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Catanduanes Street and Other Fictions

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by

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To Catanduanes Street. May you ever haunt me.
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In the year my father left for America, I learned to ride a bike. The bike was a present for my seventh birthday. My dad wheeled it into the house, its frame gleaming, the wheels still shiny. “It’s a Schwinn!” he said, a proud grin on his face. Mom stood behind me, tousling my hair with one hand and nursing a cigarette with the other.

Dad was a short man, slender, with a mop of wavy hair that hung over his eyes. He had a bony face and teeth so crooked that he was constantly adjusting his lips to cover them. Mom was waiflike and wore her jet-black hair straight as shoots down to her waist. She was not pretty in the classic sense—her eyes bulged a little, and her chin was a little weak, but I remember seeing old photos in her yearbook, a few of them catching her mid-laugh, always moving, a girl ready to take on the world, making it appear almost like she was the only one in color in those gray and grainy pictures.

They’d met at a jazz bar in Tomas Morato. She’d gone to audition for a spot as a regular in-house vocalist. He was there as part of a trio slated to play for the evening.

“It was the way he played,” mom had said. “The way he sat, the way his hands moved over the keys, the way his hair bounced and swayed…when he played the piano, he wasn’t ugly, he was beautiful.” She joined his trio that night, and two months later they were engaged.

I seated myself on the bike and rested my feet on the pedals. I remained upright thanks to the training wheels. My lola watched us from the kitchen as she put away dishes with Vilma, the maid. I leaned forward, placed my weight on one of the pedals.
“Not in the house, babe,” my mom said, putting out her cigarette in a glass of water.

“He’s just getting a feel for it,” dad said.

I adjusted myself in the seat, turned the handlebars left and right, squeezed the brakes.

My lola left the kitchen made her way over to us. She stood behind my parents peering through the space between mom and dad. She clasped her hands in front of her. This non-display of emotion was not uncommon.

My lola had grown up in San Pablo province, about a three-hour car ride from Manila. As a girl during the war, she sold flowers and fruit on the street. She used to carry her weight in bananas along dusty back roads, peddling to both defender and invader, and by the time she’d made her way to Manila, in her teens, she’d lost a brother in the Bataan Death March, her mother to consumption, and her father to another woman somewhere in the city before being taken in by relatives. She’d developed a kind of Spartan ethic quite early in her life, and for this reason, could never tolerate my preoccupation with toy trucks or He-Man action figures. A useless and indulgent activity, she would tell me. “Boys need the sun.”

I was small for my age, and thin, with a chalky pallor, and she worried how others might perceive this as the failure on her part to adequately nourish her only grandchild.

So in a supreme act of faith, knowing full well the kind of carnage that small children can visit upon gardens, with all the picking, and digging, and kicking, and climbing, and throwing of things, she encouraged me to play in hers. There were three
huge banana trees, one ailing guava tree, and two marvelously prolific mango trees that were her pride and joy. She also had Birds of Paradise, orchids in hanging pots, some roses, and a variety of cacti. Trees with strong trunks were for climbing, branches were for swinging, and the thick, fragrant grass was for lying back and looking up at the sky. While other lolas were training their grandsons to be polite, well-behaved, rosary-carrying boys, hair neatly combed to one side, noses mucus free, she was committed to seeing me become strong.

She would not admit it, but my father’s gift and the activity it promised was actually perfectly suited to her plans for me.

“Well, it’s no good in here,” my lola said.

“You’re right,” my dad said. “Let’s take it outside.” My dad took hold of one of the handlebars, pushed the bike from the seat and I pedaled along.

“Are you going to teach him?” my lola said.

My dad stopped just short of the door. “What?”

“To ride, are you the one who’s going to teach him?” my lola said. I turned around on my seat. I felt warm all of a sudden.

“Ma…,” my mom said. “Why can’t you leave it alone?”

“Do you even know how to ride a bike?” my lola said.

“Ma!” my mom yelled.

I wanted to get off the bike. I wanted to but my dad pushed the bike and me along with it out unto the redbrick driveway. The door closed behind us and I could hear my mom’s voice rise on the other side. My lola’s voice remained calm—barely audible
through the door. Dad lit a cigarette and smiled at me. After a few minutes, the door opened and mom emerged, the bottoms of her eyes red and swollen. She glanced at me and strained to smile. Dad threw his cigarette on the ground, took my mother by the waist and led her into the small white house next to my lola’s.

When they married, it had been my grandfather, a hopeless romantic and frustrated clarinet player who convinced my parents to move into the compound. He put up the bungalow next door for them out of the family savings. “Spoiled your mother rotten,” my lola had said of him once. Who was to know that he would die not three years later of lung cancer, leaving the run of the place to my lola who’d always envisioned for her only child a husband with a more respectable profession, and not some college-dropout piano player.

Mom and Dad were on the road a lot, all over the country, sometimes overseas too, to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia. I spent most of my time in my lola’s house. During a particularly long stint performing on a cruise ship, my grandmother moved me into her house permanently. Mom and Dad, as far as I can recall, never challenged the arrangement, never told me to move back in to their house, and whenever they were home, they simply came over from next door to see me. My lola always seemed to sneak off somewhere to do something whenever they were around. Even then, I felt there was something that kept her from being in the same space as Mom and Dad for too long. They weren’t really friends. However, my lola never failed to instill a sense of loyalty in me. After what happened on my birthday, she made sure I went over to my parent’s house every day for the following week, just to see them.
I hadn’t the words then, but at best lola and Mom tolerated each other.

My lola says that in my mother’s early years, she was a loud and ornery child, but, as if by magic, she would cease her tantrums and quickly fall silent once my lolo’s record player started to effuse into the house the sounds of Benny Goodman, Glen Miller, The Pied Pipers, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald. By the age of four, she could hum Duke Ellington’s “‘A’ Train.” My grandfather had dreams of being a clarinet player for a big band before becoming a banker. He was elated that music came so naturally to my mother and made her perform in front of family, friends even clients at the bank every chance he got.

Lola however, remained silent and indifferent in her own thin-lipped way towards her talent. Still, she became what everyone expected of her from very early on, and when I think about it now, now that I’m a man, I’m convinced that for some, our paths are chosen for us, that long before we conceive of it, our place in the world is already waiting. Mom could not have been anything else than what she became. My lolo was proud of his daughter to the day even bragged to the hospital staff, all the way up to the day he died.

It was upon hearing the news of her birth that my grandfather, then a fellow in Drexel University, returned home to Quezon City from Philadelphia, barely having been there a year before resigning and finding himself on a plane back to the islands. He purchased a parcel of land next to a small street with no name—winding, vein-like, and so narrow that only one vehicle could pass at a time. This small artery would curve at a
near right angle, and then widen and at that point, it was Catanduanes Street. On the side of the no-name street is a creek, which had been beautiful when my grandparents moved here in the fifties. The water would wash over so many rocks and pebbles, and on either bank were chico and guava trees whose branches gave shade to the labanderas, scrubbing away by the water.

Catanduanes Street remained a small street, tucked away, it seemed, from the rest of Manila, adorned on either side by the occasional coconut tree, quiet except for the noise of children at play or the hollering of sorbeteros with their ice cream carts. But at its east end, where it shrunk and became the no-name street, the city’s seedier elements began to encroach. The area around the creek became a haven for squatters. The creek’s north bank filled with shanty houses of old wood, scrap metal, and leftover construction materials. There was only one house on the southern bank, on a narrow swatch of dirt to the side of the no-name street: Jangga’s. By the time I was growing up in the eighties, the great influx of people took its toll on the place. The creek filled with garbage and reeked. And in the summers, the smell of rot hung over it so thick and sticky that I’d think twice before going outside to play.

“It’s those squatters,” my lola said. “They throw their waste and have their children pee and take shits there like dogs.”

* 

It didn’t occur to me then, that the nearby squatter’s area was the reason why my lessons with Patricio, which lasted about a month or so, never took place outside—why my grandmother insisted we remain behind the gates of our compound.
Patricio was a patient and encouraging instructor. He was also a natural storyteller. Every afternoon as he watched me climb unto that bike seat, as he grasped the handlebar, walking alongside me as I learned how to balance, he talked endlessly of his two children, his wife of ten years, a basketball game he’d recently seen, my mother, Vilma, the price of gas, the death toll in some typhoon stricken province, Vilma, his sore back, a movie star who pulled up next to him at a stop light, Vilma…

Occasionally, dad would come out to supervise the lessons, but he didn’t do much. Mostly, he just stood there and echoed Patricio’s advice, and then, before long, would retreat back into the house to catch up on the sleep he’d missed while playing a midnight gig. He’d remained bitter towards my lola because of what she’d said on my birthday about the bike lessons and ruining my birthday. Even as a boy, I wasn’t oblivious to that. Lola didn’t mince words, but dad never did make an effort to prove her wrong.

It really wasn’t long before I got the hang of things and started becoming restless. Once I understood that the secret to keeping the bike upright was to keep the wheels moving, there was no turning back. I rode that bike around our compound so many times that there was hardly a spot without tire tracks. My lola would watch me as she watered her plants, impassive, saying nothing, barely making a sound, but moving her lips only as she prayed with the rosary in her free hand. I terrorized Vilma, wrecking her nerves every time I dashed past her as she swept the carport. With each passing day, the compound grew smaller. The day my lola found fresh tracks over her roses, she decided that it was time to open the gates.
As Patricio’s duty to me came to an end, Vilma’s began. She was not much older than me, and was a girl who seemed constantly in a haze of languorous wistfulness, with an easy laugh, and a simple mind, whose job it was to watch me basically all hours of the day. In truth, she probably could have used some looking out for herself.

When Vilma first arrived—a “gift” from one of lola’s mahjong friends, my grandmother was just about apoplectic with frustration. Dishes were routinely broken, laundry forgotten on the line to soak up the monsoon rains. For the longest time, my lola was convinced that the poor girl was somewhat retarded, which is why, perhaps, she chose to keep her, much to Vilma’s good fortune, for she had no one else in the world, and probably why the poor girl put up with the old woman’s temper and acerbic tongue all these years. “Dumb as a block, but at least you can trust her. Where else is she going to go?” my lola used to say.

As I left my lola’s garden and the red brick floors of the compound and its cinderblock walls crowned all around with menacing barbed wire, and finally rode down the length of our street, it was she that stood guard like an angel at the gates, shrinking in the distance as I pumped the pedals, she, growing into her womanhood, I reveling in my boyhood.

We went on this way for some weeks. I was happy just to be riding at full speed, a straight shot down the street, and Vilma, never one to ask for more strenuous work, didn’t complain. All she had to do was stay at her post and make sure I remained in view. But eventually, I suppose my lola deemed it an awful waste to have a good pair of hands just parked at the hip. One day, as Vilma opened the gate for me, she said, “Your lola wants
you back in an hour,” and then walked back into the compound and out of view. From then on, I rode alone. But as things turned out, I was not unwatched.

It was nearing Christmas time. The air wasn’t so thick and suffocating, the sun wasn’t so oppressive. As I rode up and down the street, I didn’t feel as though I was grinding the asphalt into fine shiny powder as the wheels of my bike turned to glue.

Those months had past. Now, I was gliding from the point just where the no-name street became Catanduanes Street to where Catanduanes met Cavite Street, past Mr. Lee’s whose Pomeranians yelped at me from their cages, the sari-sari store owned by the pretty mother and daughter, and the large gray house that doubled as a print shop with the smell of toner frozen in the air around the place. That breeze that the old taho vendor felt as he ambled along, that was me. That high whizzing sound punctuated by a quick giddy laugh that the boy who lived in the humongous orange house on the corner of Cavite Street heard through his window, that was me too.

I was riding back to the house one afternoon, when I heard, emanating from the side of the compound, the faint but unmistakable strains of “We Three Kings.” I dismounted, followed the music, walking my bike next to me, and just outside the side-gate, I saw three boys, the tallest among them with a tambourine, keeping the rhythm the best he could.

They looked like they hadn’t eaten for days and wore clothes that would otherwise have been torn apart and used by Vilma to wipe down our furniture. They were grimy too, with ashen skin and wounds that had scabbed over.
Our gate didn’t open. They waited awhile to listen for the shuffle of feet I suppose, the movement of some silhouette in the house, some form obfuscated by window drapes, some gesture that might suggest the search for a purse, or a wallet. I wondered whether my lola had heard them, whether she wanted to help but didn’t have change or didn’t have any food prepared to give them. Maybe she was in the bathroom and couldn’t answer, or asleep. I’m not sure why, but I felt embarrassed for her.

I found myself approaching them, a tingle on my neck, queasiness in my belly. When I got close, they turned to me. I reached in my pockets and offered them some candies that I had, hard ones that I wasn’t particularly fond of, but withstood the heat better than the caramels or chocolate coins that I preferred.

They reached out to take them slowly and seemed a little suspicious. The tall one offered up a weak thank you: “Salamat.” As they unwrapped the candy, their eyes never left my bike. Maybe it was that the holidays were around the corner, or maybe it was guilt for no one having answered the door for them, but once they were done with the sweets, I asked them if they wanted to ride my bike. They just looked at each other, unsure, it seemed, what to make of the offer. But once the tall one stepped towards me, the other two shrugged off their fears.

So they rode my bike, each one of them, halfway down Catanduanes and back, twice. After, all three thanked me. We shook hands, and they ran past the shack, made a sharp left at the bridge, crossed, and disappeared. At that moment, I remember feeling not quite so embarrassed anymore. It was the right thing to do, or at least, the Christmasy thing to do.
I rang the doorbell and shouted so that Vilma would know it was me. As I waited outside, I heard a sound that made my ears prick up immediately and the little hairs on my arms stand on end: “tsk, tsk.” I looked around me, and then heard it again, realizing that it had come from the decrepit shack behind me, the hovel that had for many years faced the small side gate of our compound, whose lone inhabitant, unbeknownst to me, had watched the whole exchange. There in the dark, I could make out, just barely, Jangga’s large eyes, yellow where they should have been white, locked on me. In a slow, almost imperceptible way, she shook her head in apparent disapproval. I felt my mouth go dry. My feet turned to lead. Then the gate opened.

Up until a few years ago, the bridge over the creek was this flimsy looking, rickety, wooden thing that looked like it was always on the verge of collapse. My lola says how long it was already there when they moved. For years, it remained just the way I remember it growing up, until a powerful storm finally knocked some of the planks straight out. Municipal government being what it is, didn’t fix it until some child nearly fell through. First, they patched up the holes, but finally, just recently, they put a new bridge in made of iron and cement.

It was across the bridge that Vilma walked everyday to the tiny bakery to buy bread. Every time she came back to the house, she had new gossip, which, for some reason or another, my lola tolerated, letting Vilma talk out loud to no one in particular as she performed her duties. It was from her that I first heard stories about the woman by the bridge who, for years, had been terrorizing the people who crossed it.
One time, as he joined us for breakfast, Patricio recalled an incident when he rode his bicycle past her shack, and for no reason at all, she spat at him, clear through its opening, and cackled as it landed wet and heavy on his back. “She’s a crazy woman,” Patricio said.

“Can you blame her?” Vilma answered.

According to the rumors, Jangga had been the wife of at least three men. The first was a balut vendor with whom she had two children. The man died of pneumonia, acquired no doubt from getting caught in the rain one too many times. But this was in another town altogether, and before she moved to our street.

Soon after Jangga and her two children moved here, the younger child, a Mary Rose, or Mary Elizabeth—no one is certain anymore—died as well, a victim of a terrible dengue outbreak years ago. Instead of taking the child to the hospital, Jangga enlisted the aid of a local medicine man to cure the child and she died. For days, Jangga was inconsolable and cried morning to night, to exhaustion and deliriousness, refusing to eat or let anyone take the girl’s body. Eventually, four men from the neighboring shanty houses across the bridge forced their way into Jangga’s shack, two of whom detained her while the others took the child to be buried. The medicine man would succumb to the disease a few weeks later. From then it was just her and the other child, Alma.

Her second husband, Mang Nardo, drove a tricycle up and down West Avenue, until one morning, he put on a pair of pants and shoes instead of his usual shorts and slippers, got in his tricycle, and left for good. Once again, Jangga could be heard crying, wailing, cursing for days, unsure of what might have happened. There had been no news
of any accidents, no tricycle drivers tragically clipped by a car or a bus. Not long after though, a neighbor came to her with word that Mang Nardo had been seen in Kalookan, driving his tricycle there. She promptly threw his remaining things out into creek.

Her last husband, a certain Lem, was not her husband at all, but people referred to him as such anyway. As far as anyone in the neighborhood knew, the man had no occupation to speak of but sometimes hired himself out as a carpenter, sometimes a mechanic’s assistant, and sometimes as extra muscle to help dig ditches whenever the city decided that there were enough funds for such projects, which were few and far between. Why Jangga took up with a man ten years younger, or more curiously, why Lem took to Jangga is anyone’s guess.

One day, he was found slumped over the dinner table in their hovel, dead. And while some have suggested that poor Lem died of asphyxia, choking on his food while drunk, it was also rumored that Jangga had suspected Lem of infidelity, of seducing Alma, then fourteen or so. Alma did her best to hide the bruises and cuts on her face and arms, put there by her own mother, it was assumed. She left later that night and no one has seen her since. People waited for Jangga to weep, but she did not weep that day, nor later in the week, and soon, they stopped waiting. From then, she lived alone.

It was at this time that stories began to surface of her strange behavior. She’d begun talking to herself, directing invectives and worse at random passersby. She could be heard crying or sometimes laughing in her solitude at night. She’d become a madwoman, and some even say, a witch. People said that she placed curses on her enemies, and the manner by which one became an enemy seemed devoid of any rhyme or
reason. One night she chased a young couple enjoying a stroll by moonlight down our street with a machete, waving the blade in the air as she sprinted after them. Another time, she’d taken the same blade to a neighbor’s noisy dog. No retribution was taken out of fear that her dabbling in the occult was more than mere rumor.

Whenever Vilma and Patricio talked about Jangga, my lola rarely chimed in. Maybe a nod here, an “mhmm,” there, and nothing more. Mostly, she just sipped her coffee and read her paper, stoic as always. But when she felt it was time for them to stop dallying and get on with work, she could get dramatic. She’d say something like, “A witch she may be, and crazy also, but the two of you are not without your share of sins, and God sees yours just as well as hers.” Then she would fold the paper, plop it on the table and retire to her room or head outside to her garden.

*

The distance between the approximate spot where the no-name street becomes Catanduanes and the corner of Cavite Street is a little over half a city block. On the corner of the two streets is the great orange house where the boy who never came out lived. The front-gate of this house was framed by two posts of white stone. On top of each post was a Chinese lion statue painted gold, crouching, standing guard. I remember that as a kid, I loved the way the lions looked ready to pounce, as if daring me to cross them, daring me to ride farther out, to the end of the street, perhaps, and beyond. But I never did ride far past that corner, and always turned back once I passed the lions. This, I
believed at the time, was a good distance, a safe distance. It was the stretch of road I’d negotiated with my *lola* and the same one I’d allowed the three carolers to ride my bike.

After our initial meeting, the boys came around much more often and no longer displayed any trepidation towards me. If anything, they’d begun to display a familiarity whenever they asked for a turn on the bike. My offer from that first day I met them was, in my mind, to be a one-time thing, a small and passing kindness. I can say now with some honesty that it was a charity borne of convenience. I needed a way to feel better about the inequity I was just then feeling the weight of but couldn’t fully comprehend, a way of justifying the abundance I enjoyed in the face of their empty-handedness. After the good deed, I didn’t think I’d have to see them again. We would go our separate ways having all gotten something.

So, two or three times a week we took turns, on the bike from the bend in the road in front of my compound to the big orange house with the lions and back, until the hour I was allotted by my *lola* each day was up. After, I would always make sure to ring the doorbell of the main gate—the gate that didn’t face the shack by the bridge.

Looking back, I’m not sure what it is I had with those boys. They weren’t strangers, and they weren’t really friends. I don’t even remember their names, nor do I remember asking them. But whatever it was, this thing meant enough to me at the time to keep it a secret from my family, from my *lola* especially, who, had she discovered it, might not have ever let me play outside again.
One morning, I saw a taxi idling outside the main gate. My father was loading luggage into the trunk. I made my way to him, but before I could say anything, my lola stepped in between us, and held me tight by the hand.

My dad had gotten word from Tito Mando, his younger brother—a bongo player, who’d jumped ship in the US while performing on a cruise liner and started knocking around California before settling in Daly City—that some club owners from the East Coast whose joints had closed down were moving West and were looking for local talent. “Just for a couple months,” my father had told my mom. She was distraught. There were enough out-of-work musicians in the US to choose from. They would not have any need for Filipinos with no papers. Still, despite my mother’s pleadings, her threats, he left.

She tells it differently nowadays, like she practically kicked him out. The truth is there was a lot more hysterics. I remember her beating his back with her fists, then collapsing and clinging to his waist, blubbing incoherently, just like they do in the movies. He unclasped her hands from around him, kissed her on her forehead, and pushed her away as gently as he could. My lola stood behind me, one hand on my shoulder, the other smoothing my hair as she watched the whole thing, watched Mom at a distance, now leaning on the iron gates of the compound, weak and weeping. “And that’s that,” I heard my lola say.

For weeks, Mom waited for word rushed to the phone every time it rang, and went through the mail obsessively. But he never did write or call. And that day I watched my mother beg him to stay was the last I ever saw or heard from my father.
I realize now how strange it is that no news ever made it back to us. Because it’s not an uncommon story, really—men and women picking up and moving, and starting over elsewhere, completely fresh, born-again, as it were, in that new far away place. But usually some kind of report finds its way back home, typically the bad kind. They’ve fallen gravely ill, or are in trouble with the law, or are dead. With dad, nothing.

It’s almost as if my father simply vanished—that is, corporeally melted away, dematerialized over the pacific, leaving an empty seat on the plane and the flight attendants confounded. Or perhaps he wanted to reach out to us but couldn’t. Perhaps some tragedy had befallen him in the US—waylaid by criminals in the city, or lost somewhere in the woods or the Mojave desert. You think up all sorts of stuff when you’re a kid. But sometimes, when you’re a grown man too. I wonder now and then about what might happen if we did hear from him again, what I’d think and say. And I decide that now, after all this time, no word is better.

Mom retreated to her old room. Posters and cutouts from magazines she’d put up as a girl were still taped to the walls. Often, the shades of her windows were drawn together well into the afternoon. Naps twice a day weren’t unusual. When not asleep, she sat by her window, listening to old records and smoking, and it seemed to me that she liked to watch the plumes catch the sunlight or dissipate in the breeze. Slowly, she lost her color too. She grew gray. She began to age even as she became more and more like a child, oblivious to her own needs, helpless without us. My lola became her mom once again. And for a season, it felt as though my mother and I, became siblings. Mom wasn’t the only one who began to age. It was around this time that my lola stopped dyeing her
hair, stopped buying any more makeup. No more house calls for mah jong at Mrs. Cortes’, or afternoons at the club to watch Jai Alai. She devoted herself to her garden. She attended church more often, supported the parish more generously, and never neglected to light a candle every time she was at St. Rita’s.

