldn't do much with the strength of the woman and the knife I had under his chin. With my other hand I took a chunk off the burger meat from his plate and shoved it into his mouth. Then Miss Nora squeezed his mouth close.

He chewed, tears and panic in his eyes, because he couldn't do anything else; chewed, and finally swallowed and Miss Nora let go of his pretty mouth.

"You know who that is, Guido?" I said, unable to hold back a laugh. "You know, for sure, that the thing you just swallowed is no one, no one but our friend, Ben."

Boy, did the guy scream. The scream filled the entire dining hall and it was like he wasn't going to stop, until Miss Nora herself had grabbed the knife from my hand and buried it in his throat, having grown bored by his fear.

To tell the truth I can hear the scream until now, somewhere at the back of my head, twenty years later, as I sit here at my little 'La Tropica corner. Twenty years. Think about it, Clint. You sit here, sated by the same meat you shoved into your friend's mouth, the same meat for which Ben, and then Thomas, and Guido, and then dozens, hundreds of others, were killed by your own hands, all of them taking part in the long-hidden history of 'La Tropica Burgers, what was once Lola's Pasta Place. You are important. You are part of this history. You are deeply valued for your services. Look: everywhere was the fruit of your hard work, yours and Jojo's. The place still bustling, waiters shooting from one point to another, from a door to a table, ding of a bell, babble of customers at the waiting area, turn to one side and one old lady is munching on the perfect meat, not knowing what made it

perfect. No. Only us. Only people like Jojo and I would know what made it perfect.

Jojo has a family now, and they flew to Canada, all expenses paid, out of gratitude from Sir John. Myself, I was paid. My essay wasn't good enough for the scholarship to the university, so on top of the monthly cheque for the men and women we slaughtered and brought to his house, Sir John covered all my college expenses. Finished my BFA in Creative Writing in no time. By then, Jojo and I weren't the only people under his bloody payroll. There were around a dozen of us then, milling about the city, some based in the provinces, profiling the young and healthy ones, befriending and even flirting with them before slashing them up, all of us hunters protected by the friends of the old man, the friends of Sir John's grandfather, doing the cleanup, slipping some cash where it was needed, silencing those who might talk. All was good.

In fact, Sir John gave me the option to split sometime after graduating. *You could have a bright future ahead of you*, he had said. It isn't like I'm stuck in a rut, I told him. So instead, I asked him to keep me on his payroll, but with lower quota (am down to one body a month, at the same rate when I was required to haul in two per week as a noob). When I'm not hunting, which is 99% of my time now, I do some writing. You see I haven't much to do with my life. I'm still the plain old boring me. One day I was so bored that I remembered Guido and wrote a story about him (with a different last name) solving a crime in a suburban neighborhood where nothing was happening until a dead body showed up. In this novel, he solved the crime, had the killer arrested. Justice was served. Plain, stinking garbage. As a sort of personal joke, I sent this garbage to a publishing house, a major one, and—what do you know?—they picked it up and had an initial run of 1,000 copies, which sold out in a matter of two months.



They had to reprint multiple times, there was such a demand that they asked me to write more about this character, so here I am, having shat more than twenty books for the reading public. Here I am, at a table inside a Paseo de Roxas branch of 'La Tropica Burgers, inside one of a thousand branches in the world. The waiters know me. They smile when I smile at them, bring me what I want when I ask, and I bet they would kneel and lick my feet if I tell them to. They call me Sir Clint. We hunters are Sirs and Ma'ams. That's justice for you. That's the truth, and I couldn't imagine this truth changing anytime soon.

Although I know my novels wouldn't sell, I had been faithful to good ole truth. First book alone wouldn't be such a rave, and sequels impossible, if I had killed off my made-up Guido. They could be unaware of it, but readers turn to my lies to affirm their sense of justice. So, let them have it. What's the harm in making them believe there is hope?

I called one of the waiters and asked for a glass of chardonnay. He went away, and I observed the girl near the door reading my book. Still absorbed, I see. She was now a quarter from the end of the book. The jazz track from the speakers was a soft one, a trumpet solo. The murmurs of the patrons complimented the music. The waiter came back with a bottle and poured it into my glass. I took a sip, then drank some more. I let the minutes trickle by, observing the girl drink from the highball, now half-filled with lemon juice.

At the glass door, a boy of about eight years old stood looking into the restaurant through his hands shaped like binoculars. Behind the kid the tall buildings and the peaceful easy traffic. The guard, who had been talking to one of the restaurant's delivery men, saw the kid, then the guard drew his baton, and, while the kid was still looking in, smashed the boy's head with it. The boy fell. I could see from where I was the boy's slippered feet, and then the guard still raining blows on the lying body. The people inside weren't

watching this of course. Why would they? I took a sip from my goblet. Then I wiped my mouth, stood from my chair, and headed for the girl's table, near the door. Still deep into reading, engrossed in my words and imagined Guido. The Big Boss would be happy.

# THE NEIGHBOR



“Did you know,” Dave Lagutan was telling Sarah as dawn broke on Carver Street, “that your house is haunted?”

That morning, the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, wasn’t much different from other days. At least for Dave. He had made a point of leaving his house at five, like he always did in the past few months, stretching and jogging in place on the silent street while looking at the house in front of his. The haunted house. It was then owned by a twenty-seven-year-old banker named Sarah, who lived in it with her grandparents. Dave had since then done what was expected of him. But now he was having doubts about the success of his mission.

“Well, I’ve heard rumors,” Sarah said, flashing that impersonal smile that awed and disappointed him. He was hoping to turn the woman into a fawning admirer, much like the previous tenants of the haunted house. He had worn a tank top in the first few mornings, and when that didn’t provoke any glint of admiration in her eyes, he did away with it and exercised the next morning with only his jogging pants and shoes on. But that didn’t do the trick either. So that morning, perhaps by a mingling of impulse and desperation, he told her the house was haunted.

*Which is absurd*, he now thinks as he jogged in a pace that matched the precise steps of the woman. She wore flats and a serious look on her face that complemented the gray slacks and blazer she had on. Her hair in a ponytail, swaying behind her. He kept jogging. They moved like that in the long quiet street that led to the gate of the subdivision.

The sun appeared and Dave felt the morning light on his skin, now pale and gleaming, still unnoticed by Sarah who would only look at him out of politeness. The solid result of burpees and lunges all ignored. Halfway through the street he said, "Rumor has it that demons lurk in your house. The previous tenants went mad at one point of the year. Ever heard of that?"

"That's creepy," she said. "We've been in the house for almost a couple of months now and we have yet to feel anything strange."

"Lucky you," Dave, now hopeful, jogged more exuberantly. "Five years ago, one of the tenants ran out your house, screaming, claiming that she saw the devil. Another year, an entire family just disappeared, and the government had to take care of the selling of the place. An old woman employed by another man claimed that an ancient demon was sleeping in the foundations of the house. I could tell you the story tomorrow, perhaps, if you want."

They were nearing the gate now. Sarah said, "Well, sure."

"Actually," he took a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.* "Perhaps I could invite you tomorrow for a dinner in *our* house? Mom and dad are arriving so I think it'll be a good opportunity for the neighbors to meet?" He added a brief chuckle, as if to say that it won't matter if she says no.

Sarah seemed to think for a bit, and then said, "That'll be a good idea. My lolo and lola, they both love scary stories, so you might want to tell all of us about the history of house."

"That's awesome." He barely suppressed a smile of triumph.

Outside the subdivision's gate, Dave stood with Sarah, waiting for a taxi that would take her to the bank in Katipunan. When one arrived, she told him, "Take care, Dave," before opening a door and riding off to work.

Back at his house, Dave showered, put on a shirt and pair of shorts. He looked at the mirror soon as he was dressed. He liked how he looked. He smiled at the reflection, at the pale skin, his face, how his arms filled the sleeves of his white shirt, how his thighs looked solid in the tight shorts, like they could crush a mortal's head. He went out of his room, then out the front door and walked towards the acacia in the front yard, a battered copy of *Vathek* tucked in his armpit. There was a hammock under the tree. He laid on the hammock, half glancing at the book, half observing the haunted house in front through his opened front gates.

Houses in Villa Verda Village were spaced from each other by a grassy lot, and each house could only be as high as two stories. Dave was used to the quiet that suffused the neighborhood, delighted in it, as the neighbors probably did too. He took pride in it. The people, for one, all grace and beauty, betraying nothing of their true nature. An outsider could knock on a random door and be greeted by someone he had seen in a high-end glossy magazine. No one though, as far as Dave was concerned, was ever popular in that neighborhood. No one among them appeared on TV, the movies, or billboards, neither for showbiz nor politics. He was almost sure of this, although he hardly thought about what occupied the time of some of them.

Well, there was Mariana, a friend from a couple of blocks away who didn't mind that no one else ever laid eyes on her poems. Then there was Alex, next door neighbor, who somehow found it amusing to work as a bartender at some place in Katipunan. Alex had justified this by telling Dave and Mariana that it was a "fun" way of scoring his fix of yuppies and Ateneans. Dave's parents, on the other hand, found that travelling around the world wasn't a bad habit. Last time they phoned he was told they were in Tibet. As for Dave, he was contented with lounging around, under his acacia, leafing through his dog-eared books, enjoying the silence, the peace. That's all

he ever he wished for. That, and preserving all that by fulfilling the task he was appointed to do.

The lot where the haunted house stood was fenced off from the street with a low white wooden gate. Between this and the doorstep was a small garden with pink hibiscus and primrose. But, despite the bloom of flowers and the repainted fence, the house had always exuded a look of evil. The cracks on its wall, the tiled roofs that used to be red, the arched doorway which, when left opened, looked like a sad mouth ready to swallow whomever stood on the door mat. Dave had read enough Gothic tales to know how inaccurate it was to describe the two windows at the second floor as eyes. As he lay there in the hammock observing the house, from under dappled sunlight, the windows seemed to be two square black holes. It didn't help that the new tenants didn't bother putting up curtains. He knew what waited under the house's foundations. He, along with the neighborhood, had tended to it for decades now. And yet the sense of an ancient power still crept under his skin whenever he looked long enough at the lot.

Dave then saw the old woman through one of the windows on the second floor, feather duster on one hand, tapping corners of the pane with it. After a minute of dusting, she must have seen him on the hammock, and from where Dave lay, he saw her hand raised in a wave, a smile on her kind old face. Dave waved back and went on reading. Somewhere inside that house was the old man, whom Dave suspected to be close to senility. Dave grinned.

They'd be easy, he thought.

Later, at four o'clock, Alex and Mariana arrived at his house and sat with him on the hammock, looking at the haunted house. He told both of them: "Sarah's the challenge."

Mariana was fussing with the caftan she had on, a stark black affair that managed to make her look like the obscure and possibly deranged



poetess she aspired to be. She was getting rid of the grass and primrose petals that had stuck on it on her way to Dave's front yard. When she spoke, she had this usual dry tone he recognized. She said, "Do you need help?"

"I can manage," he said. "She said yes to my invite."

"And the oldies?"

"They'll be here tomorrow, too."

"Can't we just do away with those two oldies?" This was Alex, from the other side of Dave. Alex's chin was resting on his fist, and he was slouching, a bored look on his face while his gaze rested on the haunted house. "Sarah looks good enough."

"He knows how many of them there were. And he might ask what happened to the others," said Sarah, always the voice of reason.

"It is always easy when they're alone, isn't it, Dave?"

"Don't mind those fossils," Dave said, "Sarah's the challenge. But I'm sure it'll end well."

Mariana looked at him now. "And how do you think you are doing so far?"

"Just fine," he lied. In truth he was afraid that Sarah might come up with something tomorrow, an excuse. Dave was not afraid that it wouldn't end well tomorrow. He could always count on the others, go on with it without having to lure the woman and the grandparents to his house. All the others would need to do is to cast a few spells and, voila. Dinner is served for Belphegor.

But it had never happened before. Dave looked back through the decades of their peaceful existence and found in it none of the challenge he was having now. All the previous tenants had willfully succumbed to

his charms. Men and women, whatever their age or beliefs. He didn't have any trouble inviting them back then to his house, on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> of October. Most of them had lived in the haunted house alone, yuppies or retirees who were smitten at once by the sight of him. They would giggle even if he was not trying to be humorous. Touch his arms when he was jogging every morning, on the pretense of being friendly. He had no challenge inviting them to his bedroom while the rest of the village worked on the set-up for the night. It was the gift he had wished for: to be beautiful enough. Just enough so that when the time of the year comes the ritual would be smooth and he would prove his worth to the Belphegor. He didn't need help.

"Damn that management," Alex said, "couldn't even be bothered to look for a tenant who'd live alone."

"It was September. They realized they must be running out of time." Mariana had removed all the leaves and petals and was now looking at the haunted house too. "Really, Dave. We could help you. Alex could help you if you want."

"I'm good, thanks." He alone could do this. "You just do what you're supposed to do tomorrow."

Alex looked at his watch and stood up from the hammock. "Time to go now, my friends."

"I still don't get how you can bear the noise in that bar, Alex," Mariana said.

"I'm nothing if not fun," he said with that smile of his that must have dissolved the hearts of the young men and women he chose to have "fun" with. "See you tomorrow, losers."

When Alex was gone, Dave and Mariana settled into the usual silence. They talked at times, about the book he was reading, or if she had written anything. But overall, they were used to the silence. At seven o'clock,

a cab stopped in front of the yard and out came Dave's parents, both wearing an assortment of necklaces and bracelets. Part of their chosen purpose was to collect trinkets from wherever they went, and right now Dave was sure it was all they could do to keep from bringing back a monk with them.

Dave and Mariana stood to greet the Tibetan-accessory-clad parents, kissing them both on the cheeks, helping them with the suitcases. Mariana then told the Lagutans that she'd go back to her house and she bid the family a goodnight.

"Still writing your poems, darling?" Dave's mother asked.

"As usual," Mariana said. "See you tomorrow, guys."

In the house, over dinner, and after his mother rambled on about the wonders they saw in Potala Palace, and the monasteries they visited in Shigatse and Lhasa, she asked him "How are you doing with that girl Sarah?"

He suddenly found it difficult to chew what he had in his mouth. He washed it down with water and said, "Doing fine, Mom."

"Alright, dear. Just checking," she beamed with a wave of her hand, bracelets jangling.

"We don't want to disappoint the Belphegor," his father said at the head of the table flatly. "Just let us know if you need help."

"I think I actually might do that," he finally admitted. Then he told them about his plan of having them over dinner.

"Well, that's a surprise," his mother said. "It's been ages since we had to be part of this."

"There's three of them. She has her grandparents with her."

"So," his father now said, "the admin couldn't find a tenant who lives alone, huh?"

"We'll help, dear. Of course," his mother said.

Later when they retired to their rooms after dinner, Dave felt relief that they hadn't thought of prying into his need for their help. The two old people would be easy, and he couldn't imagine having any trouble inviting them over and making them stay. It was Sarah. Sarah, who had always looked like she needed to be on the move, a visibly iron-willed woman.

He lay on the bed that night thinking of the others before Sarah, how easy it had been to invite most of them where he was lying now. It was difficult to read her, much less influence her feelings and desires. The others had been easy because most of them lived alone. And being alone had almost always guaranteed their vulnerability, as what he had observed from mortals so far. They don't like to be alone, and when circumstances force them to be alone, they gravitate to the nearest opportunity of being with someone. Men and women in their prime, aging spinsters, balding widowers. The need became the same when they saw him.

All but her.

The next morning Dave found the three black velvet cloaks on one of the sofas, and when he saw his mother in the kitchen chopping vegetables he said, "Shouldn't you hide them for now?"

She turned to him and smiled. "Of course, dear. I just checked them for tears. I don't want us wearing rags later."

In the living room his father sat on a rocking chair scrolling through the screen of his phone, staring at tables and graphs.

"How's the market, Dad?" Dave asked as he eased himself on the couch beside his father.

His father scrunched his nose and said without looking at Dave, "It's the time of the year, son. It doesn't look good. But I'm pretty sure after the

ritual we'll be back to normal, maybe more than normal. Maybe we could get a roundtrip to the moon. SpaceX's tour looks promising."

Dave went on reading the book. Halfway through the novel, his mother called him and his father to the table. In the middle of the meal, his mother asked, "Do you feel it too?"

"What?" his father looked up from his plate.

"Weak. Like I don't want to move at all."

"I do," Dave said. "I think Belphegor's starving this year."

"Hm," his father grunted, "hope he gets his fill later."

"I'll make sure of that." Dave went on eating.

Before nightfall on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, Dave had gone to the haunted house to ask Sarah if she was still good with the invitation.

"Surely," she said. It was a Saturday, and she was in her house clothes, hair pinned up in a messy bun. She flashed him that polite smile. "I'll bring Lolo and Lola. See you later."

As she spoke Dave realized that he was even more enthralled with the mortal in front of him.

He was used to seeing the grandparents every day, both must have been in their late 60s. All wrinkly and slow moving. Villa Verde's inhabitants were mostly creatures older than these two, but none had ever looked old yet. None of the sagging flesh, milky cataracts, or toothless gums. Everyone looked the age they wished to be in. So, the grandparents' status as outsiders among them was only heightened by their physical submission to gravity.

But Sarah, to Dave at least, seemed to have always belonged with the rest of the residents. As he stood there by the white fence looking at

Sarah in her white cotton shorts and sleeveless blouse, he couldn't help but feel a sort of familiarity with her. Not a shadow of a wrinkle or scar on her face. The smooth neck as white as his. Even her smell, breath as fresh as a newborn baby's from lips as pink as the flowers blooming behind her. His heart quickened when she flashed that smile, however impersonal it looked.

"Thanks. See you," he had said meekly. As he crossed the road back to his house he rested a hand on his chest, hoping to still the pounding. Carver Street was empty, although he could feel the bustling going on inside the houses of his neighbors. The preparations.

And here he was, feeling helpless in the face of someone he should have charmed.

*I can do this, he told himself. I can do this.*

She was at the gate by half past seven, behind her the old man and woman smiled warmly, both in cardigans, the man leaning on a cane. The night had cloaked the sky with a deep indigo and the streetlights had long flickered on to make visible the quiet avenue. Dave opened the gate and ushered them into the house. They all greeted him a good evening, something they did as well once they had entered the living room and upon finally meeting Dave's parents.

"Good evening."

"Pleased to meet you, finally."

"Thanks for inviting us over."

Dave looked at the gathering of people in the room heading towards the dining table and couldn't help but feel a sense of some familiar warmth. Like this was a rendezvous devoid of ulterior motives, as if it wouldn't precipitate into a night of demonic sacrifice.

Above the table was a chandelier that threw a soft light on the people surrounding the oval hardwood table. Under this as they sat around a meal, some ordered through the phone: T-bone steaks, lobsters, a platter of rice with peas and cubes of carrots, and a pitcher of juiced kumquats. At the head of the table, Dave's father sat in comfortable silence while his mother prattled on about their latest trip and asked questions that encouraged the visitors to talk about themselves. Sarah and her grandparents sat in a neat line on the other side of the table, the old people like smiling fixtures propped on the mahogany chairs, and Sarah doing much of the talking. Occasionally, Dave's mother would direct a question to the lolo or to the lola and they would usually just nod, gently. Or speak briefly before letting Sarah overtake the conversation. This unsettled Dave for a while, for he did not expect the woman to be much of a talker, and yet with the old people she seemed to be more animated, in fact, as if begrudging the oldies the time they were given to speak.

"I'm really thankful for them," Sarah said at one point, looking at them, who in turn smiled as if they couldn't be more proud of the woman they raised. Sarah then told them how her parents died in a freak car crash, and how lolo and lola were there to raise her in their shanty somewhere in Bulacan. They worked for her to live a relatively comfortable life, she said, and the least she could do was to finish her studies, look for a decent job, and give them a better place to live in.

"I was lucky to find the lot listed online," she said. "We've been here for almost a couple of months now, and I can say that this is a really nice neighborhood. It's quiet in here, far from the noise we had by the highway shanty. In fact, I'd say at times it feels too quiet. I rarely see people outside, well except for Dave. And sometimes, Alex. He's nice a nice guy, by the way."

"It takes getting used to, dear," Dave's mother said as she stood, heading to the kitchen. She came back shortly with a tray for dessert. When

everyone had a soufflé ramekin in front of them, she said, “The previous tenants of your house seemed to have challenges getting used to it as well.”

“Dave said something happened to them, yesterday. You’re going to tell us the story, Dave, right?”

Dave looked up from his dish and at once saw the fleeting look of surprise in his mother’s eyes, her fork pausing for a while before her mouth took in the what it held.

“Oh, that,” he said. “Yes, yes, I could tell you the story.”

“Well, nothing much happened to them,” Dave’s mother said, a look of warning now in her eyes.

“We could say that,” Dave said, “but I could still tell you the strange case of the last person who lived in that house of yours.”

At the head of the table Dave’s father cleared his throat. Dave glanced at him with a look that implied, *Don’t worry, I can handle this.*

He then looked at Sarah, smiled, and said, “Last year, a widower named Fernando Kintanar lived in your house. His wife died just a few months before he moved in, so it was understandable that you couldn’t rely on him to be that jolly. I got to talk to him from time to time though, and in the first few months he seemed normal enough, a bit sad but not really that snobbish. He wouldn’t talk much but he always was such a good listener. One day, though, he told me how he saw a weird symbol etched on the cement floor of the kitchen. He hadn’t had the floor tiled because he liked the finish. He had spilt a carton of milk and the contents went under an ancient oak drawer that had been in the house before he bought it.”

“I think it’s still in the kitchen. Is it the one with filigreed carvings around the drawer handles?” Sarah interjected.



“Perhaps. I haven’t been in your house though so I couldn’t be sure. He said it was squat, just about the same height as the middle of his legs, and that it had been beside the kitchen counter.”

“That’s it.”

“Anyway, he said he had to mop the milk so he moved the drawer and cleaned it off. When he was just about to return the thing though, after mopping the floor clean, he noticed this sign that had been hidden by the drawer. It was simply a star with a circle around it touching its points, and a bigger circle around it. He was curious, naturally, so he touched the thing. For some reason though he was impelled to press his finger on it, feeling the rough edge of the rune, tracing the shape, until he felt a little pain and saw blood on one of the pointy ends of the star. He hadn’t thought much of it so he just cleaned his wound, returned the oak drawer where it was standing, and went on with his day.

“Then the nightmares came, he had said. Lakes of fire, being slowly torn apart by winged creatures, walking on burning coals. Nights would come when he woke up drenched with cold sweat, heart pounding like he was in a marathon. He was an academic, you see, a strangely superstitious one. The dreams made him feel like he had stumbled upon Dante’s vision every time he’d try to sleep in his house. ‘This didn’t happen when I spent a night in a friend’s house,’ he told me that day he decided to open up about his domestic dilemma, ‘I slept well.’

“Stranger things took place, according to him. He began seeing shadows on random walls in the house of figures that weren’t there; figures in the shape of men with appendages that weren’t normally seen in a human. A pair of horns, a pointed tail. Objects began moving on their own. Faucets had to be turned off in the middle of the night even if he was sure he didn’t turn them on.

“He traced all these to his blood on the star-shaped rune. Something had been tapped by the drop of his blood, and something must be done to stop all this at once. Fernando said he wouldn’t give up the house and move to another. It was difficult—and I think it still is—to find a place to live in these days that is accessible to much of the city and is relatively cheap real estate-wise. So, one day he invited over this old woman to assess the power they have to confront and to battle. The old woman did the usual thing quack doctors would do. She brought a candle and asked for a basin of water. As the two of them stood before the rune, she recited chants from an unknown language and the candle wax would form the shape of whatever it was that disturbed his life and house.

“‘An ancient demon lives in your house,’ the woman had gasped. ‘It lives under this house, he’s haunting you now because you knocked on his doorway.’ The doorway turned out to be the rune. ‘You disturbed his long sleep and now he has to have his fill. He has to eat. He is starving, boy, starving.’

“Fernando knew that there wasn’t just a single type of demon, so he asked the old woman if they had a name for the infernal being haunting his house. The woman told him, ‘It isn’t your regular succubi or lower-tier demon, boy. We are talking about an ancient one. In fact, one of the Princes of Hell himself. It could be Lucifer, Mammon, Belphegor, Asmodeus, or any others. Regardless, the one under this house is not to be trifled with. You have to leave now, before it’s too late.

“‘But I won’t go,’ Fernando had told me that afternoon. He was still in his work clothes, his hair ruffled and eyes red. But he stood there with the confidence of a man so sure that he would win a war. ‘I know people from the church who could help me.’

“I didn’t have much to say to him. I suspected even then that the guy needed some time off, you know, to mourn properly, knowing that his wife

had just died, so as not to have to go entirely nuts. But I didn't want to offend him, so I just wished him luck and let him know that if he needed anything I was there.

"The next morning, however, no priest dropped by to humor the man. The man himself, Fernando, disappeared, leaving behind his things and the house. No one immediately realized this, until I noticed that I hadn't seen him inside or outside the house for many weeks.

"No one knew what happened to him. The police made a visit and found no body in the house. One day, someone we didn't know or saw, got a hold of the land's title and sold it to an agent, who put it up again for sale."

"And now," said Sarah, "we're living in it. Well, I think it's fair to say that's quite creepy."

Her grandparents regarded Dave as if he had just finished reciting a prayer and they were at that interim between the last "Amen" and the part when they'd have to silently shuffle out the Church steps.

"Of course, the man might have just gone nuts," Dave's mother chuckled nervously, her eyes imploring him, *stop this nonsense!*

"Perhaps he went nuts," Dave said with a smile. "But I know one thing."

A look of grim fascination was imprinted on Sarah's face. "What?"

"I know what really happened. I can tell it to you. Mom and Dad know it. Everyone in the neighborhood knows it. Why shouldn't you?"

At the head of the table his father had been drinking from his glass, which he then banged down beside his plate. The echo hovered clearly in the dining area. Dave could feel his father's appeal for him to stop talking now.

"The man didn't just disappear." Dave pushed on.

“What happened?” Sarah was now visibly shaken, perhaps, Dave thought, because of the way now smiled and tilted his chin down. He could imagine his face gaining shadows in the eyes of the woman in front of him.

“I know what happened. I’ll tell you what happened,” he said. “In fact, we’ll make it happen to you.” Then he looked at her grandparents one by one, “And to you and you.”

“Dave, darling,” his mother now was saying.

“Mom. They need to know.” He now chuckled, a sinister chuckle that came straight from his throat. Silent yet deep.

Sarah for her part moved her chair for a fraction, Dave could guess that she was gripping its edge, preparing to bolt upright. “This is getting creepy. Or is this some sort of prank?”

“No. Nothing about this night is a joke.” Dave could feel hot blood rising to his face. He wondered if this was rage, or adrenaline. Then he pinned it: elation. The emotion he felt, Sarah now was cracking, visibly scared. This was much better than hypnotizing her like the others. Let this woman fear for her life. Who did she think she was, living here and walking every morning with her back straight and not giving him the desire and attention he was due. Ha! I am a great and terrible beauty! Let mortals tremble at my words if they cannot throw themselves at my feet for wanting to own my body.

“I think we had better get going.” Sarah was still sitting upright, although her eyes betrayed fright as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Let’s go, Lolo.” She touched the arm of her grandfather beside her, meaning to urge him to stand up. The two old people had been sitting there shaken, as well as confused.

Dave leaned towards them as he sat. He relished the look on Sarah’s face, the fear and regret. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse and he could see

gooseflesh on her arms. She was standing up now. He said, "I'll tell you what happen to Ferdinand."

"I'm not interested," she said. "Let's go, 'Lo."

"We sacrificed him to Belphegor." Then he said in a mad rush: "We tied them to a tree. Then we summoned Belphegor and Belphegor tore his flesh with his clawed hands and he tore Ferdinand's guts out and ate them because he was hungry. And you're going to be tied to so the Prince of Hell could devour your juicy, juicy flesh. All three of you."

"Dave!" his mother said.

"Son!" his father said.

"Calm down, you two." Now Dave stood and aimed a forefinger at the trembling figure of Sarah. "You're going to die tonight."

"You're sick," Sarah muttered. The two old people had also stood up and now the three of them were walking out to the living room. Dave followed them, leaving his two confused parents at the table. Sarah said, "You're a sick, sick boy. Disgusting. Stop following us. Stop your—"

At that point, Dave raised his hand in front of his face. And snapped his fingers.

The sound echoed in the living room. The three people, then near to his father's rocking chair, had stopped moving. Sarah was holding her grandfather's arm while the old woman was clutching her chest. The three of them looking at Dave in horror. And they had stopped moving. Time was suspended for the three mortals.

Dave turned to his parents and beamed. "Well, I told you to trust me."

His mother said, as he returned to the dining table, "You certainly are a bit dramatic tonight, dear."

Dave chuckled.

“Is that even necessary?” his father said, dipping his fork in the ramekin. “You scared me with your theatrics.”

“Okay, okay, I overdid it,” he said with a wave of his hand. “But at least we did it, Dad. Look at those fools.”

Dave and his parents looked at the living room, a few paces from the dining table. Their neighbors stood there as if frozen inside a block of invisible ice, like mannequins caught in the act of escaping. Sarah’s mouth agape. The confusion in her Lolo’s eyes. Her grandmother’s wide-eyed bafflement.

The Lagutans went on eating as Belphegor’s meal stood in the living room.

At nine o’clock in the evening, Dave’s parents stood at the doorway wearing their black velvet cloak while looking at Dave, who was also wearing his own cloak with the hood down.

“Are you all good now?” his father asked him.

“You know me, Dad. I can do this as usual.”

“Alright then. See you later.”

They went out the front door. He then looked at the still figures of his neighbors in the living room, inspecting them, as beyond the front door he could hear the front gates being opened wide, his parents talking to the others. There was a hubbub now, and he could sense the presence of all the inhabitants of Villa Verde gathering on Carver Street.