In early December, we got a call from San Pablo. My lola’s older sister, Rosa, was sick. Fearing that her time was coming, she called for family to be at her side. My lola, however, advised us to remain in Quezon City until she sent word from the province that it was time to for us to make the trip to say our goodbyes.

I was hiding in an empty space underneath the stairs, when I heard my lola’s footsteps coming down.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, Gina,” she told my mother. “Can you take care of the boy while I am away?”

Mom didn’t reply right away. She shot a bitter look at my lola.

“He’s my son,” she said.

Lola returned the look and raised her chin, her lips curled inward. Mom looked away.

“I left cash on my nightstand. For groceries or whatever else,” my lola said. She embraced my mom. Mom turned her head and put her hands on my lola’s side—neither pushing away nor drawing close, and then lola stepped out to the driveway where Patricio was waiting with the car.
“Just you and me for a while, baby,” mom said, knowing all along where I’d been hiding.

On bad days, she drifted often, withdrawing into herself even in my presence, suddenly going silent and inattentive, sometimes disconnecting right in the middle of a conversation and heading back to her room. On really bad days, she didn’t come out at all. But there were some good days too, when she seemed almost normal – reading a magazine on the balcony or drinking coffee and enjoying a smoke, barefoot in my lola’s garden.

She did try. She insisted on meals together, even if she barely touched her food, taking little more than a bite or two before lighting up another cigarette. At night, she would come to my room and lie next to me until I was asleep, or at least until she thought I was asleep, as I had to pretend to doze off on most nights, unused to anyone sharing my bed. Despite these efforts, it was clear that there was just too much time to make up for, and my true care would fall squarely on the shoulders of Vilma. At this time, with my lola gone, it was that much easier to take off on my bike and meet in secret with the three boys.

We’d all had a turn on the bike already, one clear, breezy afternoon, and I was getting ready to head back home, when the tallest of them, pedaling fast and attempting a few wheelies, rode out for his final lap. He rode past the Pomeranians and the sari-sari store, and past some girls in bright shirts, and closed in on our demarcation point. But
then he pedaled some more, faster, harder, passing the gold lions, and the scary banyan tree on the other side of the intersection, and kept going, to the end of Catanduanes.

“Hey, you passed it!” I yelled. He made a sharp right turn on Del Monte Avenue and disappeared. I heard the sound of rubber slippers smacking against feet and turned around to find the other two boys already running in the opposite direction, past Jangga’s shack, across the bridge, and into the shantytown on the other side. I ran after them, and stopped halfway across the bridge, panic swelling in my chest. I’d never been to the other side.

The clusters of tiny houses looked like an insect colony. The shacks had no order to them, one built on another, some seeming to grow out of others. Holes served as windows, corrugated steel and plywood as walls. Some shacks had doors, others didn’t. Then, there were the movements and sounds from within—the eyes, and hands, and legs, and everything else all engaged in acts both mysterious and natural. The other side was a beast, a confused, undulating mass. Maybe it was the shock, but I don’t remember crying. Instead, I felt tingly, and heavy, and overcome by the desire to just stay very, very still. I backtracked slowly, the way I came over the bridge. I couldn’t feel my own steps but I was aware I was moving as if the bridge was a giant conveyor belt and I was being taken back across, to my side of the creek—where I belonged.

Then I heard laughter. Her laugh, I remember to this day, was the kind that must have built in her belly, roiling, building steam before exploding out of her, vulgar and violent. She would wheeze and struggle for air before her laugh pierced the surrounding space again, cut through the air. I kept walking, trying to create as much distance between
her shack and me as I passed it, tethering my gaze to the small white gate in front of me. I was determined not to look in her direction, not to even catch a glimpse of her. When I reached the gate, I rang the doorbell in vigorously. She laughed as I waited for Vilma to let me in. Finally, Vilma appeared from behind the gate and unhooked the latch. “Took your bike, did they?” Jangga said, just as I went inside.

I was forced to confess my secret to Vilma. I begged her not to tell my mother, explaining that I would tell her myself when I felt the time was right. “Oh? And what about your lola, you’re going to tell her too?” She was right, of course. Lola was going to find out eventually, and I had serious trouble coming.

“I’m not the only one she’ll be mad at,” I told Vilma. She understood. Sometimes, I think she was a lot smarter than she let on.

The next morning, I perched myself on a branch in one of my lola’s mango trees, high enough so I could spy the small no-name street, hoping that I would catch those boys riding my bike. I waited until noon. The sun began to grow fierce and more than once, Vilma came by to convince me to come down before my mother asked where I was.

Then, I heard that voice, unmistakable, like broken glass and smoke. “Hey you, in the tree! Come here! I have something for you!” I was so startled that I shook the branch I was on and the leaves rustled. I made my way down slowly, and walked over to the gate but didn’t open it. I clasped the iron bars of the gate, tightly and peered through. I faced
her shack. There were windows that were cut out for the structure, but they were never opened. Inside, it was dark. The shack’s opening was directly in front of the gate making it seem as though the came out of some giant, cavernous mouth. Mostly, I could only catch glimpses of a hand, an elbow, the hem of some garment. But her eyes shone clear through. I could feel them boring in on me.

“You’re not going to open the gate?” she asked. I shook my head.

“What do you want?” I asked, doing my best to mask the tremble in my voice.

“You are the one who wants something.” With that, she dipped her hand into the shadow of her hovel and, as if indeed through sorcery, pulled my bike out and nudged it towards the shack’s opening. She is a witch, I thought.

“How did you get that?”

“Is that what matters to you?”

I didn’t answer.

“Those boys…” she continued “are not nice boys. Don’t worry. You won’t be seeing them for a while.” In the city, kids like them disappeared all the time, sometimes by choice, sometimes not. And the sad truth, that no one ever came looking for them, wasn’t all that strange either.

“You can have this back…” she said, “…on one condition. Can you write?”

It was simple. At noon the next day, I was to bring a pad of paper and a pen to Jangga’s shack, all of twelve feet away from the small gate on the side of our compound, sit in her shack, and take dictation.
I’d told Vilma of Jangga’s proposal and needless to say, she opposed the idea. “A boy like you should have no business with someone like her. In fact, no one should have anything to do with that woman.”

“But she has my bike,” I said.

“Why can’t we just wait for your lola to return with Patricio, and then we’ll have them take back the bike?”

“No, that won’t work.” We can’t do that, Vilma.” I tried to hide a glance towards my mom’s room. This had all happened on her watch. Vilma saw me, and seemed to understand because she stopped arguing. After a bout of negotiation, one stipulating a promise on my part to stop scaring her, she agreed to help.

As mom took her nap after lunch, Vilma and I stood by the gate, peeking between the bars at Jangga across the no-name street, standing in front of her hovel. Her form was no longer obscured by shadow, but held in sharp and startling relief by the sun. Her skin was a rich brown, not leathery as I had always pictured in my head. Her face was shiny with sweat, her hair was thick and tousled and not quite white, but a brilliant cream color, almost blonde. She wasn’t hunched over, and decrepit like the witches of story books, but instead she stood with a certain robustness, legs more than shoulder-width apart, arms sort of akimbo, palms on her rump. She wasn’t a small woman. Short, yes, but thick-limbed. There was heft to her and somehow, in full view, she seemed less frightening.

“Are you coming?” she asked.

At first, I was afraid of what I saw inside her shack. On one wall, there were shelves holding all sorts of jars and cans and small boxes. I feared the worst—that what
we’d heard about her was true, and everything on these shelves were ingredients for potions or spell-casting or divination, such as jars holding various body parts, or the corpses of small animals preserved in brine. But a closer look revealed objects that my *lola* had in her own kitchen or knitting cabinet—powdered milk, coffee, dried fish, salt, bay leaves, coins, buttons, needles, pickled vegetables, sugar, vinegar. On the other wall, a calendar with some half-naked starlet posing suggestively whose breasts were blacked out with a marker, a lone picture frame with a faded photo of Jangga and Mang Nardo, and a worn poster of a beach at sunset. Leaning against that wall was my bike.

She lit a small lantern and placed it on the table. It was bright enough that Vilma could now clearly see me across the street where she remained standing by the gate, refusing to leave until I was finished and returned safely. She waved at me, and I waved back.

Jangga began. “Dear Alma…”

I remained there for what must have been an hour, writing a letter to a woman I had never met, and one who no one had seen in years. Yet, as Jangga continued to dictate to me, I found myself wanting to know just where Alma had gone, what she had been doing all this time, why she had never sent word. I wrote of how the neighborhood had changed, how she did not like the most recent wave of squatters who showed little respect for those who’d come before them.

At one point, Jangga stopped, walked over to a plastic beer case next to her cot and took from it a coke bottle filled with water and offered it to me. Vilma saw this.

“Don’t!” she yelled.
Jangga turned to her slowly, scanned her with those piercing yellow eyes, smiled, and said “Patricio is a married man, young woman. You ought to be ashamed.” Vilma went pale. Jangga let loose that terrible, volcanic laugh. At that time, I didn’t know what she was talking about. In a few months, we would all know. Vilma’s eyes began to well up, as she cried out “Bruha!” Jangga’s laugh only grew louder.

“What did you say to her?” I asked.

Perhaps seeing that I was concerned for Vilma, and that I was beginning to have second thoughts about finishing her letter, she wheeled my bike next to her and rested her palm on the seat.

“We’re almost done,” she said.

I looked at Vilma, tears streaming down her cheeks. Very soon, I’d have my bike. Still, I felt as though I’d betrayed her. Perhaps the right thing to have done was to bolt out of Jangga’s shack, take Vilma back into the compound and close the gate behind us. Vilma wiped her face with her shirt, did her best to contain her sobbing, and turned her back to us. Which is why she failed to warn me about the car.

As things turned out, Lola Rosa had displayed the kind of resilience she’d come to be famous for throughout her life, and having battled back from death’s door, sent my lola home much earlier than we had anticipated. Had Vilma been facing the street, she might have seen the dark blue sedan with Patricio behind the wheel and my lola sitting in the back as it turned off of West Avenue and on to the no-name street, and she might have hollered at me early enough for me to make a quick dash back into the compound. Maybe. In any case, we were both caught off guard when we heard the familiar sound of
the engine already near us. Patricio spotted the open gate and Vilma standing there, face still puffy from the crying, and suddenly taking on a horrified expression.

“Hey, what are you doing out here with the gate open?” he yelled, confused and slightly alarmed.

My lola was seated on the right side of the backseat, the side closest to the shack, and as Patricio slowed the car, she saw me inside. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. She screamed at Patricio to stop the car, which must have given him a terrible jolt because he hit the brakes pretty hard.

My lola practically bounded out of the car and came racing into Jangga’s shack. She took me by the arm, hoisted me from the stool, and swung me around her so that she stood squarely between me and Jangga.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded.

I learned right then and there that unlike me, unlike Vilma and unlike Patricio, she had never been afraid of the witch by the bridge. Jangga took the finished pages of her letter from the table and backed away. She didn’t answer. She just stood there folding and refolding those pages. My lola would ask her again, more forcefully, and still she remained silent, head bowed, eyes scanning the floor.

Finally, my lola spoke again, slowly, each syllable taking on a shape, an edge. “Woman, if I ever see you near my grandson again, I’ll make sure you disappear from this place for good.”
She ordered Patricio to take the car inside and Vilma to take me into the house. But before we turned to go, Jangga said the only words she would ever share with my lola; “This is the boy’s,” and rolled the bike over to her.

My lola took the bike, examined it for a moment, then looked at me. She looked sad. Then she lifted her eyes away from me, away from the compound, away from the shack and Jangga, as her hands gripped and re-gripped the bike’s handlebars, her thumb tracing the pattern on the rubber. She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through her teeth and stepped out of the shack, the bike next to her, the chain making its ticking noises. She turned on to the bridge and stopped halfway across. Jangga shut the door of her shack. Vilma massaged my shoulders. Patricio called out to my lola, a weak and fearful croak—“Ma’am…”

“Shut up,” she said.

My lola picked the bike up to her waist. The loose flesh of her arms quivered from the weight. The aluminum frame glinted against the dark purple of her dress, once, twice—as though winking at us. She rested it on the bridge’s railing where it wavered for a second, and then threw it over. It landed with a light splash. The plastic and metal parts of the body met the rocks below with a soft crunch. The pitch of the gurgling water seemed to grow high as it washed over my bike.

“NO!” I yelled, as my eyes went hot and welled up.

Vilma clamped one hand over my mouth as I began to cry, and wiped away my tears with the other. I turned around and embraced her. Lola made her way back to us,
passing without a word and entered the compound. The three of us, Vilma and myself, and Patricio in the car, followed. Then we closed the gates.

Some years later, another dengue outbreak swept through the city. The creek grew stagnant at many points due to the garbage and bred mosquitoes, the primary carriers of the virus. Left alone, the creek was already unbearably putrid, but sometime during the outbreak, an even fouler stench began to linger around the area.

When they found Jangga, she’d been dead for little over a week, bloated on her cot. The city paid volunteers to remove the body and tear down her shack. Vilma told me that they burned all her things in a steel barrel.

Not long after the day in Jangga’s shack, Vilma’s pregnancy had become obvious, and my lola contemplated firing her. But I pleaded with my lola to keep her. Patricio was, after all, equally to blame. The fair thing would be to fire them both. My lola relented. In gratitude, Vilma named her son Leandro—after my lolo. Lola did her best to pretend otherwise, but she was crazy about the kid. We all were, mom included. Mom taught him how to sing, discovered that she liked doing that, and got a gig giving voice lessons in some fancy music academy.

Whenever I visit, lola and I sit and have coffee in her garden. Sometimes, Vilma’s boy will come around and sit on her lap and play with her hair, which is long and gray now. He likes to climb on my shoulders and look out on to the street from behind the garden wall, and make faces at the people walking by from up there, reveling in how high
up he is from the ground, because somehow, in defiance of all expectation, I grew very, very tall.
Rebel

It was a cool December day, and sitting on top of the big, yellow water tower on the roof of the Lucero Building was a man with a gun. I could see him from where I straddled the outer wall of my Tito Larry’s place with my cousin L.J., who was eleven, the same as age as me, and his younger brother Noni, who at nine, everyone said was a very gentle boy, but not in a good way. The wall was about ten feet high, painted sea foam green and we liked to toss our G.I. Joes down from the top with parachutes made from plastic bags.

The coup d’etat had ended a few days before. The rebel leader, Colonel Gregorio “Gringo” Honasan was rounded up with his remaining troops and detained in a nearby military base. Everyone expected the firing squad for Gringo. On TV, people hung effigies of the colonel from tree branches and set them ablaze. Traitor, Judas, they called him.

But this man on the water tower, with the fatigues and the red t-shirt, the bandolier and the rifle, he must not have heard that the coup was over, that his side lost.

“I bet that guy’s the last of them!” Tito Larry said, as he darted inside the house after surveying the scene from our street. My cousins and I could hear him rummaging through the large wooden chest in the living room. Tita Dina came out from the kitchen smelling of butter and sugar—she gave out cookies as gifts for the holidays—and yelled at us to get off from the wall. “Down and back inside, all three of you!”

Tito Larry came back outside with his Nikon. “Leave them alone, Deens,” he said. “This is history! The boys should see.”
“Larry, the man has a gun.”

“He won’t shoot civilians, Deens. The rebels only kill military.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Everyone knows that,” Tito Larry said, loading a roll of film into the camera.

“The boys could fall,” she said.

“They won’t fall. You won’t fall, right boys?”

We shook our heads ‘no.’

“Hay…” Tita Dina said, and went back inside.

Tito Larry snapped the zoom lens on the camera and took a few shots of us on the wall. Noni put his arms up, palms to the heavens. His head was cocked to the side and his was mouth agape in a silent shout.

“Don’t do that, Noni,” Tito Larry said. Noni put his arms down and made a peace sign like L.J. and me.

Tito Larry threw the strap around his neck and tried to scale the wall, the soles of his shoes making an ugly scraping noise against the cinder blocks as he slid back down.

“How’d you kids get up there anyway?”

I pointed at the nearby balimbing tree, a tangle of thick branches draped over the wall. The knobs of its trunk were more than enough for our nimble feet to hook on to.

“Oh,” he said. He spun around and marched back behind the house.

The man on the water tower took his shirt off and wrapped it around his head. It was nearing noontime and the metal roof of the tower must have felt like a skillet. His torso was thin and dark. The other side of the Lucero building faced West Avenue where
we heard a crowd beginning to gather, a collection of voices mixing with the noise of traffic from the road. A few cries rose above the babel: “He’s got a gun!” “Call someone!” “Call the cops!” “Hey Rambo, the war’s over!”

When the police arrived, they made a big fuss, honking their horns and blasting their sirens the length of West Avenue, almost as if the entire precinct emptied out in response, but in the end, just three of them came up on the roof of the building. The officers yelled up at the man to come down, and from that height were only slightly louder than the pedestrians below.

“Where’s their megaphone? On TV they always have a megaphone,” Noni said.

“This isn’t TV, Noni. These are Quezon City cops,” L.J. said.

Tito Larry came back out carrying an old ladder with

“What’s happening?” he asked, setting it against the wall. It creaked as he set his weight on the rungs.

“Nothing much,” Noni said. “He’s just sitting up there.”

The man on the tower held the same position for a long time—a low squat, his torso pitching slightly forward, hands gripping the rifle propped up between his knees, the gun supporting his weight. He was still for so long that each little movement seemed to signify something, when really, he may have only needed to relieve an itch, or keep a muscle from tightening.

“Here they come,” Tito Larry said. Some of the bystanders along West Avenue discovered that they could get a better view of the scene from our street, where there
were fewer cars throughout the day and trees for shade. It was a great place for riding bikes and foot races.

Tito Larry braced his elbows on the wall and clicked away. When Tita Dina got him that camera for his birthday the year before, he’d been trigger-happy for all of a month before finally leaving it on his headboard to collect dust. When Tita Dina moved it to the antique chest downstairs, he hadn’t even noticed until she told him where it was. “For your next birthday, maybe something that doesn’t cost two month’s salary. Maybe a tie clip,” she’d said.

He adjusted the lens as he focused on the man on the water tower and the faces gathering on our street, snapping rapidly. Aling Carmen, who had the small bakery across the bridge waddled over to us—she had terrible gout; a couple of teenage sweethearts who stopped every few feet or so to nuzzle; the cross-eyed negrito who peddled grilled corn; the brother and sister who passed out Bible tracts; they all wandered towards us, eventually taking up spots along our side of the street, near our wall.

Mang Tiburcio who’d delivered ice to everyone in the neighborhood for thirty years came walking up from the other opposite end of the street. He and our lolo knew each other in the army. When he saw us, he reached into his pocket and tossed up some candies. He had pretty good aim for an old man.

“What are we looking at?” he asked. He leaned his hand up against the space of wall just below us, and tipped the bill of his cap at Tito Larry.

“That guy won’t come down. He’s got a gun,” Tito Larry said.

“What does he want?”
“Who knows? Probably wants to come down and go home, but he probably wants to hear it from Gringo.”

“The news said he’s locked up in Camp Aguinaldo.” Mang Tiburcio gestured with his arm, south, in the direction of the camp.

“Well, someone should tell this guy.”

“Poor bastard. What’s that I smell?”

“Dina’s baking.”

By two o’clock that afternoon there were no less than thirty people on our street. Some of them parked their cars on our side and stood on the hoods. Some brought folding chairs. A couple of tricycle drivers even had a small table on which to play cards. Tita Dina came out with sandwiches and juice boxes for us.

“I’m going to come down,” Noni said. At first I thought that he just wanted to take his snack and eat inside the house, that he would return, but he had this expression on his face, somewhat weary and far-off, and somehow I knew he wouldn’t be coming back to join us on the wall.

“Where are you going? This is important, son. You’ll want to remember today,” Tito Larry said.

Noni inched his way back carefully towards the balimbing tree and climbed down anyway. Tito Larry shook his head and passed the sandwiches to L.J. and me. I didn’t know if it was important or not. I just knew that it wasn’t everyday that you saw someone with a gun on top of a water tower.
There was a crackle in the air, an amplified voice that sounded at once robotic and commanding. A short, rotund man dressed head to toe in fatigues was on the roof now, flanked by four soldiers with rifles. He had a megaphone.

“This is Captain Abraham Sanchez. Colonel Honasan has already surrendered and is in custody. You must do the same. Come down.”

The man on the tower slung his rifle on his back and crawled to the edge of the dome roof. He lay flat on his belly, his head peeking over. He stayed like this for a while. Our street, and West Avenue too, seemed to grow very quiet. All you could hear were the cars driving by.

“I want to talk to him!” the man finally said. His voice was surprisingly strong and clear from up there on the water tower. So clear that we could hear how it broke when he yelled out his answer—like a teenager, like Jun who came once a week with his father, Jose, the gardener, who got tall and gangly over the summer and who, when he spoke, sounded like a broken car horn.

“Colonel Honasan is in jail, son.” Captain Sanchez took off his cap, and wiped his brow with his forearm.

“I want to talk to him!”

“What’s that?”

“I want to talk to him!”

“What is he, deaf?” one of the tricycle drivers said. They had beers on their table and some crackers.

Captain Sanchez’s voice boomed back. “What’s your name and rank?”
The man on the water tower idled on the edge for a bit and adjusted the shirt on his head. Then he backed away and crawled back towards the center of the roof. He sat up, rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head.

“What’s he doing, dad?” L.J. asked.

“I don’t know,” Tito Larry said, taking another shot of the man, and then of L.J. and me eating our sandwiches. Ham and Cheez Whiz, our favorite.

Across the street, Mr. Lee’s Pomeranians barked up a storm all afternoon because of all the people, all the new scents. “Sonny and Cher,” he’d named them and they were beautiful dogs, but really quite savage. They even hated Mr. Lee.

Bianca, Mr. Lee’s youngest, was the only who could ever get them to calm down. She was two years older than L.J. and me. L.J. told me earlier that year that he was in love with her. I never told him I’d felt the same. But then, I didn’t know for sure that I was in love with her until I watched her get up on the roof of her house on that day we watched the rebel on the water tower, crawling up out of her room’s skylight. She wore a black shirt with a picture of Axl Rose on the front and purple shorts. She sat there on the roof, her back to us, her left leg stretched out in front of her at an angle so that we could see the roundness of her calf. She reclined, her body sagging, her weight held up by her pale, thin arms, like tent poles, palms flat against the roof tiles. She was so fair, and the sun hung over all of us just so that she looked almost translucent.