He could imagine the night outside, the sight of his neighbors he would walk out to later. A common yearly sight. The annual sacrificial ritual for Belphegor, demon-god of sloth, who gifted them with peace, beauty, and all the funds they would ever need for whatever purpose they have chosen

to fulfil. In exchange for a mortal, or mortals, he would then kill after a year-long slumber. Kill to devour.

At a wall of the living room the clock's hand moved to 11:35. He moved closer to the three figures by the rocking chair, Sarah being the nearest one to his father's favorite seat in the house. Dave's father must have been 300 years old now, and the rocking chair must be a thing of novelty for the people in the house. Dave moved closer to Sarah, inspecting her blouse, her white, white skin. His palm hovered over her nose and mouth, feeling the regular breathing she was unconscious of. She must have brushed her hair carefully before going to the Lagutans, shining black waves ending just below her nape, tucked behind ears pierced by a pair of mother-of-pearl. The tights she had on were brown, her feet clad in those plush white slippers the Lagutans had been wont to make visitors wear each time they entertain one.

Dave sat on the rocking chair and snapped his fingers. The three people came back to life, terror carved on their faces. Sarah, who was just beside him, looked down at him, her fingers above her mouth, knees visibly shaking. She said, "What are you going to do to us?"

He was about to say something when suddenly, murmurs arose from outside and through the open front door. The sound of hundreds of voices reciting a chant, faint at first, and then deepening, vibrating. It was almost palpable. He could feel the voices disturbing the stasis of the floor. Instead of directly answering Sarah, he said, "Do you have any last words, Sarah?"

She was crying now. But she was not hysterical, observed Dave, no. There was, buried under this face transformed by fear, a certain defiance. The tears were silent, coursing from the sides of her eyes.

"Let us go, please," she said.

She was still holding her grandfather by an arm, the grandmother holding his other arm.

“Fine,” Dave chuckled, then waved a hand. “You’re free to go now.”

Slowly, trembling, they walked out the front door. Dave sat on the rocking chair, watching them totter out. He sat there for a while thinking about the weeks that would follow. Maybe he’d go out too. Maybe he’d accept Alex’s invite, again, to visit the club. Dave loved the peace he was gifted with. He didn’t like the noise of the club, the music thumping on walls and floors, the bodies gyrating madly. In the words of Mariana, “It’s all too intense.” Villa Verde had long basked in silence and peace, and most of its inhabitants had lived in it, enjoying nothing less. An immortality of no drama. Alex then, was perhaps an anomaly.

There was a short scream. Clearly, from Sarah.

Dave took this as the signal. He stood from the chair, brought down his hood, and walked out the front door.

Sarah and her grandparents were standing by the acacia, between the house and the wide front gates. Their backs were to him, frozen where they stood, by whatever it was they were looking at.

The front gates were opened. Two figures in black hoods stood blocking the way, each holding a torch that highlighted their smooth, wan faces. These were Alex and Mariana, both of them smiling now. Behind them were other hooded figures, lining up on Carver Street and facing the haunted house, some of them holding torches as well, as they chanted in unison, which became clearer to his ears.

*“Festum Asinorum Domine, Deus daemonium inertiae,*

*Nos gratiam coram te in hac nocte,*

*Venite videre lucernam, igne tuo, saeculum vestra sapientia, infinita potestate vestra.*

*O Festum Asinorum nos gratiam ...”*



Dave stepped out and loudly cleared his throat, causing the three to turn to him.

“What is happening?” Sarah said.

Dave didn't say anything. He just stood there, smiling, and then after a few seconds he raised his right hand in front of him, stretched the fingers wide, aiming it at the acacia.

Nothing happened at first, and Dave was afraid that Belphegor was too weak now to grant him the powers he needed. Fernando's premature sacrifice the previous year must have messed up the demon's infernal metabolism.

Dave felt his hand shaking.

Then a cold wind rose, brushing his face, rustling the leaves. Then the wind was subdued, the atmosphere warmed, but the leaves and the branches kept on moving, swaying, until it was finally apparent that they were moving on their own accord. Or at Dave's bidding.

The swaying branches moved, like splintered tentacles with dark green blades. On a normal day the tree looked like a many-armed figure holding up a green cap. But tonight, as Dave willed it to do his wishes, it bent its multiple arms the way a claw game would have swooped down on prizes had it been made with demonic wood. The branches made their way down, its multiple joints wiggling in every direction, towards the three people standing beside it, the trunk almost bending.

And finally, branches coiled separately around the three people who resided in the haunted house. Sarah was screaming now as all three of them were lifted off the ground in a tight grip, twenty feet above the earth. Dave walked over to his friends and beheld the sight of Belphegor's meal squirming above them, Sarah kicking the air uselessly, wooden fingers tight around her bound arms and body. The old people were squirming as well.

“Told you I could do it,” Dave said.

He felt Alex tap him lightly on the shoulder while Mariana said, “Good job.”

He turned his back to the tree and told them, “Well, I’ll go ahead now.”

“Go get him, pare.” Alex said, good naturedly, flashing that easy-go-lucky smile.

Dave walked among the hooded figures arranged on Carver Street—some he could identify just by the outline of their cloaks: there was Gregory, part of Villa Verde’s land developer, a hulking six-footer of a man; to his right, there were the three little figures of Joanna’s children, who had wished to look like middle graders forever, their little hands linking them to each other; then there was the woman who had wished to be voluptuous as a teapot somewhere to the far left. He walked among them until he stepped up to the threshold of the haunted house. Once he was in front of it, at the place where he had just talked with Sarah earlier that night, he looked back at the road he had just crossed and regarded everyone on it.

Their chanting grew louder, the flames from the torches seemed to grow brighter. Dave’s mother and father were among these, standing in the middle of the road among the others, looking at him with proud eyes, his father holding a torch himself. Behind all of them the acacia, which had grown taller at his will, still held the three struggling sacrifices. The night was clear and humid, warmth engulfing everything, aided by the fires.

He turned back to the house. The door was already open, hot mist crawling around its wooden frame. He could feel sweat trickling down his face as he approached the mouth-like door, the deep dark of the windows looming above.

I’m here, my Master. I am here.

He stepped into the house and went straight to the kitchen, where someone had already moved the mahogany drawer and had exposed the pentagram. On its five points a lighted candle stood, illuminating the eye drawn with chalk in the middle of it. The mist enveloping the floors were coming out of the outer circle of the symbol.

The drawer had just been moved somewhere close, and as he had expected, someone had placed a lone switchblade inside its top level. He took the glinting weapon, held his left hand above the glaring eye of the pentagram, and sliced his palm, letting blood drip on the rune.

The candles burned brighter, the mist thickened, floating upwards to the wall and finally to the ceiling. The hot fog filled the kitchen, and Dave felt the warmth as it engulfed his every pore. The ground shook, as if the earth was being torn apart to make way for a god of the underworld.

Dave closed his eyes, and inhaled. He whispered, "I am here, Master."

An exhalation, putrescent and abysmally deep, blew on a side of his face. It smelled of dead rats, hundreds of dead rats.

Then a voice, a voice of a thousand souls condensed around a single sentence: "Ahh, it's good to see you again."

Dave felt something sharp trace a short line on his cheek, felt it stroking his face lovingly. He opened his eyes. A red arm had reached out through the fog, fingers with long black nails were now caressing his face. Joy welled up in Dave's heart and he could feel tears blurring his vision. He touched the hand caressing his face for a while before it retreated to the mist.

The fog dissipated, revealing now the owner of the red arms that he had so long adored, that they had so long adored.

Belphegor. He stood there beside Dave, his goat horns protruding just above his bald head, his white, fanged smile, a beard the tips of which

ended on his well-shaped chest. He had the face of an old man with a long, pointed nose. The devil stood there, naked, exposing its sexless crotch, thick thighs and feet with fingernails as black and long as those it had on his hands.

“It’s you, my child,” Belphegor said, his deep, thousand voices wafting with the scent of carrion. Dave inhaled this scent, took in all the words and vapors from his mouth, and was tempted to cry again at this miracle, this privilege.

“I am here, my Master,” he said, holding back a sob. “And we have three for you.”

“Ahhh,” the devil intoned. “I knew I could trust you with this power.”

They walked towards the front door, Belphegor’s arm around him like they were chums on the way out of a pub. When they reached the arched doorway, the murmurs arose, and the clamor of adoring voices rose in the night as the neighborhood was graced again with the presence of their beloved god.

The devil raised his hand, and quickly formed a fist out of it. Silence fell.

The chant had stopped. The neighborhood watched silently, their eyes misty. Dave could see his father sobbing, and the president of the homeowners’ association, a cougar with a streak of white on her hair, used the sleeve of her cloak to hide her face as it crumpled into an ugly cry. The children were looking in awe.

The gathering on the street parted in the middle like a sea to make way for the devil and his right hand. Dave and Belphegor walked towards the Lagutans’ house and as they got closer, the tree bent so that the hostages were brought down to the level of the approaching boy and master.

“They all look delicious,” Belphegor said, “Especially the one in the middle.”

A branch had coiled over Sarah's mouth, but it was clear to Dave that she was trying to scream. Her hair in disarray, beautiful eyes bulging in a panic, reflecting the torchlight of Alex and Mariana, who were standing close by like sentries. With her hands and feet bound, she hung there, inches above the ground like a wriggling worm.

"What a delightful sight this is," the devil said. Then he turned his back from the tree and addressed the hooded people of Villa Verde: "My children. I am deeply honored with this offering, with this flesh. You are proving that you are worth the immortality." He raised his hands. "I am blessing you all with whatever you desire: your peace, your life, your beauty. I am now—"

There was a laugh. It stopped the devil from his speech. The people on the road, who were tearing up, clutching at their hearts, trying to sate the happiness that brimmed in their burning souls, suddenly gasped. Their eyes widened, as if something behind the devil and the boy was happening that wasn't supposed to happen.

The laugh was a high-pitched one. Dave turned to the acacia and found that the branch coiled around Sarah's mouth was gone and she was laughing now.

She laughed through a pair of lips that were impossibly wide for a human. A smile that literally reached her ears, baring teeth that looked as if it was filed into sharp triangles, like that of a shark's.

Sarah laughed, and then said, in a voice that sounded like thousands of souls trapped in a single body: "You stupid, lazy garbage!" Another fit of laughing.

"Do you seriously think that you can hide here, you wretched creature?" she bellowed.

Belphegor was taken aback, and had nothing else to say to the tied-up woman but, “Huh?”

Sarah laughed and Dave felt a sense of dread knotting up in his stomach. He had stepped back unconsciously, and was now looking at Sarah from behind their beloved red god.

“Are you hiding behind your master, you naughty boy?” Sarah screeched, still smiling. Gone from her countenance was the look of a well-bred yuppie. In its place was an almost visible halo of hellfire, which highlighted the irises of her eyes, that had turned bright red. At her sides, the old man and woman had stopped squirming and stared at everyone with dumb eyes.

Sarah laughed, and began morphing into something else. A wave of fearful sighs passed over Carver Street, as a couple of horns began to sprout from under her hair, at either sides of her head. The coiled branch around her slowly wilted until it lost its hold and she was able to disengage herself. She stepped forward then, her arms raised, and Dave, Belphegor, and even Mariana and Alex, stepped backward.

Her bare white arms, which had earlier been covered with gooseflesh, peeled off, melting, an actual skin on fire, burning with it her blouse and pants and flip flops, burning skin dropping like candlewax on the ground. And it revealed skin as red as that of Belphegor’s. The nails on her hands and feet had lengthened and blackened, shining under the pyres of Alex and Mariana. The crotch was sexless, and the chest was losing fat, baring to them all a muscular set of pectorals that looked even more chiseled than Belphegor’s. The arms began to gain mass, as if inflated with solid protein. She grew taller and larger and less of a human in front of them.

Sarah had turned into the devil, David thought, or rather, Sarah was a devil all along. A more sinister, and perhaps better version of Belphegor.

His god stood there in front of him, motionless, and at that moment he seemed to have shrunk, with Sarah standing there easily eight feet tall now.

“I am not Sarah, you idiot,” the thing said, to Dave’s further surprise. It could even read his mind! “I am Mammon, god of wealth! And I came here to free you from the shackles of this sloth.”

Belphegor fell to his knees. Dave couldn’t believe it. He wanted to prop the devil up to face this intruder, to show this Mammon that he could put up a fight, that he could rip the thing apart and take its flesh and grind it fine with his jaws.

“That won’t do, my brother,” Mammon said now, “You’ve been hiding for so long. Poor thing. Fed by these lazy nothings. These people are mine now. And you are my hound’s.”

When she said that, a growling sounded from the acacia, where the two old people were still tied. It came from them, the old grandparents of the woman they had known as Sarah, who turned out to be Mammon.

The old man and woman convulsed, almost simultaneously, as if suffering at throes of a high fever. Or perhaps they were burning, Dave thought, for in front of everyone these two slowly melted in the grip of Dave’s acacia. They smoked, sizzled, and in a few moments, they were this mass of black figures slowly sliding away from the coiled branches. They became a pair of smoking hot sludge, with red spots hissing on them, dropping on to the floor, like a flaming tar.

The sludges on the floor were still for a while. Then each began to move to a spot at the left side of Mammon, meeting there and finally converging. The sludge slowly built itself. Reversing its melting, and now forming out of itself an animal that crouched on all fours.

It was a hellhound.

The black dog looked to Dave like the lovechild of a Labrador and Satan himself. Instead of saliva dripping from its muzzle, fire escaped through its unusually long and shining silver fangs. Mammon ruffled its head for a while. When he removed his hand from it, he said, "All yours, my dear."

The hound lunged at Belphegor, aiming for the devil's neck. Belphegor didn't even put up a fight. Dave saw him sob as he knelt before the hound buried its silver fangs on his throat. The animal dragged the devil to a side of the front gate.

There was a great cry now on the street. Dave fell on his knees and he could hear as well the rustle of cloaks as everyone on Carver Street wobbled down like ninepins. They felt the death of their god. Beside him, Alex and Mariana were kneeling as well. Their torch had died.

A chill passed over everything, like an impromptu winter had taken hold of this usually tropical street. A high wind knifed through the tree, bending it at an impossible angle, looming above the street now, the air whipping past and throwing the hood off Dave's head.

He was kneeling in front of Mammon, nothing or no one else between them. This new devil raised his hands again, now to the street's direction. Mammon said, "You're all mine now. And you're going to work for me. No rest now, you lazy people."

"You," he suddenly pointed at Dave, the way he must have done earlier at the dinner table. "You're going to die tonight."

Mammon waved his hand back to Dave's acacia and saw the branches of his own tree creep towards him, ligaments more animated now. Dave wanted to run, but he was just too weak he couldn't even stand or crawl backwards, to recoil. Mammon stepped aside to allow the tree to pick Dave up.

The branches gripped his limbs.



He was being hauled up then, exposing him to the street. Somewhere on the way up his cloak had been torn off him, and even the shirt and pants he wore underneath. He was spread eagled only in his boxers, the wind in his ears and the chill biting at his pallid, white skin. He looked down and saw the street, Villa Verde's neighborhood still on its knees, looking up at him. He could hear his mother screaming. All the torches had been snuffed out, and he couldn't tell who was who. He could just hear them trembling, crying, imploring. The haunted house faced him with its blank eyes and yawning door.

"Let him go! Let him go!" his mother was screaming, but the words were only carried by the wind.

Beneath him he could see Mammon walking over to Alex, urging him to stand up.

Dave wanted to scream as well. He could feel pain now, as the branches of his own tree began to wrap around his body. Around his arms, around his legs, his torso. It was squeezing him. Blood rushed to his head and he could feel his ears popping.

Before the darkness overtook him, before he let go of peace and immortality, the last thing he heard was Mammon telling Alex, who had stood up and was then smiling proudly, "You did a good job, my sweet boy." The glint of the devil's black fingernails on his friend's face was the last thing he saw.



# THE DRIVER



I need to get a hold of that son of a bitch, but not for the same reason my son had needed him. He was on the TV then, Peter Dela Cruz, flashing his hundred-thousand-peso orthodontist job, his insured, glass face framed by a greasy pompadour, talking to an aging host about this Korean TV series to be recycled by a local channel, where he would be the lead. "But," he said before giving a wink I assumed was only aimed at making young girls swoon, "there's going to be a twist. A surprise."

"Surprise me, boy," I muttered to the screen and threw an empty can of Heineken at his leering eyes. I could faintly see what William saw in him, not that I harbored any personal interest. I'm way past the age for shocking myself and other people. As for this Peter guy. This twenty-two-year-old fuckface who should have known better than to cower under what little power his Pop has, and accusing someone else's son of an assault that, for all I care, his own folks could very well be guilty of. God only knows what I could do with that chicken throat he has now that I've hacked my way to his burial.

I shut the TV off, laid on the couch and stared at a lizard on the ceiling. I need to think this through. I'm halfway through my plan now, which wouldn't happen had I not been tipped about somebody's need for a driver. Sucking this government's teat had some advantages, I admit, not only because I could now lie on my couch all day to wait for the pensioner's check, but because after all these years I still have some connection to those people who work for those nobodies running our lives. Word got around my former

office that a cousin of the son of a bitch's father was in need of someone to drive him around. "Someone they could trust," quoted this Facebook post in the private group I still haven't been kicked out of.

I went ahead and sent my resume to the office of this cousin, who happened to be a potbellied congressman himself. I was interviewed by a bullet catcher who had the guts to explain why his boss distrusts security agencies and that he himself had been picked out by the Cong after being interviewed in the same mahogany-walled room we were in. Weeks later, when I've been driving his boss in his sedan from his Katipunan residence to Congress, this bodyguard told me that I was hired on the strength of my "ripe" age (fifty-five), my experience as a forklift driver in Taiwan, and the fact that I later worked in the same place where his boss was fattening himself up now (not his words).

"Boss thinks he's safer to be driven around by men your age. He says he trusts your wisdom."

*Is that so*, I wanted to tell him as we stood outside the car while waiting for the boss to come out of the building's double-doors, looking as always like he needed to go to the bathroom. When he's in the car though he doesn't seem to think I'm a new-age guru, but merely someone who can take him to his usual strip-club or to a discreet entrance of some fancy five-star lodge. He had a way of telling me where to go while looking out his side of the window or at a folder or his phone, as if I am no one to be looked at, a mere force to take him to places. What I wanted in the first place. Step 1: be invisible.

Then step 2: circle around the prey. It was pure luck that neither the Boss nor his crony had any interest in that circus that was show business. His kind had their own circus to run anyway, which is to say the entire country. They had no interest in, though they surely must have seen, Peter Dela Cruz's

interviews on how he was forced by a man who was just slightly older than himself to kneel at gunpoint for a blowjob.

The man he referred to was my son. The police found him with a belt around the neck in his condo before they made the arrest. A few hours later, Peter was being interviewed by anchors from all the local channels. He had been holding an ice pack on his forehead, crying as he said, "I was forced by the man I love." It was good acting, I must admit. For a moment there I had almost believed in his devotion to the person I was left with after my wife was rammed into the arms of death before William came of age.

But William was my son. And I knew him. He would never do what this actor, this son of a political joke, was accusing him of. I am going to avenge him, and now the orbit is getting smaller. I am inching closer to the final step.

The boss rang me up earlier, before I made the mistake of opening the TV and finding myself watching the actor. "Drive for my son tomorrow evening," he said. I would have reminded him it was my day off until he said the line, "he'll be with his cousin, Peter. They'd be wasted again. I don't want any of them busting their heads off on some windshield. Not in my son's car."

Talk about luck. But, hold on, Oldboy. Is it worth the trouble? When the news broke about the assault, my son was not named, only a crude sketch of him circulated in the evening news and morning papers, and I've been given the freedom not to show my face on interviews. I was quoted though, and I will always stand up for that answer I gave to those stalking reporters: "My son is innocent. He would never do anything like that."

It would be worth it. My son killed himself. And I knew he would not have done that had he not been wrongly accused. He was just 25, for God's sake, and he looked way better than myself when I was his age. He had a future. He could attach himself to more boys or girls he could ever wish

for, had he been alive. He's been dead for a year now, but what kind of father forgets, anyway?

The lizard croaked. It moves, quickly, and now all I can hear is my breath, like a runner's preparing for a sprint without a finish line.

Today was the day. His name was Ben, the bullet-catcher, and as I revved up the engine, he cleared his throat and we both watched the steel gate move on its own accord. At the backseat Hector's face was lit up with whatever was on the screen of the phone he was tapping.

"Do you know where to go to, Tomas?" Hector asked and I smiled at him through the rearview mirror and told him that I did. In fact, I would have said, the path for today and tonight has been planned.

"I'm here, boss," Ben told the young man, "Kuya Tomas won't get lost."

I flashed a smile at Ben as well. As we drove out of the house I thought about this exchange and thought more about all that would happen.

Ben gave me directions to this stucco mansion, a neighbor from a few blocks, from where Peter emerged carrying nothing but himself in a white shirt and jogging pants and that confident gait. When he slipped into the backseat with the son of my boss I resisted the urge to start a conversation or join the lame one which the three were now having.

"Long night ahead, huh?" Ben asked.

"Yes, Ben." Peter said. I looked at him through the rearview mirror. He was looking outside as if in deep thought.

"So, what's the plan tonight?"

"Get drunk. Drug someone. Fuck someone. The usual, I guess."



“Come on, Pete. No need to pull off that drama queen act tonight,” Hector said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you could have said,” Hector’s voice then climbed a pitch that made me look back at him to make sure that he was alright, “Get drunk. Drug someone. Fuck someone. The usual!”

“Big difference.”

“It is!”

“It is,” Ben said.

“It’s not. Is it, new guy?”

It took me a while to realize the boy was asking me. When I did, I said, “Yes, Boss, it is.”

“Oh, shut up you three,” he said with a laugh that dismissed not only myself but the other two who appeared to have conspired to make him happy. He went back to looking at the window outside.

I stopped for a moment when we reached the gate of the village, and watched beyond the bulletproof windshield as the metal bar lifted to let us pass and drive across the highways and avenues that would take us to the club.

I was in Taiwan for a couple of years before the call came saying that my wife had died from a hit-and-run after shopping for groceries. I was working for a car parts factory forklifting boxes to and from its warehouse during the day. At night I slept in a tenement with six other guys working in the other squat buildings that lined one of the boulevards of Taichung. Most of these guys had wedding bands, which they sometimes removed on the weekends when they visited local steam baths or brothels. I had made the mistake of

joining a couple of them, thinking we were just out for a bottle of beer, when I suddenly found myself sweating in a room with wooden benches brimming with men, two of them my roommates, engaging in what looked like an orgy to end all orgies. It was not my thing, but since the two were my friends, I waited for them to finish so they could join me afterwards, for that booze I had been thirsting for after a week of labor.

My diploma had landed me a decent office job once out of this state college in Bulacan, but a decade later I had finally thought how lame it was to sit around typing god knows what for a god knows which employer in Manila, particularly if you think of all those jobs waiting outside the country that pay more for something that requires less time. I thought of becoming a welder, or one of those men wiping the windows of glass buildings, and finally settled on becoming a forklift operator after seeing the posting in an agency. My wife was not pleased that I had to leave the office or the country or her and our then eight-year-old son. She said that with my experience I could have the raise that I deserved. I brushed this idea off, the same way my past superior must have dismissed my subtle reminders on the number of years I had wasted gaining my beer gut in his office.

“You won’t regret it,” I had assured her, prior to boarding the plane to Taoyuan Airport.

She only smiled at me then. But when I returned six months later on a vacation, it was apparent that things had taken a turn for the better in the house. She had placed the boy in a private school, and still had enough savings, which we later used to pay off the mortgage, and even furnish a second floor for the house where the boy’s room would be.

When I came home days after the call came, I was just in time for the last day of the funeral, held at the living room of the house she herself designed, and chosen the paint and drapes for. She lay in the white coffin with the same hesitant smile she left me with at the airport.

I never returned to Taiwan after that. I raised the only child we had, the only child I had, with the help of a chain of nannies, while I labored back behind computers, after clinching a job in a local government bureau, where I would stay for decades.

We reached the club at five in the afternoon, after almost an hour of snaking through alleyways that Waize had so confidently pronounced as alternatives to jams we might have to encounter, before finally giving it up and making peace with the fact that we had to face the traffic of Manila for another hour. Hector had, at so many points during the trip, thought aloud that how he could just simply call for his father's security details to pave the way for us.

"I mean, why not?" the boy said.

"Because you're not the only one in a hurry," Peter quipped. "Look around you. A lot of them are trying to get to work, or simply get home. Hell, imagine if an ambulance really needs to find a way."

"It's a Saturday afternoon. I'm bored."

"You're going to a party."

"So are you."

"You're out of touch, aren't you?"

"You're a mom."

This kind of banter came up and died down periodically, but nothing really came of it, except for the weightless silence that followed, or their howling when one of them shared some online post on his phone. Beside me, Ben sat watching the view outside, no longer finding the need to be chummy after I had made clear days ago that I was simply not interested in small talk.

"That's fine, *Kuya*," he had said, "the one before you was a talker. It wasn't easy to keep up with him. That must be the reason why he was sacked."

The club sat between corporate towers in the region's financial capital. I pulled up at the U-shaped driveway and stopped in front of the bouncer by the door, let off the three; and, with no further instructions but to wait for them until it's time for them to go home, drove onto a curb of the place that led to its underground parking.

I was not what you'd call the ideal father, but I did what I could and I guess it was a feat to have survived without killing the child. I approached the whole thing the way someone confronts his first bottle of beer. I remember scrambling in the kitchen, forgetting schedules, doing sixth-grade algebra, all the while thinking of how to pin down a job. After a month of chaos in the household, which was the monster left after all the drama of having to lose my wife, I hired an old lady to look after my son on the days when I had to go to work. Although I still made sure to go to his room and tuck him in at night, as a precaution, just in case he would think of blaming me, in the future, for being such an absent figure in his life.

In all fairness to this family of two, neither of us emerged from those years with any deep-seated anger worthy of psychoanalysis. The house wasn't huge enough for us to be invisible to each other, but also not small enough not to provide the necessary distance. William entered his adolescence with very minimal doting on my part, owing mostly to the fact that I was slaving my life away, doing editorial work for a public office, and that it was not really my nature to interrogate conflicts upfront.

The office I was in was responsible for the programs the State has for the fisherfolk, and most of my job was comprised of looking over the publications and communications sent by the office to other sectors. Some days I just felt dreadful being in front of a computer once again. When the urge to pen a resignation letter came and went, I'd sit at my desk and my sight

would wander to the bobbing heads of my colleagues, although all I would see was the life I had in Taichung.

I'd remember that one Saturday evening, when I walked with my roommates through the doors of the steam bath. While both were occupied by other men on the wooden benches, another man my age who looked like a fellow Filipino sat beside me, smiled, and placed a hand on the part of my towel under which my crotch was sweating. I remember feeling like I was struck by lightning, jumping on my seat and standing up, saying "Sorry" with an awkward smile before making my way out among the moving naked bodies. I decided to wait at the empty lounge where a TV was on showing a Mandarin soap opera. I sat on one of the leather chairs with my shirt on and a towel around my waist, drinking from a can of beer.

"Hey, man," a voice from the entrance of the lounge called out. Before I even looked at him, I had a hunch that he might be the person who had groped me through the towel. He held a bottle of sparkling water while walking to where I sat. "Sorry for that," he said, nodding to where he had felt me up.

"Nah, it's alright."

"You're not supposed to be here," he said as he settled himself at the other end of the couch, adjusting the towel around his waist and wiping moisture off his bare chest.

"What do you mean?"

"It's obvious that you're not comfortable back there. You look like you walked into some horror film."

I relaxed and told him about my friends who didn't say anything about where we were going. "Maybe they thought I was into this." I said.

"Yeah." He took a swig from his bottle then asked me, "You work here?"

“Forklift.” Then I said the name of the company.

“I work in a glass factory, just a minute’s walk from your building.”

“Why are you here, then?” I asked. “It’s damn hot where you work.”

“Trust me, the irony is not lost in this one. But you know what’s even funnier?” A manic look crept to his eyes.

“What?”

“I’m working in a hellhole after finishing my MA.”

“Jeez.” I didn’t ask him for his reason, mainly because I had an idea how useless an MA was, after being friends with some academics. “Let me guess, you got a Benz back home.”

He laughed. “I’m not here to fatten my wallet, my man.”

“Some other person’s wallet then?”

“Uh-uh. I’m here because we have not much choice back home.”

“I get you.”

“At least we get to have the same shit choices here, with different faces.”

“And more money.”

“Well, you take what you can and you make do with it, I guess.”

We talked some more after that, but didn’t get to the point of knowing each other’s name.

His words remained with me long after settling back into my office chair in Quezon City. The people I worked with in the bureau all had the look of someone who had so much hope, but had given up, under the weight of the gray-walled and stale-aired office. I think I developed the same look, something which I took some time to reconcile myself to. But later, after realizing how much of it really paid the bills and the food and the school, I

eventually lost the energy to mourn. As my hairline receded, William grew up to be a healthy and intelligent young man who managed to grab a scholarship from a private college, after graduating with honors from high school.

He was seldom hostile to me. If anything, he was a sweet and sentimental boy who had always kept the things given to him by people he loved, especially his mother. He also never allowed me to dump or donate her clothes, her bottles of perfume, the mirrors she had held. When he was in high school, I found a box in his room where he kept letters he wrote for some classmates, some key chains and photographs and even the tickets for the few Pixar films we had watched together when I had a weekend to spare. In college he took up a degree in Business Administration—something I brag to the few friends I have, because he didn't make the same mistake I did of aiming for a course in the Humanities, which was virtually useless to his generation's lust for speed—all the while widening the distance between us. At first, I was bothered that he'd only open the door by a fraction just enough to show his face and tell me, "I'm good, thanks," or "Go away," when I felt the need to check on him.

"Alright, buddy," I'd usually say, trying to be cool even though I was summoning all the forces I knew to keep myself from shoving the door open and putting out his cigarette, the smoke from which had seeped beyond his room. Sometimes I was worried he was going through something. Growing up is a risky business. Sooner or later a person knows that. I had just wanted to make sure that he knew I was there whenever he looked at the dinner table as if there was a gulf in it, the depths of which his gaze could not fathom, chewing on his food like some sedative junkie. Although most of the time he was a pleasant teenager grumbling about a zit or just giving out the news that he somehow passed some well-hated professor's exam. One time he gave me this rectangular plastic tag. Printed on its black surface was the word "Cancer." It had a twine tied to its either ends.

“What is this? I thought you love me,” I had said while inspecting the thing by the light of the TV in the living room, where I was watching the evening news before he had come down from his room and told me he had something for me.

“That’s an anklet with your zodiac sign in it. Do you think you’ll buy it if you see one?” he asked. He sat beside me on the couch and sought my face for any sign of sincerity.

“Well, this looks nice,” I said.

“Dad,” he said and rolled his eyes, a habit which took me some time to get used to, when he picked it up sometime in high school. That night I looked at him and noticed how even when slouching he was taller than myself. He had sported then a haircut that every teenager who thought they were a rebel had—a long top and shaved sides. At certain angles, he might look like a delinquent. Despite his black shirts or the henna tattoo on his neck, his voice was just too soft and he moved with the same grace as his mother’s. His face, which he sometimes had tried to contort into a perpetual frown, bore more of the features of his mother’s than mine. You wouldn’t take him seriously if he said he was very angry.

“I’d buy it, sure,” I said and thought about it. “Because you’re my son and I think I have the obligation to do so.”

“Uhm. Thanks?”

“I don’t know. I guess I just don’t like walking around with “Cancer” on my foot.”

“It looked cute with ‘Sagittarius’ or ‘Aquarius’ in it.”

“I can’t change my birthdate for you. Listen, why not print the signs on it instead. Zodiac signs are signs for a reason, don’t you think?”

He smiled and told me the idea was brilliant, and that he’d pitch it to the other members of his group. “We’ll be setting up a booth in school



for a project, a small business. We think we might feed on their craze for astrology.”

I wished him good luck before he ran back up to his room.

A week after that he took back the anklet and gave me the revised version of the tag with the rune of the water sign on it. For a couple of weeks, I made it a point to show him how I was tying it around an ankle before heading for work. On the third week when his mind wandered to other things I stashed the anklet in my bedside drawer, never to be retrieved again under the empty pill bottles, glassless frames, receipts and whatnot, until after the day I went to the morgue to ID him, a few years after graduating.

Before he finished college, I finally learned what caused those episodes when I feared I might have to ask doctors for Xanax prescriptions. He was in fourth year when he told me to come to the living room for a serious talk.

“I like someone,” he said, looking at his feet, his fingers entwined.

“And?”

“And I don’t think that the person I like is someone you’d expect me to like.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “In my defense, this is the first time you actually talked to me about this.”

“That’s not what I mean...I like a boy.”

“And?”

“I said I like a boy.”

“Like, a child or something?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Come on,” I said with a laugh. “Do you think I didn’t know that all this time?”

The way he stared at me that night confirmed his unfounded belief that he was good at hiding what he was. It seemed like he didn't know whether to cry out of gratitude or to take it all back and storm off to the room he'd been holing himself in.

"Look," I said, placing a hand on one of his shoulders, "no need to get worked up about this. It's not like I haven't been in your room when you were in high school and haven't read all those letters you wrote for those boys."

He shrugged my hand off with an embarrassed smile and took some time to process what just happened. Later, as he was handing to me the dirty dishes at the sink, he told me, "I don't know if I should be telling you this, but I'd like to because I haven't got many friends at school."

"Tell me what?"

He told me he really liked the boy.

"You could tell me more about him, if you like."

"He's a Comm Arts sophomore, member of the Theater Guild. I first saw him in one of their productions. He was Hamlet. You were born on the same month as him."

He went on about how he wanted to be friends with that boy. That he'd like to send him one of those anklets his group had sold. "Do you think it'll be a good idea?"

"No harm on it, I guess."

In truth I could hardly care for this boy business of his, although I was happy he somehow felt better after spelling out that thing he thought he needed to confess. In my mind I was formulating some speech about how nothing would change between us, how I was thankful that he thought of talking to me about this, all that icky stuff. When it was time to hit the sack, I knocked on the door which he unsurprisingly opened again the slightest

bit, and said, “Hey, son, I just want to tell you, you know, after what you said earlier, that you should always be careful.”

He thanked me and smiled a smile which he would again flash, for the final time, when he finally left the nest. This was after the boom of his first business in another city, where he had lived in a condo of his own. At twenty-four, he was one of the owners of this chain of shops that sold fashion accessories, including of course the anklets from his school stall days. He was once featured in this morning show where he touted some of the new designs their company had come up with.

“I’m proud of you,” I told him once I got the luck of my call being picked up, despite what he claimed was a busy schedule.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“How are you doing?”

“Same same. I have a meeting in a bit.”

“Will you visit your old man this month?”

“I’ll check on it, Dad. Maybe for a while only. I have to fly to Hong Kong two weeks from now for an expo.”

“Oh,” I just said.

The conversations we had then, both on the phone and when he came back to visit, was like a dying animal I kept attempting to resuscitate. He no longer felt the necessity to open up about his personal life, which was understandable. But he also made it a point to limit his responses to the bare essentials. He’d appear at my front door, or the telephone would ring. And we barely had the opportunity to tell each other how good or bad the week had been, I only knew that he was “Doing good,” or “Okay,” or he’d say “I miss home,” with a look that permeated whatever wall he happened to be standing in front of. Sometimes he talked about some fight with a boyfriend or how

unbearable his office had become. But when pressed for details he'd wave my question off and begin complimenting me about the way I kept the house in one piece. When I told him of my intent to retire at fifty-three, he said, "That's not gonna be a problem, Dad."

"It pays to have a rich son," I said.

He took a bow when I said that. In truth I would have survived without the cash he left at my table and later sent via bank transfer. The pension was enough for a single old man's three-meals-a-day routine, but with what he gave I enrolled myself in this gym where I befriended other guys who liked to hide their bad bones in a beefcake's frame. William had complimented my physique as well.

"You're looking good, Dad," he once said on a rare visit. "When will I meet my stepmom?"

There was no one, of course. To tell the truth, all the interest had been buried along with his mother, and what drove me then was just the desire to move around. "You know," I told William, "just to feel alive while I still am."

"Isn't the bed business a part of that?"

"It is. But it isn't everything."

"Wise words. As for me, I love fucking now."

He was drunk that night, so I let it pass. I would have given him a lecture about driving to my house in that state, though I knew it would be flushed with water the next day, along his hangover. He looked buffed up as well, and to someone who hadn't raised him, William looked like he got everything sorted out in his life, fair complexion and all, but something in his eyes betrayed a hint of loneliness.

"Are you all right?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

I sighed. “Just be careful, son.” I hated to admit it then to myself that when I said those words I was thinking about my friends in the steam bath. I was afraid William was getting himself in situations that involved all those needless risks.

“I’m a mess. I hurt him,” he said, lying on his back on the sofa, barely keeping his eyes open.

“Who?” I asked.

He murmured something, a name perhaps, and then fell asleep on the couch. I watched him for a while in the living room, a tear streaking from his restless eyelids, before going to my own room, not knowing that the next day he’d slip out the house while I was still asleep, and that that night would be the last time that I’d see him alive.

It was half past one when Ben rang me up telling me that the boys were about to exit the club. When I drove the car back to the entrance, I saw Hector leaning on Ben, while Peter stood with a hand on his hip like it was a regular weeknight waiting for some shoot to wrap up.

*Arrogant fucker* I had thought as I pulled up in front of them.

Ben had to settle Hector, who had turned into a moaning dead weight, on the seat. Meanwhile Peter sat behind me as if he had not emerged from the same doors his cousin had gone through, although there was on his cheeks that unmistakable Asian flush.

I tested the waters. Before stepping on the gas, I asked, “How was the night, Sir?”

“So-so. This guy beside me is a wreck though.”

I smiled at the rearview mirror but he didn't see it as he was focused on his phone.

"I guess we should drop-off Sir Hector first," Ben suggested.

I agreed and we drove onto the nearly empty highways that had in the daytime been the life and nightmare of folks who had no better choices. Throughout the drive Hector had gone full-blown maoy, slurring and yelling about some "bitch" who had turned him down at the club in spite of his consistent eye contact, the Eight & Bob he had on, or even his downright refusal to back off when she said "Not interested, creep."

"Who does she think she is?" Hector said.

The three of us remained silent, listening, not because we chose to.

He answered himself: "She's just a whore who opens her legs for old men who drool over print ads. For cheap rum! Yeah, that's what she is."

"Maybe she isn't," interjected Peter.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure of it, cousin."

"Oh yeah?"

"I could buy her."

"No one's buying no one."

"No! I'll buy her. Just like I bought these two jugheads." At that Hector slammed a hand on mine and Ben's shoulder. I peaked at the rearview mirror just in time to see him slump back on his seat, staring at the headrest behind Ben, saying, "I could buy everyone."

"What is it with you and buying people?" Peter asked.

"What is it with you and sucking the fun out of everything?"

"Well, I'm just saying—"

“Not interested, Sister Marx. I know I get drunk and I buy people off. But, you...you get drunk and you become Greta Thunberg suddenly. Can't you just be happy for a night? I haven't seen you laugh in ages, not behind the camera, I mean. You're becoming boring. And...and...”

And then there was the silence, followed later by snores. Ben looked at me with a shrug that says, “Welcome to the club.”

We reached the front gates of my Boss, where a couple of guards went out upon Ben's phone call to get Hector from the backseat.

“Aren't you going too, Ben?” I asked

“I'll go where this car goes,” he answered with a smile that either meant he was suspecting something was about to go wrong or just that he had the best interest for our boss's car.

“I can walk from here,” Peter volunteered.

“We'll take you home, Boss, don't worry.” Ben said. I gritted my teeth while waiting for the two guards to retrieve Hector out of the backseat. At one point, he woke up, screamed and socked one of the middle-aged security details in the eye. This guard yelped but just shook his head and went on placing an arm of his boss on his shoulder, while his partner took the other, and then in a while they were dragging and walking him through the open gate, where one of the house help was waiting for whatever demand the young master had.

We drove on to Peter's house. The original plan was to drive out the village as soon as we dropped Hector off, but I hadn't taken seriously the prospect that Ben might want to come. I had to think first then, and so we drove on passing by stone markers where the names of vague saints were painted, blue against white, names used as well for the addresses of those high walled high-gated and automated houses of these people who had no qualms about buying people. Peter lived in a street named Saint Lazarus and

when we turned to the chicane that lead to its rows of mansions I felt like a time bomb about to burst after having reached no decision. We passed by the house where Peter was supposed to be let off. I drove on as if we hadn't.

"Hey, new guy," Peter said from the backseat, "we just passed the house."

"Yes, Kuya Tomas. That was Peter's house." Ben pointed out to the way beyond his side of window.

"I know," I said. I was praying that none of those lampposts had CCTVs, never mind that all these houses had their own on each of their gates. I inspected the tint of the car. Dark enough. All right, then.

"Sorry, Ben," I said before drawing the 9mm from under my seat and firing it at his head without giving him a chance to draw the one in his holster. The report, muted by suppressor, rang briefly in the car like a loud clap. Ben's head banged on the window after his body lolled to the side, limp, eyes opened, bullet hole on his temple. Peter screamed from the backseat. I heard him trying the door, unsuccessfully. Thank God for child locks.

"Give me your phone." I trained the barrel of my gun at him, "and sit on the right side."

"What are you doing?" he said. He was trembling, the sheen on his pretty-boy face had turned into the unmistakable pallor of fear.

"I said give me your phone." My voice had dropped an octave lower. "I'll dump all the live rounds on you."

With a shaking hand he handed it over and settled himself on the side where I could see him better. I pulled up at a gap in the line of lampposts, and told Peter, "Show me your hands."

He spread his white, empty palms as if frozen in mid-wave. When I grabbed one of his hands he retracted it the way someone who mistook a hot



pot for a cold one drops everything. I fired the gun, somewhere just below his ear. Told him this was not a joke. He allowed me to grab both his hands, which I then secured with the handcuffs I had in my back pocket, after which I showed him the key.

“See this?” I held it up, a tiny silhouette in the dark car. I lowered my window just enough to throw the key out on the pavement.

Then I drove out of the village, back to the empty avenues and on to the expressway where no one would hear his screams, as I assured him that he would be iced tonight.

It wasn't supposed to be easy, but when you've got connections, the world paves the way for getting rid of the people you need to get rid of. The gun and how to use it was the least tricky part. All I had to do was enroll myself in a shooting range, recommended by the online group I was still a member of, and just know which people inside to nudge for a walkthrough on how to get myself a semi-automatic and a registration that wouldn't arouse suspicion.

Where to do it presented a host of questions though. My rule was for the kill to be slow, agonizing, because I know my son must have suffered before meeting the end he forced on himself. Peter Dela Cruz deserved, not the mercy of a smoking gun, but something akin to Father Time's pendulum. That was when I thought of bringing him to my house, not in Manila, but the one where I grew up as a child, in Bulacan.

“Where are you taking me?” Peter asked.

We had just passed the toll gates, and now we were cruising down NLEX. It was 2:00 a.m. I drove without hurrying, letting container trucks and other private cars overtake my Boss's bulletproof sedan. I had wiped the blood off the shotgun seat window earlier and arranged Ben's bulk, so that

I could throw a large jacket over him and make him look like baggage. Do I have to be worried that the plate number has only the number 8 on it, or that somebody might be tracking this car, or that this cowering kid at the back was in fact being missed by anyone at all at this hour? I no longer cared. If, by the end of this night this kid would be dead, it wouldn't matter if I rotted in jail or be at the non-existent mercy of hired guns. My life's work would be done anyway.

“What do you want, Manong?” Peter asked, yet again.

“I want you to shut up,” I said.

“My dad could pay you, no matter how much you need.”

“You're just like your cousin.”

“But I don't know what's happening and why you're doing this. Please let me go!”

“Let me tell you why: you killed my son. That's why.”

He was silent. He needed time to think his answer through, I knew, and I knew he might not remember or even link names and events. He finally said, “I don't understand. I never killed anyone. Maybe my father did, but I'm not part of that. Manong, please let me go.”

“Really? Then am I wrong to think that you know a guy named William?”

He didn't say anything at all after that. Through the mirror I saw in his face that his brain was finally making the connections, remembering days, speculating on my motives and identity. At one point he looked like he believed I was just a deranged old man who wanted to milk his father, but as we moved closer to the place where I had dug a hole on the earth just deep enough to bury him alive, it seemed like he had finally solved the puzzle of his being handcuffed inside the car of his own cousin. We had just passed a

fast-food place and service station, where I had thought about stopping for a piss, but had thought better of it. With all those lights and people and, potentially, cops, it would be impossible to stop my cargo from screaming his lungs off for help unless I were to shoot him then and there. No, this was my lucky night, not his. We drove on, past the exit to San Fernando.

“Do you know me now?” I asked him.

“I...I think so. But I’m not sure.”

“Try me.”

In a voice barely above a whisper: “You’re Willie’s father.”

Willie. So that’s what he called my son. “You just won the prize, fuckface.”

He stared at me through the mirror and at first, I thought he would ask some dumb question or say he was sorry, but he just sat there staring, lips parted.

“Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Dela Cruz,” I said. “I’ve been waiting for this night for a long time.”

“Why?”

“A life for a life.”

“But I didn’t kill Willie.”

“Oh. Did I hear it right? You didn’t kill my son?”

“I didn’t, Manong.”

“But do you know he’s dead?”

“I know—”

“And do you know how?”

“He did it to himself.”

I thought about his answer. “For someone who touts political correctness, you could surely learn a thing about empathy.”

“Look, Manong,” Peter’s voice trembled, “I am sure you love your son. But you don’t know anything about him, not the way I thought I knew him all those years.”

“What are you saying now?” I tightened my grip on the gun. Perhaps the best thing action films had taught me was that I could knock a person unconscious with a 9mm, and if done right I might have the chance to drive in silence throughout the trip to my birthplace. But when I briefly turned to Peter, I realized that, for the past minutes, he had been crying.

“We were together for a couple of years,” Peter said, when I told him to talk. He said that he had known William since college, but had not really been friends with him until after he finished his college degree and was taking on whatever project was at hand to build his modeling credentials. It just so happened that Laces Fair, the company my son co-owned, needed someone to promote the new line of watch designs for men they had released. Peter agreed, not because of the fee (which wasn’t much to begin with), but because he trusted the owners, some of whom happened to be his friends. And because of this mutual friendship, they became better acquainted.

He said my son was a smooth talker, and that it was not difficult to fall for his charms. Hearing that brought to me a flutter of pride. So, my son’s life had not turned out to be as boring as mine had been. Apparently, he was one who sought fun in all forms. When they finally realized their hook-ups were getting more and more frequent, and had begun to involve serious conversations after the sex, they agreed to make the thing between them official, exclusive, permanent.

Or so Peter had thought. For the first few months that they lived together, and like every new couple, that early phase of the relationship had turned out to be happy.

“I’m not really sure what happened, or what started it all,” Peter continued, “but one day he came to my condo, drunk. Willie pushed me to the bed. Normally I would find that sexy. You know, when things get intense and you let the other tug at your hair, squeeze your neck or sometimes leave a bite mark. But that night was strange. It was one of those nights that I had come home after a shoot, and was waiting for Willie, who had remained in his office for some meeting. He opened the door, not bothering to knock or call my name, and with the look of hot rage in his eyes, collared me, screaming, ‘Did you have fun with that motherfucker?’

“I asked him what he meant, who were we talking about.

“‘Slut!’ he screamed at my face. ‘Can’t even remember. Saw you talking to that model, saw how you looked at him, how you responded when he touched you.’

“When he pushed me to the bed, I thought for a while it was role-play. He got on top of me. Both of us were wearing the casuals we had on at work. And then he slapped me. He was a huge man, you must know. The room spun. I lay there under him, hurt and scared, but more importantly, confused, because I didn’t know where this was all coming from.

“‘You don’t know?’ he said, ‘look at this.’ He took his phone from his back pocket, searched something in it, then showed me a video. It was me talking to this Latino football player who also happened to be a brand ambassador of an underwear line, which I also had some projects for. In fact, we were both in the shoot at that time, and the video Willie was showing me was of us talking—I admit—flirting a bit in a dressing room that I thought was private. We were in our bathrobes with nothing underneath but the

underwear we were to model. It was an over ten-second clip of us talking and then later feeling up each other's pecs. It didn't show what happened after that, which was literally nothing. We were called back for the stills. But apparently someone had uploaded this video on Twitter, and had added a hashtag and the post made it to local trending. So Willie's radar had found it. I told him it meant nothing.

"Damn right it meant nothing,' he screamed and slapped me once more before disengaging and storming out of the room. He came back crying, almost an hour later, apologizing, saying that he understood my work, and that he shouldn't have hurt me. Had he been another guy I wouldn't have forgiven him. Damn, I would even have jumped into the arms of that Latino jock for all I care. I can't explain it, but I couldn't carry my fear and anger around like a badge to justify leaving him.

"I know it may sound dubious to you, Manong, and I won't blame you for thinking otherwise, but I loved your son. I still do. Even after the many other times he pinned me down on the floor to slap me, to squeeze my throat, punch me in my stomach. Sometimes he had no reason at all, and I can't forget the times his eyes would glint when he saw me hurt, gasping for breath, dripping blood on my carpet from a nick on my bottom lip, where his fist had connected. I could never tell him to stop seeing me. I never told him that I'd like to end it all, because I never wanted to end what we had.

"But I guess the tipping point was the night that he brought the gun to my room. You see, I am not good around guns. I always tell my father's bodyguards to keep their guns where I can't see them when they are around me. I get queasy when I see one. Like I am about to faint, or that I'm going to die. They have a name for this condition—hoplophobia. I tried seeing a shrink about this, because it would also be nice to be in action movies. But it was a waste of time, and none of those sessions ever stopped me from freezing up when Willie drew the gun from his pants on the night of the incident. He

began shooting at things in my room. My bed, drawers, tables, even the wall, which fortunately was made with thick concrete. Then he aimed the gun on my head and told me to unzip his fly.

“Make me happy,’ he said, waiting as I knelt in front of him, almost unable to move because of the cold solid barrel against my temple. I did what he forced me to do. But after that, he beat me up, again and again. I think I felt the gun on my head at some point before I finally blacked out. The rest...I guess you know the story, Manong. I woke up in the hospital after a neighbor saw my open door and the broken things inside, and my body on the floor. When I came to I filed a complaint with the police, who were quick to respond. Out of rage and fear and confusion, I had them arrest Willie. They wasted no time producing the warrant, but it was no use. You know what he did.

“Later, I regretted that, Manong. I realized I still loved him. Those tears you saw on the TV, they weren’t because I broke my nose or because I had compromised my future projects, but because of the guilt of knowing that I could have done something, anything at all so that none of it would have happened. But it all happened, Manong. I’m so sorry... I’m really sorry..”

His crying was convincing. The snot, which he wiped with his bound hands, a nice touch. “Nice monologue,” I said. “We called that ‘declamation’ when I was in school.”

I followed the turn to Bocaue exit. I was gripping the wheel hard. It was as if it was a living being and stood no chance of seeing the light of day. The nerve of this kid to think that his theatrics would get him off the hook. “I have to give it to you, though,” I told him, “you know how to act.”

“I’m telling the truth, Manong. I don’t know what else to say.” He wiped his face.

“We don’t need your ‘drama queen’ act, kid,” I said.

He looked out the window, as if drained of words, resigned to his fate. To my credit, I had managed to suppress my own emotions so far. We were passing quiet houses, closed shops and warehouses, expanses of grassland, small bright billboards advertising cock feed. I bet if I opened the window there’d be the smell of dried grass, the clean cold night air, and just the faintest suggestion of a pigsty in the vicinity. Home.

“Do you know where I’m taking you?”

He shook his head, meeting my eyes in the rear-view mirror.

“I’m taking you to my house when I was kid.”

“W-why?”

“We have a huge backyard. I dug a hole in it, and it’s waiting for you.”

He shuddered. He looked pale and his lips were cracked. “I’m so sorry, Manong,” he said, hoarsely.

I drove in silence until we finally reached an unpaved one-way road which ended in a compound of concrete houses, built far from each other, at the center of which was a sort of plaza with a basketball ring that had no net. “I used to play here,” I told Peter as the vehicle crunched on the gravel path. I slowly inched the car toward this lot with a squat, unpainted concrete house inside. It was bordered by layers of hollow blocks without finish.

“Don’t try to do anything funny,” I said, before getting myself out of the car to open the gate.

Once I had parked the car inside that space in front of the house where there used to be a mango tree, I opened the door and poked the kid’s chin with the tip of the gun’s silencer, and said, “Try to squeak, and you’ll make your way to hell quicker than we both imagined. No one will hear you anyway.”



As we made our way to the door, he looked around the silent neighbors, mostly old people snoozing with their lights off, perhaps waiting for children who most likely had settled in the city or had flown to some other country, taking a chance, and liking what they found there. Once inside the door, I switched the light on in the living room, which was basically just a couple of long rattan chairs in front of a table made of rotting bamboo.

I pushed him to one of the long chairs. "I really hadn't been here since the day I took my son for a visit to my birthplace, until three days ago, when I came to dig your grave."

I sat on the other chair and let out a sigh. "And now you're here."

He sat there, some few feet beside me, looking scared and exhausted. "Please let me go."

"Uh-uh," I said. "Let me tell you a story. My *tatay* was that sort who never came home sober, who left us just before I could brag about the medal I won when I was grade six. My *nanay* did the laundry, sold *kakanin*, and was one of the women who made firecrackers for this store in the main road. She inherited this house from her own parents but instead of selling it, to give me some sort of future she worked herself ragged, so I could make a way out of the muck we were in. A few months before I graduated from the local college, she burned with the two other women who ran the fireworks store. My son was eight when I brought him here, just a few months after his own mother was buried. In this room I talked to him. I promised him that he wouldn't be alone. That I wouldn't fail him."

I stood then and faced my son's friend. "Stand up, you son of a bitch."

He stood up, gingerly, trembling. I pushed him back to the chair with a swoop of my fist. I told him to stand up. When he didn't, and just remained sobbing on the seat, crying for me to stop, I didn't wait any longer

and brought on him all my rage to my jabs, and to my kicks when he fell to the floor. I almost didn't stop. Until he stopped howling or attempting to cover his face or curl up so that my kicks would land on his shins instead of his stomach. He had lost consciousness.

He lay there, face bleeding, some teeth knocked out, white shirt and jogging pants now splattered with what looked like an abstract painting, red and dirt brown. I dragged his entire bulk by his hair toward the door to the backyard.

I was satisfied. I had thought of flaying him alive, or dousing him in gasoline before throwing a lighted match at him. But this was more satisfying. All the physical work, my muscles focused on one goal, inflicting pain on another being, my blood rushing. I could feel my heart pounding with joy, with gratitude.

The backyard was a large space where there used to be coops for the chickens my mother kept in better days. Dogs and cats and ducks used to run around here too. Now it was empty. In the middle of it was the square, six-foot hole. Beside it were the shovel and the pile of rocks and soil to bury the body with.

I dragged Peter toward the hole. There was only the moonlight to guide me. But it was enough. I could see he was still breathing, and when I threw him in the hole, I could see his upper body move to take in a breath even if he had gone in head first.

I had begun shoveling when I noticed that one of his feet was sticking out of the hole, the Reebok logo almost indiscernible on the shoe because of the dirt. When I picked up the shoe to shove the limb to its proper place, that's when I noticed this object tied around Peter's ankle. Something that I missed, almost too late, after all that I've done.

I took it off him and inspected it under the moonlight. It was a tag with strings on both its ends. A word was printed, in that cursive writing I'll never forget, on its surface: "Cancer."

I stopped shoveling, pulled Peter's body out of the hole, and, after I made sure that he was still breathing, sat on the ground to catch my breath.

The highway had a certain aura at night, a spell, lulling drivers to a blackout that would start a *karambola*, nick barriers, tip over container vans, jackknife a car with an entire family in it on their way to Manila. I like to imagine myself in a collision. Age does that to some people. To others, all it takes was a chain of bad decisions.

Once out on NLEX I kept alert for certain unsuspecting spots, a roadside hemmed in by trees that in the dark loses its name. It wasn't hard to find one. I pulled up beside this emergency telephone stall, way past the Bocaue exit, dragged Peter's barely breathing body out from the backseat, onto grass and rocks, and settled him behind a tree. I leaned him on the trunk where he might be eaten by ants and maggots if he stayed unconscious forever or if no one were to notice his figure at daylight. His eyes were shut, both swollen. He must have been dreaming some dream that made him mutter, with drool trailing from his bleeding mouth, "Help...help."

"It's your lucky day, motherfucker," I said, the way Clint Eastwood or FPJ might drop those words, before running back to the car.

I kept Ben's corpse beside me as I drove on, humming, tapping the wheel with a rhythm that matched no song I ever heard before. My brain might have turned into mush. All I wanted to do was go home, fill my mouth with water, warm up the tip of the Smith and Wesson under my chin. Do a Hemingway. At the same time, I wanted to eat.

At a stopover I went into a Wendy's and ordered a whopper with fries, ignoring the suspicious looks the girl behind the register was throwing at my stained polo barong. I sat down by a glass wall looking at the black sedan, assessing the weight of the whole mumbo jumbo I brought on myself, confronting as well the anklet's presence which I had placed in front of me on the table, in place of someone to talk to.

After licking the paper off any trace of ketchup, I stepped out of the fast-food joint and checked my watch. Half past five. Without looking back at my boss's car, I hailed a cab and gave the driver my address.

They came two hours after daybreak.

I had stumbled onto my couch and must have slept, forgetting to shoot myself after the cab ride. I woke up to a loud banging on my gate, and then, before I could walk to the window to check who was bringing down the metal work, there was gunfire, then a loud crash. A few seconds later the front door was kicked open and in came these two hulking men in identical black shirts and pants and gloves, with a bonnet on their face, both holding AK-47s aimed at who else but me.

They didn't fire at me. But when I turned my back to run, I felt the sole of a boot make contact with my ass, and in a few seconds, I was down on my own hardwood floor, being stepped on by a man a million times more massive than me.

Then the blows came. The kicks. The end of their machine guns prodding on my ribs and skull.

I didn't know how long it took for them to be satisfied. But after a while they stopped. And I was there, lying, on my back, a leg twisted in the wrong direction, a bone sticking out where my elbow should have been. The two men proceeded to demolish my living room, throwing cushions off the

couch, taking down photographs from the shelf where the TV was. One of them thought of looking in my trouser pockets, where he finally found what they were looking for.

The anklet, with “Cancer” printed on it. The hulk who found it took it and slipped the thing to his own pants. I would have screamed at him, but I couldn’t feel my mouth anymore.

They proceeded shooting at things in my living room: the TV, the glass center table, even the plates in the kitchen. Smoke and shards and papers were all over.

The morning light around me flickered. I was at the edge of consciousness when one of them tossed this card at my chest. Then they left, closing the door behind them. I took the card with my good hand. Dirty white even made dirtier by my own blood. One of its sides was blank, while on the other there was written in an almost unreadable script:

A life for a life, you said. You shouldn’t have doubted me, Manong.  
– P

How long had it been? Days? Weeks? Months or years? There was no way of telling. When one wakes up to a strange room time seems suspended. I was on a bed, hooked up to an IV bag, a monitor beeping beside me and my entire body seemed encased in a cast.

The room had high walls painted yellow, a color I would never choose for my house. It had a window with translucent drapes, some material my wife would have chosen. One of the windows was adjacent to my bed. It showed a treetop. A bird was chirping. The sky was blue.

The door opened and a nurse came in, wheeling in a cart with a tray on it, which she pushed beside me.

“You’re beautiful,” I said. Strangely, the curves of her waist in her white uniform, her red lipstick, and the whiff of ylang ylang when she leaned to check on the monitor had aroused me.

“Thank you,” she said. She started wiping my face with a sponge from the metal bowl on the cart, carefully, though I still hissed with pain.