“Hey, look up there,” L.J. said to me, motioning with his chin.

Tito Larry heard and winked at L.J. “Want me to take a couple of your girlfriend, J?” he said.
“Not my girlfriend, Dad.” The lobes of L.J.’s ears turned maroon.

“Bianca! Be careful up there!” Tito Larry hollered. He winked at L.J. again and stuck his tongue out. She looked back at us and waved.

“Stop, Dad!” L.J. said. I waved back.

“Bianca!” Mrs. Lee stuck her head out her bedroom window. She was on the heavy side, and suffered from a skin condition that caused her cheeks to flush an unusually deep shade of pink. She looked like aged doll. “Bianca, come down!”

“Ooooh,” some people on our street teased in unison. Bianca turned towards us. She didn’t look embarrassed at all and, if anything, wore a mischievous grin on her face. She disappeared back down the skylight hatch.


“Don’t be sore, L.J.” Tito Larry said. “Ramon, tell your cousin not to be sore,” he said to me with a chuckle.

“Funny girl,” Mang Tiburcio said, just below us, sitting on one of Tita Dina’s kitchen chairs, smoking a cigarette, and nibbling on a cookie.

“Hey, I thought you quit,” Tito Larry said.

“I thought so too.”

I had to go to the bathroom and slid my way down the balimbing tree. I was the best climber among my cousins, hands down.
In the living room, Noni was lying on the sofa reading Archie comics, his legs hanging over the armrest.

“Noni, why don’t you come outside? Everyone’s outside,” I said.

“Mom isn’t. She’s in here,” he said.

I left him alone and went to the bathroom. The baking smell had made it all the way in there and had clung to the towels. I asked him again when I came out.

“Come on, Noni. It’s boring in here. Don’t you want to see what happens?”

“No.” He flipped a page.

I stared at his face for a bit and could tell by the way his eyes moved that he wasn’t really reading.

When I went back outside, who did I see being helped up the ladder by Tito Larry but Bianca.

“Better to watch here with us,” Tito Larry said. “So your mom doesn’t worry.” He had a big grin on his face. He looked me away, cocked his head back and pointed at her as she made her way to the top rung. Even from a few feet away, I could see the maroon on L.J.’s ears spread down to his neck.

“Your tito can be a real jackass sometimes.” Tita Dina was standing behind me. She had the quietest footsteps of anyone I knew, which is probably why L.J. and Noni were so well behaved. She handed me a cookie, wiped her hands on her apron and went back inside. I put the cookie in my mouth, careful not to bit through it, and climbed up the balimbing tree. There was a net of branches, where little bulbs of fruit were blooming and I perched myself there. The view up here was even better than on the wall. I could
see the poor poker hands that the tricycle drivers were trying to conceal from each other. Mang Tiburcio had fallen asleep and from where I was, I could see down his shirt to make out the horns of the famous black devil tattoo on his chest. I always wondered why he got such a scary tattoo, and wondered what kind I might get someday.

Bianca sat about a foot away from L.J. She didn’t straddle the wall like he did. Just braced herself with her hands, her legs hanging off the other side. Tito Larry shot looks at L.J., signaled with little twitches of his face, his eyebrows for L.J. to scoot closer to her. L.J. ignored him. He looked small next to her.

“Why don’t you make room for Ramon?” Tito Larry said.

I could tell he wanted me as an accomplice. “I’m good,” I said.

“You sure, Ramie? Don’t fall from there. Your mother will kill me.”

This was true. Mom was a hard woman. She didn’t even cry when she sent me to live with Tito Larry before getting on that plane to Brunei. Her boss over there was the sultan’s cousin, who had a son not much older than me. A month or so before, Mom called to say she’d sent me a box of the boy’s old clothes—they renewed his wardrobe every year. But then the coup happened and we never did get that box.

Bianca looked over at me and smiled. L.J. looked up at me too. His lips quivered, as if he about to say something, but he didn’t. We heard the voice of Captain Sanchez over the megaphone again.

“Please, son, don’t make us come up there,” he said.

The man swung his rifle up front. He held the rifle to his chest. I clutched a clump of branches, felt the leaves crunch in my hand.
“No one comes up here!” He banged on the dome with the butt of his rifle, which made a high clanging sound. The tank must have been mostly empty.

Mang Tiburcio woke up and made a gasping noise.

“Easy, easy, old man,” said one of the tricycle drivers.

“Name and rank,” Sanchez said.

The man on the tower wiped his face with the loose end of his makeshift bandana. He rested the barrel of his rifle on his shoulder.

Bianca reached for my uncle’s camera, the strap still around his neck. She looked through the viewer. “He looks so sad,” she said. She handed the camera back to Tito Larry. He looked through the viewer as well. “You’re right,” he said, and took a few pictures.

The man on the tower crawled to the edge again. He said something to Sanchez, who was standing thirty feet below. We couldn’t hear.

“Repeat that please,” Captain Sanchez said.

“Perfecto de Asis, Corporal!” the man yelled. His voice broke again.

I’d never heard the name “Perfecto” before. I mouthed it to myself. It felt light on my tongue.

“Corporal de Asis, you need to come down.”

“I-I want to talk to my wife!”

Bianca drew her hand up to her face and scratched her nose.

“What did he say?” Tito Larry said.
“He wants to talk to his wife,” one of the tricycle drivers replied. They’d stopped playing cards.

“Poor bastard,” Mang Tiburcio said.

“Her name is Jenalyn!” Perfecto said.

“Alright,” Captain Sanchez said. “Come down and we’ll talk about it, corporal.”

“Jenalyn de Asis! J-E-N-A-L-”

“Come down here Perfecto, and we’ll get her.”

Perfecto bent one of his arms and rested on it, as though to nap, the other wrapped over his head. Captain Sanchez drank from a canteen. It was almost three in the afternoon.

“No, I want to see her! I want to see her first!” Perfecto said.

Captain Sanchez took his cap off and rubbed the top of his head. He took another swig from his canteen and handed the megaphone to one of the soldiers. Captain Sanchez said something none of us could hear. One of the soldiers took what looked like his backpack off, only it wasn’t a bag at all. The soldier placed it on the ground, stretched out an antenna and spoke into a receiver.

Tito Larry went up another rung on the ladder. Mang Tiburcio lit another cigarette. L.J. sat very still. Bianca began to wipe at her eyes. I slunk down the tree and went back inside the house, and headed for the kitchen. Tita Dina was putting her cookie sheets in the sink.

“Tita Deens, can I have some tissue?” I said.
“Sure,” she said. “There’s a box in the bathroom.” I passed the living room on the way to the bathroom. Noni wasn’t on the sofa anymore. The knob of the bathroom door didn’t turn all the way. Locked. I jiggled it.

“I’m in here.” Noni’s voice was a soft croak behind the door.

“Noni, I need the tissue box.”

The door opened, and Noni handed me the box through the cleft. “I don’t think he’ll come down, Ramie,” he said.

“Who?”

“The man.”

“Sure he will,” I said. I took the box and Noni shut the door.

I went back outside. There was a faint mechanical whistle in the air, like someone vacuuming behind closed doors.

On the wall, L.J. seemed to shift on his perch. His hand reached for Tito Larry’s shoulder.

“Dad…”

Bianca had her arm on L.J’s back. She scrunched his shirt up in her fist.

Tito Larry seemed to shake. The ladder’s hinges rattled.

“Oh my God, “ Tito Larry said. “Oh my God.”

And then I heard it—the metallic throb of propellers, getting louder, drowning out the sounds of West Avenue, and then Mang Tiburcio on our side of Catanduanes, just below L.J. and Bianca screaming, “Wait, you sons-of-bitches! Wait!”
Kampeon

We were kids and we were up to no good. Not trying to hurt anyone, just hungry. We did what we could, one day to the next, just to keep from wasting away. Took stuff that nobody would look for. Kept look out for the older boys, the ones who boosted cars and snatched purses. Shit like that. Most of the time, we just roamed the streets looking hopeless and begged for change. Surprising what you could get if you knew who to ask and how.

We were on our own in the world—Richard, Sammy, and me, and we stuck together. I had family in Quezon City—an uncle—my mom’s brother, who drank too much, and his wife who drank even more. She hated me for God-knows-what reason and I only showed my face there anymore so they knew I was still alive. Mom went crazy after my dad left us, and ended up in a facility across town. I only ever gone to see her once. She didn’t recognize me.

“It’s me, it’s Jomar,” I said. But she just kept looking up at the ceiling and chewed on a piece of string that came loose from her shirt collar.

Richard says that he was found in the back of a jeepney one night, wrapped in an old t-shirt and some newspaper. The jeepney driver took him to Her Lady of Perpetual Mercy where the sisters took care of him until he was about nine. No one ever adopted him.

“Nobody wants a negrito baby, an Aeta baby,” he said once.
I remember asking him once why he left the orphanage. He says something bad happened there, that the nuns are a bunch of phonies and that he doesn’t believe in God anymore. That’s all, and we leave it alone.

Sammy’s parents died when the textile factory they were working in caught fire. He ended up living with his older cousin, Alvin, a drug addict who collected money for the local syndicate. What little money we made hustling on the street went to him first. He gave us an allowance every week to live on, and told us we were lucky to have the syndicate’s protection, and that we were never to cross him or else he’d chop us up and feed us to the dogs. Some days, he let all of us sleep at his place, which was just a room in the back of an old vulcanizing shop owned by a junkie buddy of his, but that changed in 1986, the summer Alvin got shot.

They found Alvin in the creek. When we got there, a crowd was gathered around the body. We tried to push our way past the people, but they wouldn’t let us through.

“That’s his cousin!” Richard hollered. “Let Sammy through!” But of course, this had the opposite effect, and a couple of rough-skinned construction workers took us by the shoulders and led us back on to the road.

“You don’t want to see that,” one of them said.

I’d seen dead bodies before—an old man taken out of his home on a cot with his eyes open and rolled back in his head, a girl twisted up under a delivery truck on West Avenue—but never someone I knew. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to see.
At the corner of Catanduanes and Cavite Street, just a few feet away from us, was this police car. There were two officers standing next to it, talking to a large man whose silk shirt stretched over his swollen belly. Butch Valdes was a cop once. He’d made a name for himself when he took down the Ocho-ocho gang some years before. Rumor is that he challenged the gang leader to throw down one-on-one, and hit him in the stomach so hard that he crushed the man’s spleen, killing him. Now, he worked security detail for politicians and celebrities.

“Did you have to shoot the kid, Butch?” one of the officers asked.

“Of course, I did. He was getting away,” Butch said.

“But in the head, Butch?”

“That was an accident.”

“Oh, Butch, okay.”

“Are we good?”

“Yes, Butch. We’ll let you know what the Captain says.”

We lingered close. We pretended not to listen, but Sammy was starting to cry. I put my arm around his neck. His round cheeks were shiny from the tears and sweat. How Sammy managed to stay fat was a mystery.

A gray car slowed down to where the officers were, and a window rolled down. A woman’s voice came through.

“What happened here?” she asked

“Purse snatcher got shot, ma’am.”

“You shot him?”
“No, ma’am.”

“Oh. Who?”

“We’re investigating.”

The window rolled up and the car drove off.

The crowd began to thin until we could see Alvin’s body. One of his feet were on
the on the bank, but the rest of him was in the creek. Richard got up and walked over.

Sammy sat down on the street, put his head between his knees, and I sat with him.

Richard stood close to Alvin’s body for a bit. He walked back to us holding a hand over
his right jaw and ear. What Alvin was now missing, I guessed.

“Shit,” Richard said. “Where are we gonna stay now?”

The story that went around the neighborhood was that Alvin had run off with the
purse of a woman at an ATM. There was a struggle and he knocked the woman down,
and she twisted her ankle. Butch Valdez had been close by and he chased after him. After
yelling at Alvin to stop, he pulled his pistol and fired. It was all too bad. Butch wasn’t
trying to kill him. That’s what people said, that’s what people heard.

We didn’t mourn Alvin, exactly. He could be a real shit. He’d smacked each of us
around at some time or another, and sometimes he’d stiff us of our money just to show us
he could. But it didn’t seem right that he’d end up face down in the water with a bullet in
his head like that. All of a sudden, it’s like he wasn’t so bad. It’s a strange thing to
suddenly like someone more when they were dead.
We went back to the room behind the vulcanizing shop and collected what we could.

“Alvin never stole like that. Not like that,” Sammy said.

“It’s a bullshit story. Right, Jomar?” Richard said.

“Alvin could get a little crazy,” I said. It’s true, snatching purses was not Alvin’s modus operandi. But the drugs made him more and more unpredictable, would keep him up for days on end.


“Yeah, I guess,” I said.

“Whatever. Butch didn’t have to shoot him,” Sammy said. “He didn’t have to shoot him.”

We were sad about losing the room, but we weren’t strangers to sleeping outdoors. If you could find an old box, you could flatten it and you had a mattress. Bus stations were good too because if there wasn’t any guard on patrol, you could sleep inside the buses, on the seats, which smelled like ass, but you got used to it. Sometimes we found stuff trapped in the seats or on the floor: candy, combs, a little change if we were lucky. It could be tricky finding a place where no one would mess with you. Kids like us disappeared in the night. Usually girls, but boys too sometimes.

There’s a good spot by the bridge in the north end of Catanduanes Street, by the bridge that goes over the creek, a patch of grass under the branches of a rubber tree, but
no one ever takes it because it’s next to that crazy woman’s shack, Jangga, who talks to herself and keeps a machete.

That year, there was a house on the corner of Catanduanes and Cavite street that was halfway built and never finished. Just the wood and iron frame, 2 x 4s scattered about, bare concrete walls, and on the far end, bags of cement stacked on one another, already hardened and made useless by the rains. The skeleton of a house. That’s what we called it; the skeleton house.

We stayed here. We liked the walls.

* * *

The first time we saw Mang Isko, we were busy flooding an anthill we’d discovered on the side of the road. We’d managed to get our hands on a plastic bucket left by the nearby creek, filled it up that with water to pour into the mouth of the hill. We watched all these big red ants come up and out, riding the miniature wave, their frantic little legs kicking and shaking. We flick them at each other, trying to get each other in the face.

He was wearing a faded grey t-shirt and baggy shorts and came walking past us carrying a bag of empty glass bottles. He had a distracted look on his face, like someone being whispered to. He set down the bag, the bottles tinkled against each other as they touched the ground. Then, without warning, he exploded into furious movement. He shot
his arms out in front of him, he bobbed his head, his feet made small shuffling
movements, he pivoted and turned, and loose flurry after flurry of punches into the air.
He hissed as he snapped out his left hand. “Boom!” he yelled as he launched his right
hand on his invisible opponent. Then the action shifts—he became his opponent,
impersonated his victim. He swiveled his head in slow-motion, his knees buckled, he
went limp, he pretended to fall but caught himself. Then suddenly he was the victor
again, and raised his arms. “Kampeon! Kampeon!” He yelled. He hopped in place a little
bit, hands high, palms in the air, like in those churches where people go ‘Praise the
Lord!’ but his dance is silent. His legs settled, his arms came down slowly, until they rest
at his sides. He smiled and he whispered things to himself again. Then he picked up the
bag and continued on his way.

We laughed until our bellies and faces hurt. We mimicked him. Richard threw
dramatic punches at me and I acted groggy. I collapsed on the ground and Sammy
counted over me. We laughed some more, until we couldn’t breath, until we realized that
our feet were burning and starting to swell from all the ant bites. We limped off towards
the creek to soak our feet, right around where Alvin fell dead.

It was a regular thing, him strolling down the street and breaking into this boxing
routine, him telling stories to himself, him. He was too easy a target. We would wait for
him on Catanduanes, hide behind some bushes and throw pebbles at him, try to get him to
drop his bottles. The winner got five pesos. It was a nasty game to play on him, I know.
I’m not sure why we did it. Would have been better just to steal the bottles from him and
cash them ourselves, but we were stupid like that. For me, there was something about that
dance he’d do in the end. I’d get a sour taste in our own mouth and feel electricity in my face. I didn’t know what this was. Maybe embarrassment. Embarrassment for him. Or disgust. Hate that wasn’t hate. It was something without a name, something that Richard and Sammy feel too, maybe. But whatever it is, we acted on it, we needed to let it loose.

We found out later that he was Lani’s dad. Lani was one of the hairdressers at Modern Cuts salon around the corner. Guys liked to hang around there to watch the young girls get their hair done like Cindy Lauper or Brooke Shields. Sometimes they flirted with Lani too. She was a neighborhood beauty once, but got knocked up in her teens, and then again some years later, by some city official, people say, and by the time she took her dad in to live with her, after his wife died, Lani looked tired. Two kids and a dad with dementia could do that, I suppose.

After our first night in the skeleton house I heard him running along the road, the gravel crunching with his steps. I got up from the bed I shared with Sammy and Richard—a large piece of plywood we found leaning against the back of the house. We lay three across with our feet sticking out, rolled our shirts and used them as pillows. At least our backs didn’t soak up the wet earth, or chafe against the concrete. I rubbed my eyes, spat out into the darkness ahead of me. He had a steady rhythm, and breathed real heavy. I moved towards the front of the house and hid behind a wall that faced the street. The crunching got louder. The breathing too. I looked around the edge and saw him pass in front of me. He made other sounds, spoke, had a voice, deep and hoarse at the same time. He hissed and grunted as he shot his arms out in front of him.
Later that morning, we hung out by Aling Carmen’s bakery which was just a hole in the wall with some benches outside, hoping for some leftovers or some change from the customers rushing off to work. Sometimes, when Aling Carmen was in a good mood, we’d end up getting our hands on hot \textit{pan de sal}, even if they were the burnt ones. But that day, she came out with her broom handle, ready to whack us behind our legs.

“You’re harassing the people,” she said. “Get out of here.”

Sammy and I backed away, but Richard stayed put.

“We’re not bothering anyone,” he said.

Aling Carmen poked at Richard’s chest with the end of the broom handle.

“You’re bothering me.”

“No we’re not.”

She, dug the handle into Richard and pushed him back.

“Bitch, that hurts!” Richard said.

Richard slapped the stick to the side and lunged for some sweet rolls on a nearby table. He dropped one of them as he dashed past us.

“Run, fuckers!” He yelled at us. And we did.

We reached the far end of Catanduanes Street, near the Shell gas station where Alvin used to buy the dirty papers. Richard handed us the rolls. Sammy chomped down on his but I just picked at mine.

“What’s the matter?” Richard said.

“Well, now we can’t go back there. Aling Carmen hates us now.”

“Fuck her.”
“She’s not so bad,” Sammy said.

“Yeah? She wouldn’t have given you this,” Richard said, and took the half roll from Sammy. He put it in his pocket. I gave Sammy my roll.

Richard walked off a few feet, sat himself on the bumper of a parked truck and ate Sammy’s roll.

He’d been different when we first met, some years ago in the market, playing with stolen marbles. Softer. We all were. We thought that maybe things wouldn’t always be this way, that I was just passing through or that if stuck things out, somehow God would reward us later. It didn’t feel that way now. Something changed in the way Richard moved, the way his eyes rested on things. I wondered if it was the same way. The strange thing is that even if he was the one who’d just lost someone, Sammy didn’t seem altered in any way. He was as sweet and as lost without us as ever.

In the afternoon, we jumped on the back of a jeepney, hung on, for a ride to the mall at the end of West Avenue. The driver stopped at Lawin Street, and threatened us, so we got off there and walked the rest of the way. Our luck wasn’t any better there, really, but at least the mall had air conditioning and the girls were pretty. The mall cops would kick us out, of course, but we were persistent, and they were lazy, and there was always another way back in. It was a game.

But this time, we weren’t there to play. We were there to report. We answered to Alvin, but he answered to someone else, and his name was Don-Don Lara. He was eighteen, tall and fair. He had a long, thin nose, sunken cheeks, slits for eyes, thin lips. He
was always in a tank top so he could show off his muscles and his tattoos—an eagle on his chest, one wing stretching across and over his left shoulder and another one of a scorpion on the inside of his right forearm. He wore his hair brushed up, spiky, and trailing down his nape was a rat-tail. On his feet, almost everywhere he went were those beautiful, original, black and red, Nike Air Jordans. Rumor has it that he took them from a student somewhere in Cubao after he stabbed him near to death with an ice pick.

He and his buddies were by the newsstand. Don-Don was leafing through a magazine with a rock band on the cover. He didn’t say anything when we got there, just kept reading. But he always had this degenerate hanging around him—Pipoy—who was always giving us shit.

“The fuck are you coconuts doing here?”

“Alvin is dead,” I said.

“We know Alvin is dead.”

“He was shot. Butch Valdez shot him,” Richard said.

“So? That fuck up had it coming,”

Pipoy was missing a couple teeth. You could see his tongue flick around in his mouth when he spoke. He was also blind in one eye on account of his mother disciplining him with a wire hanger to the face. This is probably why he was so angry.

I could feel Sammy backing up behind us. Sammy was Pipoy’s favorite. He thought it was hilarious that Sammy was as fat as he was and never passed up a chance to remind him, to poke the jiggling paunch that hung over his shorts. Sammy really did look like a giant baby, though.
“What’s the matter with him? What’s the matter with you, piglet?”

Don-Don put the magazine back on the rack. “Alvin was his cousin.” He stared straight at Sammy. “Right? Alvin was your cousin.”

“Yes,” Sammy said. He looked at us, and then back to Don-Don.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Don-Don said, glancing at Pipoy. An awkward laugh came out of his mouth, slithered past the gaps.

“Got told…” Richard said.

Pipoy heard him though and slapped him on the ear. “I’ll fuck you up, blackie,” Pipoy said. “Like last time.” Pipoy was referring to the time Richard got fed up with all the insults to both him and Sammy and kicked him in the nuts. Pipoy got him back by slapping him so hard that Richard blacked out. Pipoy stripped off all his clothes and left him naked on the sidewalk.

Don-Don shook his head. He waved for Pipoy to go away for a while, and he did but first he flipped us off with both hands.

“Alvin was a friend. I liked him. But the drugs got to him. Do you guys do drugs?” Alvin asked.

We shook our heads.

“Glue? You sniff?”

We shook our heads. I had tried it once, because I’d heard that it made the hunger go away, but all it did was give me headaches.

Don-Don reached into his pocket and pulled out a red bill. Fifty pesos.

“Get something to eat,” he said. “I liked Alvin. From now on, you come to me.”
Richard took the bill and offered a soft ‘thank you.’ We turned to go.

“Hey,” Don-Don added. He lit a cigarette, took a drag and let the smoke stream out of his nostrils. “Fuck with me, I’ll chop you up and feed you to the dogs,” he said.

We didn’t cross him. We didn’t want to. Not because we were afraid. It wasn’t that.

We would bring him the money every week. Don-Don placed coins in a large plastic candy jar. If we had bills for him, he placed them in an envelope. We were not the only kids that kicked back money to him and judging how fat the envelope could be by the end of a week, there must have been a lot us.

He would give twenty-five pesos to each of us, barely enough for two days worth of food but we never said anything. I could tell that Richard was starting like Don-Don. He started to adopt the same kind of swagger. He’d make fun of Sammy sometimes, rub his belly, but then he’d give him treats too—candy, fried banana. He’d tell me “Jomar, you watch out for these two. You’re the smart one.” He took care of us, maybe even more than Alvin did. Even though the money he gave us was never enough, he gave us stuff every now and then: comics, slippers, little things like that. There was the time he gave us some firecrackers.

The firecracker prank was my idea. I’ll have to live with that. I thought it would be funnier.

We waited in the skeleton house. I knew when he would run past. We hid behind a wall facing the street. There was a hole cut of it where a window should have
been. I prepared the firecrackers, “Five Stars,” shaped like triangles in different colors.

When we heard him, we lit the “Five Stars” and tossed them into the street. We heard Mang Isko slow down. We peaked through the window. He stopped running and it looked like he was trying to make sense of the flickering wicks, the odd, glowing shapes on the ground. He looked left and right, to the sides of the street. He looked in our direction, saw us through the opening, our shapes anyway. The street was still that early morning shade of purple. He was about ready to say something, about to make a gesture, when the firecrackers exploded, one after the other “BANG! BANG! BANG!” A high-pitched scream came out of him. Something like “Hayiiiiieee!!” He tried to cover both his eyes and ears at the same time. He ran off blind but tripped over garbage bags left on the side of the road. He crawled around to get his bearings.

I had one last firecracker and threw it. It landed a few feet away. When it went off, Mang Isko fell forward and curled into a ball.

We come out from behind the wall. The smoke from the firecrackers hung in the air. We weren’t laughing. We moved closer to Mang Isko and we see a puddle growing from under him. He’d pissed himself.

It didn’t take long for Lani to figure it out, to track the firecrackers to us. She convinced Don-Don and Pipoy to hand us over. They had us come to the salon, where she was waiting.

“Sorry boys, you’re gonna have to take this,” he said, shaking his head, smiling at us.
Lani didn’t bother to take off her rings before she slapped each of us across the cheek. I teared up but tried to hold it all in. Sammy made no such effort and let out a wail when she hit him. Richard ducked, but Lani grabbed him by the hair and twisted his sideburns until he yelled for her to stop. She threw him to the ground. Pipoy was cracking up the whole time. She slapped each of us again and then went inside the salon. Don-Don gave us five pesos each.

“For taking it like fucking bosses,” he said. “You didn’t tell her where you got the five stars.”

Somehow, that made it alright. Almost worth it. But we quit messing with Mang Isko anyway, just to be safe.

In 1986 the best boxer in the world was “Iron” Mike Tyson. Some had suggested that he could possibly turn out to be greater even than the legendary Ali. But not according to Butch Valdez

It was a November night when we borrowed a pushcart to collect bottles and newspapers with. We were going up and down Catanduanes Street, house to house when we saw a gathering, mostly men, in a makeshift cafeteria with tables and chairs set up outside like Aling Carmen’s bakery. A birthday party, we thought at first. There was a long table and on it were platters of food, a pot of soup. There was a large cooler next to it, with beer and soft drinks, and beside that, a grill. The smells coming from that grill were torture. I felt it stick to the insides of my nostrils, stab the pit of my stomach. Sammy’s mouth grew very wet. He bit his upper lip.
The men were crowded around a television propped up on a chair which itself was set on top of a table. They leaned on and over one another, squeezed in between one another for better view. But in the center, right in front of the tv was Butch Valdez, sitting in a chair with large red cushions. There was at least a foot of space all around him. He wore cream-colored pants, and a white, wide brimmed cowboy hat.

We pushed the cart down the street, and parked it underneath a tree. Richard and I climbed up and sat on the branches. Sammy couldn’t and sat inside the cart, on top of a pile of newspapers. From where we were we could see that Don-Don and Pipoy were in that crowd of men.

I tried to make out the figures on the television from a distance. It was a boxing match, that much I could make out. There was a flash of motion on the screen, and then commotion. The men went “whoooolll!!” Their hands would come up to their foreheads in disbelief. “Did you see that?” they would say, and they would engage in brief re-enactments of the action. Like us when we first saw how far gone Mang Isko’s mind was. “Three punches! Boom, boom, boom!” someone yelled, copying the movements.

“Maybe you can all just shut the hell up for a second. The program isn’t over,” Butch said, looking back over his shoulder.

They calmed down. I focused on the screen. Mike Tyson, shiny with sweat, was enveloped by arms and bodies. They hung on to his limbs, his waist, some even kissed him on the cheek, and whispered things in his ear. Then there was a replay of the action in slow motion. The men around the tv shushed each other and were very still. We all
watched the killer blows land, the ones that brought down the other man, a large man, even larger than Tyson. He went down once, and got up, but his legs were rubbery. He fell down again. There was a close up of the beaten man’s face. His eyes were wild, confused. He tried once more to get up but tipped forward and rolled to the side. The referee threw his arms around him, embraced him, and kept him on the ground.

The men return to their seats, shaking their heads, to their food that was probably already cold. My heart sank as I realized that if we weren’t so busy watching, we probably could have snatched up something from any one of those tables and gone off running, and maybe no one would have bothered chasing after us.

Butch got up from his chair and pulled up his cream slacks. “I don’t like his style,” he announced. “He’s just a brute. No finesse, no style.” Butch crouched low, imitating Tyson’s stance. Butch always had a willing audience, especially with guys like these, guys who were both terrified of him, but wanted to be around him. Guys who bragged to their friends that they knew him, could have beers with him. The men didn’t know what to say. They nodded or looked down at their food or laughed softly to themselves.

“Well, I do,” Don-Don said. “I like him. He’s a monster.”

His voice seemed so clear at that moment, like there weren’t any other sounds on our street or any other street. And all the men there seemed to stop mid-chew to get a
look at the kid who had the courage that they didn’t. Butch looked at him and smiled a crooked one.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Butch said. “Ali would play with Tyson, play with him like a child.” He moved towards Don-Don. His shoes clicked against the concrete. Pipoy looked down at the ground, turned to the side, in our direction. His eyes met mine for a moment but he looked down again. He looked pale. Don-Don looked stiff. Butch got up very close, his hard round belly almost touching Don-Don’s. Don-Don stood up very straight. He was almost as tall as Butch. I turned to Richard. His eyes were wide and he breathed very slowly and quietly. Like you could count to four each time.

Butch took Don-Don’s hands, folded the fingers and balled the hands into fists. He lifted them up to Don-Don’s face, right next to his cheeks.

“Go ahead, you be Tyson,” Butch said. “I’ll be Ali.” Butch set his hat on a table, then lowered his hands by his waist. “This is how Ali fought.” He paused to move some chairs aside, cleared a space for the two of them. The men around them drank their beers, smoked, and watched.

The running count for the number of people whose lives ended at Butch’s hands was fifteen. Fifteen confirmed, but depending on who you talked to, the number has swollen up to almost twice that. Whether that kid Don-Don stabbed for his Air Jordans lived or died isn’t known. The point is that people kept their eyes out for the ice pick he
supposedly carried with him, that they—we—always kept our voices low, our eyes soft when he was close by.

Butch touched Don-Don’s shoulders, his arms, his hips. Moved him around just so, told him to hold this pose, that pose. Butch circled around him, shadowboxed, controlled their distance, showed how Muhammad Ali would have outsmarted the monster. Butch pressed his knuckles against Don-Don’s chin, his temple, palmed his forehead, wrapped his arms around him in a clinch.

“You see? Ali had too many tricks. Too smart for Tyson. He would either be too far away for Tyson to hit, or he would smother him like this,” Butch said, resting his head on Don-Don’s shoulder, pinning Don-Don’s arms against his body. They were very close together. The men in the cafeteria nodded their heads. Pipoy watched them from some feet away, drinking a Coca-Cola.

“Ali was strong. Very strong. People forget that. And he was bigger than Tyson,” Butch explained from the clinch. “If Tyson had him against the ropes, all Ali would have to do is hold him like this and then turn him around.” The two men spun so that Don-Don ended up where Butch was, and Butch where Don-Don was. For a second, it looked like a dance.

“That’s how he would have done it,” Butch said. He put his hand behind Don-Don’s neck and patted him on the shoulder. Butch put his hat back on, poured himself
some whiskey, sat down and picked up some grilled meat from a plate. Don-Don flexed, and cracked his knuckles.

“Can I have some of that?”

“This?” Butch raised his glass.

“Yes.”

“No,” Butch said. “Not this whiskey. This is a gentleman’s drink.”

Don-Don grinned, collected Pipoy, and left.

I looked down to where the cart was. Sammy had fallen asleep on the papers. Richard shifted towards me, prepared to climb down. His eyes were misty. I readied to climb down too. I could still smell the char off the grill, but I wasn’t hungry anymore.

Don-Don was all about boxing after that night. He took to walking around with a pair of gloves hanging down from around his neck. He made Pipoy carry an extra pair, made him spar with him. Pipoy never put up much of a fight. When some of their other friends came around, Pipoy gladly passed the gloves over. They would pretend to try, but gave up the moment Don-Don landed something meaningful.

Butch wasn’t around for some weeks. He would accompany important people out of town sometimes, people who liked having someone dangerous around. Butch didn’t
mind. Fact is, he loved cashing in on that. Not sure why, but I felt that that was what all
the boxing was about. Like Don-Don wanted to show Butch something when he got back.
Not that he was tough, but that he’d listened.

So Don-Don would practice punch combinations and really work Pipoy and these
other guys over. We’d watch them mess around in the parking lot of Lani’s salon, trying
to impress the girls. Richard and Sammy copied them. This time, they took the imitation
a little more serious. Not like when we first saw Mang Isko. Sometimes Richard would
smack Sammy hard, and Sammy would cry. “Suck it up. You’re not a baby. We can’t
take care of you forever,” Richard would say, and smack him again. I didn’t like that, but
Richard was probably right.

We had fifteen pesos between us. It was starting to drizzle and we hadn’t eaten all
day. We tried our usual spots—the gas station, the Jollibee, the train station—and were
unsuccessful. A lady handed me some watermelon bubblegum. I didn’t like watermelon
so I gave it to Richard and Sammy, and they quieted their hunger pangs with that until we
saw the fish-ball vendor pushing his cart up Catanduanes Street.

“We can get two sticks. That’s two balls each,” Richard said.

The smell of the oil and sweet, salty sauce made me slightly dizzy. The vendor
was very short—my height—but was old enough to be my grandfather. And he was
stooped over, looked even smaller in his faded pink polo, two sizes too big. His slippers
were worn thin but his feet looked tough, like they were carved out of wood. He was very
dark and had curly hair.

Sammy counted our money and handed it to the old man, and that’s when Don-
Don and Pipoy came around the corner from West Avenue.

“Hey, monkeys,” Pipoy said. We ignored him. He had both the boxing gloves
with him. “Whoa. Richard, is this your dad?” Pipoy started laughing. Hard, so he choked
on his on saliva.

“He’s not my fucking dad,” Richard said.

“Looks like your dad,” Pipoy said. “You know this kid? Is this your kid?” He
asked the vendor as he pointed at Richard. The vendor laughed, scratched the back of his
head. Don-Don approached the cart, came up close to the vendor.

“Did you charge these boys?”

“What?” He held the money in his hand, unsure what to do.

“These boys don’t pay.”

“It’s my living,” the old man said. His eyes shifted between us and Don-Don.

“These boys are with me. You know me?”

“No, kid. I’m sorry, I don’t.”
“I’m not a kid, you dumb fuck. Show some respect,” Don-Don said. He grabbed on to the old man’s ear, pulled him close.

I felt tingly. My mouth was dry. Sammy looked confused and held on to the two fish ball sticks.

“Tell your dad you want another stick,” Pipoy said.

Richard put his hands in his pockets.

“Tell him you want another stick.”

“Do you want another stick” Don-Don asked.

“I..I’m hungry,” Richard said.

“We’re good. Two sticks, is good,” I said. I stared at Richard. Richard looked up to Don-Don, to Pipoy.

“No, I want another one. I’m hungry,” he said.

“Give him another one,” Don-Don said. He adjusted his shoulders. The vendor shook his head, put the money in Don-Don’s hand. Don-Don handed the money to me. The old man swallowed hard, pursed his lips, and began skewering the fish balls.

“Respect. You need to respect us here,” Don-Don said. He let go of the ear.
I wanted to look away from the fish ball vendor, to look anywhere else, but I couldn’t. I looked at his face, at each tiny movement of dark skin over bone, at the deep lines around his mouth, at his yellowish eyes. My teeth hurt. I was biting down hard.

Then a familiar sound came from behind us, the tinkle of glass on glass over hoarse-throated whispers. Mang Isko appeared with his bag. He saw us all around the cart. His eyes focused on Pipoy. A funny smile formed on his face. He put down his bottle bag and began to shadowbox. He had his eyes on the boxing gloves around Pipoy’s neck.

“The fuck is this?” Pipoy said?

“That’s Lani’s dad,” Don-Don said. “You know…,” he put his finger up to his head, moved it in circles.

Mang Isko shuffled to and fro, punched at the air. He was beginning to work up a sweat.

“He’s lookin’ at you, Pips,” Don-Don said. He laughed and lit a cigarette.

“Oh yeah?” Pipoy took a pair of gloves from around his neck and handed it to Mang Isko. He put it on.

“Oh shit, you’re gonna get it, Pips,” Don-Don said.

Pipoy took his shirt off.
“Serious?”

“Yeah, man. So I can move, you know?” Pipoy said, jerking his shoulders. He looked over at Mang Isko. “Sorry, did you want to take your shirt off too? You know, so you can move better…” Pipoy took the hem of his shirt and quickly pulled it up over Mang Isko’s head. Then he yanked down his shorts, roughly, down to his knees. Underpants too. Pipoy let out a wild sound, like a bird caw, not a scream, not a laugh, but something in between.

“Fuck! That’s cold, dude!” Don-Don said, laughing, coughing on cigarette smoke.

Mang Isko tried to get his shirt off from around his head, but couldn’t with the boxing gloves on. Pipoy got behind him and held the shirt around his face.

“Get the gloves, and let’s split!” Pipoy said. Don-Don tossed his cigarette and wrestled Mang Isko, who was flailing blindly, and yelling muffled shouts. His pants fell to his ankles.

“Hold still, grampa!” Don-Don got the gloves off, Pipoy let him go. They walk off.

Mang Isko pulled his shirt down, his shorts up. He picked up his bottles and walked past us. The fish ball vendor shook his head, and pushed his cart after Mang Isko.

“You ok?” we heard him ask. Mang Isko didn’t answer. Just kept walking. We watched the two men walk up the street.
Lani waited for Butch to get back. Good move. Butch chewed Don-Don and Pipoy out, but Pipoy he actually smacked around until his mouth and nose bled.

“That’s Francisco Pascual. The Pistol. Bantamweight contender, and he would have torn a whole through the both of you back in the day. Show some respect you fucking punks,” he told them. At least that’s what we heard. We didn’t see it, but the next time we saw Pipoy, the side of his face was pretty swollen.

In early January ‘87, the neighborhood was still coming down from the high of the holidays. The people were in good spirits, which meant they were extra generous. We were the happy recipients of Christmas leftovers and church handouts. Over the season we collected nearly triple what we usually get on the streets. We ate well for the first time in months. Sammy put on even more weight. Somehow, over the holidays, Richard learned to smoke. I picked up a notebook and some pencils from the supermarket. All of the money still went to Don-Don first, of course. He gave us a small bonus of an extra twenty pesos.

Richard liked that Don-Don was in charge, felt that we could go on this way for a while, that we’d be okay. Sammy said that maybe Alvin’s ghost was watching over us. Richard reminded him that all Alvin ever did was get high and make fun of him.

Life was simple then. Either you ate, or you didn’t, and there’s something I came to respect about that.
One night we were coming back from shopping center at the intersection of EDSA and West Ave. In the mall parking lot they’d put up an outdoor movie screen for a film festival—one whole week of Philippine cinema. We’d just finished watching action star Lito Lapid shoot up some bad guys and go home with the girl. It was late, but we were wide-awake, we played out the fight scenes to each other as we headed down West Avenue, back to the skeleton house. Richard took puffs of his cigarette. He still looked really awkward.

Richard dared us to take the small road that ran past Jangga’s shack, beside the bridge. Maybe it was because we were all feeling a little bit like Lito Lapid, but we took him up on it. We turned from West Avenue on to the little windy street and felt a chill once we spotted the shack. Richard bolted down the road fast as he could. I followed and then Sammy who almost tripped and landed on his face. The neighbors must have hear us laughing and hooting like spirits in the dark.

When we got to the skeleton house, it was pitch black. The nearby street lamp had gone out. We groped at the unfinished structures, careful not to get ourselves caught on a nail or a piece of jagged stone. We found our spot, and we laid down, Pipoy lit up another cigarette, before turning in.

I woke up to the sound of voices in the skeleton house. The sky was just beginning to change color. We heard whispers. Moaning. I shook Richard and Sammy. For a second, the thought crossed my mind that Jangga had seen us, that she had come after us.
The noises came from another corner of the skeleton house. Sammy was scared and wanted to go.

“No way,” Richard said. “This is our place.”

“But it’s not, we just sleep here,” Sammy said.

“Pussy,” Richard said. Richard waved at me to follow him. Sammy stayed behind. We followed the noise. There was someone behind one of the walls. Richard and I crept closer, quiet as we could. We tried to find smooth surfaces, free of gravel and small stones. But it was no good. When we were about five feet away, the noises stopped. Then there was a rustling behind the wall. I scrambled back, but Richard froze. We heard the voices again before someone came running out from behind the wall. It was dark, but I saw that it was Pipoy, fumbling with his pants, only one arm and his head through his shirt. He nearly knocked Richard down as he ran out.

There was still movement coming from behind the wall. Someone else. The voice cut the air, raspy and low.

“What did you little shits see?”

I knew who it was before he stepped out, before I saw the tall, muscular frame, outline of the tattoos. Don-Don stepped towards us slowly. He was barefoot, naked except for a pair of black denim shorts. He was holding a bundle of discarded electrical cable, the frayed copper wire peeking out from the ends. His grip on the wires tightened and loosened. Tightened.
I backed away, back to Sammy. Richard stayed frozen where he was. Don-Don closed the distance. He looked past Richard, at Sammy and me, then back to Richard. He looked off to the side, his gaze seemed to drift towards the length of the street. Don-Don took a deep breath and pat the side of his leg with the cable. Then he drew the cable up diagonally across his body and whipped it down over Richard’s face. Richard let out a yelp as he fell to the ground.

Don-Don sped towards me with his arm raised. I put my arms up in an ‘x’ and let the cable strike my forearms. He grabbed me where my arms crossed, by the wrists, gripped me with one hand. I feel his fist sink into my side, my insides get moved around. I felt the air leave me, my legs go weak, like I might have soiled myself. I dropped to my knees. I rolled over to my side, tried hard not to black out. I could only see blotches of light and dark.

I could hear Sammy crying. He started to beg, the snot and spit choking the words “Pl…e…a…se… Pl…e…a…se,” was all he managed to get out.

I heard the sound of the cable whip through the air again and again. I would never forget the sound Sammy made as that cable came down on him. It is the saddest sound I know.

My vision began to clear. I could make out Richard struggling to stand. There was blood and dirt on his forehead. Sammy was facedown on the ground, his hands clasped
over the back of his head. That’s when I picked up on a familiar sound coming up Catanduanes Street. I knew the rhythm.

The footsteps slowed down as he passed the house. He must have heard the sounds inside. Maybe he remembered the firecracker prank. I don’t know. He appeared at the opening, stood square where the door would have been. I got up and spat out some bile. Mang Isko looked around, looked at each of us. He turned to Don-Don still standing over Sammy, breathing heavily. The cable was still in his hand.

“Get out of here,” Don-Don said.

Mang Isko moved towards Don-Don slowly, like he was going to tell him something important, and then threw a punch, so fast, that I don’t remember which hand he used. Don-Don hit the ground hard.

Sammy crawled his way to a far corner and stayed there. Don-Don got back up with a cut lip. Don-Don lunged at Mang Isko, and threw a wild right hand. Mang Isko ducked the punch, rolled under, and stepped out of the way. Don-Don stumbled forward. Mang Isko put his hands up, took his boxing stance. Pistol. Don-Don cocked his right hand back again, but before he could release it, there was a fist in his face. Then two more, one on the temple, the other on the chin. Don-Don’s head snapped back, whipped to the side, snapped back again. It only took a second. Don-Don lay facedown in his own blood and spit.

Sammy scuttled back to me. Richard moved closer too. The gash on his head was not too deep, but it bled a lot.
Mang Isko stood over Don-Don. The sun was coming up. Mang Isko’s face was serene. Like a man looking at the ocean. No smile, no nothing. He just stood there. I thought that maybe he would raise his hands, hop around a little. But he didn’t. Instead, without even looking at us, he turned back to the road and resumed his run, his pace exactly the same. Don-Don was breathing but completely out of it. We left him there, left the house before the sun was fully up.

That’s the last time we ever saw Don-Don Lara. We heard that he was clubbed to death somewhere in Ermita some months later in a fight over a girl, but who knows. Ingo still hung around but he never said anything to us again, never even looked our way.
Revolution

For years, Catanduanes has been a street strangely left out of many city maps, perhaps due, as some have postulated, to its insignificant size and scant traffic. For roughly three blocks, it runs parallel to West Avenue, one of Quezon City’s main thoroughfares. While West Avenue is a broad and bustling road lined on either side with a variety of establishments such as restaurants, banks, martial arts schools, copying services, tire shops, hair and nail salons, massage parlors, video stores, and coffee shops, Catanduanes has for decades remained almost exclusively residential (with the exception of two businesses – a sari-sari store and a small bakeshop – both run out of houses). The two streets join at a three-way intersection where they are met by San Francisco del Monte Street – the oldest of the three streets, having been established by the Spaniards in 1590 with the intention of leading travelers to San Pedro de Bautista Church.

Some have observed that the intersection at which these roads meet indicates the convergence of three periods in the country’s history – San Francisco Del Monte which was created during the Spanish Colonial period; West Avenue, which became a major artery in the heart of the city during the Commonwealth\(^1\) years; and on the corner, Wally’s Diner\(^2\), which served the best malts in Metro Manila and the famous “Wally’s

\(^1\) The Philippine Commonwealth (1932-1946) was a form of transitional government established through the Tydings-McDuffie act of 1932 designed to move the Filipinos from a colonial state under the United States to one of complete, independent self-governance.