After wetting my lips with drops of water with a towel (“You can’t drink yet, honey,” she had said when I croaked that I was thirsty), she took a phone from the tray, dialed a number, and told whoever picked up her call, “He’s up, Sir.”

Few minutes later my Boss, the sumo-wrestler Congressman himself, came in, dressed in his suit and tie. He dismissed the nurse before shutting the door. Then he looked at me from the foot of the bed, and smiled, like a proud father.

“You surprised me,” he said.

“Are you going to kill me now?”

“I should. You took Ben down. He was good, you know.”

“Where am I?”

“Somewhere. Look, you may not understand, but I’m telling you anyway because I want you to think about it.” He paced around as he talked, defying certain laws of gravity with his comfortable gait. “You didn’t choose this job. We chose you. Ever wondered why it was too easy for you to come in? I know your background, Tomas. I’ve been keeping my eyes on you since that ruckus with my nephew.”

Outside a bird chirped some more from the tree branch before taking off.

“Been tracking your steps since then. We need your rage. You see, this is all a funhouse. I have little games I play with my nemeses. My cousin

owes me something, and I guess I had to nudge him a bit. Ben was supposed to be taking care of the whole thing that night, but you killed him. You may not have killed Peter, but you gave him a good rounding up. I decided that instead of getting rid of you, why don't I give you the chance to go on with all this? It's easy to hire people but it's difficult to find someone as sly and as deranged as you are."

"What's in it for me?"

"Another house. Money. I know you don't need those," he said, "but you'll have them anyway. Along with the chance for an adrenaline ride, the chance to feel alive, really alive. To even avenge your son's death with all the ammos you need, once you change your mind about Peter."

For some reason as I lay there with the tubes and bandages, with the Boss dangling some kind of offer, clearly a bait, I remembered the man I met in the steam bath who had groped me and told me the useless things he did that led him to the glass factory.

I smiled at my Boss.

We make do with what we have, I guess.





# DONALD AND THE KILL



A month after the 24-hour disappearance of Southeast Pacific's Flight Seventeen, one of its survivors was very much alive and he was giving Donald Garcia a hard time to land the shuttle on his opponent's side of court. The survivor and opponent was Leonardo Ortiz, who, at fifty-three, still managed to elicit stolen glances from the ladies flocking the courtside benches of San Antonio Sports Complex after a Sunday Zumba session. Don had just returned a serve with a simple backhand. But Leo, all muscles and reflex, deflected it with a net kill and the shuttle whipped past, inches from Don's cheek. He only had time enough to realize he lost yet again while the middle-aged women in tights and yoga shirts sighed. He had long believed that the occasional rally with his friend was just an act of charity on Leo's part.

Don liked these Sundays nevertheless. On the court beside them were the other pals, Jimmy and Paco, in the middle of a rather friendly set. Of the four of them, Don thought as his friend served, Leo had seemed to have it all. Leo, the only bachelor, the owner of a chain of gyms across QC, who needn't think about school fees or wife trouble, who only needed to wear something without sleeves to make people swoon. At times, Don felt a sliver of envy at his friend's luck, but this was always overpowered by the ease he felt when he was around Leo and the two other guys.

"Let's take a break?" Leo said, smashing the bird to his side of the net, giving Don a point.

"All right," he said.

They walked with their rackets to the wooden bench in front of their court, Don feeling the stares of the matrons a couple of benches away from them. The men sat and wiped the sweat off themselves.

San Antonio Sports Complex isn't much of a complex, thought Don. The entrance all but disappeared, lost in between the walls and other glass doors of a drugstore, a pet shop, a laundromat, and some transient food establishments. One would only realize how enormous the space was upon entering. Inside, the box-like building was as high as four stories and large enough for ten badminton courts. Right now, as with any weekend, each court had its light on, the sound of squeaking of shoes and shuttlecocks making contact with rackets filling the wide space. Perhaps, Don thought, it was a "complex" because the attendants allowed non-players to rent. Like the Zumba ladies. A net would be removed from a court so it could be used for some other purpose.

Don caught himself thinking these thoughts and realized he was deliberately doing it to avoid dwelling on his own dreadful speculation, which suddenly resurfaced before he could stop himself.

"I think Amy's having an affair," he told Leo, who promptly looked at him with confusion. Don couldn't hold back, and he thought he would feel better upon confiding his suspicions. But he wasn't comforted with what he saw on his friend's face.

"What made you say that, pare?"

"Just a hunch." Don wished not to comment further, at least not now that Jimmy and Paco had finished their set and were making their way toward them. Either Leo took the hint or he just didn't care. He didn't press the topic and instead went on drinking his Gatorade as the two men had now reached their seat.

“You haven’t really told us about what happened on that plane, Leo,” said Jimmy, the youngest among them, plopping his thin frame on the seat and fanning himself with his shirt. Jimmy has been a PhD candidate for ten years now, and Don suspected another half a decade would pass before the man would finally emerge from UPD with his newly minted diploma in Anthropology. He was only thirty-five, but the exhaustion wrought by his teaching position had so effectively aged him that he looked like he rightly belonged to their loose group. Jimmy had a grim view of the world and his own life, an observation that Don gathered from the man’s almost incessant complaints about his own family, the academe, and the state of the country, whenever he got the chance to talk. The other three weren’t bothered, though, since he was a nice antidote to their own calm demeanor when left alone by themselves. He always spiced things up, and on top of this, Don was guiltily relieved to think that someone in the group would always be worse off than them. Or than him, at least.

“I think I said everything in those interviews.” There was an edge of irritation in Leo’s voice. This made the other three look at him, though no one made a comment, and Jimmy didn’t say anything further. Leo was looking intently at the bottle he was drinking from.

Several benches away the ladies stood up and began packing their bags, having changed into their civvies.

“Bye, boys!” The instructor, a muscular man wearing red lipstick, a singlet, and sweatpants, waved at the four of them as he led the procession of bashful women out of the complex.

The four of them waved back, though the three secretly knew that it was Leo the instructor had been truly waving at.

The four of them had first met almost a year ago in this court, drawn to each other, it seemed, by unremarkable circumstances. Back then, Donald

had been in the habit of bringing his team to the court once a month as a way of bonding with the agents in his span. He saw these monthly excursions as an opportunity to build rapport with the people he was supervising, and as a respite from the dreary atmosphere of the production floor. He had been a TL for years then, and he had genuinely enjoyed their company. He had realized long before that he wasn't blessed with the reflex to sustain a rally with any of his team members, but he was delighted nonetheless.

One Saturday morning, he had noticed a man juggling a few shuttlecocks in the middle of the court next to his. He nodded to the man when their eyes met once, after a game between Don and one of his agents. A few minutes later, Don casually edged towards this man's court and said, "You've been here for a while now, man."

The man had smiled and told him his friend had an emergency but the information only got to him when he was at the complex and had paid the nonrefundable fee. "I'll just sweat myself out," the man, who introduced himself as Leo, said.

Don had offered a round, and although he proved to be more of a nuisance than an opponent (spending much of the time picking up the shuttle off the floor), the time had been valuable for the chance to know each other, and to discover that they shared the same opinion on certain life matters. By the end of the hour, they had agreed to meet again the next week, with a promise from Leo that he would introduce the friend he had been expecting.

Don became acquainted with Paco the following week, and a few weeks later, when the three of them decided to invite the young scholar who had been sulking in a corner watching his kid and wife play on the court with another mother-daughter tandem, Don realized that they had formed something of a boy band, which played badminton instead of trashy music. They would occasionally invite other men but the only weekly constants were the four of them.

“I think I better head home,” said Paco. He had been stretching his arms and legs, and now as he spoke, he tilted his head to the left then to the right. “Wife and I are going out this afternoon.”

They nodded at him before he walked out, not bothering to drop by the showers since he lived in San Antonio Ridges, a nearby subdivision where Leo had his own house as well. As Paco walked with a confidence that was fit for his still athletic body, Don wondered, as he had a few times before, how he’d feel out of place in the group if not for Jimmy. Leo and Paco had a lot in common: both were raised in households that thrived from inherited family business, were not really inclined to talk about politics unless, this or that politico needed their sponsorship, and both had this certain aura of ease. As if everything they did was done without really trying hard. Paco, for one, owned several auto repair shops and the size of the shops alone ought to attract even the most picky of car enthusiasts.

It was 10:30, half an hour before the rent was up. As usual they had paid for a couple of hours of court time, but it seemed that agendas were ripe for that Sunday. A little over ten minutes after Paco walked out, Jimmy had gone to the showers, changed into his casuals, and told them that he had a mound of papers to check.

“I swear to God,” he said as he retied the laces of his battered sneakers, “we are jammed between a shitty department and even shittier students this semester. Take care, you two.”

He ambled out with his knapsack, his mumbling growing fainter as he walked past the reception area and finally near the glass door, where he emerged out into the bright sunlight of San Antonio Road. Don knew that the man would still be mumbling as he ambled his way to Commonwealth Ave to wait for a jeepney that would take him to Philcoa, where he lived nearby.

That left the two of them again, Don and Leo. After Jimmy had left, Don had stared at his own sneakers and was quite relieved that they didn't look like something fished out of a dumpster, against the green rubber matting of the floor. He looked around the court for a while, observing the space bustling with players. The staff had already returned the net to the steel poles of the court where the Zumba crowd had danced earlier, and a family of four had walked in and settled on the white bench in front of this court.

"As I was saying earlier," he told Leo, "I think my wife's having an affair."

Leo looked at him with the same half-hearted concern. "You said it was a haunch."

"Yeah."

"Have you actually talked to her?"

"That's the thing. It's like she doesn't want to talk to me these days. We were in bed together, but she wouldn't even look at me. She'd spend a long time on her phone, and when we were alone it felt like she was always staring into space. I'm thinking she might have met someone on the job."

Don had met Amy at another BPO, the one where he had worked at before he moved to his present company. Amy had stayed in that call center in Cubao and was later promoted to a rank in its TQ tower, while Don had moved to a nearer one, in QC, along Commonwealth Ave. In the past few weeks, after dismissing the nanny tasked to look after their two girls, who were just in grade school, they would sit around for a meal in a silence that grew more and more pronounced as the days went by.

"Just try to talk to her," Leo said. He had settled the bottle of energy drink on the bench and stretched himself. "That's the only thing you can do, I guess."



“Well,” Don said, shrugging his shoulders, “perhaps you’re right.”

“One more game?”

“Sure.”

They went back to the court to have what Don would like to call a “charity game,” where Leo made it easier for him, returning the shuttle to where he was standing. The effect was that he almost had no need to move for much of the quarter of an hour. And, because Don hadn’t much control on his swing, Leo would be the one covering the most area on his side of the court.

In the first few months, Don had been touched by this gesture. He had thought that this had been his friend’s way of training him. There had been in fact quite a few Sundays when Leo would give him pointers on how to hold the racket, how to hit the shuttle depending on where it was about to land, and even how to secure a score by doing a net kill.

“What you need to do,” Leo had explained, “is to get a comfortable grip and approach the bird with the aim of leaving no room for the opponent to predict the direction of your smash.”

Leo then would purposefully return the shuttle to where he was, giving Don the ease to do the kill he had taught him.

But the novelty wore off in the succeeding weeks, to the point that he felt less of a person in front of this nearly-perfect being. The feeling that he always had to try harder than his friend was only driven deeper in him.

This was the sort of feeling he chose not to be open about to his friend. As Leo moved with an odd mix of grace and solid will, Don reflected that he had, in fact, been happy that their friendship was reduced to these Sundays and that most of their talk revolved around matters that rarely touched his insecurities. He had long acknowledged that what he felt was insecurity. It slightly helped that this sweating and agile muscle man in well-

fitting shorts and jersey shirt only liked to talk about metaphysical things, ideas that Don rarely pondered on, and had only vague opinions about. Leo would say words like aesthetics, veganism, or concerto grosso, and he would feel himself dumbly smiling and nodding as if he fully understood. He delighted in these one-sided conversations because he thought he was learning. At the end of a usual Sunday, he would consult Google and when the next weekend came, he was armed with enough ideas, while Don would have another concept to talk about. He delighted in it because it was far from the conversations he was having at home or at work.

This Sunday, though, was marked by an unusual silence. Leo's mouth had been shut for the most part of the morning. This had been the case since that airplane incident. What had happened that day? He wanted to ask Leo as the bird shuttled back and forth between them.

A month before, Leo had boarded a flight from Maldives bound to Manila, having just gone for a three-day vacation. It was a Thursday when the local stations began airing a flash report about the Southeast Pacific's flight that suddenly went off the radar and plane tracking websites. After a few more hours, it was presumed that the plane had disintegrated, with hundreds of passengers charred in the middle of the Atlantic. Missions were sent to search for whatever it was that would have remained. On Friday, at around 11:00 MNL, the same stations flashed another report about the puzzling reappearance of the plane, exactly where it had last been seen in the radar. When Flight Seventeen finally touched down at NAIA, the press had turned the seemingly clueless passenger-survivors into instant celebrities, including Leo, who, like the others, went down the tarmac in a flood of camera flashes. From what the press gathered from all those who agreed to be interviewed, the passengers didn't have an idea that they had disappeared from the face of the earth for around 24 hours, and that they and the pilots and the crew were useless in the airlines' search for answers. What was important, though, was

everyone was alive and that broiling lawsuits were dropped; everyone went home sighing with relief. Life went on as usual for the “survivors.”

In the first couple of weeks since Leo returned, the press had almost incessantly rung his phone for an interview. When they met up on the first Sunday since the incident, the three of them had almost thought that he wouldn't be joining them. But he came, although he was apparently in a bad mood, his face grim in all the sets he played. Later he explained how he was being bugged by the media; and the three understood him and wished not to further trigger him.

Now it had been four weeks, and a part of Don wondered why the seriousness in his friend's face hadn't dissipated. He would have thought further about this had he not been faced with a more personal matter.

When they finished the game, they went to the men's room, beside the reception area, to change into their clean clothes. While they were all stripped to waist and washing their faces in front of the mirror covering the span of a wall, he couldn't help but wonder if Leo was the sort of man Amy would cheat on. They were of the same age, but that was where the similarities ended. Don felt nothing better than the Zumba ladies running their eyes over his friend, but for him it was done to assess himself. Whereas Leo had that olive skin and rippling abdominals, Don had a pale complexion and a beer belly. Don wasn't even a drinker. And whereas Don had flabs for his limbs, Leo had a pair of arms and legs that could perhaps lift him and throw him far enough from his own worldly problems.

When they emerged out of the glass doors of the complex, Don said, “Yellow Cab?”

Leo stared at him with a hint of surprise, “Uh. Sure?”

They walked up to Commonwealth Avenue, where the fast-food joint stood facing the Sunday traffic of the highway, jeepneys roaring away

and buses stopping in the middle of the road to board passengers. They entered the restaurant, went straight to the counter where they asked for sodas and Charlie Chans, and settled at a table on the far end where the road noise wouldn't reach them, even though the doors were swung open patrons. They settled into a comfortable silence until their orders arrived.

In between forkfuls of pasta, Don felt the urge to speak.

"It's quite troubling, really."

"Hm?"

"Amy. She wasn't like that before. It makes me wonder if I did something wrong."

"You didn't, most likely."

"Well. Anyway, I'll stop talking about her."

"Yes."

"How about you? How are you doing, man?"

"Fine."

"Is everything really fine? I mean, I could try to help if you need any help." Don wasn't sure what sort of help he could offer his friend, but it was the best thing he could say that wouldn't betray his curiosity at the particulars of Leo's life. Like *what happened in that plane?*

Because, as they sat there, Don couldn't help but notice the way Leo looked at him, at everything, inside the restaurant, at the food, at the glass walls that showed a sidewalk with its occasional pedestrians and vendors. His eyes seemed glazed. His movements seemed prompted by a hypnotist's pendulum.

"I'm doing fine, really," Leo said, masticating,

Don decided to stop talking. *Everyone seemed not to be in the mood,* Don grumbled to himself. He just let his mind wander elsewhere.

After the meal, they walked back to San Antonio Complex. Don slipped into his Corolla parked in the little lot beside the complex. He rolled his window down and gave his friend a salute. Leo nodded and gave him a lukewarm smile.

As he climbed the rise to Commonwealth Ave., he caught through the rearview mirror a glimpse of Leo's figure walking in the opposite direction, to San Antonio Village. Leo didn't look back.

The next Sunday, Jimmy was found dead in the shower room. Don was about to take a piss, and when he opened the stall nearest to the door, he screamed. He had screamed and screamed he was sure the entire complex heard him. His friend was sitting on the lid of the toilet, eyes opened in terror, looking it seemed at the head of the badminton racket jammed in his throat. Blood congealed around the mouth of the dead man.

A cruiser wheeled in the parking lot later, and two cops promptly told the patrons to stay inside the complex for the investigation. Don was too shaken to dwell on the strangeness of being told by the police to just sit on one of the benches for their questions, just a few feet away from the bathroom where Jimmy was found.

"What happened, Mr. Garcia?" a cop asked, bringing out a notepad and preparing to write, as they sat by themselves on the bench. Murmurs of the other people inside bubbled around them. An ambulance was waiting beyond the glass entrance, the body now being carried on a stretcher with a white sheet over it, the head of the racket visible at one end.

"I wanted to take a leak," Don told the cop, a younger fellow who had a nonchalant look, as if this was something he had expected to happen. "And then I opened the stall, and there...and there I saw him..."

But was it the entire story? Don would later reflect after cops had let everyone go without making arrests. That was about three hours after Don found the body. Within those hours the cops had questioned everyone inside, about what were they doing before and around the time the body was found. They had also watched the CCTV recording and were given copies of it by the staff behind the reception area, where the screens were, and where, ironically it seemed, the entrance to the bathroom was but a few steps away.

When they finally left the complex, the afternoon was cool, clouds hanging about, giving the road a tinge of gray with the threat of impending rain. As he stood by the entrance, thinking whether or not to go home or go somewhere else, a hand clapped his back and there behind stood Leo flashing him a hesitant smile. Beside him was Paco, understandably speechless as well.

“It’s a shock,” Leo said. The three of them were at the nose of Don’s Corolla. Behind them the patrons were trickling out, some murmuring, some silent.

Don didn’t know what to say. To the best of his knowledge, no one else saw the freshly dead body of Jimmy besides himself and the staff he had called on to have the bathroom locked and to call the police. And the killer. Whoever that person must be, whoever was that person who had the will and force to throttle the man and ram the handle of a badminton racket down to his throat. Don couldn’t imagine how it must feel to have that thing skewering you from the mouth.

“I better head home,” he said.

Leo and Paco nodded, almost in unison. They watched him walk to his old car, and started the engine. He had the window down and told the other two in a weak voice: “Take care.”

As he drove down the gray road, he let his mind wander back to what happened that morning.

He had come to the complex thinking he would be spared from more strangeness than he could process for the week. At the office, some of his agents were absentminded, getting off the queue and placing themselves on ACW for as much as 10 minutes, and he'd had to go to their station just to tap them on the shoulder to remind them that they were at work and were not being paid to just stare at their screens that had flashed the screensavers because of inactivity. Some staff were already complaining because they had to work more than these agents, who were suddenly struck with inability to properly do their work. At his house his wife still gave him the feeling of being cuckolded, and on top of that, one his girls had, for much of the week, taken to speaking only one or two syllables at a time. Maggie was already twelve years old, and, for a while, he wondered if puberty was the reason, she chose to talk less and to bury herself in the room she shared with her older sister.

"It's like a virus," he had told Jimmy one time that they had doubles with Paco and Leo. "Like people I knew are beginning to act weird or distant lately."

On the other side of the net were that classic Leo-Paco tandem, although the score was strangely in favor of Jimmy and Don. Part of Don was tempted to think it was one of those "charity games," but something about the nonchalance of their opponent's moves told him they weren't invested in the whole game. Like they were both going through the motions of swinging the racket and occasionally returning it without much flair. It had been too easy for Don to replicate what he learned from all the demos of Leo's net kill. Paco was quite a sight. To Don, he seemed like the man had a whopping hangover, and he was tempted to call the game off to let him sit in one of the corners to chug on a bottle of electrolytes. No one, though, had even hinted on wanting to stop the game.

“I have a theory,” Jimmy said as they continued passing the shuttle back and forth across the net.

“What?”

“Something’s happening to these people. Like those two.”

“I can see that.”

“They’re changing into something else.”

“Something else?” They had lowered their voices and would occasionally walk near each other to murmur.

“Yes, something else. I think something happened to Leo when that plane disappeared. I’m thinking of aliens, or maybe a close call to the angels or something. Another dimension perhaps.”

“I can’t believe you of all people would tell me that.”

“I can’t believe it either.”

“Why would an anthropologist say such a thing?”

“I am not one yet. But how else could you explain all this? My own colleagues at the department, almost all of them moved like lethargic druggies. Just look around you, Don.”

Don took a sweeping look at the occupied courts and was disheartened to realize that there was a general air of slowness around, only one or two moving swiftly among the players bathed in the white light of each court. There wasn’t the flood of satisfying sound when players almost smash a shuttle, that sound akin to a cork popping from a bottle of wine, an octave higher.

The Zumba instructor and ladies were all settled on the floor and benches, not even looking at Leo. They had finished their session earlier than usual and were now just staring off into random space, as one of the staff, a teenage boy in a white collared shirt and khaki shorts, dragged the net



toward the court where they did their slow aerobics. In a corner, one of the benches was being repaired by a balding old man in overalls. He was tapping a nail with a hammer, but slowly. Too slowly. It seemed no sound would ever reach Don. At the courtside opposite Jimmy's and Don's, Leo and Paco were standing without their usual competitive stance as they awaited the return of the shuttle to their side. They stood straight, holding their rackets with the head down.

"Do you see what I mean?" Jimmy asked him.

"Yeah," he could only murmur.

"I've been trying to talk to others. I talked to that young guy, but as you can see you might as well have an airhead manning this place."

"I also talked to one of the Zumba oldies but she could only say 'yes' and 'no'.

"Even that carpenter looks like he hasn't spoken for a few days now."

Discreetly, Don saw Jimmy roaming the room earlier, like a reporter trying to discretely interview witnesses.

"That boy over there," Jimmy nodded in the direction of a young man, a couple of courts away, who looked like he still had the energy to hop around while waiting for his female companion to serve. "I talked to him. He told me his girlfriend began acting weird just this morning. He thinks she just wasn't in the mood and she just needed a good round of physical activity."

"But you know what she needs? What almost everyone in this room needs?"

"What?" Don asked.

"They need to leave. They're taking over us. It's invasion all over again."

"You're not making any sense."

“Nor what is happening around. Someone’s behind all these, I’m sure of that. There’s a conspiracy we should know about. Otherwise, we’ll become the slugs these people had turned into. Or maybe these aren’t the same people at all. They’ve been replaced by something else.”

“You sound just like the person you’re not supposed to be.”

“I do. And I hope I am wrong.”

Their discussion ended and they went on with the game without many words exchanged. Later, Jimmy excused himself to go the bathroom, and the other three settled on the bench quietly, not conversing. Don was used to the silence of his friends, but after their brief conversation, the lack of exchange oppressed him. He wanted to speak but he was afraid that Jimmy’s theory would only be confirmed. So, he stood from the bench and told the two that he would just walk around to cool down.

He took a stroll around the fringes of the courts, observing the players. One player stood with her shoulders down, as if carrying an invisible weight, another one swung his racket with a force just enough for the shuttle to touch the net but not go beyond it. He walked slowly, so he could afford to mull on what had Jimmy said, to speculate on his friend’s sanity, or to believe at least that something was wrong and that something must be done.

But suppose that something indeed was wrong and that someone should do something? What would it be? In the unlikely case that they were now surrounded by people who weren’t what they were supposed to be, what kind of fight should they put up against that force turning these things into their likeness?

Don thought about his work, and how the Australian stakeholders would consider dissolving the account should they eventually learn that they were now paying for some agents to do nothing but stare at a turned off monitor. He also thought about his own family. It would indeed be horrifying

to know that something else had snatched the body of his wife, not some corporate bigshot or some biker who could give her that thrill he must have denied her those decades of their marriage. What would be more terrifying was to realize that their child was now some alien who somehow learned the intricacies of coming of age as a human.

Don shook his head. Ridiculous. Aliens and body snatchers, ha! That's what you get from listening to some loser academic. You turn into a loser yourself and become deranged as well. As he walked, he tried to force a smile and flash it at the familiar faces in the courts and courtsides. Very few of them smiled back in recognition; they mostly stared back as if he were a faceless wind.

On a wall an LED clock showed five past ten. A light bulb flickered off in one of the courts, its players having dragged themselves out the door some minutes earlier. He had not even finished his first lap, and he already was weighed down by what he saw. So, when he approached the spot where he had begun walking, he decided to settle himself on the seat with Paco and Leo. Both of them looked as if they hadn't moved an inch. At the corner where the bench was being fixed, the carpenter had stood up and now was staring at the seat. The old man stood there looking down, perhaps at the nail. He was as still as the toolbox between him and a foot of the wooden bench. Five minutes must have passed before he turned his back on the thing he just fixed, and walked off toward the reception area. He spoke to one of the staff, an old woman wearing eyeglasses, who nodded once before going behind the counter and doing nothing but stare at the panel of CCTV monitors. The old man walked to the exit without going back for his equipment with its hammer and pliers and screwdrivers protruding from the top of the lidless plastic box.

"I guess I better head home," he told Paco and Leo. When he spoke, they looked at him with blank expressions, and nodded.

Don took a towel and shirt from his drawstring bag and headed to the showers. He entered in the shower room just beside the reception area. He was sharply aware of how silent it was, at that moment, expecting as well to catch Jimmy, perhaps washing his hands as he had been gone too long from the court, and the only explanation could be a pressing need to take a long hard dump.

“Jimmy?” he called quietly.

Don needed to address his bladder first, though, so the matter of Jimmy’s absence wasn’t of much importance. He placed his shirt and towel on a corner of the sink in the white-tiled room, and approached the door to the first cubicle.

The door swung open with a little push of his fingertips.

Behind the door was the friend he was just thinking about. Jimmy. With blood around the mouth, staining the V-neck of his yellow shirt. His eyes were wide open. His hands were hanging down, motionless. There was blood on his fingertips. The badminton had been rammed between the teeth—and, perhaps, down to the stomach.

That was when Don screamed.

That was when he realized that his friend, now dead, must have been right.

He screamed like he had never done before.

And yet, thought Don as he now made a turn to their street, his knuckles pale, his grip on the wheel forcing veins to bulge at the back of his hands, and yet I am here, and I am still alive. And something must be done. What it was, he didn’t know and he didn’t have any idea.

He had now approached his house and at the windows that faced the street, the yellow light of the living room flashed through the curtain. Another light danced in the middle of it and for a while panic settled in his core. This light was tinged with blue, flashing and dancing, fixed in a box-like shape. As he stepped out the car, he realized that he had only been staring at the light of the television, perhaps being watched by the alien wife and daughters.

But what must he do?

The next Sunday, he found himself still strangely alive, still unturned by the wife and the two daughters, or the colleagues that filled the office, or some strange visitor he had been expecting to knock on his front door with a mallet. The week had proceeded as usual without any climactic confrontation with his wife and daughters, nor with any of his colleagues and bosses, who continued going to the building but wouldn't now be doing any work. And anyway, no customer seemed to call now and the onshore managers seemed uninterested in holding the usual executive meeting for the week. The people who came into the office would just sit in front of their PCs until the end of their shift.

It seemed that everywhere he went he turned out to be the only normal person around. The one who still had hope and the will to move with more life. He felt alone.

He had tried to ring his other friends, even the ones who may have only remembered him by name. No one answered. His chat box was silent, and his Facebook feed was only flooded with ads for some obscure technology. No new posts from colleagues, even those artists he had "liked" some time ago. The television was mostly kept alive by reruns of more ads, noontime shows, or Asian dramas. The news anchors stood in front of the

cameras, saying nothing when the time for the morning or evening reports came. In the streets everything took on the quality of a film in slow-mo. Don wouldn't have been surprised to find that not a single car crash happened in the past few days in the whole city.

He had not planned to go back to the San Antonio Sports Complex the following Sunday. He had been expecting phone calls from the police or some shrink to talk to him about what he saw. There wasn't any call, and given the way that the "news" was ran now, he wasn't surprised to realize his friend's murder was not reported. He thought about connecting with Jimmy's family, but when he tried to stalk his social media, he was baffled to realize that his friend's account had been taken down.

So, when Sunday came, he had nothing to do. In the hopes of talking to someone or figuring out what the hell was happening to the world, he resolved to go to the complex. His intention was to ask Leo about what happened to the plane or if he had any idea why the people seemed to be drained of feelings and drive. Should Leo not be at the court, he would drive on in the subdivision to pay him a visit to his house. Don thought in advance that he might end up with the same fate as Jimmy's, but he realized it would after all be better to be murdered than to remain walking alone among people who no longer cared.

Don wheeled into the parking lot of the complex. There were other cars around, and the businesses in the complex's vicinity still stood with their doors open for customers. No one walked in front of the shops and the food establishments. In the siomai and hotdog stands for instance, the attendants only looked out from under their hats, sitting before their cooked food. Behind him, the traffic on San Antonio Road was only composed of one or two vehicles at a time. There was a drizzle now, gray clouds looming heavily above everything.

He entered the door to the sports complex and was welcomed by the sight of the lighted courts. What Don saw might have been the strangest thing in his life.

While all the courts had their lights on, only one court had players on it, the third one from the entrance. Paco and Leo were the players, and they had been standing straight, hitting the shuttle back and forth with the usual sluggish swings. The wooden benches surrounding the court were occupied by the patrons of the complex. The Zumba ladies and their instructor occupied three wooden benches, slouched, watching his friends play. The others sat in the same pose. The faces he was familiar with were on the benches, and it seemed that all the people who ever went to the court were there. Even the two policemen who interviewed them when Jimmy was murdered were there, in their camos. All the seats were occupied and everyone was looking at the empty movements of Leo and Paco. The two men were not even sweating.