\(^2\) Wally’s remained open until the sergeant’s death in 1992, at which point, the property was bought by J. Chang of Dim Sum Hut.
Mushroom Burger” established by Walter J. Newkirk in 1949, a US army sergeant who settled in the area post WW II.

In the basement of #103 Catanduanes Street, there are stacks upon stacks of papers, some in folders, some merely stapled or flimsily held together by paper clips. There are maps of cities as well as country-sides, mountain regions, and forested areas pinned on the walls and spread over tables. There are building schematics, diagrams of waterways and power grids rolled up and leaning against walls, and bunched together in bins. There are two projectors, only one of which continues to function. Floor to ceiling there are bookshelves containing everything from the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* to multiple copies of both the US and Philippine constitutions; volumes by Renato Constantino, Teodoro Agoncillo, *Chicken Soup for the Soul; Your Body, Your Business; The Woman Who Had Two Navels* by Nick Joaquin; *Jose Garcia Villa: Collected Poems; Growing Old-Getting Better: Sex for the Seasoned Man*; The Bible. In the corner sits an old RCA television set upon which sits a VCR which in turn serves as platform to a Betamax machine beginning to collect dust. Next to these are some videotape towers that carry titles such as “EDSA, CNN coverage,” “History Channel Special: Death March,” “Back to Bataan” starring John Wayne,” “Dodi’s Wedding, 1982,” “50th Wedding Anniversary, Manila Hotel,” “Back To The Future,” “The Magnificent Seven,” “Johnny Boy’s first birthday,” “Farewell Messages (just in case).” There are hundreds of LPs in a box, beside a Dansette Junior record player, with the following most recently listened to: Stan Getz: The Jobim Songbook; Count Basie’s one o’clock jump; The Best of Peter, Paul and Mary; The Complete Tommy Dorsey. There is a rusty bird cage with a one-eyed
maya inside. Stapled to one wall, a vintage WWII propaganda poster circa 1943 with the words “The Fighting Filipinos” emblazoned across. On another wall, The Philippine flag, only black where it should be white, and the red and blue sections reversed. In a glass case mounted on a wall, a Colt .45 pistol circa 1906. On a large green desk, a typewriter with a sheet of paper inserted through the feeder with the words “Dear Children,” and nothing else. From this basement, at odd hours, issue swift, traipsing, whimsical melodies, expertly played on a soprano clarinet, but also, sometimes, sweet sad ones, played on an alto.

The whispers have been around for years. They are dismissed as foolishness and of dubious origin, mostly by the younger folk, those who never seem to ever give a second thought to things not always having been the way they are. But the rumors continue among the old men of Catanduanes street, who up until the late 1970s numbered close to a hundred but are now fewer than twenty, told in hushed tones and sentences that trail off into the ether, unfinished but understood. Among them is Mang Tiburcio, who sells blocks of ice and supplies most of the small stores in the neighborhood, Mang Eli, a retired band leader who can be heard at times playing old jazz standards on his clarinet, and Mang Rommie the barber, whose shop on the corner of Catanduanes and San Francisco del Monte street has been open since 1945, a most fortuitous year that saw the birth of his first son, the inception of an unsinkable business and the end of the second World War. The war that took place forty or so years earlier however, the one that
followed the break in history that was the year 1898\textsuperscript{3} had been a far less dramatic affair, at least, as far as the rest of the world was concerned. It goes without saying of course, that for the Filipinos, after three hundred and thirty three years of deference to the King of Spain, and faced immediately with the threat of yet another race of men bent on rescuing them from their own terrible primitiveness, the war was everything.

The story of the Catanduanes Street Rebellion cannot be found in any history book, in any document or file no matter how obscure or secret, or tucked away in some dusty backroom of a library or municipal office or university archive. This is the case in part because the street now known as Catanduanes did not get its name until 1951 and had been up until then an obscure dirt path. But also, and perhaps, more importantly, because the old men still speak of the rebellion not as some event that never achieved its own glorious birth, but as something that has yet to take place. Therefore, they take special care not to speak of it outside of their own ever shrinking circle that meets in secret every year, on the sixth of September, the date that President William McKinley

\textsuperscript{3} On the 12\textsuperscript{th} of June 1898, Emilio Aguinaldo, first president of the Philippine Republic declared Philippine Independence. In its written form, using the American declaration as its template, the government renounced Spanish rule and accepted its place as a protectorate of the United States of America. However, what slowly became clear to the Filipinos was that their supposed saviors, the defenders of all oppressed and enslaved peoples everywhere, were apparently no less immune to the fever of conquest. The Americans were there to stay.

By December that year, all pretenses fell to the wayside as President William McKinley called for the “Benevolent Assimilation” of the Filipinos. What transpired next proved that the Filipinos could not be assimilated any more benevolently than a bullet into a body, for on February 4, 1899 the first shots were fired on the San Juan Bridge, in Metro Manila. Thus began the Philippine-American War which was fought, officially, between 1899 and 1902.

The conflict had not originally been referred to as a “war” by the invaders but an “insurrection,” implying that the islands were already the rightful possession of the U.S. government, and that the Filipinos were not sovereign, but subjects. The Philippine resistance force fought tenaciously, but, weakened by internal disputes and mistrust between members of the ilustrados – the well-educated, wealthy, social elite – and members of the peasant movement, collapsed in the face of the Americans’ superior arms, tactics, and martial experience. Skirmishes continued sporadically well into 1912, but eventually, all hostilities came to a halt, and any more plans at revolution were put to rest. All but one.
was shot by a man whose last name was even more unpronounceable than their own
Spanish or native ones, one Leon Czolgosz, born in Michigan to Polish immigrants,
whose sensitivities and history-altering actions had evidently been shaped by anarchist
ideology. While it is uncertain whether or not Leon Czolgosz might have been aware of
the conditions created on the islands by President McKinley’s policies, the man referred
to simply as “The Pole,” was perceived as nothing less than an ally by a group of men
quite inept in the methods of 20th century warfare and ignorant of the intricate
machinations of imperial politics, who lived on a tiny, negligible street, tucked away in a
small backwater town on the outskirts of the capital, in the northernmost island of an
archipelago in the Pacific.

Every morning before sunrise, Mang Tiburcio silently slinks out of bed so as not
to awaken his wife, heads to the bathroom for his ablutions, dresses, and proceeds to his
delivery truck. His wife is roused ever so slightly by the initial pop and roar of the engine
– which for many years, she has associated with the exact time of 5:20 am – and mutters
a prayer for her husband before sinking back into her slumber. He drives the truck three
blocks down from his house and pulls up in front of his first stop, Regal Fish Market,
where he unloads the first of his supply at 6:30 am. The ice comes in a variety of forms:
big blocks, chips, crushed. Upon parking, Mang Tiburcio reaches under the passenger
seat, retrieves three books and a flashlight, and in the hour or so that he waits for the fish
mongers to set up their stalls and their wares, proceeds to leaf through the books,
examining and revising their contents, unperturbed by the great din of a fish market just
then coming to life with the curses of toothless old tinderas, the laughter of the workers still drunk from the night before, the clatter of knives, scales, buckets, old newspapers – all the materials for the day’s business.

One book contains the accounting for all expenses beginning in the month of July, 1924. The list of items purchased ranges from offices supplies such as paper and pencils; books on a variety of subjects but a majority on politics and culture; subscriptions to magazines such as *Popular Mechanics*, *TIME*, and *National Geographic*; building implements such as wood and steel, power tools, gallons of gasoline; receipts for food items such as beer, pork rinds, condensed milk, canned meats, as well as restaurant trips to *Alex the III*, *La Dulcinea* or the ever popular *Dragon Boat Inn*.

Another book contains pages filled with drawings. Along the pages’ margins are paragraphs upon paragraphs marked up and hastily scribbled over with notes. Some pages have the word “ABORT” written diagonally across in thick red marker, and on the corners of other pages, the word “consider” in green ink.

In the third book are names: Bartolome Ocampo 29/ tuberculosis, Maximo Cruz 22/ gun-shot, Pedro Soliman 30/ knife wound (domestic dispute), Federico Galang 60/ pneumonia, Alfonso Katigbak 45/car accident, Narciso Gomez 70/prostate cancer, Carlito Tiongson 63/ syphilis.

Only a few close friends and family are aware of Mang Tiburcio’s passion for ice, which differs from that of the butcher who caresses the bloody muscles and tendons of dead animals and imagines the moist, warm, comfort they will bring to waiting mouths, or that of the farmer whose heart swells at the sight of the robust size and color of his
crops. Mang Tiburcio feels for ice the way poets must feel about paper or computers, or painters feel about canvas: that the sweetness and bitterness of life can find some home there, contained, unchanging, immortal. Those close to Mang Tiburcio might trace the old man’s fascination with ice to a magazine article in which he’d read about the great glaciers in some northern land surrendering the story of an ancient death, a prehistoric hunter, a cadaver with secrets from some forgotten time buried in the ice. Ice, which struck Mang Tiburcio as possessed of the remarkable ability to destroy and preserve life in the same instance.

On some days, after writing into his books, he takes the magazine from the glove compartment, turns his flashlight on the yellowing pages, and looks at the pictures of the hunter whose skin has grown thin and leathery though still mostly intact, the hunter’s lips curled inward baring brown and jagged teeth in a strange grin, and the eyes half closed as if testament to the lethal drowsiness that set in all those millennia ago, or perhaps half open because he had just then, in the middle of the 20th century been awakened by the chatter of giddy anthropologists. Mang Tiburcio has, on the few occasions of having had one drink too many, rambled on about wanting to be found in similar fashion, frozen, sitting up behind the wheel of his ice truck. “And wouldn’t that be a sight, the whole of Catanduanes Street locked in a white blanket, just waiting to be dug up again,” he would sometimes say while lamenting the unlikelihood of such an event due to the country’s tropical climate.

It had, in fact, been the suffocating torridity of the place that facilitated an unlikely encounter many years before, when in August of 1901, a platoon of American
soldiers in pursuit of a dozen or so Philippine rebels made their way through what is now West Avenue, which at that time was a flat and dusty road, pocked with hoof marks. The area was known for its banana trees – abaca which grew in abundance there. Peering through the openings in the surrounding foliage, the soldiers found little paths hacked out by what could have been machetes, sure signs, they assumed, that the Filipinos were yet close by. Following one of these paths, they found a creek by which they camped, hoping for a few hours respite from the maddening heat.

For reasons unknown, Private Jeremiah Banks and Private Carl Downs ventured up the creek until they were no longer in view of their company and were never seen or heard from again. Believing that an ambush lay in wait, and fearing the decimation of his unit, platoon commander Lt. George Figgs, an officer of limited ability and a known coward, promptly marched those under his command out of the region, never to return.

Many years later, after the hard day’s work of delivering ice, Mang Tiburcio sought the company of hard-boned, leather skinned men like himself in the beerhouse up the street, and while there, as a consequence of his inebriation, spoke of the two American boys whom he had spied from atop a tree, lying next to each other by the gurgling waters of the creek, completely naked, face down and backs to the sun at first, but then, soon, in each other’s arms, stroking each other’s hair, seemingly free from any cares in the world, as if the war were little more than some grand adventure. “It was at that moment that I feared them less, and feared them more,” he said, before resting his head on the table top and falling asleep.
There had been no singular moment to which those who would be the fathers of the revolution could look back upon as the true beginning of things. They have come to believe that it must have all started with some small idea, casually thrown about during a meal or doing something utterly mundane in times of war such as the digging of a ditch. None of them quite remembers who started the whole thing, or even what the thing initially was. One might say that at the time, their objective had been the same as everyone else’s which was to survive, though some said that the plan was to build a nation. That was good too, some of them thought, but there would be no nation if they were all dead. A nation of dead people, a giant graveyard, became the prevailing image for a romantic poem written by one of their number, a poem subsequently lost after the writer was swallowed up by the tumult of those early days, never heard from again.

Their exact number had always been something of a mystery, even from the start, a vague figure, taken for granted. With one conflict always coming at the heels of another, they lived in a state of perpetual exigency and their actions were constantly propelled by some sense of opposition, a sense shared by most everyone around them. The battle lines were clearer in the old days.

When the time came that sides had switched, and former enemies became allies and friends, and guns finally stopped firing, and the flow of blood slowed to a trickle, and hatreds burned less bright and better days appeared ahead of them, their numbers changed yet again. It continued to fluctuate over the years, swelling at times of strife, shrinking in times of comfort. That there was a collective, however, never seemed to be in question, as conversations invariably began with the word “we” – “We must come together…”;
“We shall show them…”; “We shall endure…” characteristic of such talk, but who the “we” actually were, no one was certain anymore.

They had originally been brought together by the movement of time and the necessity of circumstance, caught up in the history that was unfolding, rolling forward. As it rolled on, some found that they’d been left behind while some rolled forward. Finally, the spirit of resistance was flattened out like jagged earth forced to submit to the pressure and current of a river. That is how one revolution split into two. One made it into the history books, and the other did not. One ended, and the other had not. Has not.

In the summer of 1981, a cryptic, ominous, and somewhat baffling flyer was found stapled to light posts and taped to the gates of houses along Catanduanes Street. The flyer, which began with what appeared to be random nonsense, read as follows:

I visited New York once. The price of gas will continue to rise until we all shall have to go back to riding carriages. There is a woman in church who sits a pew in front of me with an ass that commands worship. What’s that sound? Who’s there? Go away! The trick to a perfect mechado sauce is to grate quezo de bola into the mixture. We’ve all been here before, and will be here again. At night, I see a man on a wheelchair pushing himself along this street. I call to him and say “Why are you all alone?” but he doesn’t answer. Oh, what’s the difference? In this climate, one must be vigilant in the changing of one’s socks.

We are your neighbors, your friends, your family. We are godparents to your children. We are their doctors and teachers, as we were once yours. We cook your food, we mend
your clothes. We are your tailors and your barbers. We sit next to you at church. You
invite us into your homes on birthdays and Christmas, for baptisms. For births, for
deaths, we are there, next to you. We weep. We held you when you were children just as
we hold your children now. When we talk of the good old days, know that we are lying.
We are sick, and frail, our eyesight is failing. Our hearts are clogged, our livers tired,
our bowels wholly unpredictable. We have but a few years left to live. That is what we
tell you, that is what you believe. Our knees ache. We can sit silent and motionless for
hours on end. We will appear occupied and content as we sit stone-faced in front of the
television and listen to records and do the crossword as you go about your day, rushing
to and fro, here and there, oblivious to our devices. That is why you will never see it
coming. We are exactly who you think we are.

Within twenty-four hours of its posting, the flyers disappeared, some taken by the
residents of the street themselves, but most removed by one or more individuals whose
identities remained secret. In the days that followed the incident, the street was abuzz
over the flyer and more importantly, the individual (or individuals) who had written it.
By week’s end however, the whole affair was dismissed as a prank of some sort, “clearly
the work of attention seeking hooligans,” as flatly expressed by Mang Rommie behind
the barber’s chair, and “obviously perpetrated by juvenile delinquents,” as vociferously
preached by Mang Tiburcio at every stop on his delivery route.

The flyer had in fact originated from the house at #56 Catanduanes Street, which
had been converted into a printing press for a Catholic organization gone defunct. Its sole
resident, the hermetic Mang Lito, had succumbed to syphilitic dementia, a consequence
of his weakness for cheap whores. Not long after the incident with the flyer, Mang Lito died. The few who mourned him – friends who’d known him in younger days, before his years of seclusion – were also men who, while genuinely saddened over the loss, experienced a wave of relief upon their friend’s passing, a friend whose future contributions to their future activities would be missed. There was laughter that followed too, for who could deny the irony that along with the delirium brought about by Lito’s ailment, it had been through the very resource they prized – Mang Lito’s printing press – that their near century’s worth of work came so close to unraveling. Soon however, those old friends looked to one another and thought that maybe, with Lito gone, they were the last.

On Saturday afternoons, one may walk into the barbershop on the corner of Catanduaes Street and San Francisco del Monte and find there three elderly gentlemen whiling the day away reading the newspaper and listening to radio programs. Many have noted however, that when entering said barbershop, one is taken by the feeling that a conversation is always in the process of being interrupted, or rather, a conversation has been going on for some time, but with the tinkle of the bell tied around the aluminum handle of the barbershop door, is then suddenly dropped, disengaged from, and spirited away, hidden like a note crumpled into a pant pocket or a desk drawer or thrown in a panic on the floor and kicked under a rug. This feeling is enhanced by what can only be described as the overly genial demeanor of the men, evidenced when, in perfect, seemingly rehearsed synchronization, one looks up from his sports page and over the
ridge of his reading glasses sitting on the edge of his nose, the other turns his ear away from the radio as he adjusts a dial to lower the volume, and the third sets down the scissors and razors he had previously been disinfecting, to greet the visitor or customer with a harmonious “Good Afternoon.”

Mang Rommie first discovered his barbering skills as a POW in a Japanese prison camp, managing somehow to completely shear off the hair of the heads of his fellow prisoners to spare them from lice with nothing more than a dull razor and cupful of tepid water.

When he first opened the shop at the end of the war, he charged twenty-five centavos for a haircut. He has always been one of the last to raise his prices, and even today one may notice that while other barbershops and salons charge upwards of one hundred pesos for a simple trim, Mang Rommie’s price remains fixed at forty pesos. “Anything more would be criminal,” he’d say. It is no secret that Mang Rommie, who often loses himself in the humming of romantic melodies while performing his work or the telling of obscure histories, will, on rare occasions, let patrons leave without paying, explaining that there are few more gratifying occupations than his, by which, after a visit to his shop, people can return to the world feeling beautiful.

First-time customers are often treated with a bit of local lore:

“The Banana Street Bandits,” was the name given to a group of young men who, if his autobiographical account is to be believed, abducted Captain Robert Strathern, of the 6th Cavalry brigade, on the 14th of January 1906, stripped him of his uniform, his weapons, and his provisions, and butchered his beloved appaloosa stallion, with which
they made a spicy stew. Six kilometers away from Catanduanes Street, the Captain was picked up by a small American contingent, still naked and covered only by palm fronds which he held quivering in front of him. Though the actual identity of the bandits remained forever a mystery to the Americans, and no further investigations were ever conducted, the young captain’s story was accepted as nothing less than the unimpeachable truth, only confirming the Americans’ notions that far from being the hoped for “noble savage,” the Filipinos were a most nefarious adversary, deserving treatment commensurate to their nature.

Mang Rommie passes on this story, like an heirloom, fragile and priceless, which he tells from behind the barber’s chair as he snips and combs, with a smile on his face, but always, a little sad of eye. Whenever an inquiry is made regarding the source of the tale, Mang Rommie insists that it is just a story, and quickly diverts attention back to his task by asking if sideburns are to be shortened or if one would prefer a rounded or square hairline at the nape. “Juuust…a story…” he says in a soothing voice, soft and raspy as he expertly draws the razor over skin or pats down any strands jutting out of the customer’s freshly cut pate.

Upon leaving the barbershop, if one were, perchance, to look back through the glass door, one may notice the three men suddenly animated, or perhaps re-animated, making small but purposeful, lively, peculiar gesticulations, and not at all the slow, languorous movements of old men spending the day following a religious broadcast over the radio or catching up on the previous day’s racetrack results. It is as if those things are not what they do in that barbershop at all, and they appear, from the other side of the
glass door, hands and arms tracing invisible diagrams in the air, to be miming a scene in which things come toppling down.

On some days, just before noon, one may hear the unmistakable, masterful, clarinet playing of Mang Eli, often to be seen sitting on his porch, blowing old tunes out into the fresh air. No neighbor ever complains about the playing. Those who were imprudent enough to have done so at some time or another, have been all but shunned by the other nearby residents, who have come to associate the one-time bandleader’s playing with their own sense of home. Indeed, Mang Eli, due to his quiet, gentle nature, his kind face, and his gift of music, has long been the most beloved of the old men of Catanduanes Street.

Every now and then, his neighbors come by to bring him food and other items – leftover birthday cake, a pot of *adobo*, used books – a practice that began shortly after his wife Cecilia passed, leaving him alone in the house, his children having relocated a few towns over, some years back. A few of these generous neighbors even volunteer to come help him tidy up his house, thinking that the old man has, perhaps, begun to neglect its maintenance, and worried that it may soon fall into disrepair. But Mang Eli has always declined the offer, often stating that his friends – the barber from down the street, and the brawny old ice delivery man – did more than their share to keep things in shape whenever they came to visit, which was very often.

The sight of the three old men, sitting on the porch, sipping coffee and reading the paper, has, like Mang Eli’s clarinet playing, been embraced, even cherished, as a fixed
feature of the street, as part of the neighborhood’s identity, and talk that one day, one of
the three men may no longer be there, relaxing on the porch with his friends, is the
occasional topic of conversation. “How sad would that be,” someone might say “for you
to lose someone you’d known for over forty, fifty years!” without realizing that the three
men have in fact, known each other for much longer than that, and that the sight of three
friends in the twilight of their lives, one of whom is a poor widower, quietly enjoying
each other’s company in what little years they have left together, is exactly what Mang
Eli wants everyone to see.

On September 30, 1946, in a demonstration of appreciation, goodwill, and
recognition of suffering shared and blood shed in the war against the Empire of the Sun,
the mayor of Quezon City organized a day’s worth of festivities with a delegation from
the United States as his honored guests. They included two members of congress
accompanied by their wives, a decorated colonel and his family, and several other
politicos of lesser importance whose names and positions were not recorded but who
were nonetheless treated with the same unfettered adulation accorded to men of their
provenance. On a small plot of land used to grow sweet potatoes, on which, thirty years
later, would be built a dental office, and then a record store, and then finally, a
McDonald’s, a stage was built, adjoining three tiered bleachers adorned with red, white
and blue ribbons. A parade would run the entire course of what would become West
Avenue. Dance troupes, a marching band, and representatives from some of the
Philippine regiments that remained had relatively intact would make their way up the
street in celebration of a new beginning and a lasting peace between the bloodied but unbowed people of the islands and the sons and daughters of the New World.

On that day, in what should have been recorded as the hottest day in that nation’s 20th century, such that street dogs and vagabond cats deserted their marked territories and birds seemed to abandon the skies for shadowy secret places, the Americans found little relief in their seersucker suits, and white wide brimmed hats. Four young girls, between the ages of eleven and fourteen, selected from nearby communities for their beauty and cursory understanding of English, were bestowed the honor of attending to the guests and seeing to their utmost comfort. Throughout the day, they engaged in an elaborate dance involving the waving of fans made from banana palm, and the ant-like relay of pitcher upon pitcher of ice water to the Americans, who were nothing short of amazed by such a display of diligence, compliance, and grace on the part of the four radiant girls who performed their task in utter, beatific silence. To their credit, the Americans faced the stifling heat with remarkable resolve, determined not to embarrass their hosts who, after all, had just survived the sequel of the war to end all wars and responded with a fiesta.

Following the parade was a short music program, in which the marching band would switch from Sousa to Swing and play a number of American standards: Tea for Two, In the Mood, When the Saints Go Marching In, Chattanooga Choo Choo being among the repertoire.
The Philippine national anthem\(^4\), which at that time had been an object of endless revision, was left out of the program, by order of the mayor. The US national anthem, however, would be played at the end to honor the guests, but not to open the ceremonies.

It is said that the band that played on that day would have rivaled any that hailed from the largest American universities, the army, or any of those found in the legendary New York clubs. “Never have I seen so provincial a race gifted with such a profound faculty for music,” the colonel’s wife was heard to have said. And indeed, for many decades, no other country east of the Prime Meridian has proven as adept at echoing the beat driven, jumping, jiving, swooning, crooning, hip-shaking sounds of America. In that way, the day proved to be a success, for though the guests panted like animals, unaccustomed to the hot, near viscous tropical air, and were by noon slick with sweat, they simply would not seek shade and reveled at the band’s mastery of their favorite songs. The only setback proved to be at the end of the program when the young band leader refused to conduct the Star-Spangled Banner, and instead elected to perform an original composition on his clarinet. Had it been recorded and studied, musicologists might have proclaimed the beginning of a new genre, one which only used the most melancholy of musical chords known to man. But the only time that song ever reached human ears, it succeeded in dispersing the remaining 43rd Philippine Infantry regiment, humiliated and infuriated the city officials, stunned the Americans into slack-jawed

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\(^4\) The Philippine national anthem was composed in 1898 by Julian Felipe, a music teacher appointed by Emilio Aguinaldo to the post of Director of the National Band. The anthem’s lyrics were originally taken from a patriotic poem written by one Juan Palma but written in Spanish. During the American colonial period, it became illegal to play the national anthem, that is, until 1919, when the lyrics were translated into English. Throughout the 1940s, efforts were underway to translate the lyrics into Tagalog. The current version had not been made official until the 1960s.
stupefaction, and brought the day’s proceedings to an abysmal halt. It was when he finished, with the entire street enveloped in silence, the civilians overcome by some unknown emotion, their eyes glazed over as in a stupor, frozen in a state resembling catatonia, and just before the mayor’s men came to take him away, that Elias Sebastian first conceived of the idea to stop time.

Early in the mornings one may see perambulating briskly up and down Catanduanes Street a short, slender man with coke-bottle glasses; another – swarthy, with a slight potbelly, a neatly trimmed mustache and hair smoothed flat with pomade; and a third, a man with sharp features who, despite his age, can still boast forearms taut with ropey muscle. The trio began this habit of early morning walks in 1979. This routine had not been established due to poor health. If anything, it was the opposite. Friends and family, and pesky physicians had noticed that the three men were rarely ever sick, engaged rigorous manual tasks with little to no trouble, and for men who were supposed to be in their mid-sixties looked a decade or two younger. Reasons for this seemingly unnatural vitality were needed. So began the terrible business of pretend maintenance. They purchased boxes upon boxes of vitamins, supplements and popular but utterly useless elixirs. They eliminated food and drink commonly associated with age-related health problems, a course of action that tries Mang Tiburcio in particular, who in front of his family has to feign the forsaking of alcohol but as soon as his appetite overcomes him escapes to the beerhouse close by. They began to exercise. It is a tiresome charade, but one that has kept any questions about their remarkable physical condition at bay. The
regular morning walks however, are not entirely tedious and become occasions for recollection.

In the early weeks of May 1903, peculiar tracks were discovered along the dusty path that is now Catanduanes Street. At first, it had been assumed that a carriage had simply been through and thus the tracks were dismissed. But upon closer examination, it became clear that this could not be the case for no hoof prints were found accompanying the lines on the ground, lines nearly two feet apart, that traced the path end to end, straight as a beam of light. Some of the locals supposed that it was a trick crafted by the Americans to keep their minds occupied, to distract them, that perhaps, somehow, the Americans had discovered how people here did not flee from strange things but were drawn to them like moths to a flame. While it is true that the area was populated by simple, God-fearing folk who at times were given to superstition and rumor-mongering, neither was this the case. Others decided that certainly they had been utter fools, the whole lot of them, for clearly the marks were left by nothing more sinister than sticks in the hands of children at play. And so, one afternoon, a few men blotted out the tracks and decreed that no children were to play outside for two days. The very next day however, there they were, the same tracks, exactly where they had been before they’d been swiped at with palm fronds and the ground leveled again with sandals. And because at either end of the street, the tracks rounded off so that the lines on one side met the lines on the other, forming a kind of ellipsis, not unlike a race track for horses, no one knew where the infernal thing began or ended.
That night, three young men waited in the tall grass that grew next to the path. Had they a watch among them, they would have noted that at exactly one minute past twelve, the “Sublime Paralytic” began to trace for them, in the blackest of nights, one which no other man would have braved without a lantern, the path of perpetual illumination. Had they not been so frightened, they might have approached him. Had they known who he was, they might have asked him to speak courage into their hearts, and indeed it had been the absence of it that stayed them. Had they, things might have been different. Instead, Apolinario Mabini\(^5\), the mind of the revolution, its last true visionary, its beating heart, pushed his shattered body first in straight lines up Catanduanes street one way, turning in a perfect semi-circle at its south end, and then facing North, slowly, painfully, a few feet at a time, completed his lonely orbit.

\(^5\) In 1896, Apolinario Mabini, a brilliant young lawyer, was stricken with polio, paralyzing him from the waist down, confining him to a wheelchair, and securing his legend as “The man who could not stand, but would not kneel.”

In 1898, he was sent for by then general, Emilio Aguinaldo to serve as an adviser to the incipient, revolutionary government. Having heard rumors that his new adviser- to- be was an invalid, Aguinaldo dispatched an entourage to serve as porters. Mabini was transported on a hammock from Cavite to Aguinaldo’s retreat in Laguna, no mean distance. Upon sight of the cripple – meager, sullen eyed, with legs withered and thin as a small child’s, it is said that Aguinaldo was visibly disheartened. However, it would not take long for Mabini to show his benefactor that despite his shadow of a body, his was a mind of unparalleled luminescence. Being of humble origins, Mabini quickly found himself at odds with the ilustrados whom Aguinaldo had courted to his side a few years prior, believing that their position and prestige were sure to influence the masses. Throughout his tenure, Mabini did little to hide his disdain for those whom he believed to be committed to nothing but their own interests, those who believed they had more to lose than the common field worker. In return, he was referred to by his enemies as “The Dark Chamber of The President.”

When Aguinaldo declared Philippine independence in 1898, Mabini bristled at the decision, viewing the act as woefully premature. It did not take long for the wedge between them to finally drive them apart, and beyond reconciliation. Mabini’s refusal to endear himself to the ilustrados who continued to hold sway over Aguinaldo’s decisions would prove to be his political undoing. When peace negotiations with the Americans fell through, the ilustrados wasted no time in blaming Mabini’s famous obstinacy and unwillingness to compromise. On the 7\(^{th}\) of May, 1899, Mabini was replaced by one Pedro Paterno. Mabini held office for a total of five months and five days.

Apolinario Mabini died of cholera in 1903.
Oftentimes, during their walks, the three men follow the very path the man in the wheel chair traced all those years ago. They tread the path over and over, imagining the perfect lines that stretched over the street, making the half moon turns at either end. They walk with heads tilted slightly down and forward, eyes narrowed and keen to the ground, in search it, may seem to the careful observer, of some small thing in the dirt, something left behind.

They’d all married within two years of one another, to women who, in typical Filipina fashion, appeared demure and submissive during the courtship phase but not an hour after leaving the altar began taking over everything. Once the honeymoon was over, as the saying goes, the finger-pointing began among the three men as they sought among each other someone to whom the disastrous idea to end their bachelorhood could be attributed. Each of the men found themselves regularly assailed by a torrent of questions as their wives were constantly finding the odd piece of suspicious paraphernalia – pamphlets, logbooks, makeshift timers, mini-recorders, ball bearings, pieces of paper with rough drawings or coded messages – in pants pockets, under the bed, hidden in jars in cupboards, rolled up in socks, and wrapped in rags tucked behind rose bushes. “If this goes on,” one of them said in those early days of marriage, “they won’t let us see each other anymore.”

In time, the three men discovered ways around their predicament. They discovered that certain locations were seemingly cloaked from their wives’ radars, and began hiding the questionable items in obscure automobile compartments and the insides
of radios or mixed them in among the hammers, nails, and files in rusty old toolboxes. Particular times such as the hours that coincided with the timeslots of their wives’ favorite soap dramas or weekly mahjong games became opportune moments for quick meetings under the guise of *merienda* by the *sari-sari* store or a poker game in a neighbor’s house. Nevertheless, accidents could not be avoided completely, and sometimes items were thrown out unawares, meetings nearly discovered and abruptly terminated.

Once the children came, the men’s days became consumed with sleepless nights, diaper changing, measles, chickenpox, vaccinations, and later, report cards, bullies, parent-teacher conferences, braces, and later still, acne, first loves, the birds and the bees. The men, with little choice but to attend to the traditional obligations of providers and heads of the household, resolved to handle what they could in their own private time. They went to work. They cut hair. They delivered ice. They continued to teach music in a local high school where all efforts to instruct students on the importance of practicing their scales or impart an appreciation for the compositions of yesteryear had been in vain.

So it was during this time that their former activities began to feel alien and unnatural, and clandestine objects once so carefully, temporarily stashed away lay forgotten where they were, left to gather dust as artifacts from another time, another life. Much later, they would look back on this time and agree that they could not – did not – feel regret for loving their wives and watching their children grow, for this time when the selves they’d never planned on becoming became the selves they wanted most to be. They had been undeniably, unapologetically, happy.
Soon, however, much sooner than any of them had ever wished, those days were over. The children were on their own, married with kids or expecting, and all the time that had seemed so scarce a commodity only a decade or so before, once again seemed to flow into their lives like a spring suddenly liberated from a natural obstruction like a boulder or a fallen tree. And with that time on their hands, the three men began to feel the return of an old itch, and in their minds, certain wheels, dormant for some time, began – squeakily at first, then not long after, with greater energy – to turn and turn. Upon reflection, the three men began to see the thirty or so years that had passed as a blessing in disguise, a surreptitious path that went the long way round, one which, perhaps, only helped them avoid detection and in the end, brought them exactly where they needed to be. Things would begin again even as they went about the decades-long routines they’d established, routines that continue today: they play poker or mahjong on the weekends; they would visit their grandchildren no less than twice a month; they participate faithfully in bingo fundraisers at the nearby community center; attend first communions, golden wedding anniversaries, and funerals; and after church on Sundays Mang Tiburcio and Mang Rommie or more precisely, their wives Lucinda and Claire respectively, take turns hosting each other’s families for lunch. Mang Eli’s house had been part of the rotation until Cecilia passed on in 1990. Of course, Eli himself never fails to attend these lunches where in the presence of his friends and their wives, he feels the most and least alone.
To the complete bafflement of their respective families, in February of 1986, Mang Eli the Band Leader, Mang Rommie the Barber, and Mang Tiburcio the Ice King, all fell ill and came close to death. Even more puzzling and disconcerting to their loved ones was their apparent excitement at their final departure from the land of the living. Sudden weakness, terrible hacking coughs, and inexplicable weight loss took hold of them, and yet, they had never appeared more ebullient, as if their spirits had already begun to seep out of the pores of their skin. Much to the dismay of their concerned relatives, they insisted on spending their last few weeks together at Eli’s house, in the basement, exchanging stories, watching sports and listening to music. In the midst of the unmistakable stench of physical decay was the resurrected laughter of their youth.

What everyone failed to understand was simply that the three, whose real ages had remained a mystery even to their wives, had finally begun to look and feel all of their one hundred years. And what was known only to them was that the cataclysm

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6 In 1986, EDSA or Epifanio de Los Santos Avenue – after a Filipino artist and historian – became the site of the People Power Revolution, also known as the EDSA Revolution, as thousands of Filipinos swarmed the streets and converged on the highway, stopping traffic in a mass demonstration to protest the corruption and tyranny of the Marcos Regime. Three years earlier, Benigno Aquino Jr., a former journalist and senator, and one of the leading voices against the Marcos dictatorship was assassinated as he stepped off a plane in Manila International Airport6. Images of his body lying on the tarmac were broadcast the world over. The Marcos government was quick to claim its innocence. By this time however, after nine years of Martial Law6, the people had had enough and were convinced that the government was behind the killing. As the voice of one man was extinguished, millions found theirs. They took to the streets with the fallen man’s name on their lips. Aquino’s widow, Corazon, a housewife and mother, became the symbol of resistance, of justice and of hope for the Filipino people, and it was upon their urging that she took over her husband’s role as leader of the opposition.

Between February 23 and February 25, EDSA became a sea of yellow, the official color of the revolution. General Fabian Ver, Marcos’ bulldog, advised the president to green-light the use of fighter jets under his command to disperse the crowd, a tactical move that would have resulted in the deaths of countless civilians. In what would be remembered as Marcos’ final act of redemption, he ordered the cessation of any more violence on the people. Within hours, Ferdinand Marcos, the deposed 10th president of the Philippine Republic, along with his wife Imelda, was on his way to Hawaii, courtesy of the US air force. Upon arrival, the Presidential couple was met by their good friends and long-time supporters, President Reagan and wife Nancy.
transpiring a mere ten kilometers from their homes – the long awaited galvanizing of a fractured people, the greatest moment in their four hundred year history – was the very reason for their precipitant corporeal deterioration.

However, their joyous transformation into earth and ash did not come to pass. For in the afternoon of February the 28th, just as Mang Eli began to collect the old documents and the objects they’d tried so hard to find secret places for, objects now rendered meaningless, to set ablaze in a steel can in his backyard; as Mang Tiburcio reposed in his favorite wicker chair; and as Mang Rommie packed his barber’s implements in a leather bag, preparing them for interment along with him, they all began to feel young again. Later that night, having gathered in Mang Eli’s basement, they wept at their renewed strength and the knowledge that history was about to resume its normal course and things were already returning to the way they were. Flashlights in hand, they proceeded to the backyard, where from the steel can they retrieved the objects, unburned and in perfect condition, once again awaiting their use. Their bodies, tragically infused with renewed vigor once again took to the performance of their everyday, apocalyptic gestures.

Originally written on napkins from Max’s Fried Chicken restaurant as the furious outpouring of ill-timed inspiration, the plan to re-shape the nation was later re-transcribed on thirty sheets of clean yellow pad, and finally, typed out by several individuals, each of whom insisting upon the inclusion of last minute revisions in the draft.
First, the general population’s full attention would be required, calling for the immediate disruption of all possible forms of entertainment. Power lines to television and radio stations would be cut, and backup generators would either be destroyed or stolen (the latter being the preferred end to these things in case a future need for them arose). All but a few, select, newspaper presses – those whose key employees were known to have similar leanings and would be likely sympathizers, would be shut down as well. At this point, thousands of copies of the new manifesto (yet to be completed) would be printed and passed out to commuters by the jeepney drivers, famous for their impartiality and indifference, thus limiting needless inquiries that would otherwise slow down the process. The same would be done on buses and trains by their respective conductors. Law enforcement would remain true to their nature by accepting bribes and even distribute the manifestos themselves to the jail population. A complete overhaul of government at every level would be called for. The most corrupt elements, those who had made a career of silencing their consciences would be weeded out (the method of disposal still under development). Sacrifices would have to be made of course, and along with the very worst, some whose only crime would be their certain resistance to the new order of things would have to go as well. This was the most unfortunate part. They were not thugs after all, but patriots.

The Catanduanes Street Nationalist Party (a name still subject to change) would pick up where the local heroes left off, the men of the fields, those who took to the mountains. They would bring their spirits back to the city, those who never surrendered but only faded away. The complete dissolution of national government would result in
the establishment of “liberated, independent, localities,” as stated in the first draft of their manifesto. Rule would fall to their own constituency, men and women from their own communities at the helm. In time, a new school system would be instituted. The CSNP would not suffer the children of the bright new nation to be denied the truth, and so the new curriculum would accommodate for the fracture in history. The first one hundred pages of every textbook would be devoted to the new manifesto, so that the children would know the reasons for the nation’s return to the year 1898, and would grow to take pride in being descended from the only people on earth to ever successfully turn back time.

The final phase of their grand project of ultimate and irrevocable liberation, would be for the islands, all seven thousand one hundred and seven, to be quarantined from any more history. No more vessels, airborne or nautical, would traverse its skies or its waters. In the end, written on giant banners held aloft by bright yellow buoys scattered at various points around its shores, painted on helipads and airport runways, carved out on the edifices of mountains, cropped out of the grass of large fallow fields would be the words, “Keep out. The Philippines is closed.”

They would be called anarchists, but that is not their word. Should they fail, and the event of a trial ever come to pass, they would point to the relative bloodlessness of their deeds, set against the truth that they have brought to bear, truth that shames first, then angers, then liberates. Casualties would have to be weighed against the fiends who were deliberate targets for elimination, those that fed on the very marrow of the nation, like a cancer.
They would be cursed, but their cause would be considered. They would be misunderstood, then understood. They would be vindicated.
Jake Torres’ last film, “Rain of Bullets,” had been a flop. In it, he portrayed a man whose girlfriend falls victim to a gang of serial rapists terrorizing the streets of Manila. Half-mad with rage, the protagonist single-handedly metes out vigilante justice at the end of a gun and a custom-made machete, wiping out the villains in what one reviewer described as “an orgy of blood and gore, reminiscent of Charles Bronson’s “Death Wish” but with much less of a story.” The movie came out at a time when action films of the like, whose implausible scenarios, familiar revenge plots, and unrelenting, near comical violence, were moving rapidly out of style. The grim-faced, lone-wolf action star was a dying breed, slowly replaced by the heroes of romantic comedies—fresh-faced charmers, whose dimples, bleached teeth, and androgynous hair-styles made Jake want to vomit. “So that’s what they want now? They’re prettier than the women,” he would often fume to himself. And whenever he had to field questions from old acquaintances or even complete strangers as to why he no longer made movies, he explained that there was simply no room for “real men” any more on the Philippine silver screen, that the viewing public had become inexplicably enamored with these baby faced Casanovas (That is actually how some of them were billed: “The New Casanovas”).

In reality, Jake’s star had never really taken off. He’d often been cast as little more than a gruff but faithful sidekick, or, on occasion, a villain—and not even the head villain, but as some second-in-command enforcer. “Rain of Bullets” was his first real big break, and his last.
Jake was not entirely above changing his image and had, in fact, in the final weeks before his pass to the studio lot was revoked, pleaded no less than five times for an audience with Mr. Faustino, president of Royal Films, to which Jake had been under contract for just over a decade, for the opportunity to demonstrate his range by reading lines from scripts with titles like “Love Me, Leave Me, Love You Anyway” and “Hello, May I Kiss You Now?” that he’d swiped from a desk in Development.

Finally, after the fifth call, one followed by the delivery of a box of Swiss chocolates, Lila, Mr. Faustino’s phlegmatic, chain-smoking secretary finally gave him a call back.

“Fifteen minutes. No more,” she’d said.

The old man’s office was covered wall to wall with posters of films stretching back to the late 50s. The only time Jake had ever been inside was when he was first signed, back when the studio scouts thought he might amount to something big. At the very center of the room rose a gargantuan mahogany desk that smelled of dust and ink, upon which reclined a colorful porcelain statuette of the Chinese Buddha, corpulent and blissful. Next to the massive desk was a two-in-one television and VCR set atop a rolling cart. Mr. Faustino, a thin man in his seventies with droopy cheeks and Coke-bottle glasses, fiddled with this machine the whole time he spoke to Jake, never once looking at him.

“I’m sorry Jake. No one would buy it. You’re too old now, and too fat.”
It was the latter part of Mr. Faustino’s dismissal that hurt Jake the most. Jake felt that he wore age rather well; a few lines around the eyes, a creased brow, even a little gray in his hair—all things that he’d convinced himself bespoke seasoning, a grizzled worldliness. But his expanding waistline, that insidious bulge that rode precariously on the top of his belt, was something that he’d been trying very hard to wrangle back in to no avail. His midsection continued to swell despite the subscription to several new diet plans and his constant exercise. He’d even taken to jogging around his suburb in a plastic sauna suit at the height of noon only to quit the torturous regimen when a neighbor found him one day talking to a lamppost, gone delirious from dehydration.

“I can lose the weight. I promise. Give me six months,” he’d said to Mr. Faustino, who by that time in the conversation had put into the VCR a tape of a young scantily clad starlet up for a role in a summer romance, one that Mr. Faustino knew wasn’t any good, but as with most films of its genre, guaranteed substantial returns in the box office.

“It’s not just the weight, Jake. It’s that you can’t seem to do any real acting except in scenes where you are about to murder someone. That’s you. You’re a killer, Jake, not a lover.”

Jake’s profession had always ensured the affections of the kind of women easily seduced by celebrity, however minor—a phenomenon that Jake had voraciously taken advantage of over the years, a practice that cultivated in him an unmistakable swagger, much to the chagrin of most who knew him. But in the two years that followed his
dismissal from Royal Films, he’d put on another hundred pounds and all but depleted his bank account.

The weight gain was no doubt hastened by the perks that came with being the younger brother of Sandra Torres-Yu, the entrepreneur behind the city’s most successful chain of noodle houses, called simply “Oodles,” a sister from whom he received a monthly stipend on the stipulation that he begin attending her evangelical congregation at least twice a month. So while he enjoyed unhindered access to the restaurant’s House Special # 5 with Pork and also Spicy Wonton Soup with Shrimp—his favorites—the once steady stream of witless females into his bedroom had slowed, first to a trickle, and then, finally, to a complete stop, such that he’d gone a whole five months without sex, a duration which, only a year before would have been inconceivable. But a visit from an old college friend promised to change that.

Eleanor had been a theater major along with him in the university, and the first girl he’d ever made love to. Though not a stunner, she was pretty enough, and was possessed of that tenebrous magnetism effused by women who thought like men. She liked sex and had no qualms about leveraging situations in favor of acquiring it. Jake had been one of her conquests, and not the other way around, but a conquest she’d taken a special inexplicable liking to—not in any true romantic sense, but in the way that makes some people take in three-legged dogs not long for this world. They dropped out of school together and while Jake pursued his acting, she took up work as a consultant. At least that’s what she’d always told everyone, including Jake. He, in turn, never learned, or more precisely, cared to learn, just what kind of consultancy, over the many brief
meetings they’d had over the years. Their talk revolved around old friends, old loves, Jake’s carnal exploits as well as hers.