When Don entered, the old woman at the reception looked briefly at him, eyeglasses glinting under florescent light. Beside her stood the youth, still in a white shirt and khaki pants, who made an effort to flash him an empty smile before returning his own attention to the two men playing. The door to the bathroom still had the “Caution” tape tacked in the middle.

Don finally stepped on the green rubber flooring that marked the beginning of the court proper. As he proceeded, he didn't need to look back to know that no one was paying attention to him even if he was practically in front of them. Everyone's eyes were glued to the two men as if it were the greatest match that ever happened. Even the carpenter, remarked Don, that old man was standing beside the chair he repaired, which was now occupied by a row of patrons. Still between the old man and the bench was the toolbox with its hammer and pliers.

Don walked on, found a corner on the floor where he dropped his bag and left the leather container for his badminton racket. He took a deep breath and approached his friends with the racket in his hand.

He approached the side where Paco was. Paco, as if sensing that someone was approaching from behind, didn't swing his racket as the shuttle flew down. Instead, he caught it with his hand. When Don was finally beside Paco, his old sleek friend flashed him a smile that didn't reach the eyes. He rested a hand on Don's shoulder and said, "We've been waiting for you."

Don didn't say anything. Fear had lodged like ice in his spine, but he didn't want it to show. He just let Paco tap him on the shoulder, once, before the man handed the shuttle to him and walked out of the court, standing beside one of the Zumba ladies on one of the benches.

Don turned to face Leo.

The man stood there with his blank expression, his chest still bulky and the muscles of his calves defined. Leo's hair was styled in a pomp, the strands of white at the top served as an accent to the still handsome face, not a betrayal of age. The arms out of the sleeveless blue shirt looked, as always, strong enough to rip his head off.

"I've been waiting for you, my friend," Leo smiled. He shifted his racket from one hand to the other, slowly, and his eyelids were halfway down, as if he was about to fall asleep anytime.

"What's happening?" Don asked, trying without much success to hide the trembling of his voice.

Leo pointed the head of his racket to Don. "We're going to play, man. That's what is going to happen."

"I don't want to play. I want answers."

"You're going to get them later."



“I want them now.”

“Oh. Well. I suggest you don’t try my patience, my friend.” There was a momentary change in Leo’s eyes. For about a beat they had refocused, becoming two slashes intending to cut Don up into little pieces. Then they softened again into half-mast, the head nodding to something behind Don, who didn’t take the cue at once. When Don realized that he was being urged to look behind, he was stunned to see that the Zumba ladies and the instructor had stood up from their seats. They had the same sharp look on their eyes, resembling the one Leo had flashed. The women, faces caked with powder, lips red, and rolls of fat protruding from bellies they had long worked hard for, now looking as soft as his own. Their instructor stood beside them. A deeply tanned man, taller than him by a foot, muscle shirt looking like it was about to be ripped by the shoulders and chest. The man was smiling with his lips redder than the ladies’. He made a sound with his knuckles. They all had stood up and were looking at Don, poised to run, to chase him, and, if he as much as thought about running to the door, perhaps...

Don looked at the veined hands of the man and the ladies. He was certain he would be torn apart if he made a move.

He turned back to Leo, and said, “A game then.”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll tell me what is happening.”

“You will know everything. But you have to beat me first.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You’ll never know.”

“I don’t have any choice anyway.”

“Serve.”

Don, hands cold and heart pounding, hit the shuttle and watched it. He was relieved when it crossed over the net. It flew in an arch broken by Leo's effortless backhand. The bird returned to him and he didn't need to step elsewhere to mirror what his friend did. Thus was the game for the first few minutes, a time they took to talk.

"Can you tell me at least what happened in that plane?"

"You have to beat me first."

"That depends if you give me the chance."

"I could give you a clue. I saw the light. We saw the light."

"Are we talking of God or flying saucers?"

"You humans sure have interesting ways of understanding the world around you."

"So, you're not a man. Are you still my friend?"

"You like yourselves placed in neat little boxes. Reduce yourselves into something you're clearly not."

"You're not my friend."

"I am. I could be."

"You're not helping. Choose one."

"It isn't important." Leo's pose relaxed a little more. He leaned his weight on one foot. "What's important is we are here, and we're here to stay."

A thought occurred to Don. "Am I the only one who hasn't turned yet?"

"You could say that. But not for long, I'm afraid."

"Are you going to kill me too? Are you going to shove a racket to my face like your kind did to Jimmy?"

“Don,” Leo laughed. “My dear, sweet, innocent Donald. My friend Don. I want to show you everything. I know what you’re thinking, you see. I know how you feel about this shell of a man you’re playing with.”

Don stiffened. He could feel his breath quickening, not because of the slow uneventful exchange of shuttle, but because of the feeling that his own private thoughts were being intruded upon. Leo was looking at him intently and a tendril of ache crept to some buried part of his brain. The tendril was like a pincer tearing a piece off the insides of his skull.

Then the sensation was gone. Leo’s eyelid drooped once more.

“You’re too afraid, Don,” he said. “But there’s no need for that.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to relax. Your suffering is about to end.”

“Why do I have to be the last one?”

“This man you call Leo, he thinks highly of you.”

“What?”

“I can feel his mind too. I am him. Where I came from—where we came from—we feel the feelings of our imperfect selves in this dimension. We think their imperfect thoughts.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You refuse to understand.”

“Leo adores you. The way you strove hard to be where you are now. In a way he was envious. He envied the challenges that you’ve had. The experiences he’d never have because of his own privileges. He liked that you are a simple man. He craved for simplicity.”

Anger welled up in Don, to the point of reminding him sharply of the game. When the shuttle approached once more, he remembered in a flash

the times his friend instructed him on how to take the opponent by surprise. His body moved then, stepping away from the zone he had begun to be comfortable in, to the left, sharply opposite to where Leo was. Don raised his left hand in anticipation of the shuttle, while the right one positioned itself at the top of his head. He let his mind go blank first. And then, in a swift moment of decision, he smashed the bird down.

The shuttle quickly whipped back to the other side, just above the net, white bullet in a straight line. The sound when it hit the racket echoed. Leo made a swinging motion, but his racket met the empty air. The shuttle bounced on the floor a few feet away, inside the service line.

For a while there was only the silence. Don smiled.

“I won,” he said, panting.

“You did.” Leo smiled as well.

“Tell me everything.”

Leo stood where he was, doing and saying nothing for almost about a minute, like a broken wind-up toy. Then he dropped his racket on the floor nonchalantly. After which he walked to the side where the carpenter was. The old man only looked at Leo as he picked up the hammer from the toolbox, and turned back to Don and walked toward him.

He reached where Don was standing on his side of court.

“This is the answer,” Leo said, handing him the rusting hammer.

Don hesitated, then took the hammer by the head, feeling its weight. “How come.”

“You’re going to kill me. Or at least try to kill me.”

“You know I won’t do that to Leo.”

“You said you believed I am not who I am supposed to be. Now’s the time to prove it.”

Don looked at Leo incredulously, unsure of what to do next. The hammer in his hand felt heavier by the second.

“Hit me,” Leo said, looking bored.

“I don’t want to.”

“I know you want to hit me.”

“No.”

“Then I will make you.”

In an instant, Leo’s hand was around Don’s throat. There was no pressure, not yet, but Don could feel the cold hands of the man close around his neck, and as it went on it then began to tighten. His other hand dropped the badminton racket, while the other maintained a feeble grip on the hammer.

“Hit me, my dear Don.”

The hand didn’t hold back then. Choking sounds issued from Don’s mouth, and he could feel himself disassociating as the air was cut off from his head. He felt himself being lifted from the ground. Around the courts the people on the benches just watched, and in a while, they became blurred bodies and faces, background of no importance. What was important was this perfect man in front of him, choking him with one hand, lifting him off the ground.

“You have to hit me, hit me my dear lovely Do—”

Leo was cut off by the hammer connecting with his temple. Don had gathered all his remaining strength and swung with the force not unlike the net kill he did to beat the man in the match earlier. There was dull thud when the hammer made contact to the skull and at once he was dropped to the ground.

Leo had fallen to his knees, touching his bleeding temple. There was no hint of pain on the face though, only the eyes glinting now. As Don recovered, standing up himself, towering above the kneeling likeness of his friend, he realized how bright his eyes had become as the man looked up to him and their gazes met.

Where the black should have been, his friend's eyes showed a bright, shining yellow.

Don couldn't hold back any longer.

He raised the hammer, and brought it down on the head of the creature. He brought it down. He brought it up. And then down. He smashed. He killed.

Blood pooled around the mutilated head of the body that claimed to be Leonardo Ortiz. A part of the open skull had spilled forth bits of brain and bone, the left eye seemed to have melted off and disappeared in the gore of what was once a handsome face.

After smashing the creature Don had stumbled back, tripped on his own foot, and had let himself collapse on the floor, the bloody hammer beside him. There was a ringing in his ears as he stared at the green floor. He remained that way for a while, until he could catch his breath, and until he had the resolve to stand up.

When he stood up, wobbling, he looked at the people around on the benches. They sat still as they had before, not a change on their faces, as if the players and patron have melted into the dark green walls of the complex. The Zumba ladies and instructor had gone back to their seats; the carpenter still stood where he was devoid of any expression; as was the creature who might or might not be Paco. In one corner was the young man whom Jimmy had

nodded at the previous Sunday. He was now sitting on one of the benches, beside his girlfriend, wearing the same blank look as everyone else.

Don walked to the corpse and stared at what the hammer and his hand had done. He killed Leo, or whatever this thing was.

Suddenly, a bright yellow light flashed in the middle of the court, just beside the dead body. It was as if the very air was slashed open and out came pouring in the middle of nowhere a beam that was almost impossible to look at.

“What?” he caught himself asking in wonder, shielding his eyes with his hands while trying to look at the strange bright light in the middle of the court. Cold wind poured out along the light, and there was the smell of frangipani. Don thought about approaching the light, but shadows began moving in it, black figures which, as they came into focus and as they emerged out of the hole, turned out to be two men.

To be precise: it was him and Jimmy.

The two men ambled out of the hole, which then closed and left no trace of itself in the air. Jimmy and the thing that looked like Don stared at the trembling man that stood by the foot of the dead body on the floor.

Don couldn't tear his gaze from the thing that looked like him. For a wild second he thought what he was seeing was his supposed real self. The thing still looked like him, with its unremarkable body and paunch, and it was even dressed the way he was now, in loose baggy shorts and oversized shirt that aimed at hiding his own shapelessness. Even the untrimmed moustache was there.

“What are you?”

“You know the answer,” the thing said. “I am you.”

“I am me. You are nothing...you are...”

And then the idea struck Don as he looked at the way the thing stared at him with a distant smile and eyelids halfway down. It is him. Or perhaps another version of him, one who no longer cared and thus had the look of someone at peace with the world.

“You are figuring it out now,” the thing said.

Beside him, Jimmy—or what looked like Jimmy—smiled as well. The thin man smiling. And then between them, the foot of the body suddenly twitched.

Don looked down at Leo. The fingers moved, searching for something to grasp, then relaxing. Don couldn't believe what he was seeing. He had killed the thing. And yet, there it was, the mouth that had been twisted grotesquely by the hammer was now forming a smile. And then the blood on the floor started moving, not away from the head but back into the open skull, back from where it had spilled. The skull bits and brain flesh were all moving back to the head, which, by the second, slowly reversed its way into being what it was before, that handsome face of Leo. The eye spun for a while as it was lifted out of the gore and finally settled into its rightful place.

Leo lay there now, as if a hammer never connected to his face. Even the pomp looked newly styled. The eyes shining as he went on smiling.

The thing stood up, now restored. He stood between Jimmy and Don's own mirror image. Then it spoke, “I want you to see what we are. That is the least that I could do for this man. Consider it a favor for him that you are the last one.”

Leo walked towards him. Don instinctively stepped back, heart racing. The thing walked towards him with a lazy smile while Don stepped back almost beyond the service line of the court.

Leo picked up the hammer.



There was a shuffling noise behind Don, and when he looked back everyone was now standing, looking at him, the cops, the ladies, Paco and the carpenter. All were stepping towards him, closing in on him. Beyond the glass door the hard rain whitened the street.

Leo now stood in front of him

“No, please...” Don whimpered.

The thing lifted the hammer above its head. Don’s final image of the world was his other self, before the net of a badminton court, staring with arms crossed, watching without care, at his own death.



# THE GUARD



The guard by the mouth of the glass and white concrete building was a young man, who, for the most part of what shift he had, had no reason to smile, poking with a stick at the satchels of students in CAFA uniform—maroon blazers on white Oxford shirts or blouse, black slack pants—as they entered, ensuring that none of these boys and girls whom he might have less than half a decade on would, as he was paid to do, forget to tap their IDs on the scanner that beeped and flashed their face on a monitor he checked when he was on in the mood, or if the kid about to go through caught his fancy, like this boy who brought on the screen with a loud tap the same porcelain face, shining pink lips, and sharp eyes which now looked at him with plain blunt interest, as its owner assessed him from his cap to his face and down to the gun locked in the holster by his belt, wounding around a waist he had taken pains to ward off the paunch that now had become a common denominator for men who, finally, had lost the will to try harder in what life they were left with, “No Sir,” “No Ma’am,” a chain of bad luck can never bring a good man down, not a knocked up runaway nor the thought of a child fed with lies about who he was could bring him down, for he believed himself to be good, inherently so, and for folks like him, he thought, a tangent awaited somewhere in those years lined up in the future where redemption and the chance to laugh all that shit off exists, so that even if he had none of the fortune these adolescents swam in, he still had faith in his luck, after all he had managed for a quarter of a century without landing behind bars, nor had meddling in a sketchy business that might involve lawyers he could never afford crossed his mind, such a mind that even to himself seemed half as functional as those of the kids he now was a bomb joke away short of frisking, students and academics

for whom he should supply an illusion of safety, like this boy, who neither had to look up nor down to meet his eyes, since they were of the same height on the red oxide floor of the College of Architecture and Fine Arts Building vestibule, darting a look straight into his eyes, holding for a moment the queue of people waiting to be let in for a a.m. class, this kid whose bag he had probed with a drumstick (virtually useless, with who-knows-what gunk staining its length) and who had thrown a look at his snub nose revolver (unloaded, used before a few times exclusively on cardboard targets, broken down, oiled, and reassembled at least once a month regardless of the lack of live rounds fired), something he thought he should be alarmed about but for some reason not entirely unrelated to the boy's almost inhuman beauty—the glow on the cheeks, the way he stood with stolid confidence, chest out, pale hands gripping the strap of a shoulder bag, a face trying to be fierce but only managing to heighten those features that had so often been the envy of girls with bad skin and skewed proportion of eyes, lips, nose line, and even eyebrows—the sort of beauty he was used to seeing on a girl but now had fogged his mind, ushered him into a bizarre state of confusion, powerlessness, and a hard-on so sudden and palpable he felt his ass choked by the tight agency-issued pants, stunned into near paralysis before this boy, who now smiled with eyes apt to pierce what soul he was left with but also too attractive to kill, who now was greeting him, “Good morning, Sir,” before finally moving on, walking, finding no need to look back, leaving on the screen a primer on his identity, Isaac Garcia, BFA Major in Painting, an ID number the first four digits of which was the previous year, 2017, and he would have taken note of the other tidbits of his life but the next student, a girl with unkempt hair and crusted eyes, had now hovered a lanyard on the scanner, her face promptly replacing that of the boy, who, for the next few hours would fill his skull with fantasies and questions as he stood there in the entrance poking bags, peeking at the monitor, waiting for bomb threats, deviants, or a hobbling fossil with a name garlanded with suffixes in need of his arm to walk to a waiting car

without crumbling into dust, thinking of the boy who, on that day, he had set his eyes on for the first time and wondered what the boy meant with that stare and *good morning*, failing for the first couple of hours of his shift to be certain, but not for long, because at one point he had to use the bathroom for a leak and the boy (*what luck!*) happened to be there, leaning on the sink, splashing his face with water from the sensor-operated faucet, and having done so had faced the mirror to wipe himself with a handkerchief from his pocket, catching in the process the gaze of the entranced guard, who, at that same instance, had nearly wet himself out of shock from seeing the boy, and who walked over to one of the urinals where he unzipped his pants to relieve himself under the young man's bald-faced stare, a look that made pissing difficult as his penis grew and fattened to a six-inch rod tilted slightly to the right, while a thin stream now struggled into being, a mighty task to commit to what with this Isaac Garcia's stare, eyes locked on his, an unspoken challenge taken, the guard understanding that at the last drop of his piss a decision must be made, but then it seemed to him that Isaac was not made for waiting, was not predisposed to wasting a few precious seconds just for the final act to be an earned one, thus the boy closed the bathroom's door behind him, slid the bolt, walked over to the guard who was still pissing, or was trying to piss, unable to break the contact of their eyes, unsure of whether or not the stream was hitting the urinal or if it had strayed to the wall, no matter, because now the boy was beside him, one of his hands moving, and finally, a palm meeting a cheek of his rear end through his pants, stroking it with pale butterfingers that felt like air pressing on his behind while cutting short, not without a dull pain at the bottom of his navel, his piss, and coaxing an erection to its fullest potential that he never once had in those years of porn-induced self-satisfaction nor in his months of actual fucking, way before when he and Grace were still a thing and the baby had yet to enter the picture, oh but he surely had no need to think of his child now, not now when he could feel the boy massaging his behind then undoing his belt to let his

pants fall down around his knees with the weight of the gun, ammos and pepper spray, thus naked with a raging boner he faced Isaac, thinking for a while about repercussions and possible reports to file against this young man and then changing his mind as his dick slipped into the mouth of the now kneeling Painting major with lips the color of apples, not an exchange, not even a wink between them, just the eye contact of bipeds who had evolved to end up with a primal mutual need, satisfied whilst Charlie and Tango bickered on his whereabouts between static on the radio by his breast pocket, those other fools like him stationed around this Catholic campus littered with young hopefuls, among whom walked budding anarchists, and staff and academics whose constant fear of placards and Molotov cocktails would explain his assignment here, along with cops, both uniformed and in plainclothes, milling and sniffing around for signs of student unrest—any sign at all of solidarity with the public universities whose populace had, for months now, been calling for the removal of the country's leader for reasons that ranged from gross incompetence to plunder down to the existence of her nose, hideous enough to make any tryphobic faint—and when one was found, plot disappearances and frame innocents for murders they themselves commit, to all of which the guard was privy, with codes and jokes and anecdotes and the halitosis of fascist spies waltzing in the campus air, while on the other hand no one knew of his newfound guilt, namely that after all he wasn't much of a bigot as he first thought, being that now he stood before this young man who was taking him by the mouth in front of a piss bowl holding his butt cheeks with both hands, pushing his torso forward and back, his fingers holding on to the sleek sheen of the boy's hair, and he could smell him, this man not much younger than him, faint sweat and sandalwood, his shaft disappearing and reappearing, the tongue licking the head, now purplish, bulbous, surprising himself by having no thoughts of tits or pussy or the high-pitched exhalations of a woman with an activated G-spot, but rather just looking at the boy with a delicate frame, whose bones he could



snap with a flick of nunchucks, blazer sleeves pushed to the elbows, revealing skin that almost glowed against the black material of the coat, so smooth, the guard thought as he felt himself edge to a climax so explosive he almost teared up, shuddering as the boy licked his penis clean from his own man cream, ah, what a life, he whispered, and as he turned to the urinal to let go of the last of his hostaged piss, he felt a sort of tender reverence for the boy who now had stood up, wiped a side of his mouth with a finger which ended up on his tongue, and once more faced the mirror to rinse his lips, not gargling—the guard noticed—but moistening that orifice that had taken in his manhood just enough to get rid of telltale signs of his cum, after which the boy went to the guard who had finished peeing and was zipping up, cupped his face with moist palms, and kissed him on the lips, with tongue from where the guard could taste hints of menthol cig and the sharp tang of his own juice, icky, but the gesture was not lost to the guard who, despite his preference for avoiding the taste of himself, nonetheless reciprocated, welcomed the tongue that had explored his mouth with a brush of his own taste buds, not closing his eyes and making it a point to look at the boy closely, that face, and at that instance he realized that what had happened would happen again, he or the boy or whatever lovechild fate and chance would conceive will find a spacetime intersection where his dick would throb by this soft mouth and where this soft mouth would meet his, and who knows what else they could do and whatever else he could turn into, the answer for which they were both yet to see, as now the boy broke the kiss and told him, “thank you,” with a smile as assured as the hand that groped yet again his ass and—he couldn’t have just imagined it—the holster by the belt, and whatever it was in the holster, the handgun, on which he could feel a twirling of fingers before both of the boy’s hands landed on his waist, kissed him once more, and turned his back to him without any parting words, unbolting the door from where he walked out leaving behind the tap tap tap of his leather shoes echoing beyond the bathroom, leaving the guard to

buckle up and question himself in front of the mirror, his identity reconfigured all of the sudden, past actions and desires prodded under a mental microscope for the rest of the day starting from the moment he went out of the lavatory door and back to his post from where he was teased by a partner, Charlie, who took his place when he went for the bio-break about techniques on making himself cum faster in the workplace, not knowing that the joke wasn't at all unwarranted for, which the receiver might have seriously taken note of had he not been suddenly faced with a cache of mental knots to be untangled, rather painfully as if he only had arthritic fingers to work them with, and he thought: what a burden, this self-revelation, on top of all the things he had for so long a time now tried to shove back to the farthest reaches of the everyday dullness that was his life, thus while he stood there manning the entrance trying to finish off the rest of his shift without a breakdown, before the usual dusk that crept unseen behind the campus buildings, his thoughts swam back to a time when he thought he had everything sorted out: Grace, that woman, back then a girl of sixteen in the high school hallway walking with peers who had the same preference for lip tints and brainless jocks like him, who in turn was more of an anomaly than a student, barely getting seventy five—just enough not to be booted out—by charming his way to the hearts of his young underpaid teachers and feigning interest at the subjects of older ones, a boy who at seventeen chain-smoked post-dismissal without attempting to hide what he had between his fingers or his lips from parents, sometimes even his own, just beyond the school's gate, in plain sight, school uniform thrown hastily in his near-empty backpack, standing only with a tank top and pants rolled up to show his hairy shins with a pack of guys, some classmates and some out-of-school skateboarders, talking and showing off what male bravado their pubescent bodies could allow among their female counterparts, traps and triceps shaped from all the push-ups he had as a daily exercise of submission to their CAT corps commander, oozing with precocious manliness that nonetheless caught

the eyes of the girl he had often seen and had wet dreams about, and when at last they had managed to make known to each other a watered-down version of their desires, after letters penciled on pages ripped from spiral notebooks and flowers and chocolate foils folded in memory of certain dates, he was happy to realize it was an honest-to-goodness affair, one where they professed to be better for the other, where promises were made with the intent of fulfilling them, cheesy lines and tears and cheap mementos exchanged and acknowledged as they really were and not as the clichés they were made out to be, everything—the months, furtive sex on sofas or bedrooms when the parents were not around—was going well, until one day at the cafeteria on a square plastic Monoblock with an out-of-earshot distance from the other students, their trays with bowls of twenty-peso macaroni and glass bottles of Coke stabbed with reused plastic straws, Grace, in a tone he interpreted as either of remorse or just the fear of what the news might bring to their lives, eyes on the bowl over which a fly zigzagged searching for a landing pad among the ketchup and tomato paste splattered elbow pasta, said, “I am pregnant,” and for the first time in his life he felt that sinking feeling he would later associate with surreal news like someone’s friend shot to death on the streets or much later when he found his gun in the hands of someone else, *I am pregnant* echoing in his ears until the fly had strayed off to another table, at which point he regained his composure and made up his mind to be the man that he was and own up to his dick’s life-altering (or creating) blooper, told the girl he had irrevocably turned into a woman, “it’s alright, it’s okay,” that while he was shocked still he thought nothing on Earth could make him happier than to father her child, which he would say later, after a week of deliberating, days of fist-on-the-table arguments, muted disagreements, self-doubt and self-evaluation, to Grace’s father, a lawyer known to have defended and set free perps accused of crimes that ranged from petty frauds to manslaughter, one Saturday afternoon in the Acosta residence, Mr. and Mrs. Acosta both unmoving, initially, like steel-spined droids waiting to be brought

to life by rage, across them on a sofa, while he and Grace kept a distance between each other that could be construed as an attempt to ward off thoughts that they might have been banging on that same sofa, well, good news to the old couple because, “I am owning up to it, I will marry your daughter,” words he had squeaked out of fear of the lawyer, all testosterone flying out the window, leaving him with a raisin for an ego, no skyhooks or smoke rings—which had impressed Grace in their pre-fuck weeks—could now save him against the wrath of the father who finally stood up, veins on fists and temples, screaming a la huramentado, “how dare you!” and sparing no second to let him escape, swung a fist, their initial contact being knuckles against a left eye, which was followed by another, then another, on the nose, a cheek, on the stomach, ending with the pointing of a gun against his curled up form on a then-bloodied couch, then a threat: “get out of my house,” and, beat-up and shocked, he limped out the Acosta’s gate leaving, if only for a while, his sobbing pregnant girlfriend, thinking as he wiped the blood off his mouth with the back of a hand on the street, not looking back for fear that the armed butt plug would still be there, *I’m coming back*, and sure enough, a month later, after they had marched on the school stage to shake tired hands and receive a high school diploma, Grace managed to slip out their gate from a house arrest intended by the parents as an interim between the graduation and their flight to her mother’s province in Visayas—where she would be tasked to plop the bastard into the world and wait till she’s well enough for a flight back to Manila where then she would claim the baby as a cousin from a relative too impoverished to be adding another member to an already ill-fed litter—and told him that she had treated the moment her father turned him into pulp on their couch as a go signal to think of a life more or less permanent with him, “with you,” she said, “who won’t think twice about being beaten just to show how much I mean to you,” and boy did it make him happy, too happy in fact, that at once he decided to alter what he was and man up and face (for real) the consequences, and he began this by leaving his mother and father,

both because he didn't want to burden them with having to raise two more individuals and for the practicality of being beyond the radar of Grace's father (whom he was sure would plant a bullet in his head once chance permitted), so, armed with a bag of clothes and what money they smuggled out of their houses and his high school diploma, they ventured out into the world with a vague blueprint for their life as newly-eloped teenagers, lucky enough to chance upon a unit in Sampaloc cheap enough for them, as he looked for a job, which he finally found after weeks of pre-license training, in a security agency that deployed him to a textile warehouse somewhere in Balara, where at night he would sit on a plastic chair fighting nothing but the urge to drift off to what world his dreams might bring, and ride back at daybreak to the small space where Grace lay on a cot waiting for him, waiting as well for the baby which as the months progressed caused her belly to swell more and more, the three of them trying to survive amidst intervals of hunger, discomfort, and just the plain fact that they had detached themselves from a life that may have been better had they been careful or had they just waited for the right time to fuck it all up, because "what do we know about all this?" a question Grace finally asked as the creature in her womb approached its sixth month, Grace, standing in the middle of the apartment, her hands waving at the unpainted cement walls with cracks and roaches, the floor with peeling linoleum, a table with a thermos and a Maxwell House jar with an inch of sugar in it, outside the tricycles and jeepneys roaring into a night that just began, Grace looking and smelling tired already in a ten peso duster dress unearthed in a thrift shop the day when they thought of looking for things to fill the space they would live in, now stinking with mold and disappointments, the tenants both hopeful and hopeless, and all he could say was, "you have to rest, Grace," that he would find a way, that he was making a way, that he was earning and that there would be enough for all of them, but Grace, that fiery spirit now dimmed with disillusionment, only sighed and sank back into her cot where she didn't budge even as he buttoned up for

another twelve-hour shift, and at Balara he didn't slip his cap down to his eyes, instead spent most hours thinking, at times murmuring a prayer, drawing plans out of thin air about places out the country, dollars, possibilities, all the things their child wouldn't miss because he has been good, which excited him for much of the night and the morning that approached, and when the dawn came he took the jeepney, uniform in his backpack like it was high school all over again, civilian clothes on, t-shirt flapping in the wind as the PUV growled on Commonwealth Avenue, the Elliptical Road, to Quezon Avenue, and finally on the multi-stoptlight slowness of España, where he alighted, his heart stuffed with the urge to lock Grace and their yet-to-be-lucky baby in his arms, assure them of his plans, that, in fact, he *had* plans, that they were not going through all this with a blind man's walking stick, surprising himself, alas, when he opened the door and beheld an empty apartment, the sheet on the cot folded, the cabinets opened and emptied of Grace's clothes, on the table, weighed by the coffee jar, was a note at the back of a drugstore receipt: "I can't do this...I'm going back home...I'm sorry" and what else could he do but slump on a chair and look at the space he was left with, his mistakes summarized by four corners and a splintered ceiling, he thought of sending a text or a quick ring but he understood that it wouldn't be of any use, that he now had to go on with his decision to be a man, not to chase the impossible, a life with her, who had given up and would then be shipped to another island, pretend in the near future that the fruit of their love was nothing but someone else's, though by no means would he drop everything and wave a white flag to whomever was responsible for his unfortunate ass (God? Fate? Chance?), no, he has found his stinking corner and a job to pay it with, might as well as go on, which he did, brave little soul that he thought he was, trudging on with the days and months and weeks with his baton and gun in an empty workspace, Armed Security Officer, securing for the first few months a warehouse, then a bank, then finally a college building, at which point he already had enough to commit to an

indefinite payment scheme for the apartment, which he in turn had bought new paint and linoleums for, better pillows, a bulb that didn't flicker on its first week, fruits, and proper coffee to occupy the plastic table, things to make the place habitable despite the solitude that had for the first few months oppressed him, smelling on the sheets traces of Grace (whom he had sought, whilst in a gray jacket and baseball cap so he won't be ID'd just in case, sad but not surprised to find the Acostas' house empty) lying on the bed, finding the courage, alas, to change the covers so that guilt won't grip him when he brought home women he met on bus stops, waiting sheds, anywhere, or when he lay back on the bed, phone raised to his face by the left hand, on the right his dick, fapping to DPs, bukkakes and all sorts of weird sex wildly skewed from the norms of "proper" intercourse, an area where he and Grace had before the break-up been exploring, rather exclusively, which, now as he stood back in real time at the mouth of the Fine Arts building, he thought might be the reason for the lack of second-thoughts (or maybe third or fourth) when he went to the bathroom and allowed himself to be sucked by a boy just a few hours ago, but upon chewing on this thought he supposed it wasn't the case, after all had he wanted to rebel from the rules set down for his species, he would have done so long ago, finding ways for rounds of soggy biscuit with unsuspecting friends or dropping hints to wild couples that he'd like to be with them in bed someday, no, if he had any doubts about himself he would have known and would have acted on it given his impulse, which now he believed had nothing to do with his impromptu bathroom hookup, such an odd first contact, which was clear to him then that it was not about himself, but something about the boy, whom he now thought of as he threw a quick look at the clock on a wall above a mural of the Spaniards' arrival (colonizers flocked with drawn swords behind a priest wielding a hand-sized crucifix before Indios with their spears and loincloth) on which he would have taken the usual closer look had not the clock turned six, bringing with it students going out of rooms and into the vestibule where he at present

watched those coming in for the next hour's class, at the same time on alert for signs of the boy as he did before for every thirty minutes, unsure of what he was to do in case the boy appeared, and when at last he did, the same satchel slung on a shoulder, he had probed while beside him another boy, a longhaired one, about Isaac's age, involved in what looked like the peak of a debate with Isaac, the guard was just in time to stop himself from picking the whistle up for nothing but that itch to know beyond the steely gaze and bathroom kink, to ask details outside of what he knew from the tap of an ID, or perhaps to extort an answer as to why he was drawn to him, because he couldn't from himself, poor, confused shithead that he was, crushing on a hookup, turned by a pale, thin boy into nothing but a predator, for that's what he had turned into, a fanged mass of pain and hunger circling, if only in his mind, a prey who turned out to be Isaac, this boy walking, gesticulating, approaching then the steel bar parting those who walk in and out, as then out walked Isaac and his friend with the throng of babble and leather shoes on the floor, not before—again, he couldn't have imagined it—the boy threw a look and a nod at his direction, eye contact (this time within a microsecond) long enough to assure him that what had happened was real and would be worthy of late night faps, although at the moment, Isaac, quite disturbed and amused with a theory his friend Ernest had to share with him, only had half a mind for whatever it was that lubricated the guard from head to toe with confusion, the nod being a variation of his kiss and *thank you*, although that was not to say that Isaac was too casual about the whole thing; he had in fact retained that sexed-up flush throughout History of the Arts 2, third subject for the day, for which he had been late for ten minutes after milking the guard at the bathroom, tongue still tingling with jizz remnants, unabsorbed look at a headless marble torso of a man bent over a PowerPoint slide, his chin resting at the back of a hand as the prof slashed at the texts and reproductions with her clicker's laser, unable to stop thinking not just of the new guard but what the guard had carried by his belt, that cold metal, those cylinders locked



in leather, ah, who would have known that all he had to do to get closer to a gun, at last, was to try his luck with that poor excuse of a guard too easy to bait, to see through, to fool into submission, to reduce into a trembling mouthfucking closeted bitch by the toilets, Dalisay, F. (his name, sewn under PADPAO logo; he wondered what “F” means: Ferdinand? Francisco? Frodo?), not a bit close to Isaac’s main man, Roger, in his prime, with his beefy chest and shining Mossberg 500, not to mention the tip of that Glock 22 that once had slipped in his tight young ass, pre-pubescent afternoons then rushing back to Isaac as he sat in the room now with a board where the *Guernica* was diluted by the light of an ancient projector, attuned to the lecture he had lost interest in were his classmates, including his best friend and fellow sophomore Ernesto Delos Reyes, Arki major with a taste for toppling down dictators, or at least dreaming to do so, dreaming now perhaps as he slouched on the black armchair with his stubble and hair that flowed to the shoulder, most likely undaunted by the prof’s habit of pacing at the back of the room, panopticon scanning the back of everyone’s heads ready to pounce with her version of light, red laser, and high-decibel screeching to top any prison megaphone: *Mr./Ms. (insert unfortunate bastard’s surname), read what we have on the board and tell us what you think about it*, poor bastard being some oft-ignored irregular and “on the board” being Picasso in a Hamburglar outfit beside a quote approximating what weight his canvass splattering pulled in the context of anti-war efforts, which was very little, believed Isaac (as he thought Ernest would believe as well), if at all, but the art prof being an art prof, and Isaac and the rest of the room being what they were and where they were, had to, of course, play their part in one of humanity’s (or Humanities’? thought Isaac, with capital H?) civilizations-long circle jerk, involving of course the framing of dead white men’s “art” and close scrutiny of now-obsolete techniques (“I mean,” Isaac could almost hear his best friend think while the brilliant fucker slouched with his greasy mane framing those eyes that were more Oriental than Hispanic, “shouldn’t art

serve the cause of the masses?”), but, whatever, because despite his equal regard to the academe’s bizarre leaning on art and Ernest’s staunch refusal to be gobbled by what trappings the “system” was setting up, Isaac—now copycatting the posture of his friend beside him, staring out the window where the campus lounged under a cloudless sky, the open field dotted with football players, students fanning themselves under gazebos with parasol-shaped roofs—couldn’t help but remember the first afternoon his parents had left him in the care of Tito Roger, neighbor-extraordinaire, former police chief superintendent, without any blood relation to his family, living just next door which happened to be the sole reason he was called “Tito,” the afternoon when his ever-so-innocent parents had to eyeball a distant cousin on account of some family business (what it was, Isaac never knew), “Don’t cause your Tito Roger any trouble, ha?” being their parting words for the day, and he was quite stoked and confused as he stood there, ten-year-old kid with a backpack swollen with third grade textbooks before the doorstep of the man whom he must have known since forever as the retired officer who moved into the house next to theirs almost the same time as they did when he was but a thumb-sucking infant, Tito Roger, a man at fifty then who still had the posture of a newly minted corporal, perpetually shaved face, thinning cap of hair but not balding, not a hint of the double chin he was used to seeing on men his age at school or the tricycle terminals when his Mama took him to school, placing a hand on his shoulder and steering him to the walkway where, after he locked the gate once the exhaust of the Garcias’ second-hand Impala had long dissipated, he asked Isaac, “got some homework to do, boy?” for which Isaac nodded and smiled, and the man smiled and his heart warmed with the prospect of befriending this next door cop with whom his parents were friends, and as they entered the door he was excited to know where he should plop his bag so they could work on his Science assignment about leaves and flowers, answered thus by the man’s strong hand waving him into a living room where a black leather couch was parked in front of a low

wooden table reminiscent of East Asian drama set pieces where families gather around for bowls of ramen and far-from-subtle scandal confrontations, although, as the light went out the sky beyond the windows with missing blinds, no confrontation happened, only the man and the child cutting from pages of *American Rifleman*, *Guns & Ammo*, *GQ*, and other periodicals from surplus stalls which ended up stacked on the middle of his center table, allowing the kid to clip out whatever may have resembled a plant in the pages, to be glued on a box in the textbook, and once all was done the book was tucked into Isaac's bag and he sat on the couch gawking at a Tagalog-dubbed *Ranma ½* as Tito Roger vacillated between the sink, the stove, and finally the kitchen table where he had set up a bowl of rice and a platter of hotdogs which Isaac downed with milk while the cop downed his with a can of Bud Light, talking periodically to Isaac about his schooling and answering questions about his life, Roger Pamintuan, former cop who had locked petty criminals behind bars and placed terrorists on hit-lists because electric chairs were not an the option in this country, and Isaac, in awe, listened to his exploits and near-failures when commies almost slipped out of his hands but were, of course, given his suave tactics, brought back to the state's custody to be reformed into law-abiding citizens, the story then half lost to the child that he was but nonetheless made a deep impact due to the telling: Tito Roger's posture on the chair, beer can on the left while the right palm stayed still on the table, voice deep and tailed by echoes that wouldn't stop bouncing off the walls until the next sentence was delivered, and Isaac sat there as if compelled by no less than a president with an edict to bring peace to the country, as if Tito Roger was in front of a camera and a phalanx of media people to arrange what history and dissidents had torched: "Peace," Tito Roger said, "could only be attained by killing off those who have no respect for it," and never before in his life had he heard "kill" with such reverence, the word ringing in his ears even as he was lead to a room, Tito Roger's room, where he would sleep on the bed while Tito Roger would stay on a mat he

had set on the carpeted floor, where he had looked around and found pictures hanging on the walls, framed portraits of men he would only recognize years later during classes on World History, men with berets, clipped moustaches, and a look of dead-set seriousness, all looking at him and the former cop, who seemed to be okay with it, and so he was okay with it as well, thinking that these must be the angels guarding Tito Roger and thus him as well, starting that night, and he slept and dreamed a dream where he and his best friend Ernest were in a ship not unlike the *Going Merry* in *One Piece*, sailing off to an island where a chest full of marbles lay buried when a small boat with a fat panda standing in the middle of the stern appeared from beneath the ocean floor, and this panda stared slit-eyed, raised its hands and a leg to do the crane-style whence from its widening mouth boomed out cannonballs which, one after the other, took their ship down and finally brought them beneath the surface of the water, both of them, Ernest and Isaac, drowning, and he woke up welcomed by the stares of men in the portraits as he gasped on the sheets of Tito Roger's bed, who was not in the room anymore but he could hear his voice, along with his mother's, in the kitchen, and when Isaac walked from the room his mother greeted him good morning and, after thanking Tito Roger, they went out and back to the house to prepare for another school day, not once forgetting the dream he had of the boat, which, upon arriving at school, he made a point of telling Ernest, who said "cool!" and for much of what break time they had they swapped details of their dreams and Ernest tried to extend the story all the while Isaac penciled scenes from their voyage at the back of his notebook, drawing as well this weird tilted cross that suddenly was stuck in his head, a drawing that stopped Ernest in the middle of nose picking to ask, "what is that?" and Isaac could only say "I don't know, but I saw it last night in Tito Roger's house," both of them looking at the symbol that Isaac saw at an armband of one of the framed men in his neighbor's bedroom, coaxed him thus to such intense curiosity that made him ask his mother, later in the weekend, to allow him to go to

their next door neighbor's house for a visit, which was promptly granted, he knocked then on Tito Roger's steel gate holding the notebook where he had drawn the symbol and was allowed in by the stocky crewcut man in the living room where he was served a glass of lemonade and shavings of history, "that," he said as they sat on the same sofa where they had cut stray flora pictures out of gun magazines, "is the Swastika: the symbol of greatness, the peak of civilization, of everything that everyone should stand for," both of them staring at Isaac's drawing, in awe of the sign and its possibilities, Tito Roger's eyes then shining with pride, telling Isaac to come with him once more to the bedroom for a lesson, "this one here," he had said, pointing at a frame at the heart of the wall of men's portraits, "is the greatest leader in the history of this country," a man in a sepia photograph, sitting on a highbacked chair before a table with microphones, looking straight at the viewer, one hand on a sheaf of documents, the other parked before his face, forefinger and thumb meeting as if the man was about to pinch whoever was in front of him, "this man," continued Tito Roger, "had a vision, a clear vision which would have saved the country, but he was overthrown by deluded masses," Isaac, curious as to why such a great man was ousted, asked Tito Roger, "why?" to which he got this answer: "because people had no use for peace," and he was more confused than enlightened, though when he was asked "do you want to know what we did to those had no use for peace?" Isaac felt thrilled and rather anxious as to what that smile and glint in the eyes of the former cop meant when the question was asked and when he said, "I don't think I should tell you," Isaac promised that whatever it was would be a secret between the two of them and not even his best friend Ernest will know about it, so Tito Roger said "all right, then" and without missing a beat the man knelt in front of the bed and placed his hand at the space between the bed and the floor, where then he pulled out a lidless box with a duffel bag, grunting as he recounted how "I used these back in the day," placing a hand over the black bag filling the paper box, after which he unzipped the bag and revealed the contents which to

Isaac's ten-year-old brain meant very little: a handgun and a shotgun submerged in bronze bullets, "we used these to wipe them out," Tito Roger said as he took out the shotgun, wiped it with his hands, the air between them percolating with the smell of metal, the shotgun's barrel black, both of them staring at its tip which Tito Roger was still wiping, back and forth, smiling at the same time at Isaac with a look that then puzzled him, *why is he smiling* and *why is he touching my head ruffling my hair* reeling in his child brain as his neighbor went on looking at him with a charged smile, one hand on the gun that rested then against a part of Tito Roger's bared thigh (bared when the lower end of the jersey short he wore went up when he knelt earlier to retrieve the firearm), the other hand ruffling his hair then the back of his head until it rested and fluttered at his nape, then Tito Roger asking if Isaac wanted to know what happened to all who fought him and rallied against peace, "those who mess with the State," he said and Isaac looked at his Tito Roger for a while and at the walls where the eyes of the greatest leaders in the world urged him with their dead-set gaze to say, "yes, Tito Roger," to which Tito Roger lit up even more and said, in a deep and even tone, "you have to take off your clothes to know it, I'll let you feel it, boy," and something in the boy felt fear and even more confusion but he looked up to him so as Tito Roger set the shotgun on the floor and retrieved the revolver from the bed of bullets in the bag, Isaac took off his tank top—where a print of Space Sheriff Shaider ready with his blue sword was fading—and worked himself out of his counterfeit Nike shorts, then his white underwear, and when he was out of clothing Tito Roger looked at him with such admiration that he felt shy and proud and strangely stirred by a new sensation that ended between his crotch, which the former cop saw and noted by saying, "that's my boy," and then followed by, "you'll have a taste for it, I see," after which Tito Roger went closer to him, warm breath on his cheek, heat radiating off the man and onto the naked boy who then looked not at the eyes digging deeper on his skin but at the revolver inching its way to his face, until the tip went close to his

mouth, closer than the breath of Tito Roger, feeling some sort of racing in his chest, until the gun slipped into his...oh fuck...shit...oh...but of course he had to stop these daylight wet dreams, present-day Isaac, else he'd have to stand with a cum-stained fly alongside students with the habitual Hail Mary murmured at the end of every subject, Art History now done and the prof walking with her floral print shawl and thick specs out the door, tailed by the class magnetized to some schedule, and Ernest tying his hair in a ponytail that didn't help much to argue for his cleanliness, asking Isaac, "KFC or Seven-Eleven?" to which Isaac, both because of the hard-on and the genuine lack of need to eat, said, without standing up despite the room emptied then save for the two of them, that he's all good and that "I'll see you later," restraining the urge to call his friend by the usual term of endearment, "Hippie scum," as he was in no mood to be called a "cocksucker," at least not after reeling in the vortex of past, after skidding on the tractions long-hidden under rugs of incompetent one-night-stands, not now that he finally had his guard whom he might see again, perhaps each day, to finally end his search for the ultimate lover cum dominatrix, and not especially now when he was in no mood to be lectured on the long history of hippies and rebels and the "One Big Fight" that truly mattered, so he let Ernest go with just the usual fist-bump and sat on the armchair for some time as students for the next class came trickling in, reminding himself not before his dick deflated that he had to be in the room for his next subject, which happened to be an interesting one, Figure Painting, and for the next hour and a half he sat with both hands on one of the wide-topped desks as the prof talked of chiaroscuro, line, volume, and a review of color theory, before dismissing them with a note on what materials to bring for the next meeting, after which Isaac sat through his last two classes without paying much attention until it was 6:00 pm and he caught up with Ernest on the ground floor hallway, filling up a plastic bottle by a fountain while beside him a long-haired boy with a peace sign earring was talking for a while before getting lost in the traffic of moving

students, to the building's exit, and by the time Isaac reached Ernest he was just screwing the cap on the bottle and he told him, while pacing with the throng, that somewhere along these rooms and hallways was the State, "they got funds to plant intel among us," he said, which of course Isaac thought was crazy, "I mean," Isaac said, "why bother, anyway?" and this was the discussion—bordering in fact on a crash course on "The Movement"—which the guard saw from a distance, to which Isaac was engaged as he had zero answers as to why should folks like Ernest be a POI, "an absurd question," said Ernest, "you know how we are at coups," which made Isaac laugh and say, "by singing songs and burning effigies? Do you think Rhodora would care to look at you guys in her Malacanang flat screen?" questions that the guard couldn't hear of course but whose intensity he could sense, by the wave of the two boys' hands, though he in turn wasn't eyeballed, at least initially, by Isaac, not until Isaac and Ernest had reached the unavoidable point of talk where the horrors of late capitalism sashays in, at which point they were at the steel bars dividing the comers from the goers of the building, and at which point Isaac remembered the guard, finally, now looking at him, and, like handing out a coin to street urchins, gave F. Dalisay a wink to end the day with, walking out the of building with his friend, shaken by the thought of a snitch among them, he couldn't help but think of what the next day would bring to his dick's life, though he too was disturbed by what Ernest learned that day, because Isaac thought, as they stood then by a vendor in front of the school gate lighting up their menthols, despite his fetish for men with guns, if what this greasy-haired fucker picked up is true, then they might as well expect the same campus disappearances known to happen in other schools but which were of course blacked out by what remaining frequencies TV stations were allowed to send from commandeered media towers, but again, no matter, because he believed his woke friend had a slim chance of courting spies' attention, which he tried to reassure himself by asking "you're not like a leader or something, are you?" to which he got the answer, "I guess you don't



know me after all,” a response Isaac got after Ernest spat on the gutter, hands on his hips, eyes oscillating in a likely symptom of sudden paranoia at passersby and stalled cars in P. Noval Street, hair now loosened from the ponytail, and when Isaac said, “do you want me to crash in your place for tonight, man?” Ernest’s eyes lit up and told him it won’t be a bad idea, so they finished their sticks, ate in a *turo-turo* without once talking of whatever it was that bothered them, and walked to Ernest’s dorm, where Isaac slept after texting his parents that he was with Ernest and he won’t be home that night, where, before closing his eyes whilst hugging a frayed throw pillow on the lint-infested couch, he told his friend, “take care, you hippie scum,” and he was answered by the voice from the blanketed bundle on the bed beside him, “you too, cocksucker,” and as they snored, the guard, having just done the dishes and brushed his teeth, laid on his bed in his apartment a couple of streets away from the dorm where the two boys snoozed, the guard having no urge to go Incognito on his phone browser for an arm exercise, lying on the cot staring at the squares of light on the ceiling from the window chaperoned by the reverb of tricycles, listening to himself breathe, a hand on his chest rising and falling, slipping into REM with an afterimage of the boy, Isaac, nodding at him, the hours then quiet and uneventful, and before daybreak he sprang from the bed, did crunches on the floor, downed a boiled egg and rice with a mug of coffee, bathed, buttoned up in his uniform and slung the bag where his gun—which he brought home as there was no place in the school to keep it in—was kept along the cuffs, taser, walkie-talkie, and self-defense spray, and he walked the short distance to the school where he arranged all these around his belt and lined up with the other guards for a morning pep talk by the chief before being dispersed to their respective stations, in his case The Fine Arts building, his assignment for two days now, having transferred from the Arts and Letters Building where he had been for the past three months, now retracting the collapsible gate of the Fine Arts entrance but without letting the lined-up students in, only allowing the

admin, teachers, and maintenance personnel who were yet to learn not to greet him with a smile as he scarcely returned the favor, until the clock above the mural by the vestibule wall announced with red-on-black display of LED that it was 6:00, at which point the scanner began beeping again by the entrance as students came in for their morning classes, and so he stood and waited for the day to proceed on its usual course, only this time he kept glancing at the digital clock waiting for ten to strike, and when it was quarter to that hour along came the boy Isaac walking up to him tapping again his ID, staring at him again, and the guard stood there as if in *deja vu*, nailed to the floor by a boy too easy on the eyes, heart racing, but the guard had enough sense in him to say first, with a smile he hoped was not creepy or too conspiratorial, "Good morning, Sir," to which Isaac, tailed by Ernest, whose uniform he borrowed after crashing in his place, flashed a neutral smile without returning the greeting before walking on with his friend to a turn in the hallway where they both disappeared with the rest of the rushing students, and for a while this bothered him, as it had yesterday, but this time he wondered if yesterday's episode had the same plot he had in store for the women he brought into his apartment, for a while he had to stand by the entrance, nursing the thought of moving on from a bond that never happened, foolish of him to think how things would take a turn for the better, and yet, upon walking to the bathroom at the exact time as yesterday, after himself putting on the knob a plastic laminated sign that says, "Cleaning Time," Isaac was there, by the sink drying his hands, and after the customary seconds when made sure of the other's intent, he had Isaac in his arms, traces of Lucky Strikes on the boy's spittle, Isaac cupping his face as they deep-tongued each other, then the boy's hand worked on his belt and fly and for the second time he found his pants down to his shins, his dick throbbing in those pale, slender fingers, his balls massaged, then the boy kneeling and taking in his manhood again by the mouth, all the same beautiful shit life served him yesterday now repeated, but this time perhaps for the better, because the boy stood up again,

unbuckled himself to let his slack pants fall down his shoes and, naked from the waist down, turned his back to the guard, hoisted up his blazer and Oxford shirt, leaning to the adjacent wall, exposing his smooth white ass, saying, “fuck me, Sir, fuck me hard,” the guard—quite familiar then with porn involving bitches without qualms about the backdoor entrance, having no need for further instructions—spread the butt cheeks wide enough to expose the pink hole, where he spat and slid a digit, then two, trying to work it loose amidst the moans the boy suppressed by biting his own fingers, and when at last the guard had somehow eased some rear-end tension, proceeded to slide in the real thing, in a slow rhythm, back and forth, his first anal turning out to be a decent one, in fact, a good one, and he had scarcely rocked himself for five minutes when he felt a quaking below his navel, thus spurting forth in the tight sphincter the love juice he saved up from a fap-free yesternight, leaning on to the boy and kissing him behind the ears before drawing back to walk, weakly, to a box of Kleenex by the mirrors where he drew some sheets to wipe his dripping glans, during which the boy stood straight, walked while hoisting up his pants to his waist, shutting himself inside a cubicle after, from where the guard heard little scuffling noise and the toilet being flushed and after a couple of minutes the boy emerged from it to join him by the sink to wash his face and ask him, “what’s your name?” which the guard, caught off-guard so to speak, answered, “Fidel,” and the boy thought at once, *hm, not bad*, thinking of a missile crisis and failed assassination attempts, he edged closer to the guard, looked him in the eyes, said, “pleased to meet you, Sir Fidel,” and Fidel, fearing that the boy would again walk off without leaving him assurance of a future meet-up, gripped the boy by the arms and said, “I live nearby,” a statement enough to signal to Isaac the guard’s intent of taking all these, finally, a notch higher, so he asked what time would the guard be off duty, and upon hearing the answer, he said, “later, then,” before slipping out the door, leaving Fidel with his thoughts, staring yet again at himself in the mirror, inspecting his uniform for any crease hinting at the tryst that just

happened, or would happen again, he thought, thinking as he went out of the bathroom, returning the plastic sign to the janitor's closet beside the door, of possible acts they could do in his room, thus in this state of subdued panic he went through the day, standing by the entrance, half-hearing the clip-on walkie-talkie by his breast pocket sizzle with coded gossip from fellow guards about a broiling unrest, about President Rhoda's edict to ice "suspicious elements" threatening the country's peace, by all means necessary, including shoot-to-kill orders for anarchist top guns pretending to be part of the innocent masses, how even they, security officers, are free to use their Smiths to bring down one, and that "there's no need to worry," as Tango said at one point, "no jail time for killing the wrong guy, just a reprimand, or at least a reminder that we should be more careful," to all which Fidel could say, at least to himself, *no thank you*, as he didn't see why he should be part of all that mumbo jumbo, since he had his own life to sort out now, especially now that he found someone better suited for his dick than Grace, more worthy of sleepless nights than a baby he never once saw, and for the rest of his shift his thoughts alternated between the boy Isaac, and the girl Grace, whom he never saw again, because when he came back to the Acostas' months ago, wearing the same jacket and cap, a sign hung on one of the pointed arrows welded to the top of the steel gate, "For Sale, Please Call..." for a minute he had stood there contemplating what would happen if he called the number on the sign, the chance of hearing Grace's voice again or perhaps the distant chuckle of a baby, but before he had hit the "Call" button it struck him how it was more likely to hear the thundering roar of Grace's father, he wasn't in the mood for that, so he contented himself with dropping by the house of his own parents (with whom he had reconciled, not without the tears he'd come to expect to flood his homecoming) and taking a tricycle ride to the village where Grace had lived, taking a stroll on that same street where he had limped with swollen eyes and bloody mouth, losing the jacket and cap in his subsequent walks, only stopping his excursions when the "For Sale" sign

disappeared, taking with it what scraps of hope he had, as he watched, one nightfall, through the Capiz windows, unfamiliar faces moving in the living room, from then on resolving to steer away from needless complications brought by devoting oneself to someone else without the guarantee of a happy ending, something he never found, or believed he never would, so he had to treat flirtations lightly, bearing in mind that however willing this or that woman was to bend for him, in any position on his apartment mattress or on the seats of a crumbling movie house or an oft-unused cubicle of a mall bathroom, there must be an end to all these bush-beatings, he either had to move on or sniff for a the chance once a motive was hinted at, and because between Grace and the boy Isaac no one among the women had shown much post-coital interest anyway, he settled on counting his blessings so as not to find reasons to want to be gunned down by President Rhoda's vigilantes, although this Isaac surely had changed the game for him, not that he was sure it was something better than the Grace situation, but of all the others he'd been with Isaac was the one bitch to have made a difference, both dick-wise and, well, he might as well admit, oxytocin-wise, nonetheless he still had to trust for things to go south, as per the usual track of his life so far, and to just content himself with standing in his assigned corner, let fate do its business, watch students and professors walk in all directions on his side of campus, watch, with his heart rate pumping up right after the 1:00 bell, as Isaac himself walked to the entrance, paused just beside him briefly enough to say, "See you later, Sir Fidel," before going out the building, leaving him for the nth time to tend to his self-assessment, while on the other hand Isaac walked to the gate leading to the footbridge on España, which he crossed to wait down in the shed for a bus with a Litex/Fairview sign plate, boarding one and settling himself on a window seat where he intended to lean his head and nap while enduring what he supposed would be an easy traffic, only to be disappointed with the frequent full stops that ended twenty minutes later, past Welcome Rotonda, where demonstrators had set up a stage with

placards screaming “Rhoda Resign!” “Rhoda! Hitler! Diktador! Tuta!” and other such phrases, flags raised with a circle-A, hammer and sickle, CND emblem, or raised fists painted on them, a teenage girl with megaphone and a bandana red as a fire truck leading a chant, notwithstanding the heat at half past one or the jam they summoned on the road, which on the usual days would set off a mental barrage in Isaac’s mind how these noble-hearted road warriors could have done their business in a less important venue, but now, having remembered a conversation he had with Ernest (who’d dismiss Isaac’s complaints as the whines of a classic “petit-bourgeois” cocksucker), he thought briefly of the role he was playing at this point in history, as the bus now sped on a decongested Quezon Avenue, and was disappointed to realize that he was part of the problem, more than the fact that he fantasized about sucking men in uniform, the problem being that he was yet to find a reason convincing enough to halt these fantasies, but still, regardless of his bizarre attachment to batons and barrels, he found himself in sympathy with the likes of Ernest, and Ernest in particular, childhood pal who always had his back from middle to high school, for Isaac was a weakling as a child, easy to pick on due to his perpetual thinness and soft voice, Ernest always there to scare off some butch (“say another word, pig,” Ernest had once told a hulk twice his size who called Isaac ‘sirena,’ although he would have no way to defeat the offender in a brawl, being lanky himself, though back then he already had that freaky look enough to make you think he had razor in his back pocket, or a membership card for some hazy street gang, both untrue yet believable if claimed, the truth being that he was a weirdo himself who grew up with a mother and father whom Isaac once saw on *TV Patrol* interviewed about the need for social change while standing by a picket line), falling out only once as an aftermath of the time, back in their freshmen year, in college, when Isaac expressed a far-from-flattering opinion about The Movement (“I think they’re stupid,” were his exact words as they walked between classes on the hallway, referring to students who died in another

school after a lightning rally that led to a shootout), reconciling after an invite from Ernest for a two-session course from student leaders in a Fine Arts building classroom, which he attended with other pledges without fear of being caught by anyone, although he opted not to attend the other courses, because, Isaac's hard-on resources being what they were, he'd find it beyond his tolerable limit for irony, although the attendance was enough for Ernest to be convinced to patch everything up with his friend, for which Isaac was glad, and at times guilty for, like right now as he sat on the moving bus, thinking of Fidel Dalisay, barely restraining an erection as the PUV rolled past this monument in South Triangle, bronze statue of a senator slain on a tarmac decades ago, an arm raised as if expecting a fist bump, the sun beating down on the roadside people waiting for a ride while he sat inside the controlled chill of the bus, thinking of what he might do with the guard in his house, ah, poor specimen of the male species, not knowing what Isaac had in store for him, Isaac then smiling at the thought, smiling still as he got off the bus before it zoomed down the Q. Ave underpass, standing for a while by the empty carpark of a Hi-Top store, then walking casually under the pinpricks of daylight on a footbridge, onto a street shaded by palm fronds leading to the gate of San Miguel Village, where his family nested in a nondescript two-story concrete box in a row of similarly designed houses, knocking then on their gate and surprising his mother in a house dress, leaning over her bushes of dandelion on the yard, who asked him, "too early?" which he answered with a lie: "profs got a meeting for the day," a mumbled answer, segueing thus to his reason for an afternoon touch-base, the need to get some clothes as "I'll be staying with Ernest overnight," a satisfactory answer that didn't merit further discussion as they sat for lunch later, his mother then telling him about his old friend next door, now hooked up to an IV twenty-four seven, supplied with TLC by a sister who just flew from Ilocos, a spinster in the latter part of her seventies who had caught Isaac's mother sweeping dried leaves from the front gate the day before, launching into a dry-throated