When she invited him to have drinks during his first Christmas unemployed, he assumed the conversation would eventually, like countless others before, wind its way back to his or her bedroom.

“You look good,” he said, as he slid his hand towards hers, across the smooth green table at the King’s Court bar in Quezon City. She laughed hoarsely as she tapped her cigarette over the edge of her ashtray.

“Jake, please. I think those days are over.”

“Are they?” he asked in a half-whisper, trying hard to summon a seductive smolder in his eyes, squinting ever so slightly, which instead, inadvertently, conveyed a mix of weariness and desperation.

“Yes,” she said flatly. He drew his hand back and let out an awkward chuckle, before putting his hands together at the edge of the table, fingers laced, like a schoolboy. She called for another gin tonic. He asked for water. “What’s the matter? You haven’t been getting any?” she asked.

“Just a dry spell, that’s all.”

“Why’d you get so damn fat anyway?” she asked as she turned her head and let out a stream of smoke.

Eleanor had always had a sharp tongue, but the casualness of her tone needled at Jake, made his mouth go acrid. “What are you saying, fat people can’t get any? That’s discrimination.”
“Call it whatever you like.”

Jake downed his water and brought the glass down on the tabletop a bit harder than he’d meant to.

“Listen,” Eleanor said, her voice turned hushed and croaky, “I’ll do you a favor. Between friends.”

“What do you mean?” Jake asked as he massaged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, a sudden wave of fatigue suddenly washing over him.

She fished out some bills from her purse and set them on the table. “Finish your water.”

After they left The King’s Court, they took Eleanor’s car—a vintage 1967 Mustang that Jake coveted the moment he laid eyes on its gleaming ruby exterior—to another part of town, not ten minutes away, stopping at the corner of Catanduanes Street and San Francisco Del Monte, outside what looked to be a modest apartment complex, just two floors, painted a salmon pink.

“Twelve units. Well, fourteen actually. One converted into storage, the other into a multipurpose.” Eleanor said.

“You live here?” Jake tried to peer over a tall and forbidding iron gate.

“I own this place,” she said.

They sat in the car in silence for a moment, regarding the structure. Purple shadows overlaid its features, the hum of various appliances reverberated through its walls.
Finally, Jake muttered, “I’m sorry, Eleanor, but…”

Eleanor cut him off. “You see unit 7? The one closest to us? At 6 pm, every Tuesday, the vice-mayor comes in with a bag of groceries, a bag which never fails to include a box of purple yam ice cream. He puts on some jazz—bad jazz, mind you, the garbage they play at dental offices—and eats the ice cream with a girl half his age. After that they go to the bedroom. When they’re done, he gets dressed, exits the complex where two men in a white Mercedes wait for him. He is driven to the chapel down the street, where sits in the back pew for about ten minutes. Then he gets up and heads home.”

As Eleanor finished, Jake felt the weight of his hands on his knees, felt the metal of his belt buckle against his heaving paunch. His eyes traced an invisible line between Eleanor’s mouth, which at some point during her report on the Vice-Mayor’s indiscretions he felt like kissing, and the green door of the apartment, in particular, the gold number “1” affixed to it, a tad left off-center.

“So, he’s having an affair. So what?” Jake said.

Eleanor turned to him. Her eyes were large and soft and gave off a sad glimmer in the darkness of the car. She ran her hand through her hair. “Her parents sell vegetables in Cubao. She’s a smart kid. She was salutatorian in her high school. She wants to get into nursing school.”

Jake cupped his knees with his palms. He began to rub them in circles as if to polish them. His head made little nodding movements to appear as though he grasped what she was telling him. Eleanor was more than familiar with this act.

“Jake, she works for me,” she said.
Eleanor’s confession, that she had been, for nearly a decade, a purveyor of flesh, what society has rather ironically referred to as a “madam,” made the bones in Jake’s face ache. A high-pitched ringing filled his ears, so sharp that he felt his eyes water. He opened his mouth wide as if to devour a large sandwich to try and make the sound go away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“My ears hurt.”

“Could be tinnitus,” she said. “Have that checked.”

And that was the problem. For while it was true that Eleanor had never been, nor pretended to be a paragon of morality, and if anything, always, even back in college, remained a steadfast pragmatist, she’d always seemed to Jake, despite her hedonistic proclivities, to be very responsible and kind, and not at all possessed of the potential for something so sinister as full-blown criminal activity.

“I want it to be clear,” she’d said, “that no one is in those rooms that doesn’t want to be.”

Jake did his best to grasp what he thought to be the statement’s redeeming quality. Whatever it was slipped through his fingers like sand. She took good care of both her clients and the women in her employ, she said. Especially the women, who, were it not for her sensitivity to their condition and her fierce professionalism, might otherwise be strung out on drugs and doing the same thing on the streets but for less money, and with far less security. These women actually lived in these apartments, and never wanted for food or access to medical care.
“Monthly check ups,” she said. “What more could they want?”

They were quiet on the ride back to his house. An urge to ask Eleanor why she’d told him any of this and why she thought he might want her services welled up in him and crowded his chest. It stayed there, constricted by that other, baser urge deep in the pit of his stomach and the unexpected thrill at this dark new prospect. Jake was surprised at how quickly he’d already begun to weigh the implications of taking up Eleanor’s offer, how easy it all seemed.

“Think about it, Jake. I’ll take care of you,” she said with a look of complete earnestness as he stepped out of the car.

Lying in bed that early morning, despite not knowing what he believed about the Almighty anymore, he felt compelled to pray for Eleanor. He stared at the ceiling and tried for the words. They felt foreign in his mouth. “God, help…” was all he got out. He shut his eyes and lay listening to the susurrus of his own breath for a while, and felt the weight of his hand against the rise and fall of his chest. He squeezed his eyelids tight, the way they’d showed him in the few movie scenes in which he’d had to cry, until he felt a stinging in his lashes and the faintest build up of moisture behind them. He held them this way until he grew tired and fell asleep.

~o~

Ensconced within the apartment complex’s u-shape was a courtyard, at the center of which stood a banyan tree whose trunk bended and twisted in what seemed to Jake a painful, unnatural manner, as though a contortionist had been frozen for all time in the middle of an act. He peered down at it contemplatively from the second floor balcony,
resting his forearms on the iron guardrail, waiting for the door behind him to open. This one had no number. Jake assumed that this was the multipurpose room, an odd choice, given his purpose for being there that night.

Almost immediately, he’d regretted his decision. The seemingly random nature of his friend’s largesse, this deliberate, aggressive kindness hadn’t escaped Jake, and had stirred a little suspicion in him. He’d waited weeks after their meeting that Christmas before finally giving her a call, and after the arrangements were made, he’d been close to calling her again, several times, to cancel the whole thing. Now, waiting on the balcony outside the door, he imagined the worst. Perhaps he was unwittingly guilty of some past offense, a wound she’d harbored for some time and for which she would now exact revenge. Jake felt a chill of danger, the possibility of some hidden menace waiting behind the door. Eleanor had said that for him, she had something special. Somehow, her words seemed to take on insidious meaning now.

And then it occurred to him. My God, what if this woman recognizes me? What if she’s seen my movies? He went pale at the thought, and then right at the heels of fright came a shot of embarrassment at the idea that anyone would recognize this current incarnation of himself, or that anyone would care. His mouth filled with the taste of bile.

He took his weight off the guardrail, straightened up, took a deep breath, and began to walk in the direction of the staircase, away from what he was now sure to be a terrible idea. It was then that he heard a shuffle behind the door followed by the soft, smooth turn and click of the knob. The door opened slowly and remained only halfway
ajar. In that long, narrow, rectangular space stood a girl. “Hello, sir. Have you been out here long?”

She had straight black hair that fell just past her shoulders. On each ear were studs with pale blue stones of clearly no real value. She had a child’s nose—near bridgeless with remarkably small nostrils. Her lips were quite pronounced, on the full side, and were perhaps the most seductive feature in what otherwise was the image of a young woman who, in all other respects seemed very plain. She was thin and had the hips of a young boy. Her chest appeared prepubescent behind a black t-shirt with a print of James Dean’s face across the front, his already tortured face distorted by horizontal creases. Her legs shot out of the bottoms of a pair of red shorts like two shapeless poles, not a curve to them that beckoned a touch or even a lingering look.

Jake stared at her a while before answering. Not at her, really, but the picture of her, the whole scene, the numberless green door, the rectangle of light that was the opening, and her, the girl, standing inside the rectangle.

Jake took three steps towards her and noticed that she had very light-brown eyes.

She opened the door wider. The rectangle expanded then disappeared, and he walked in. The space inside was bare, no furniture except for two white plastic chairs and a long white picnic table folded up and leaning against one of the walls. Jake was sure now that this was the multipurpose room.

“If there’s anything you need, please let me know. Ma’am mentioned you’re a friend,” the girl said, as she shut the door behind them.

“Thank you. My name is Ron,” he said.
Jake winced the moment the name left his lips. He was annoyed that he hadn’t come up with a more interesting sounding alias. Julius, or Armand, he’d always thought to be elegant names for men, men of gravitas.

She stepped closer to him, tucked a tress of hair behind one of her ears, and said “Nice to meet you, Ron. Ma’am said to call me Thirteen.”

Jake thought he’d misheard. “She said to call you what?”

“Thirteen.”

“Why?”

“Sir?”

“Why Thirteen?”

“I don’t know, sir,” she said diffidently. Her voice was shaky. Her eyes darted to the sides and to the floor. She bit her lip. Seeing this, Jake began to grow agitated as well.

“It’s okay. Forget it,” he said, bringing his hand up to his head and massaging the lobe of his ear. “Thirteen,” he said. She nodded.

As she stood in front of him, wispy and soft, Jake suddenly felt enormous. He knew he was fat, but a sensation came over him, a fleeting hyper awareness of the hot and slick mounds of flesh, his moist places, his various odors and the fabric of his clothes grown sticky and suffocating over his skin.

“Can I use the bathroom?” he asked.

“Yes, right there,” she answered pointing to a door at the end of the hall. As Jake opened it, he noted a faint grout smell. The bathroom was hardly ever used. A plain square mirror, too small for the room, floated over the sink. Jake turned on the faucet and
it sputtered brown water. He waited for it to clear before cupping it into his hands and splashing his face. He ran his moistened fingers through his hair and tried to dry his cheeks with toilet paper but it quickly disintegrated and bits of it stuck to his face. When he came back out, the girl wasn’t where they’d been standing.

“In here,” she said, her voice coming from an open door on the right side of the corridor.

He walked towards the pale yellow light that spilled unto the floor. He pushed the door open gently. In the corner was a small round table upon which a reading lamp served as the only illumination. There was a mattress on the floor where the girl sat cross-legged, her shirt off and cast to the side, struggling to unfasten her cream-colored bra, the hook of which apparently refused to come loose.

Jake came closer and knelt down, one knee on the floor, the other on the mattress. “Let me,” he said.

~o~

It was when Sandra dropped him off after service, one in which the pastor preached on the seventh chapter of Romans that Jake saw Eleanor’s car parked outside his house. His mind had wandered through most of the sermon and he eagerly waited for the worship band to start up again. The music, at the very least, was something he could tap his foot to. He was humming one of the songs as he stepped out of his sister’s van
when he saw the red Mustang parked outside his house and suddenly gasped and nearly choked.

“You okay?” Sandra asked from the passenger side. Jake held out a palm to her, signaling for her not to worry as he cleared his throat. She noticed the Mustang. “Nice car,” she said, leaning slightly out her window to get a better look. “Anyway, bye Jake. Shut the door. Love you.”

Jake mouthed back the words as he slid the van door forward but his voice was still tangled up in air and saliva.

Jake opened the gate and found Eleanor sitting on one of the wicker chairs he kept on the porch, a steaming cup and teapot on the table next to her.

“I had the maid prepare this for us,” she said. “Hope that’s alright.”

He would have to talk to the maid, a new girl sent over by Sandra, about letting people into the house. “Of course,” Jake said. He walked up to the table and took the seat next to her.

“Where did you come from this early on a Sunday?” Eleanor asked as she stirred her tea.

“Church,” Jake said.

Eleanor stopped stirring and looked at Jake with a wry smile. “I thought we’d both given that up in college.”

“I never said I did. Besides, it’s just to make Sandra happy.”

“How is big sister?”

“You know, rich. Pious and rich.”
Eleanor nodded in approval. “I always liked her,” she said. She blew into her cup. Jake pushed the handle of his empty teacup so that it rotated within its saucer. “So what brings you over, Eleanor?” She held the cup in her hands and swirled the tea a little.

“What’s wrong with my girl?” she asked.

“What?”

“Thirteen. What’s wrong with her? Did you find her ugly?”

“No.”

“Is she dirty? Does her breath stink?”

“No.”

“Did she bore you? Is she a moron?”

“No.”

“So?”

Jake took the kettle, poured some tea into his cup. The rising steam made his forehead perspire.

“Just didn’t feel like it,” he said.

She fixed her eyes on him. “Jake, you noticed that there are twelve apartments at my place, right? And in each one there’s someone in there who works for me. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you notice that the girl I had for you was ‘Thirteen.’ That tells you something, right?”

“Yes, I was wondering about the number.”
“What about it?”

“What, like ‘Ron’?” Jake blushed. Eleanor snorted out a laugh. She slurped some more, quieter this time, then set the cup down. She gathered her hair, which was wavy and long, reaching nearly to the small of her back, and twisted it into a bun. She lit a cigarette and took a slow drag. “I’ve tried that you know.” She shook her head ruefully.

“Names complicate things. Names stay with you. They stay with you and they come to mean things to you.” Jake knew this to be true. Now he was stuck with ‘Ron,’ and wondered what kind of meaning he’d given it. What would this girl think of when next she heard that name? Someone fat and cowardly?

“There were incidents. Clients writing to some of the girls, offering to buy them out of the contract, professing their love to so and so, this girl, that girl. That sort of thing.” She grimaced. “And then what? They leave their wives? They get these girls pregnant? I’m not in this to wreck families. And when I tell the clients that they’re not for sale, things get tense.”

“What happened?” Jake asked

“They needed to be convinced otherwise.”

“How?” Jake felt his pulse beginning to quicken.

Eleanor shot him a quick sideward glance, and then looked away. “I found ways. Friends who did that sort of thing.”
“Who?”

“Listen, don’t be an idiot, okay? The point is, the numbers are better. The numbers are a reminder that this isn’t a matchmaking service. The girls belong to me.”

Jake stared at his feet for a moment, at the chunky white sneakers he’d taken to wearing everywhere, the veins of dirt beginning to grow darker over the shoes’ toecap. He hadn’t drunk any of his tea and when he sipped it now it was only vaguely warm. He did his best to get a coherent thought to form, something that he could verbalize into a response. He was left only with the sense that there were perhaps depths to Eleanor that he never realized, nor wanted now to know. “So why Thirteen?” He asked.

Eleanor turned to him and appeared thoroughly exasperated. “Were you not listening?”

Jake retreated a little into his chair. “I mean why not any of the other girls? Why this girl?”

Her face softened. Her lips curled into a smirk. “You’re a jobless actor. I thought you’d appreciate being on the other side of an audition.”

“That was her first time?”

“No, Jake, it wasn’t. It would have been if you hadn’t chickened out.”

It’s true, he had been quite nervous when he waited outside the door that night, and more so when the girl let him in, and when she stood close to him in the dark, empty living room. But as Jake thought back to that very moment in which he’d helped the girl with her bra, it was not fear that made him refasten the hook, but something altogether different. Jake remembered how quiet the room seemed then, how warm and liquid the
lamplight was, and how effortlessly he seemed to rise up from his knees to the sound of
the mattress springs being unburdened, the inhalation of the cushion, the shifting of
fabric. He felt light, as if the fibers that connected meat to bone had come undone, and
the mass of epidermis and glands, adipose tissue and muscle, simply began to float on
their own, even carry him, a few steps across the room, where her t-shirt lay in a bundle.
When he picked it up, he felt the weight of it immediately, the crush of the cheap cotton
and polyester against his fingertips, its predisposition to hang from things, the embrace of
gravity upon it. Jake stretched the collar and slipped it over her head where it remained
scrunched up around her neck and over her shoulders. Jake remembered the look of
puzzlement that formed on her face as she sat on the mattress. He could not seem to
remember, however, how he left the room, the apartment, or how he ended up outside the
complex and on the street, oblivious to the cars and street lights, and then walking briskly
home for twelve blocks, still feeling rather weightless.

“Yes, I chickened out,” Jake said. “I’m sorry. What’s going to happen to her
now?”

“She’s got to have a first time some time,” Eleanor replied, smoothing the front of
her slacks as she got up from the chair.

Jake felt his stomach turn. He imagined the girl opening the door to another man,
imagined what the man might do.

“Okay.”

“Excuse me?”

“Give me another chance.”
“Jake,” Eleanor put her hands on her hips. “You don’t have to prove anything.”

“I want to, Eleanor. Please.”

~o~

It was the first week of Lent when Jake returned to the apartment complex. Jake noticed that only one or two units had their lights on and wondered if the girls or their clients observed the holy season. There was a sliver of light that shone underneath the numberless door. He felt the tickle of nerves again in his stomach, as he rapped on it.

When the door opened, she met him with a warm smile. Jake was encouraged some by this, but was also bothered by the idea that she might already be practicing some feigned enthusiasm for her clients. She wore a white tank top but the same red shorts as last time.

“Ma’am said you wanted to see me again. I thought you didn’t like me.”

“No,” Jake said. “I like you a lot.”

She was holding a tabloid magazine in her hand. On the cover were the “New Casanovas.”

“You like them?” Jake asked.

“I do. I like him,” she pointed to a fair skinned boy raising his shirt to show-off his toned abdominals. “Kasper Perez.”

“He’s all right,” Jake said.

“What’s that?” she asked, gesturing to the yellow plastic bag he had with him.
“I thought maybe we could eat first.” Jake handed her the bag. He set up the plastic chairs and table in the center of the room.

“Do you like noodles?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“I brought some soft drinks too.”

They ate out of the same Styrofoam container. They each took only a few bites, but continued to drink their soda. In between sips, the girl played with the accordion crook of her bendy straw.

“Can you tell me your name now, or do I still have to call you Thirteen?”

“Ma’am said to call me Thirteen,”

“Okay, okay. How old are you?”

“T-Twenty.”

Jake heard the hesitation and knew right away he was being lied to. “Twenty?”

“Yes, sir.” Jake put his drink down and picked up a napkin to wipe his hands.

“Where are you from?”

“Sir?”

“Where are you from?”

“Zambales, sir”

“Mostly farmland up there, huh.”

“Yes.”

“Did you go to school?”

“Yes.”
“How much schooling?”

“Fourth grade.”

“How long have you been in the city?”

“Eight months.”

“And this, working for ma’am, is your first job here?”

“N-n-no, I sold umbrellas at the market.” The stutter now came with a nervous look in her eye. She put her head down.

“You didn’t like selling umbrellas?”

“It was okay.”

Jake scratched his chin, put his hand over his mouth, the forefinger over his upper lip. He spoke through gap between his fingers. “Why did you quit then? Why are you here?”

Her mouth was closed and pursed. It quavered and bent into a half-smile that made her look slightly goofy. She took to smoothing locks of hair behind her ear again the way she did the first night they first met. Jake waited for an answer. He thought she might say something about how demeaning and futile it was to sell umbrellas at the market, how one barely made enough through the week to eat, how her wages there would never amount to anything, that she would never save enough to leave some shanty town hovel that she probably shared with a dozen other kids—fellow runaways and vagrants and how she was liable to end up getting robbed from or raped or worse in such a place. But she said nothing, and instead, simply fixed her eyes on the tabletop and sucked on her straw.
Jake shut the Styrofoam container and returned it to the plastic bag. “I’m sorry,” he said. The air seemed to go out of the room. Why had he come back here? He studied her face. Her expression betrayed nothing except some inscrutable mixture of embarrassment, melancholy, and resignation, all of the vaguest sort, all seeming to be present there in her pupils, in the way her lower lip drooped and revealed a bit of her teeth, and in the lazy way her head tilted to the side. He hadn’t come here with any real plan and he wasn’t absolutely sure that he wouldn’t have in fact taken this girl to the bedroom and completed the transaction.

“Are you alright, sir?” the girl asked. The girl had finished her drink. Jake slid his cup across the table, offering what was left of his. She replaced his straw with hers and began to sip. She tucked one foot under her, while the other glided over the floor, the big toe brushing against the wooden surface. Jake observed the foot’s slimness, its soft, subtle blade, its taut skin, the small mole on the instep. His mind broke open to a memory.

In the film “Virgin of the Mountain,” a young girl is the recipient of a beatific vision beside a waterfall at the foot of dormant volcano. The Blessed Virgin commissions her to spread the word to surrounding villages to pray the rosary, to turn to God. In the movie, Jake portrayed one of the communist rebels whose headquarters happen to be the very same mountain. As more and more townspeople come to the waterfall to erect small shrines, the rebels threaten them with violence. It is only supernatural intervention—the sight of the young prophetess blanketed in divine light—that keeps the rebels from doing
harm. In the climactic scene, the rebels throw their weapons on the ground and prostrate themselves before her.

Jake recalled being on his knees directly before the fourteen-year old actress—cherub-faced Sonya Tamayo—who, only eight years later, was found dead of a drug overdose in a nightclub bathroom. While on the ground, he was mesmerized by the actress’s feet—every bone of every toe, every nail, the knobs of her ankles, all perfectly symmetrical and unblemished, as though crafted from porcelain. Jake had felt lust uncoil within him as he bowed in reverence to the prophetess. He wanted to lay his face on her feet, to close his arms around her calves, to tip her over to the ground. When the director yelled “cut,” he was still lost in the fantasy, and was roused from it only when the feet turned around and took the actress back to her chair, where her attendants handed her a soda and a cigarette. As he rose from the ground, his gaze met hers for a moment. She looked curious at first, but then quickly her eyes clouded over with what looked like disdain and she turned to someone next to her who was ready with a lighter.

Jake began to feel light again, not as dramatically as the first time, but enough to create the sensation that he supported his own weight with ease, that he could perhaps balance all of his mass on the very edge of the seat that held him without fear of collapse.

“I can help you,” Jake blurted out.

“Sir?” said the girl sitting across from him. She freed her leg from under her and set both feet on the floor.

“Don’t do this. Don’t be this,” Jake said. He got up from his chair, moved it closer to her and sat back down. “I can help you,” he said again.
The girl clasped the cup with both hands. Her eyes darted around the room and she began to tremble.

“I have money,” Jake said. He’d saved his stipends and had a few thousand pesos in his savings. “It’s not much, but I’ll have more for you.” Jake wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but he felt strangely confident that he was telling the truth. “Go back to Zambales. Go back to school. If you need anything, you write me,” he said. “There’s nothing for you here.”