monologue about how “nice” their village was and how lucky Roger was to have such a peaceful environ to grow old in, to make peace with the cancer now munching at his colon, “not a bad place to die in, eh?” this woman had said while flashing a nearly toothless smile, gray hair down like stiff threads on her hunched shoulders, finally stating her name and relevance to the former cop next door, shaking hands with Mrs. Garcia and inviting her to see the man she now had to change bedpans and pray the Sorrowful Mysteries for, Mrs. Garcia understanding by the look of the gaunt body without hair and eyebrows on the just-delivered hospital bed that there wouldn’t be much time, “I’d say days, or weeks if he’s lucky” Irene Garcia said as she piled the used plates on the table and walked to the sink where she implored Isaac while doing the dishes to “see him before going... you were such good friends,” saying this as Isaac stood by the kitchen table with a glass of lemon-infused water, Isaac guessing what he would find lying on the old man’s bed bordered by a wall of framed snapshots of dictators from various points of time and latitude, trying to prep himself for the man his mother had given a flatline date to, oh well, he thought, before downing the half-empty glass, handing it to Irene, and heading out of their gate and knocking on the one to their left, a low iron sheet with pointed bars extending well beyond his head, calling out, *tao po tao po*, taking a couple more calls before an old woman opened the aluminum front door while squinting at whoever was knocking on the gate, “I’m Isaac,” he said, “a friend of Tito Roger’s,” the woman’s eyes lighting up in feigned recognition before ambling down the short walkway and unbolting the gate to let Isaac in with an apparently questioning look as they approached the rubber “Welcome” mat, Isaac finally deciding to break the ice by saying, “I live next door,” at which the old lady nodded and formed an “O” with her dry mouth, saying “thanks for dropping by, *hijo*,” leading him to the room he seemed to have always known, where nothing had changed except for the bed, now a steel-framed one the upper half of which was tilted at a 15 degree angle, and the main man himself, Tito Roger, neighbor-extraordinaire, who



once had the bulky chest of a lifter trained for the juggernaut method, who had a well-kept crewcut, who had a booming baritone suited for warfare, now reduced to the bones of himself, a shrunk pre-corpse, head worthy of an infant's bonnet, hissing in his sleep through cannula, IV dripping, a monitor waiting for the pending straight line, "shouldn't he stay in a hospital?" Isaac said, feeling a lump in his throat, and the sister, who introduced herself as "Lourdes," said that her brother wanted to die in here, "in this room," her hands swept along the walls, "with these men," both of them looking around and touching down, separately, on the same understanding of the man's character, Isaac remembering days past with Tito Roger, growing sentimental, regretting to have forgotten about him for the past couple of years in his pursuit of other men, in his belief that he had outgrown this next-door veteran, regretting that he didn't take seriously the word going around the street about the man having to be rushed to the ER just about a month ago, where he stayed until yesterday when he arrived with this kind old sibling, regretting as well not to have returned the man's favors, for introducing him to the wonders of the gun, the flesh, the erectile charm of anything at the right side of the law, he, Isaac, always the one to receive between them, never the other, and he regretted that, a regret that made him wonder where the man or his sister may have transferred the box with the Smith and Mossberg, certainly not under this new bed, although when the woman went briefly out the room he knelt just to be sure, not surprised to see the space below empty save for the wires and tubes at the head of the bed, and when the woman came back with a cup of tea to offer him, he said, "I was last here, I don't know, three years back?" a confession perhaps, more aimed at the unconscious man than at Lourdes who had hauled stools from a corner so they could sit as they talk and start a sort of vigil, Isaac explaining that he had other things to do in those times following the years when he and Tito Roger had a sort of close friendship, at least twice a week visits and all, Lourdes saying, "it's fine, he understands," while Isaac on the other hand firmly believed that the

man wouldn't, because I was unfaithful, he thought, reliving thus to himself the year leading to his high school graduation as he sipped from the teacup, the boys with dripping noses he flirted with, and just the year before, all that post-dismissal cruising in other schools, mostly public ones, littered with the remains of burnt chairs, gin bottle shards, the smell of gas somewhere, trying to chance upon a prowling cop who may have been looking for someone to arrest even before the eleven o'clock curfew, routinely disappointing himself when he allowed some longhair strolling the area lead him behind a tree or an empty classroom, doing it with another teenager, a potential Molotov thrower, who would leave him not only with pube in his mouth but also a pitch for him to be part of the masses, to sign up for The Movement, not unlike the occasional comments of Ernest, and he would later walk down their street, feeling guilty as he noted the faint light through the mesh wire of Tito Roger's front door, thinking how dare he let his asshole be touched by someone who should've been put away, let alone, as was the case with Ernest, be even friends with them, which was also the reason why he hadn't said much about Ernest to the old man, the same way his thing with the old man was never revealed to his hippie scum of a friend, but of course he had to choose one over the other, and the old man, for all his wisdom and bullets, had to be left out, though Isaac guessed the man would be happy to know about the guard he finally found, two days ago, he would tell him the story of this guard, the way jokes are supposed to be cracked, if only Tito Roger would rise and prove himself worthy of Isaac again, beat his chest, claim that he was the only strongman he needed, but no, he wouldn't, that much was clear now, now as Isaac and Lourdes stared at the pattern of ribs rising and falling through the white shirt Tito Roger could barely fill, cardiac rhythm filling the room, despots from the Third Reich, The Soviet Bloc, Latin America, and Southeast Asia all looking on with grim grayscale and sepia faces, Isaac then stood from the chair, excused himself to go out of the room to the sink where he washed his teacup, walking back afterward only to stop

for a moment in front of a partially opened door beyond which things were haphazardly settled, including the bed he slept on when he first came here, shelves of paperbacks, and, on a corner, a carton box without a lid inside of which was the black bag he knew so well, thinking to himself, *so it's still here*, before heading back to Lourdes to thank her and to tell her that he must go ahead, thinking in between the faint heartbeats if he should take the woman's hand for a shake or a tap on his forehead, settling instead on a slow nod as if to say *later*, packing with him like baggage the view of the shrunken man on the bed in his mind as he walked out the gate, back to his house, failing to free himself of the thought even as he shoved a tank top, shorts, and a set of his uniform in his bag, seeing not Irene but Roger's face when he bid goodbye to his mother, walking back down the same streets through sunlight diluted by palm shadows and the hour advancing to 4:00, in his ears the green line still pulsing like Morse with a belated message of disaster, overlaid on the track of afternoon noise on Quezon Avenue as he stood by a bridge, waiting for a bus back to school, not shaking off the image until he had that nap when he finally managed to on the seat of the bus with a sign plate for Quiapo, TV by the driver's head tuned to a televised radio show where a middle-aged man, the host, screamed on about his love for the president and how the recent bombings done by anarchists had terrorized many of the people in Manila, "these terrorists," the host had declared, lifting an index finger, horn-rimmed glasses reflecting studio light, obscuring the eyes behind them, "must be killed, they must be captured, tortured, for messing with government property, property built with the blood and sweat of the people, of the Republic, how dare they tell us no one died in these bombings, that they only want to be heard, well, we hear you, terrorists, and President Rhoda will make sure that you know she hears you..." the voice droned on and on until the tapping of Tito Roger's lifeline retreated to the backseat of Isaac's brain, the host's tirades taking the shotgun and letting in through the window some air fresh with reassurance, while Isaac watched the scene beyond the window

by his temple turn from the side a mall busy with shoppers flagging down taxis to police in camos halting random riders for a checkpoint near a church rebuilt from what wasn't pulverized from the Pacific war, sonic and pictorial assurances cradling him, with the movement of the bus, to a shallow sleep which he later woke up from, wiping drool with the back of his hand, when the bus stopped for a red light just before it wheeled past Padre Noval Street, where he alighted feeling just a bit rested and a lot more motivated to throttle himself or something, anything, to distract him from the regret that suddenly grabbed him by the windpipe upon seeing Tito Roger, "it's crazy," he later told Ernest when he went up to his unit, plopping himself on the couch as his friend sat on the windowsill near the bed tapping ashes into the wind, "seeing someone like that, you know, it's like seeing myself where he was," Ernest listened and turned up the light at the end of his cig with a long drag, asking after breathing out a veil of smoke, "this friend of yours, he's a cop you said?" answered thus by Isaac with, "he's retired," which made Ernest think and do a bit of calculation, back to some years when both of them were yet to be conceived, shrugging his shoulders and muttering, "serves him right, I guess," and for a second Isaac was tempted to throw hands, stopped at once by a sudden understanding of Ernest's point, that period back in time, perhaps their parents' or grandmothers', where death and disappearances were as common as they were now, "but he's my friend," Isaac only said, "don't blame me for throwing a pity party," looking at Ernest, an almost-silhouette by the dusk, who said, "sorry, you're here because you want me to comfort you, I guess I'm not such a good friend," to which Isaac at once protested, launching on a list of things he was thankful for, like "saving my ass too many times for your own good," or "all the math assignments," or for "texting my parents that I'm with you when I'm busy with someone's dick," both of them laughing at the final bullet point, followed by Isaac saying as if he just remembered, "I am actually here because of a new friend, who won't be out till six," Ernest at once holding up his hand and saying, "spare me the details, you cocksucker," before

their talk wandered off to other planes, the Movement being one of them, at one point prompting Ernest to say that “anarchists shouldn’t take the full credit, you know, we hippies are in it as well, and you can also count on your local parish priest to be in it, hell, even some of those white-robed prowlers in the campus might have grenades handy, and not only them, of course, we also got your commies, your socialists, students and non-students, housewives, blue-collar workers, people who don’t want to be labelled but aren’t about to get fucked by our lady of blackheads and vigilantes, Madame Rhoda,” Ernest said these all the while walking over to a table where he emptied a packet of mushrooms into a filled-up thermo pot, continuing to talk as he waited for the tea to simmer, “I’m not part of the bombings, mind you, but you could sure look for me in a picket or some demonstration nearby..” and just before the water began boiling he unplugged the unit and sat on the arm of the couch where Isaac was, asking “by the way, can I ask you out for a date?” a question which brought Isaac out of the reverie he was swimming in earlier as his friend rattled on about The Movement, telling his friend, “I’m not sure,” then he looked at Ernest’s crotch, “is that six inches?” the room then filled with their howling, lasting for almost about a full minute, then Ernest, once they had recovered, said as he wiped tears off his eyes, “prof asked us to go to this exhibit in your good old National Museum, you might be interested,” and Isaac thought, strange, “why would you need a chaperone?” he asked aloud, asking his friend if something was wrong, though Ernest shook his head before telling him, “I don’t know, man, someone’s texting me about being the next one,” showing Isaac a thread of messages on his phone from an unsaved number, a message that at once alarmed Isaac, unable to stop himself from swearing, “that’s fucked-up, dude, so they really took down some of your kind before?” unable to correct himself whilst looking at the phone Ernest held out, unable to see fear creeping to his friend’s face, his friend said, “from other schools of course, I guess I’m the opening act for this uni,” Ernest then walked back to the table to pour himself a cup of the tea he

had steeped, asking Isaac with a smile that still betrayed a vague dread, “‘shrooms?” lifting his cup to where Isaac sat, getting the usual no for an answer, but a yes to his other question, “I’ll have that date with you then,” Isaac said, giving his friend a loving once-over as Ernest walked with his cup to a spot on the floor adjacent to the window and the bed where he sat in a lotus position, before standing up and walking to the bathroom where he primped himself, took a swig from his friend’s mouthwash, gargled, spat and stared at the young man in the bathroom mirror, searching for anything wrong or misplaced and, finding none, went out to find Ernest still sitting on the floor like some Indian guru sipping his way into psychedelia, which now wasn’t far from kicking in, now with Ernest’s face settling on a smile that couldn’t be anything but true, hair down to his shoulders, bell bottom pajamas, peace sign moving in a rhythm on his bare chest that matched the steady closed-eyes inhalations, the cup almost finished, palms on folded knees, Ernest’s eyes opened then he said, “Shambhala, my cocksucking friend, may you find what you’re looking for tonight,” Isaac answered with a bow, “and you too, master hippie scum,” picking up his bag from a corner, growing serious for a moment as he looked back at Ernest, who was then waving his hands in the air with such slowness that you’d think there was music to dance to, to tell him to lock the door once he’d gone, “but of course I will,” Ernest said in a singsong manner, which Isaac didn’t believe so he went out, closed the apartment door behind him before straining his ear, not surprised not to hear anything beyond it, so he knocked and shouted, “I said lock your door, Ernest,” after which he finally heard his friend walking to the door, then the metallic click of the lock behind, and then a bolt sliding into place, Ernest telling Isaac in a voice muffled by the closed doorway, “I can see your shadow on the floor, my friend, you may now go in peace and get your pussy fucked,” with these words Isaac walked to the elevators, took the lift from the seventh floor back to the level of the Earth, where everything went on as usual, the world outside the dorm’s glass door humming with the 6:00 regulars of

Padre. Noval Street, buses and jeepneys with no space to spare for students from all sides of U Belt, an aproned man fanning a grill under a tent while uniformed boys and girls clanked on plastic wares as they ate an early dinner on the side street Monoblock tables, having given up the thought of going home close to what time they had for school dismissal, eating burnt pork chops among the scuttling stray dogs, a cop's whistle somewhere, maybe a distant gunshot or two, a siren (firetruck, ambulance, someone's weird idea of evening news theme, who cares?), flyers with President Rhoda's porous face under banners of platitudes swept by what wind managed to touchdown on this part of the city, where everything jitterbugged in fear and smog light, Isaac now walking to a school gate, thankful for having remembered to wear his ID after changing into civvies, getting his bag out of the way to show the card hanging by his solar plexus to the uniformed gun-wielder, whose stiff face relaxed, allowing him to walk into the campus, not knowing of course that this kid was intending to be screwed by a fellow guard, Isaac somehow finding reason to chuckle as he glanced over a shoulder at the guard, potbellied, okay, but not really too bad looking himself, not of course with that pistol by the man's shoulder holster, definitely worn to scare off potential State enemies, *a bit too late for that*, Isaac told himself, going on with his walk until he reached the entrance of the Fine Arts building, not lining up to go in but just parking himself beside the glass podium where the ID scanner beeped as occasional students went in, behind which the guard Fidel stood now with an indecisive smile, telling Isaac that "you can't go in, Sir Isaac, you're not in your uniform," which Isaac understood, of course, of course, I'm not here to go in, "I'm here for you," words said to time with the lull where no one walked through, hushed but audible enough to be clear to the guard, to send a blush to Fidel's face, to urge him to say, I'll be out in a bit, "just wait for me over there," nodding to the gazebo with a parasol-shaped roof across the campus road, Isaac nodded in return before walking over to this coordinate, settling himself among uniformed schoolmates dotting over phones or plates

or, like he, waiting for someone to go out of the building as the campus lamplights flickered on, while the sky wasted no time sliding into a violet sunset, watching Fidel talk to another guard, who then replaced him behind the beeping monitor stand, Fidel walking inside the building and entering a corridor the depths of which lay beyond Isaac's field of vision, making Isaac wonder where the hell this guard was going, especially as the minutes trickled by and as his fellow gazebo transients one by one walked off to the campus road with the friend or fuck buddy they had waited for—maroon coats flapping in the wind, cannisters slung on their backs—replaced on the concrete seat by someone who'd only stay for about a minute, until Isaac was alone with a spectacled fellow doodling on a sketchpad settled on his thighs, and Isaac was about to move his ass over to this boy when a voice said, "hey, sorry I took some time," Fidel of course, standing there already in a plain black shirt, jersey shorts and rubber shoes worn without socks, making Isaac stand and say, "no problem," before, they, with Fidel in the lead, walked out of the gate Isaac had earlier entered Fidel nodded to the potbellied guard with shoulder holsters as they left the campus premises and as Isaac lost interest in the doodling boy and the not-so-bad-looking guy at the gate, led by Fidel whose back muscles were traced well by the thin material of the shirt, thick calves and arms moving as they walked along the exhaust and noise of the street, passing by the front doors of Ernest's dorm, walking to another street, a bend, then another street, then an alley where the rush hour noise wasn't as terrible as it really was, bright orange lamps lighting up an almost empty way with few parked cars and a space barely enough for a garbage truck to pass through, power lines dangerously low overhead, wooden houses sharing walls, some gates forged out of corrugated iron and rusting Marston mats, which in fact were the materials that made up the gate of the house where the walk ended, Fidel removing the padlock from a coil of chain link, tying a part of the gate to a pole protruding from an unfished cement wall that divided the property from the street, the property itself being a single-floor cement



box jammed between two-story flammable houses, and once they went through and had stood inside, with Fidel returning the lock and the chain-link, Isaac couldn't help but say, "I must admit, you first struck me as someone with a taste for crocs and cargo shorts," to which Fidel asked, "what do you even mean," facing Isaac then passing him by to walk to a wooden door, slide a key in, turn a light on before letting the boy inside, letting Isaac sit on the bed just beside the wall to the left of the doorway, and Fidel removed his shoes to stand on the bed, opening the jalousie windows with missing panes, drawing down the curtain before sitting beside Isaac, not touching or trying to be cute or anything, just wanting to ask again, "what do you mean?" a question which made Isaac shrug and say, "it means I was judging you," which was true, really, thought Isaac, and right now, though he didn't really want to, he *was* passing judgement, not on the man, not directly, at least, but on where the man lived, a space suggesting to Isaac a life kept solely by a dead-ass dedication, kind of like those videos of sprinters with a bad foot who refuse to leave a lap incomplete despite all the others having reached the finish line, determination so fierce it tried to deny the cracks on the wall with a pink cement coating, the uneven cut of a bed's leg with a piece of folded cardboard, the general dimness with a saucer-shaped LED light bulb in the middle of a patched-up plywood ceiling, even the air smelled of cheap perfume sprayed as an afterthought, everything smeared with traces of a soul that likely strayed to someone else's bad karma, but because of a stubborn hope one could not bring oneself to feel pity, only respect, as was demanded by people who refuse to bend, and this thought got Isaac all too intent on staying for the time being, even as Fidel got up from the bed and asked if he could have a minute to wash himself in the bathroom, despite the argument tearing at Isaac's conscience about the spoils of time and history: on one hand there was Tito Roger in a coma, waiting for his one-way ticket to the Pearly Gates, then on the other there was Ernest, tripping and ill-prepared to dodge State-funded threats (who knows what would end that scum? riding-in-tandems? some

fellow longhair? OD? good lord, thought Isaac, will that fucker be ever safe?), despite all these he could only peg himself on the surprisingly soft bed covered with a clean white sheet, looking around, his hands on the bag resting on his lap, faucet water whooshing behind the small closed bathroom door in a corner, the whirring of a stand fan close to the head of the bed, a calendar tacked behind the locked main door with pages ripped to show the month of August, Fidel's sling bag on what must be the man's dining table, the bag Fidel had carried when he led Isaac out of the school gate, just settled there beside a thermos and jars for coffee and sugar, that bag which perhaps through ESP Isaac knew the contents of, but he let it be, *for now*, he thought, having not the energy to shock someone, not yet, with all these thoughts hiving in his mind, it might be best to moonlight for now to his role as a penis-oriented cruiser, like a decent human, to sit there and wait and behave and pray that disappointments wouldn't find their way through the whole thing, thus just as he was about to start a mental list of things that might go wrong, the bathroom door opened and out came Fidel rubbing his face on a towel which he then tossed at the back of one of the plastic chairs by the table, walking over to Isaac, and then sitting beside Isaac, still not close enough to touch, just enough to feel the sloping of the mattress with the man's bulk, Isaac looking at the man's face framed by a buzzcut, a face that turned out to look younger than it first appeared, now that Fidel wasn't in a uniform, he could've been one of those bums spending afternoons shooting hoops on makeshift street-side courts, with nothing better to do than to be fed by too loving parents or to bully some neighborhood freak to extort some funds for recreational marijuana, and it thrilled him to realize this, this roughness of character, almost antagonistic, and it's not even because Fidel neglected himself, no, the man doesn't even have a beard or nose hairs to speak of, and while the scent he wore was a cheap one, some kind of floral note that would fade after a few sniffs, Isaac could bet that even without it he wouldn't mind getting beside Fidel post-workout at a gym, he just had that

look, one of sadness and rage that couldn't be masked by a smile, and it must be this look that Isaac mistook for shyness since the day before, whenever he made the point of pausing by Fidel and giving him a once-over, so Isaac said "you're a real man, Sir Fidel," unsure himself whatever this meant, not surprised as well with the confusion that furrowed the man's brows, which made him look even more sexy, and at this Isaac couldn't resist, he moved his face over to the guard's, the tips of their noses touching, he said, "kiss me, you beast," and it was as if something was activated inside the guard, some lever pulled that brightened the burning in his eyes, which made him grab Isaac's face and trace his tongue on the boy's upper lip, saying, "you like that?" and with Isaac's nod he proceeded to kiss him, tongue, spit and so forth, not too sexy as much as it was raunchy, but the boy seemed to not mind, in fact he looked like he had no qualms about being gripped that way by the face, a liking for self-violence that might sit too well with his unfulfilled urge to break things, and Fidel was too horny to think about safety precautions that after shedding their clothes, after having sucked and rimmed and licked and slapped, Fidel asked the boy, "what do you want?" and he answered after half a beat, "choke me," thus he got on top of the boy, and placed his hand on Isaac's neck, not really gripping yet, only letting his fingers touch what circumference it could of the slender neck, and the boy must have sensed the hesitation, saying, "what? are you afraid now?" but of course not, the guard would like to say, instead Fidel spat on his other hand and lubed up boy's asshole with it, settled himself between Isaac's spread-eagled legs, and began thus the age-old ritual of MSMs, of course spiced up this time by a predilection for hurting and being hurt, Fidel, this time finding the purpose for his use of grippers, with veins appearing now at the back of his hand as it tightened around Isaac's throat, leaned forward, just a bit under ninety degrees, enough to sustain the motions of a well-intentioned pussy-fucker while at the same time maintaining that called-for neck grip, enjoyed by Isaac though he clearly was in need of another lungful of oxygen to continue this

fetish—and life in general—Fidel of course seeing this, high on alert for signs of him being mere newtons away from becoming a murderer, seeing this through the boy's face growing redder and the mouth opened as if a big word was lodged in it, so Fidel loosened his fingers and withdrew to lay beside the boy, watching Isaac recover through a couple of coughs and continuous deep breaths, asking him, "are you alright?" quite astounded, really, at how easy it was for him to slide into that mood apt for snuffing out someone else's life, even more surprised to realize how his thoughts seemed to be too transparent to Isaac, who said, "you're afraid you might kill me, aren't you?" and Fidel said why wouldn't he, "I never dreamed of killing any one," a response that for some reason brought a frown on the boy's face, which in turn troubled Fidel to the point of killing his hard on and doing a playback of that dread he felt the morning he found the house sans his pregnant girlfriend, in a snap his lust for throttling replaced by the fear that a box in the boy's mental checklist would remain unticked because of this answer, asking himself if he should do something to the boy worthy of the ER, "but I'm not a criminal," he thought aloud, "far from that," which Isaac heard before saying "I'm not asking you to be a criminal, I'm asking you to be what you are," Isaac didn't look at him then, but at the plywood ceiling which, though unpainted, Fidel had taken measures to replace portions formerly ruined by leaks and termites, Fidel sharply aware of the sudden distance, not of their bodies still touching like lovers yet to find reasons to part, but of thoughts that came reeling in their skulls, because although they both lay naked under the bright light, even if one of Isaac's legs stayed on top of Fidel's, there no longer was an erection to sate between them, both dicks limp above their respective nutsacks, and when Fidel held the boy's penis it remained soft despite what he thought of as a decent hand job, despite his effort to go on all fours later when his hands wouldn't do the trick to finally do his first oral, at first weirded out that he had in front of him not a bearded clam but a shaft with thin pubes around it, but as he took the soft mass in his mouth

and did his best impression of his own past whores to no avail, he was almost tempted to bite just to be sure that the organ was feeling anything, and when he looked up, Isaac's face was there above him, not looking at him but still at his repaired ceiling, either he was spaced out or he was merely waiting for Fidel to finish his attempt at picking up where they left off, so the guard stopped and sat on the bed, his ass touching a shin of the boy, and a few minutes later the boy sat up as well, briefly, before picking up his clothes off the floor to put them on, and as he slipped into his shirt, he told Fidel, "I have to go, Fidel," the guard at once noting the sudden shift in tone and the manner he was addressed, could only nod, despite being puzzled, could only stand from the bed to put back on his jersey shorts, to walk the boy out the door and let him out of the chained gate, where they stood still for a while, divided by the line between the property and the street proper, Fidel, bare-chested, brimming with regret he couldn't place, looking forward to another night when he would again question his motives for trying, persisting, clawing at illusions of hope, telling Isaac, "you know your way out?" not so much in a way of a question but more as an attempt to get him back inside, on the bed, but Isaac could only say, "Yes," while looking at the well-sculpted frame of the guard, standing under the orange beam of a nearby streetlight, like a titan who lost the respect of mortals, with no idea about the thoughts eating away at Isaac's interest in him, no idea that as he looped the chain back on the gate Isaac himself reeled with guilt, more and more so as Isaac walked away tracing the steps they had taken earlier, emerging out on the main street and its updrafts of pollutants, both areal and sonar, Isaac thinking not just of the guard but of the cop, the former cop, that formerly well-shaped neighbor now tended to by an aging sister in the room he first came of age in, this old man who back then gave what the guard couldn't seem to give him this night, namely that willingness to sink into power, enough to subjugate a pretty much willing subject like Isaac, which is why the boy was disappointed: Isaac, back on the bed, had more than hinted at a surrender, and yet there was

Fidel, hesitant, afraid actually, and this spiked guilt in the murk of Isaac's morals, having realized his corrupting potential on someone who turned out to have conscience, guilt laced with disappointment as he had pegged his hopes on Fidel, but, never mind, thought Isaac as he turned on a bend and welcomed the view of a city night corroded by a looping history, taking in Rhoda's face on streamers and posters glued on lampposts beside ads for *poso negro*, the traffic intensified by impatient drivers, Padre Noval animated by raging taillights and horns blaring out of frustration, half past seven in the evening and students and workers were still at large, chasing jeepneys and buses, beside the menu up on a wall of a *turo-turo*, the TV showed a rerun of some historical show by a State-owned channel, and Isaac wouldn't normally bother, but when he passed the place he was just in time to hear a popular historian telling a guest curator—the museum's former director who happened to be the title holder for Miss International back in '60s—how art “in a way reflects history and history is reflected through art,” a sentence which moved Isaac to walk into the place and point at a random meal beyond the glass compartment for a pretext to stay and watch the episode, thus through rice and sisig he halfheartedly chewed at he went on watching the exchange, forgetting Fidel for a time to channel his energy towards the talk between the two icons on the tube, learning that an exhibit happened a year ago for the works of Saul Hofileña and Guy Custodio, whose names, explained the curator, was the basis for the exhibit's title, “Hocus,” which, the historian observed, could also mean “magic,” seeing how the paintings could hint at the spectacular, and while the two talked snapshots of the gallery panned on the screen, showing portions of the artworks, blindfolded friars reading Scriptures, Jesus crucified among colonized Filipinos, retable where the few saints introduced for the invaders' colonial mission were shelved while over them loomed the king of Spain, the battle between the living and the dead with the mortals caught in the crossfire, no one in the *turo-turo* seemed to be interested in these as they went on with their lives eating and

prepping for the night ahead, women with their hair down and men with collars opened, the place's servers scuttling around, on the screen above them the interview approached its end with the curator saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words," filling Isaac's ears with bad frequency as if someone with sharp nails scratched a blackboard, standing up to leave his meal unfinished before the beauty queen was done explaining how each image had a symbol to be questioned, keeping his head down and hands in his pockets to duck from any more potential assault to his senses as he reached the entrance to Ernest's dorm, where he took the elevator, thankful for the respite from the outside world, for the silence of the corridor leading to Ernest's unit, where his friend received him with a look of mild surprise, "why so early, my friend?" which Isaac answered with only a shrug of the shoulder before walking past his friend to plop on the couch and place the pillow not under but *on* his head, on his face, and Ernest, sober now, remembering as well how he was used to these mood swings, knew better than to ask any further questions, so instead he faced his desk, where his plate for an AD course, design for an airport, was looking back at him, yet to be rendered, sitting then before it to check the various elevations, to add some touches, T-square, technical pens and Rotring geometry set scattered around him on the table and the floor, all of which he arranged later in a corner before walking to Isaac, who somehow fell asleep despite the light he had on and his humming of a chant he had picked up from a recent demonstration, taking off his friend's shoes and placing it on a small rack by the door, then walking over to the light switch before settling himself on the bed to ease into a sleep he had hoped would bring that sort of peace he only attained with 'shrooms and a lighted joint, only to be disappointed by his brain which shimmed to his own floor plan, somehow watching himself walking through the symbols for doors, and even windows, a circle like a point on a radar, navigating the corners drafted on the vellum sheet, and at one point in this dream another circle appeared, which for some reason he knew to be Isaac, both of them moving slowly at first,

without a pattern, not following the other, just moving around, aimless, sometimes bumping into each other (“sorry!” or “excuse me!” one of the specks would say), like satellites denied of an orbit on a 2D plane, before a corner of the paper suddenly caught fire, which ate away, quickly, at the scaled down draft, burning with it the plans for the walls, the doorways, and the pair of isographed circles which wavered to the last corner to be turned to ashes, then all went black as somewhere a siren detonated a series of cries, and in the dream Ernest felt like running, running, from what, he didn’t know, perhaps from a fire engine chasing him, in the dark, and as the cries grew closer and closer he felt his legs failing him, the cries were almost next to his ear, then he finally woke up, back on his bed, staring at the dancing shadow of the curtain on the ceiling, realizing that the siren was real, that it was the curfew signal the local night guards seemed to find amusing to use, the sound made loud by the window which Ernest forgot to close, so he went over to it, slid it shut, drew the curtains, checked on Isaac, who hadn’t shifted in his sleep, before going back to his bed in an attempt to find peace again, all the while the blaring outside went on, which turned out to be from a megaphone at the top of a roving utility van loaded with drunk cops prowling for curfew violators along the web of empty streets, the boulevard which hours ago was choked by almost static traffic was now deserted and one could cross the road without the fear of being killed by the wheels of a bus, only from the bullets that might be shot by one of those armed officers lounging among the lights of closed convenience stores and other buildings lined along España and the inner roads that veined its length, including the street where Fidel Dalisay lived, where Fidel lay on his bed plagued yet again with regret, lying for a while without moving, thinking of what just happened earlier, having turned to his phone and logged on a porn site, failing to get off on any permutation of straight coitus, wandering then to that part of the web frequented by people with a taste for the unspeakable, men on a circle jerk, man and a glass bottle, two girls with a cup of shit, woman with a horse, of



course most of these, while mildly distracting, never managed to give him as much as a precum, his penis remaining soft in his mad grip, and when the curfew siren began blaring outside he had just clicked on a box with a thumbnail of a woman with a dog, the whale-like screech bringing him back to some sort of sanity which urged him to cut the crap and face his fucked-up life, meaning to go to sleep for he still had a building to guard the next day and weeks and years to humor, although for a while he thought of the time back when the web wasn't all porn, sweepstakes, and State-backed addresses, back to that time, pre-Rhoda years, when socmed sites and apps were still functional and hadn't been blocked by NTC, proxy-links and VPNs all cauterized from possible access points in the hyperspace by no less than the government intels, not that Fidel was enraged like the rest since Rhoda came to power and brought down all potential dissent-inciting sites with an iron fist (he had mild sympathies for all things right-wing and ambivalence for those on the left, for he believed that whatever happens to someone couldn't and shouldn't be blamed on the powers that be, because life is all about squirming out of ugly situations and when you are squashed the finger should be pointed only at yourself) though Fidel, that night, could've made use of Facebook to view what profile the boy might have built around his identity, or perhaps not just the boy, but Grace, perhaps that woman would have a chance not only to upload her own face but maybe a snapshot of a child, whatever relation she might claim to have with it, a boy or a girl hanging on to a pacifier, around two years old now, and as the sound of the siren grew distant he tried coming up with possible names for the baby, strangely forgetting what names they came up with before she left, settling then on Rhody or Rhoda, because, why not, no one would care anyway, although he thought that was untrue, possibly, and so he closed the browser and came up with an SMS not unlike the precedents on that thread filled with his own messages, always unanswered, both drunk and sober texts, nonetheless there was Fidel telling Grace how he wanted to be with her and the child, how he

wished for their safety and that one day she'll find it in her heart to grant even a one-time meet-up, hitting "Send" and praying that the number he had would lead the message to his intended recipient, lying for a few minutes on the bed with closed eyes and a mind afire with all too many what-ifs, slipping at last to a dreamless snooze as the night went on beyond his opened jalousied window, as the moon traced its slow path and the sparse clouds moved seaward, as the white noise came on the screens of people who sleep better with the sound of a television in the background, sleeping through the last pitch of a host for a diamond brooch on a home shopping network, through the national anthem replete with stills of President Rhoda in a range of staged salutes, through that interim between the fading notes of *Lupang Hinirang* and the static frequency, when, for half a minute, a title card with "To God be the Glory" flashed, people like Ronaldo Garcia sleeping through all these which he couldn't care less about what they meant, although if Irene, who then sat at the kitchen table with a glass of pinot noir staring at the man breathing through an open mouth as he slept still in his office clothes on the couch, would as much as crank the volume down, Irene knew he would briefly resurface from his tired workman's dream to reverse what was changed, and she would sit there in her house clothes sipping and swishing and humoring the man before turning the bright lights on in the living room to give him reason to be led to their bed, where then they'd sleep, finally, and when the next day came flashing hotly through the lace curtain she'd stand and remember that she only had to set plates for her and her husband, since the boy was with a friend of his, thus she went on with her morning, seeing Ronaldo off to work, watching the Impala with its rusting hubcaps disappear around a bend on the street, while some kilometers from her the son decided to ditch his morning classes to be with a friend in need, "are you sure?" Ernest asked as they slipped into their uniforms, "we only got lecture classes anyway," Isaac said, so at quarter to ten they walked out of the dorm, onto a shed to wait for a PUV with a sign plate for Taft, got into one, alighted at the nearest

juncture to the National Museum of Fine Arts, leaving their bags at the counter before heading straight to the fourth floor, to where Ernest and his blockmates were instructed to drop by, at the Mañosa collection in the New Trustees Gallery, and when he and Isaac went through the doors of the retrospective Ernest at once began a lecture as they fluttered from one mounted design to another, a lecture amounting to the fact that it's all a matter of luck, "really," Ernest said as they looked down at a model of the Coconut Palace, "it's about your stars aligning at the right place, which in most cases don't, but I'm not after all these" he moved his head in the general direction of the room, where some other Arki majors—certain faces familiar to Isaac—trickled in, "all I want is for us to have a decent future here, you know, in this wasteland, be given the same chances as anyone else, not to be taken advantage of by bigshots, public and private," Isaac, though sensing resentment, could also pick up some hint of awe as they moved on to other projects and models, even at drafts, especially as they stopped in front of a scaled-down version of the "People's Basilica," in front of which also stood another Arki blockmate, "Manuel," Ernest introduced this possible dope-fiend, Ernest shaking hands with him, another uniformed longhair, peace-sign earring, notes of patchouli and so forth, taking a couple of seconds before he realized this was the guy Ernest was conspiring with two days ago by the water fountain at the ground floor of the CAFA building, and the three of them moved as a group to another part of the room, the two Architecture majors suddenly animated, exchanging notes and speculations about whatever they stood in front of, Isaac trailing behind them, at first amused by the way the hippies' eyes glowed with whatever accusation they could throw at the architect, though as the minutes went on his curiosity flew out of the room and to another, wherever the "Hocus" exhibit might be, if it's still here, which is why he was only stoked that upon having a roundtrip in the gallery, Ernest said they had a class in about an hour, that he thought he could manage now with Manuel, asking Isaac if "you want to go now?" and Isaac

said, "I might as well do some research myself, now that I'm here" so he let his friend go with the other friend after telling Manuel to "take care of that scum," parting ways outside an egress for the gallery, and then walking over to a roving guard to ask if the collection he was looking for was still around, directed then to another floor and then to a door which turned out to be the old Senate Session Hall, footfalls muted by the red floors along with those of the few who had strayed to this part at this time of day, to be looked down on by neoclassical translations of Hammurabi, Moses, Mabini, and other historico-religious personae then rendered motionless near the ceiling, paintings all around, none of them related to Hofilena or Custodio, wandering around aimless until he found a door at the end of the hall's mezzanine leading to what amounted to a small gallery stowing away paintings of eclectic variation, included among these were some of the "Hocus" pieces, the one with blindfolded priests, the one with the retable, and this four by eleven feet triptych titled, as Isaac read the card beside it on the wall, "La Pesadilla" or "The Nightmare," oil on canvass translating a literal nightmare of sorts, the battle between good and evil with the Golgotha as the focal point of the central piece, painted around which were scenes worthy of torture porn (men and women impaled by wooden poles from butt to mouth a la Cannibal Holocaust, four carabaos pulling a man's limbs in separate directions, a skeleton driving a shovel at the back of another man, bodies in Filipiniana sprawled around, headless, limbless, hung upside down, stabbed, devoured by giant insects while winged creatures fought another battle in the sky), the left part of the piece showing an army of the dead, or hell, hollow-faced, ready to maim, while the right wing showed the living, the heavenly creatures, the entire piece seeming to scream at Isaac: "Bosch!", with traces of *The Last Judgement* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* all rendered in a brushstroke akin to Brenda Fajardo's, and for a while he felt that desire to feel relevant to whatever he was seeing, as if he had no place in this *pesadilla*, that when war came he wouldn't be among the undead tearing mortals off their flesh, nor

would he be on the side of the mortals and God to defend what was left of the ruined land, he might not even be a victim, thus he would have no space on this canvass, which disappointed him, deeply, but just as he was about to storm out of the hidden gallery, his eyes caught, on a portion of the central panel he had earlier just glossed over, just beside the carabaos tearing a man apart, a woman sitting in front of a gold-framed mirror primping herself, oblivious of the bloodbath around, even as beside the red platform she was on a dead body, and Isaac looked at this woman looking at herself, disgusted, and even more angry, for he had found the space he was looking for, and at this thought he went out of the gallery, out of the Session Hall, down to the reception area to claim his bag, back to Taft, where he took a PUV once more, intending to catch his 1 pm class as he didn't want to idle around, feeling lucky because the traffic wasn't as congested as he came to expect, alighting at España, and he was about to go through the gate nearest to the CAFA building when he noticed a gathering of onlookers near the Padre Noval and España intersection, blocking half the lanes of the street, some cars slowing down while passing by the site, drivers cranking windows down, a look of disbelief on their faces, a look not unlike what the gathering men and women had, children and old people, uniformed students and street vendors, servers and customers of a nearby *carinderia* pausing from their afternoon business to gravitate to this collecting clump, the sun making Isaac sweat and want to go in but because of the itch to know and a bad gut feel on what was happening he had second thoughts about catching up with his next class, giving in at last to that desire to pry when a sharp scream pierced that general murmur of the curious witnesses, sprinting then to the group, unable to see whatever it was so he had to push and squeeze in among the people, his heart rate for some reason climbing, feeling vertiginous as he guided himself to the way where the sob-scream came from, somehow familiar, and coming up at last to the source, a boy in a CAFA uniform, and Isaac was too jarred to find this to be Manuel that he forgot for a while to look at what everyone

was looking *at*, asking the guy, “what happened?” and Manuel, too busy kneeling then on the asphalt sidewalk with a manic look on his eyes, went on screaming as if stabbed, all Isaac could do then to be answered was to look, finally, at what really just happened, because there he was, now in his full-view, at the center of the gathered people, Ernest, splayed on the ground in his uniform, eyes and mouth agape, blood streaming from a bullet hole on his forehead, on his right cheek, more bullet holes on his throat, chest, stomach, his white Oxford shirt gathering blood as the seconds trickled by, blood running from the body and onto his bag just beside him, his red cannister still swaying from its fall, and Isaac was just about to kneel beside his friend to try and look for a pulse and tell him that he was going to be okay, he would be safe, when there was a whistle and in came through the crowd a couple of cops in chinos cordoning off the onlookers and leaning on the body, shooing them away, the crowd reluctantly dispersed, leaving just a few around to be questioned, Isaac in a state of absolute denial, wanting to puke or just to run from the scene and onto the street to Ernest’s dorm all the while hoping that this wasn’t true, that he would find his friend smoking or brewing psilocybin in the room, but there was Ernest, as real as he was dead, and he didn’t know who to throw hands with, so he turned to Manuel, collared this classmate reeking of patchouli, and asked him, yet again, “what happened?” and Manuel, through sobs and deep breaths told him that they had been about to go back to the building when Ernest remembered to get his plate for their AD class, “so up he went to his room while I waited downstairs, then he went back with his tube and we were walking like normal people when suddenly, man, there’s this motorcycle rider, couldn’t ID him because of his helmet, he like all of the sudden just stopped beside us and we were just too surprised when he took a pistol out and began raining bullets on Ernest, not on me but *just* on Ernest,” and Isaac had been seconds away from the rider speeding off to the inner streets when he came; on the other hand, Fidel at that time was just in his usual post, at the entrance of the CAFA building, minding his business,

nothing much to do, really, but to stand and sit and wait for the sunlight to move on along the students and instructors and staff going in and out the building without much incident, wondering where Isaac was for a while and when the clock struck twelve he told himself that he might not have a class for today, although second year Painting majors were still coming in at that time, giving him reason to think that, possibly, the boy would rather ditch his classes than to see again this excuse of a man that Fidel had become, this loser, nothing much to live for, might as well give it up, raise that white flag, surrender and bite the dust, instead of justifying each breath he took to himself, instead of always becoming someone's reason to be disillusioned, instead of standing here and playing no part in the events unfolding around, why not give that Smith in his holster a good reason for its being, instead of him poking bags, waiting for someone who had no interest in him, waiting even for some girl to tell him how their child was, there wasn't a purpose whatsoever now to continue, now that he thought about it, no reason at all, and he was in this state of existential dread when the gunshots echoed off the street just behind the building, turning heads everywhere, pausing the world inside the campus for about a beat before moving on, everyone's brain, including Fidel's, at this point numbed by sirens and gunshots that these all just registered as another body bag zipped somewhere, or maybe a good betting game on how many were taken down this time, how or why or who, "tell you what," Tango said through the radio, "I bet they got a commie this time," Charlie at once rebutting, laughed, "nah, I bet my lunch it's one of them innocent folks who had nothing to do with The Movement at all," and from the walkie talkie then ensued bets and counter-bets that involved someone's pair of boots, holsters, and cartridges, and Fidel would not as much as give an input in all these, not even mildly surprised to learn about an hour later, when the word began its rounds through these fellow guards, that the gunned down boy was a hipster CAFA student active in marches, in fact one of the leaders of the chapters of The Movement in this school, a fact precipitating

such comments as “oooohhh” or “serves him right, then” from the other guards, while Fidel stood there listening to his radio feeling a heightened sense of irrelevance, taking nothing in but the sense that he had nothing to do with all these, thus later, after his shift, as he walked down the street where the body had been removed, everything going on as usual, the night approaching once more as it always had, he walked head down through the exhaust and the passersby, feeling the weight of his gun and ammo in the bag slung on his shoulder, which seemed to be even heavier that night, a presence too difficult now to ignore that once he reached his house he locked his gate and unloaded the bag’s contents on the table, as if ridding it of a ticking bomb, he sat by the plastic table, pushing aside his jars of coffee and sugar and the thermos to give space to his self-defense paraphernalia, the pepper spray, the cuffs, the cartridges, and the revolver, realizing as he looked at the gun that he never had looked at it as sincerely as he was doing now, a forgotten friend, one might say, and to ease it out of neglect he peeked at the cylinders, all empty, and he was just about to slide in a bullet when there came a knocking on his gate followed by his name called by a voice he would have to be demented to even mistake for another’s, walking then out of his door and over to the gate to find the boy beyond it, of course, but when he took off the chain link he was taken aback by the sight he had in front of him, for a while he had to ask himself if the young man on the quiet street bathing in the orange beam of the streetlight was the boy he was aching for, because Isaac stood there, still in his uniform, hands at his back, the once sleek hair now messed up like hay reaching out to all directions, eyes swollen either from crying or drug use, eyes expressing such a deep sorrow that even the smile he tried to eke out of his face wouldn’t help, smiling as he said, “hi, Sir Fidel, would you let me in?” why not, Fidel would like to say, recovering now from his initial surprise, his chest suddenly filled with the same fluttering it felt when he first saw the boy, “of course, of course,” he said, letting the boy in, returning then the chain and leading the boy to the door, into his house, and



he was standing once more facing the table where the gun was, remembering then to keep all these somewhere, back to the bag perhaps, only he had to make the boy feel at home first, so he turned around, asking all the while, “are you all right?” and when he did, he was just in time to see the boy closing his front door, the calendar behind whooshing with the force of the Isaac’s hand, while the other hand presently revealed itself from behind his back, revealing as well this chunk of white rock he had been holding since he was outside, what looked like a five pound marble, rough cut, the guard having just enough time to ask himself why the boy was holding that thing when Isaac, smile evaporating from his face, swung the object on Fidel’s head, then everything went blank, Fidel swimming then in nothingness, no visions, not anything, just this pitch black where nothing could be made out or heard from, and in this darkness he felt himself panting, like he was running or chasing something, he didn’t know, everything had dissolved, light, sound, memory, even the faintest sense of direction, he just *felt*, he could be swimming, he could be drowning or flying or floating, he wasn’t even sure if he still had a body to feel with, or was he just a beating heart, that much was possible, for he could feel the pulsing, the echoing, how he *felt* he didn’t know, *is this death?* but if it is, surely there wouldn’t be a heart to talk about now, but what is this, why am I here, where is everyone, am I alone, if I am then that’s just sad, surely no one lives alone, no one should, and with this another voice different from his own echoed in the blank dark space, saying “Fidel...Fidel...” is that my name, so I have a name, and he felt himself around, towards the voice, wherever it was, he just needed to keep moving and moving until, alas, here it was, a crack of light in the dark, and he moved towards it, to this name that might as well be his own, until he surfaced finally, Fidel’s eyes opening and seeing Isaac’s face looming above him, Isaac with his hair still disheveled, Isaac now standing beside the bed, Fidel himself was on the bed, and after a few brain-shakes he realized he was on the bed, naked, his four limbs tied by ropes to the metal poles on each corner, moving his arms and his legs to test

how serious it all was, sensing that he was in for either some kinky episode or some really deep shit, resolving then to ask the boy, “what is this for?” still trying wiggle his way out of the thick brown ropes as the boy undid his own pants and removed the coat and the white button-up that looked grimy and unironed, and when he was as naked as Fidel, he got on the bed and knelt at the lower half to take him by the mouth, as if this in itself was the answer to his question, and Fidel just felt happy, lying there, tied to his own bed yet lip-serviced by someone who didn’t actually leave, someone he had fucked who found a reason to return, not unlike everybody else, this thought eliciting a moan from him as much as the way the tongue worked on his glans, but just as he thought he would once again cum in the boy’s mouth, Isaac stopped sucking, letting the purplish erection to spurt forth its white juice on Fidel’s own abdominals, the boy not licking at it anymore but placing a finger on the puddle to trace lines and shapes on Fidel’s skin, saying as he did so, “you disappointed me, Fidel,” and Fidel without thinking sighed as he exhaled and his heartbeats fluttered back to normal, “and is this the punishment?” to which Isaac laughed, looking up at the guard he had tied, and then standing from the bed to walk to the table where—to Fidel’s horror—his revolver was still settled along the bullets, and Fidel just watched, his mouth opening and closing, not really sure what to say to the boy who may or may not have crossed the border to madness, red lines inflaming the white parts of the boy’s eyes, a smile that only hinted at a plan, which he must be executing now, as Isaac snapped open the cylinder to check for its load, before closing it and holding the gun with both hands the way a trained person would, the fingers where they should be on the grip, Fidel even noting how the boy knew how to move his thumbs down from the cone, out of the cylinder gap’s way to avoid burns from the gas that would come out of it once fired, Isaac extending his arms in front of him, barrel trained at somewhere above Fidel’s head, and then pulling the trigger, once, twice, the sound sharp inside the room, lowering then his arms to say, “I’m just here to be what you failed to be, Fidel,”

and at this the boy turned once more to the table to touch the bullets as if these were a selection of badges to choose from, "I'd like to tell you a story, Fidel," Isaac said, "there was this boy once, an innocent boy, he had a friend just about his age, who would later be killed, but that's not the story, the story is about this innocent boy who did nothing wrong, nothing *then*, or perhaps his fault was that he was too trusting, because he wanted to have another friend, this kind man next door, and they did become friends, you know, and like all friendships they shared their time with each other, made time to meet and to learn from each other, and the boy really learned from him, I'm telling you, this old man knew a lot, and he taught this boy a lot about life and death and what must be done to people who don't like peace," at this point Isaac picked up a bullet, saying as he looked at this bronze cartridge, "the boy learned a lot from him, do you know what he learned from the man?" the guard shook his head, "I...I think I'm good," then Fidel tried to squirm more violently out of the ropes tying him, and Isaac saw this effort, so he said, "no, no, no...no one's really all good until they play this game the old man taught me, and this is a fun game, makes taking the lives of dissidents more fun if you ask me," at this he loaded the single round, spun the cylinder and snapped it shut, "you see, the boy hasn't touched a gun for many years now, in fact he never was the one to touch the gun in those games, only the old man, but always it was the boy at the receiving end, so in a way his body touches the gun, wherever it was plugged by the old man in him, it could be here, for instance" the boy then moved the gun's barrel into his own mouth, sucking on it, showing his tongue to Fidel, who watched, unable now to move or say anything, and Isaac continued, "the boy, he doesn't have a gun, but he practiced, with toys and videos and replicas, for the day he would," Isaac then moved over to Fidel, S&W in one hand, and when he was at the foot of the bed, he smiled, then said, "let's play this game, my man, others might call it Russian Roulette, but I'd just like to call it a game of chance," Isaac went on the bed, kneeling between Fidel's legs spread by the ropes, "I'll be careful, I

promise,” Isaac then raised the middle and index fingers of his empty hand, slipped these in his mouth, before touching with these the hairy asshole of the guard, who in turn squirmed as best as he could, to no avail, and even if he tried his best to contract his butt cheeks to stop the fingers sliding in him, the boy threatened him with the loaded gun so he had no recourse but to let this all happen, and in a few minutes the rear-end tension was loosened and there Fidel lay under Isaac’s gaze, sphincter quite loose and hard on coming up, “Good, good,” the boy said, and then, without warning, touched the asshole with the gun, spitting on it, before slowly sliding the barrel in, Fidel, hurting then, feeling as if he was being torn apart, the cold two-inch metal slowly digging in, he screamed, having nothing else to do, as the boy with those bloodshot eyes fucked him with the gun, screaming and then stopping as the movement continued, and he could somehow feel pain then, but not just pain, because somehow as the boy’s arm moved below him, Isaac’s face softened, and there was this connection that went beyond the fact that the boy looked like shit, some understanding of where this was all coming from, and where this was all supposed to lead to, so he told the boy, “keep going, Isaac,” and he realized at that instance that it was the first time he had addressed the boy by his name, and with this came the feeling of sudden contentment, despite the literal pain in his ass, as if he had found what he was looking for, finally, “I give up,” Fidel now sobbing, “I give up, Isaac, I give up,” he is surrendering, now, all too willing now, here’s the white flag, take me take me, if you please, “do what you need to do,” he told the now-confused younger man, who at once stopped pushing and pulling the barrel in his sphincter, having not expected the man to waver, to give up, for he had initially believed that if this guard would fear power in his hands, then surely he would not just yield if faced with someone using force on him, which, as Isaac could now see, turned out to be a flawed argument, looking now at Fidel, openly crying under him, so he drew the gun out, aimed it at the other end of the room where the small bathroom was, and pulled the trigger, and it

turned out they both got lucky for the loaded chamber—like the stars Ernest had believed in—happened to have found the proper alignment, both of their ears ringing at the report, and Isaac stood for the last time from the bed, assessed the form of the tied man in front of him, feeling pity now, realizing that such revenge was not fitting for such a weak soul, so he put his clothes back on, laid the gun on the guard's table, and undid the rope tying Fidel's right wrist, telling him then, "so long, Fidel," and Fidel lay there baffled by the thwarted surrender, watching the boy turn to his phone camera, to finally fix his hair smoothing it back, and when it didn't Isaac went to the bathroom to wet his fingers, which finally managed to primp him up a bit, partly back to that image of a young man Fidel had fallen for two days ago, and the guard couldn't help but say, "don't leave me like this," to which the boy could only reply, before walking out, "don't do anything stupid now," words which the guard would hang on to from that night, as he lay there waiting for his heartbeat to settle, as he listened to the boy undo the chain on the gate before walking out of his house, as the boy himself ran down the web of streets and onto España to take a bus back to where they lived, back to the source of all this, back to his old man Tito Roger, meanwhile Fidel would remain tied to his bed until he would remember to undo himself hours later when the curfew siren began crying again on the streets, and even after undoing the ropes he would only lie there on his bed, naked, until he'd sleep strangely with his mind fogged with nothing but the thoughts of seeing the boy again, and the evening would go on as on the other nights, following the same pattern, a beast tracing the same path in the streets of a silent city, lounging under the same sky, exposing itself to the same moon which pretended, night after night, to be different from the thing that it was before, waxing now, waning later, full moon, new moon, while the city lay submerged in the static muck of suppressed frequencies, muted screams, the report of bullets, everything numbing everyone to the point of resorting to extremes, people on the one hand forced to organize, underground, to draw their maps to that

change they needed, on the other hand there were those who would rather remain where they were, comforted by illusions, assured by promises made mostly by the self, like Fidel, as the days and nights went by, as he went on sleeping the night Isaac left, as he went back to his post the next morning as if the night before he hadn't thought of giving up, standing by the beeping monitor watching the uniformed boys and girls, believing that fate would make a way for him and Isaac, one day, one day, he thought, and this was the thought that fueled him, convincing him to stay, to tread the next days without much hopelessness as he once had, the city teeming with people like him, but the city wasn't alone in this, because it was the center of a ripple bifurcating to other islands, miles and leagues away, like wherever Grace was, sitting with a child beside her, a two-year old girl, one afternoon watching a weekend documentary with her family in the living room of a mansion nestled in a Barotac Viejo poblacion, her own father snoring on a La-Z-Boy, having just spent the entire morning in a regional trial court defending, successfully, a local official responsible for the loss of funds that would have been used for road reblocking projects, the mother occupied with a glossy on another sofa, and the two of them—Grace and the child—watched without speaking, as a voiceover narrated the “Crime of the Month” which turned out to have happened earlier in the week, the male host narrating as pictures of a young man, then later this young man's family, panned on the screen, “people knew Isaac Garcia as a silent but brilliant young man,” began the voiceover, “but little did they know that this impression would be marred, forever, by this one fateful night,” pictures of a rowhouse, “in this idyllic neighborhood of San Miguel Village, on the evening of August 22, 2019, multiple gunshots were fired in the house of one Roger Pamintuan, former police senior superintendent in the 70s and 80s, then retired and suffering from colon cancer,” clips from inside the victim's house, then later in his room, grayscale, the scene of the crime, “Isaac Garcia was speculated to have gone to Pamintuan's house at around nine in the evening, bludgeoning to death the

man's sister, Lourdes Pamintuan, with a rock, proceeding then to look for the old man's gun, which he found and which he used to do the unspeakable crime that would forever be ingrained in the memory of this country;" the voiceover went on to narrate how the boy loaded the man's Mossberg 500, which he found in what looked like a storage room, walked to where the old man was, stripped the old man naked, to fire at the man's "sensitive part," the host giving out what the censors would remove out of the man's autopsy report, summed up with the phrases "ruptured organs" and the "unrecognizable remains," but this wasn't all the crime was about, because after Roger's ailing body was turned into mere pieces of itself, Isaac proceeded to tear the framed pictures off the wall, pictures of world leaders from countries that shared the same tastes for dictators, including the Philippines, tearing them off the wall and once the wall was empty save for the nails where the frames had hung, Isaac went on to make a canvass out of it, painting then a face familiar to all, the face of President Rhoda, painted with the blood, bones, and fecal matter from the former cop's remains, the camera, in grayscale, focused then on this wall, as interviews continued as a voiceover, "I wasn't aware he was in his house last night," this was the suspect's mother, Irene Garcia, "my husband and I were already sleeping, and for some reason we missed the sound of the shotgun fired next door," and then another voice, a neighbor, who found out what happened when he came to visit the old man, finding the young man dabbing blood on the wall, still in his school uniform, and this neighbor was too shocked yet lucky that he had sense enough in him not to be caught by the boy, to run outside to call the police, "they were friends, I don't know why he did that," and then on the screen came the face of a bearded man in his mid-forties with a mic in front of him, standing just before the house of Roger Pamintuan (the man was an artist, a painter, who also happened to be one of Isaac's teachers in the school where he was taking up his undergraduate studies), saying, "he had been missing my classes for the past few days, and when I heard the news, I went over here to see what my student did," he

gestured to the house behind him, “what Isaac did in there is brilliance in flesh and blood, I don’t think anyone could ever do it like he did, you see, this is the essence of art, this danger and daring, and I am imploring you, President Rhoda, to please grant our prodigy the pardon he deserves, for he is clearly serving the higher purpose of art, and more importantly, he is clearly serving the even higher purpose of your good office, your good name,” with this flashed a clip of the boy in a straightjacket, hours after his arrest, in a press conference where he was bathed in camera flashes from media people, not saying anything even if he was given a time to justify what he did in front of the mic while flanked by two hulking cops at each side, and Grace, as she watched there with her child in their house, couldn’t have just imagined the look the boy gave these cops, like the boy was flirting with these two armed officers, after which Isaac just sat there, smiling the smile of someone who had no use for remorse, the screen fading then to black before the host’s face emerged, with the newsroom as a backdrop, saying the name of the jail where the boy was kept, maximum security, and how the expected reclusion perpetua will be challenged by the art community, headed by the boy’s professor, how, in another interview the artist had said that Isaac “must be given the chance to create, to present his view of the world, the beauty in madness,” and should the court pass the sentence the People of the Philippines is expecting to pass, “then we will make sure that Isaac would be provided with the materials he will need for his unique art, we’ll have blood and excrement donation drives, and so forth, and we’ll give his art the space it deserves in exhibits around the world, to represent the art of our beautiful country,” and with this the documentary ended, replaced with soap commercials, Grace suddenly remembering Fidel, that poor man, what is he doing now in that wretched city, so she picked her phone up and typed a reply to that message she received days ago, surprised to feel worried for him, not really knowing what to expect out of this exchange, perhaps she’d finally sneak out of their house, fly to Manila for a visit with their daughter, or



maybe for a permanent move back to where they had lived, or someplace else, Grace having no idea that Fidel would later notice a message in his inbox, as he lay there on the bed in the house he was renting later in the night before the streets would be flooded by the curfew siren, that Fidel would not in fact open this message, even if he saw that it came from her, that he would just lie there on the bed, watching the same documentary Grace and the child had watched earlier that afternoon, now uploaded to the web, in a State-sponsored app, watching Isaac beam at the cameras, Fidel stroking the boy's face through the screen of his phone, planning then his visits to wherever the boy would be, jails, asylums, how much of his blood could be donated, how much of his own shit would be banked for the boy's art, planning his days ahead, mulling on his purpose for what little life he was given, and finding, finally, after all the days and weeks and years, his own undeniable reason to smile.

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