Tears formed around her eyes and rolled down to the edges of her mouth. Her shaking subsided. She put the cup down on the table, wiped her hands on her shorts and then dried her face with some napkins that were lying on the table. She exhaled heavily, and threads of saliva, thin as spider silk danced on her lips. She was quiet for a while, and Jake too. “Ma’am will be upset?” she asked.

After Jake had been unemployed for several months, Sandra had tasked him with checking up on her employees throughout the city. His visits to the various branches of her restaurant, however, consisted of little more than a greeting and the placing of an order. All except the Oodles along West Avenue, which was the only one he ever spent any time in as it was close to home.

It was on a Friday evening, as Jake polished off two whole orders of the House Special while reading the entertainment section of that morning’s paper, that Eleanor walked in. Jake cleared his throat and folded the paper as she approached the table. He straightened up in his seat.
“Hi Eleanor. How did you know I was here?” Jake said.

She didn’t answer. She stood by the table and looked down at him. Her look wasn’t hateful or hostile, but it was grave, the look of a parent at the end of their patience, the look before the discipline. “May I sit down?” she said, finally, softly.

“Of course. Are you hungry?” Jake asked.

She leveled her eyes on his. She breathed deep slow breaths.

“Water,” she said.

He waved to a young man behind the counter. “Jong, two waters,” Jake said. He opened the glass door of the refrigerator and picked out two bottles. He placed them on a tray with two glasses. Eleanor kept her eyes fixed on Jake.

“You sure, just the water?” Jake said. A knot was beginning to form in his throat. Jong placed the waters on the table and returned to his spot behind the counter. Eleanor opened the bottle, poured, and drank. She finished the water in her glass.

“What are you doing, Jake?” she said.

“What do you mean?” It was the most acting he’d done in a while. He was rusty.

“Stop it. Thirteen is gone. Where is she?”

“I don’t know,” Jake said.

This was true. After they left the apartment, they took a taxi to the bus depot where the earliest bus left at ten past five in the morning. All the girl had with her was a small backpack of clothes, a magazine, a plastic bag containing a large bottle of water and some crackers. She also carried seven thousand pesos that Jake had withdrawn from an ATM along the way. “Don’t come back here,” Jake had told her when he dropped her
off. “This place is no good.” Then he got back in the taxi and left. As he looked at back at her from some distance down the road, he’d wondered whether he should have watched her get on the bus.

“Jake,” Eleanor said, his name issuing from her mouth like a sigh, “I told you not to be an idiot. I told you,” she said. “There are rules to what I do.”

Jake shifted his eyes downward, to his stomach that pushed against the edge of the table, and the buttons that strained to keep the flaps of his shirt together. He opened his water and drank straight from the bottle. “It was wrong, Eleanor. She didn’t belong there,” Jake said.

Eleanor slid her hand across the table and put it over Jake’s. “None of them do,” she said. She took his hand, pulled it towards her and kissed it. Then she took her bottle and got up from the table. “You’re a bastard, Jake,” she said before turning to go. As she opened the door to leave, she paused. “Next Christmas, no presents.”

Jake stayed in the restaurant for another three hours after Eleanor left, and in that time, consumed yet another meal, but his mind had raced, and turned the events of the last few weeks over and over, so that the memory of them felt false, as though he’d been watching something on television and had simply mistaken it to be something from his own life. When Jake arrived home later that night, he was tired. He ambled wearily toward the gate of his house, and struggled to place the key through the hole in the door. The streetlamp had gone out. He stopped what he was doing, and rested his forehead against the cold metal of the gate. A thought stabbed at him. The girl never told him her
name, and she never asked for his address. He felt weak, and let out a sigh. He shook his head and tried his key again, and just as it slipped into the lock, he heard a voice behind him.

“Excuse me,” the voice said.

Jake turned around. There were two men. That was as much as Jake could make out. One of them switched on a flashlight, the beam of which lit up Jake’s face.

“Oh my god,” the one with the flashlight said. “It is him. Hey—,” he addressed Jake directly now. “—I saw you in that one with the boat, and the snakes...”

*River of Sin* was the film, where Jake had played yet another evil henchman creatively dispatched by the movie’s hero. In a fight scene on a ferry, his character is sent crashing into a wooden crate containing poisonous snakes before he falls into the murky waters below.

The other man, the larger and older of the two adjusted something on his hand. It wasn’t until the hand flew towards his face that Jake saw they were brass knuckles. They landed squarely on his mouth, and right away he knew he’d lost a few teeth. He crumpled to the floor and spat them out along with globs of blood and flesh. The younger man kept the flashlight on his face, blinding him. “Oh man, you hit him good,” he said.

The blood in Jake’s mouth was thick and warm. His jaw was broken as well. While Jake was on all fours, the man with the brass knuckles dug another blow to Jake’s ribs. He felt them snap felt the breath leave his body. He rolled over on his back and wrapped his arm around his side.
“I think that’s enough, right?” the young man said. The older man ignored him and moved in. As he lay on the ground, Jake’s feet scrambled and pushed against the pavement in an effort to back away from him. Out of instinct, Jake flailed his legs at the man, and entirely by accident, managed to put a good amount of his weight behind one wild kick that shattered the man’s kneecap. The man fell on top of Jake, who then wrapped his arms around him and turned him over so that the man was now pinned under his thick torso. Jake straddled him and proceeded to pummel his head. The attacker, whose left leg was bent at the wrong angle screamed as he covered his face from Jake’s fists.

Jake let out a savage howl as he attacked, the blood gushing out of his mouth and spraying on the shrieking figure trapped underneath him. The younger man swung the flashlight against Jake’s ear, knocking him off his partner. Jake slammed against the iron gate still conscious, but robbed now of his equilibrium. The younger man swung again, and connected on the temple this time, harder, so that the flashlight broke, and the heavy batteries clattered on the ground. The light was out, and Jake fell next to injured man who was groaning and reaching for his leg.

“I’m sorry,” the younger man said to Jake, as he collected his partner. “Sorry!” the younger man yelled again, dragging the man with the shattered knee across the street, towards the white car. The engine roared and the car sped off.

Jake lay on his side. Blood was trickling from his ear, and began to form a puddle. His insides felt twisted around somehow. Things were out of place. It hurt to breathe. He tried to breathe slower, softer. He rolled over so that he was flat on his back. He could see
the broken street lamp, and above that, a few stars that shone very faintly. He shut his eyes, heard the sounds of cars on the main road, and wondered how far she was now, and how close to home.
When Maggie stepped through the large double doors of the terminal, the heat and pollution of Manila kissed her full in the face. Her limbs felt heavy, encased in a blanket of moisture that seemed to grow heavier by the second. Dark spots were beginning to show on her shirt, under her arms and she did her best to keep them raised to minimize skin-to-skin contact. She’d forgotten how bad it could be this time of year in the Philippines—nothing at all, really, like the California summers, which were dry, and in the evenings tempered by the ocean breeze. It was more oven-like here where the air was thick and sticky, and shade offered no escape from the stifling humidity. Maggie wanted to wait inside the air-conditioned duty-free store close by, but she was worried that her ride would miss her.

Behind her stood a porter who’d loaded her bags unto a large yellow cart and wheeled it out of baggage claim for her. She dug for small bills to give him. It was a mistake, she quickly realized, this unsubtle rummaging into her pants.

The eyes and ears of the ubiquitous street children were almost preternaturally keen when it came to such gestures, and within seconds, three of them appeared, seemingly out of thin air, already with their palms thrust out at her, the tones of their voices sufficiently melodramatic, their eyes soft and large. Dark, wispy little things.

Maggie was taken hold of an acute awareness of her own appearance—her pale, freckled skin, the bright red coils of hair that were beginning to frizz in the humidity, her
height. At five feet eleven, she towered over the porter, whose head only came up to her chest.

She was amused that someone half her size assisted her with her luggage, but was grateful that he was there to help in this circumstance.

The porter slipped himself between Maggie and the children, waving them off and telling them not to bother her. They paid no attention to him, and perhaps, insulted at this dismissal, he actually placed his hands on their faces and pushed them away. One of the children, a girl of eight or nine, tried to bite him. The porter grabbed her by the shoulders, turned her around and kicked her on the buttocks. She ran off, crying, cursing him.

Maggie was appalled—but less by his brutishness than her initial perception of him as a rescuer.

“Very sorry, ma’am,” he said to Maggie, with a large toothy smile. She wanted to lecture him about putting his hands on those children but she lost her nerve. She’d have managed to give the children something, some coins, candy, if only they’d been less frenzied, if they’d have just let her think for a second, perhaps if they’d gotten in a nice straight line. She tried to convince herself, anyway. Now there was no one else except this child abuser to give something to. Pay him, and he’ll go away she thought. She pulled out a fold, extracted two purple bills, one hundred pesos each. He took them eagerly, nodding his head.

“I help you. Put in car,” he said.

“No, it’s okay,” she said.

“Okay, I help,” he said, palm to his chest as though swearing an oath.
She looked ahead, across the street, at a shed with a green roof made from sheet metal where a throng of people stewed as they awaited the new arrivals, a few of them holding up cardboard signs with last names scrawled across. The porter began to hum something as he leaned his weight forward on the cart handle. She unfastened a button on her blouse and wiped herself just under the collarbones with a handkerchief. Her mom had taken care of her flight arrangements. *Would it have killed her to get me an evening flight?* Her patience was eroding. She could not remember a time when she so badly wanted to submerge herself in a tub of cold water, to linger there for hours with an arm dangling over the side, holding a beer. Or a cigarette. Or a cupcake. She let out a long hiss through her teeth as she ran her hand over her head.

“Very hot!” the porter exclaimed.

She did not acknowledge him. Instead, she did her best to curb her annoyance. It was petty. She was being petty. Her reason for returning to the islands was anything. Maggie imagined how her dad might look. Had the cancer begun to suck him dry? Had his hair fallen out? She couldn’t bear to ask any details over the phone. She’d seen him a few years prior, in Fullerton where he was attending a conference for Pentecostal pastors. It was a short reunion, a late lunch at T.G.I. Fridays, where she finally told her father that she was an agnostic. He took it surprisingly well, and only said that he’d pray for her.

A white van with a large sticker of a dove emblazoned on the side window pulled up to the curb—her ride, as described by her mother in their last conversation. A curly-haired boy got out of the driver’s side and approached her.
“Miss Maggie?” he asked. He had bad skin, and an awkward smile. He looked like he could be in high school.

“Yes?”

“I’m Elmo. Driver. Your dad’s.”

“Oh, ok.”

Elmo slid open the van door then proceeded to load the luggage in the back of the van with the help of the porter.

Maggie shut the door van’s sliding door, opting to sit in the front passenger seat instead. Elmo got in the driver’s seat.

“I’ll sit up here, instead,” Maggie said.

“If more comfortable, okay,” Elmo said, manning the gearshift and pulling out into the road.

The radio was set to the Christian Music station. The songs were dramatic and percussive, and stretched out to include impassioned exhortations by the song leader. She knew some of the songs by heart when she was a teenager.

“Could we turn this down, a little bit?” she said.

Elmo turned the knob back a few notches.

“You’re okay, Miss Maggie?”

“Just tired. And my head is starting to hurt.” She’d left her bottle of ibuprofen in her backpack which was now out of reach in the very back of the van.

“We’ll be home soon,” the young man said, but what that meant, she knew from experience, could be very different in the islands. People here never seemed overly
concerned with promptness. Their ideas about space were different from what she’d
grown accustomed to as well, as one look outside her window reminded her. The lanes of
traffic did not seem to follow any clear logic, but merged and diverged, every vehicle for
itself.

Maggie’s temples throbbed. She closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep.

Ryan had said to call him as soon as she landed. But she’d forgotten and now she
was busy nursing what promised to be a nasty headache. He was a sensitive sort, and very
caring, more so, perhaps than some of her boyfriends, more affable and responsible. He’d
taught composition at the community college for eight years and helped organize
community art events. She liked him. But she reminded herself of that more often than
she wanted to admit. She was pushing thirty and the possibility of yet another
relationship doomed to fail before the year’s end grated against her insides. She
remembered that she’d put the complimentary sleep mask from the airline in her shirt
pocket. She put it on and reclined the chair some more.

“Soon, Miss Maggie. We’ll get there,” Elmo said, and then he began to hum what
sounded like the porter’s tune.

The old house was on a small street that seemed perennially in need of repair.
Potholes pocked the road from end to end, some so deep that in the rainy seasons, water
would collect in them, turning them into breeding grounds for mosquitoes. But as the van
turned on to Catanduanes Street, Maggie saw that the road was smooth and clean. She
scanned the houses for something familiar. The sari-sari store that sold small dry goods
out of a home was now a small bakery. Maggie recalled afternoons playing with the
daughter of the woman who owned the store.

“Does Maria still live here?”

“I don’t know, Miss Maggie. Sorry,” Eboy said. He slowed the van.

Maggie tried to remember Maria’s face. The image was fuzzy, but she
remembered thinking that Maria had been beautiful.

They pulled up at the gate. It was painted a conspicuous lime green, which
Maggie found disorienting. She’d expected to see the familiar bright orange color she’d
grown up seeing. She didn’t know quite how to feel about the new paint. She found it
rather ugly, but then, so was the orange.

Creeping over the cement wall next to the gate were the branches of an old
banyan tree. The vines spilled over the top, a few grown very long and nearly touching
the ground, a tempting plaything for a child, but no child ever swung from them, as far as
Maggie could remember. In fact, no one ever lingered under the generous shade of the
tree. Maggie’s gaze remained transfixed on the branches, the way the lattice they created
looked black against the sunlight.

Elmo honked the horn. The sound of the latch clinking and the cry of the gate’s
hinges snapped Maggie out of her daze.

A young girl in a white uniform—knee length skirt, button up blouse—opened the
gate.

“That’s Rosalynn. Osang. We call her Osang,” Elmo said.
The van rolled forward into the driveway then squeaked to a stop. Just as Elmo cut the engine, the front door opened. Penny stepped out in a cream-colored housedress. She wore her in a bun, high on her head and stood with her hands folded in front of her. Maggie slid out of the van and shut the door. She left her hand on the handle.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hello, Margaret.”

Elmo and Osang onloaded the luggage. Maggie took a deep breath, and approached her. They embraced.

“You’re looking healthy,” Penny said. Maggie knew that this meant she’d put on some pounds.

“I’ll sweat it off here, ma.”

“No, no, it suits you.” Penny put her hands on Maggie’s cheeks. “It suits you just fine.”

“Where’s dad?”

“He’s at a meeting.”

All through her life, her father was at some meeting or another—board of elders, planning committees, men’s ministry, women’s ministry. Or else he was leading Bible Studies or conducting seminars. He was a man of great buoyancy, inexhaustible, and resolute.

“Shouldn’t he be resting?”

“He should be,” her Penny said as she led Maggie back to her old room. “We can catch up after you get settled. You must be exhausted.”
“Thanks, ma.”

The wallpaper was the way she’d left it. She’d had a Pride and Prejudice phase in high school and the lavender Victorian style paisley made her feel like one of the Bennet sisters awaiting a caller in their drawing room. She’d always been a romantic. As far back as she could remember, she entertained fantasies—innocent at first, an imagined companion who wanted little more than to hold her hand, or kiss her on the cheek, but then, later, when she was a little older, the musing would sometimes involve eloping with some mysterious lover.

She was still a believer then—she wasn’t sure what she believed anymore, and neither did she give it too much thought—and prayed to God for forgiveness and protection against the poison of the evil one. But that kind of guilt belonged to another life. She’d lived out her fantasies to some degree or another since then, had her share of romances and lovers.

But there was one that, in her private moments she often revisited in her mind. It was in this room that she last felt her soul to have been truly bared before another. Anjo had seen her the way she always wanted to be seen.

She’d met him in a weekly youth Bible Study. He was a schoolmate of one of the other boys. They’d gotten each other’s numbers through friends. He looked older than his eighteen years and was, by his confession, pretty experienced. He’d lost his virginity to an older girl when he was only fourteen. He was as tall as her and had the broad round shoulders and narrow waist of a swimmer, as well as a deep tan. His eyes were large and earnest. She wasn’t the only girl in the youth group with a crush on him.
But she looked her best then. She was as tall as she was now—5’10”—but lithe and radiant, a girl just having come into her womanhood. Breasts and hips took on marvelous new proportions. Her belly was still flat, her buttocks firm, a body unencumbered by gravity, and not yet worn down by too much work, too much drink. She missed that body. He’d loved that body. Couldn’t keep his hands of it.

Maggie took of her jeans and changed her shirt. She closed the blinds, drew the curtains and lay on the bed, the sheets of which smelled of floral-scented detergent. She stretched, shut her eyes, buried her face in her pillow and tried to recall the way Anjo would twirl her red hair around his fingers as he kissed her neck, and the way he placed his nose in the hollow of her clavicle.

That’s how her mother found them that night, he seated Indian style, Maggie on top with her legs around him on her bed, her bra undone and Anjo kissing her neck and working his way down.

Maggie felt a shiver in her spine and her lips break into a smile. She chuckled to herself as she recalled how Penny rushed at him with her leather-bound, annotated King James. She brought the Bible down hard on his head and back as he stumbled about the room trying to gather his clothes. How different things might have been if Penny’s prayer meeting hadn’t gotten canceled on account of the host, Mrs. Gomez getting adult chicken pox of all things.

Three weeks later, Penny was back in Orange County, with Ginny, her mother’s sister. She would finish the rest of her schooling there.
When Maggie awoke, it was eleven at night. She made her way to the kitchen. She was starving. She was rummaging through the fridge when she was startled by her father’s voice.

“Hey, Magpie”

“Jesus! Dad…” Maggie turned to see him seated at the coffee table in the far corner, a collection of yellow pill bottles in front of him. He was thin and his hair had gone completely white. It has been as fiery as hers once, and as curly, but now, the waves seemed to have relaxed. It looked as though different man’s scalp had been stitched on to her father’s head.

“Must you take His name in vain?” Jack said as he rolled his eyes.

Maggie came up to him and embraced him. He stayed in his seat. She put her hands around his head and pressed his face unto her belly. She began to cry.

“Hey, come on, no need for that right now,” he said “I feel fine.”

“Okay, Dad, okay,” Maggie said.

“But I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

Maggie wiped her eyes with her shirt. “What’s all this stuff?” She picked up a bottle.

“Supplements, mostly. Need to keep my strength up. We just started a few new ministries.”

He didn’t look quite as sick as Maggie had envisioned—older, yes, and certainly thinner, but not on death’s door. Her mother had sounded very grave over the phone.
Your father isn’t well, Margaret. It’s time we settled things. But now, a thought flashed in Maggie’s mind: that perhaps her return to here was premature, followed quickly, however, by some measure of guilt for even thinking it.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine without you for a bit, dad. I’m sure god understands.”

“God? Are you and Him on speaking terms again?”

“I never said I wasn’t. I just wasn’t into the organized religion thing, that’s all.”

Osang came into the kitchen through the back door. “I saw the light, Pastor Jack. Does Miss Maggie want to eat? I can make something.”

“No thank you, Os…”

“Osang, Miss Maggie.”

“Thanks. You should go back to bed. It’s late.”

Osang nodded her head. “Good night.” She guided the screen door back as she stepped outside to keep it from slamming.

“Does she look familiar?” Jack asked. He began to place all the supplements in a rectangular plastic container.

“Should she?”

“She’s Rowena’s girl.” Rowena had been the housemaid while Maggie was growing up.

“I didn’t know she had a daughter.”

“Doesn’t quite cook the way her mom did, but she’s easier to talk to. All the kids speak English nowadays, you know.”

“I see.”
“Bedtime for me, Magpie.” He got up, kissed her on the forehead and ambled out of the kitchen.

Maggie returned to the refrigerator. She took out a bottle of *Sarsi*, a popular brand of root beer.

Maggie went out the back door, came around the house and walked to the garden barefoot. The blades tickled the sides of her feet. The earth smelled different in the Philippines, she thought. There was a sweetness to it, but not the pleasant sort, not fresh and redolent, but robust, moist, and closer to rot. Primeval earth, she imagined, the kind that bore away secret violence. But maybe that’s just the way soil smelled in the tropics.

Against the concrete divider between her family’s house and the neighbor’s there was a long green planter that contained birds of paradise. Their sharp ends came in red and yellow; the red ones looked like bloody spears, the yellow ones like candle flames. She touched them and was amazed at how firm they were, as if artificial, as if plastic. She moved towards the wooden trellis that suspended the jasmine vines. Their perfume filled her head, making her dizzy, but in the mildest, most pleasant way.

Her eyes drifted to the banyan tree in the far corner of the compound. It looked virtually unchanged over the years. The banyan’s trunk rippled with vines, tendrils wrapped around the host tree giving it the appearance of a sea monster whose tentacles locked a ship in its deadly embrace. The thick branches contorted in strange shapes and improbably directions. The high crest of leaves at the top, on the crown, a culmination of verdant growth made the tree look out of place along Catanduanes Street, as though it belonged deep in a jungle.
She approached the tree slowly, holding the bottle lazily next to her thigh, her finger lightly tracing the circumference of its mouth. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the cracks and scars of the tree, all there, the same ones from when she was a child. It was here, she remembered, this very spot, that Rowena, first told her about the mysteries of the banyan.

She was a girl of seven, in a yellow summer dress, her hair in two long pigtails. It was dusk, and her parents were in the house and Rowena came outside to tell her that dinner would be served soon. Maggie pointed up at the tree. She turned and asked Rowena, “What kind of tree is this?”

The helper rushed to her and pushed her arm down. “You mustn’t point at that tree,” she whispered hoarsely. There was a severity in her eyes.

“Why?” Maggie asked.

“Just don’t.” The older woman looked behind her and muttered something in Tagalog, which at the time, Maggie had not yet learned. Then the helper grabbed her by the shoulders, turned her around and walked her to the house to a chant of Hail Marys.

It wasn’t until a few months later, and only after incessant pleading that Rowena finally told Maggie about the Kapre. She said that it conjured enchantment from up there, in the banyan tree, in the invisible world that throbbed between the branches and leaves, in the ever shifting palette of light and dark, laughing in the shadows, occasionally letting on its existence with purple plumes of smoke inexplicably curling out from the tops of trees. A giant, the old woman said, dark, with a wild mane of curly black hair and a thick beard, dressed in a loincloth, who puffed on sweet-smelling tobacco. It cast spells to
confuse travelers and lead them astray. To those who stood under the shade of the tree it was the cause of a sudden hair-raising chill, or flash of heat, or a mysterious unrelenting itch. And on some occasions it was blamed for the temporary disappearance of beautiful women who, when found surprisingly unharmed, were afflicted by a kind of amnesia, a mental fog such that they could not account for their whereabouts during their absence from the world, nor the manner by which they made their exit and re-entry.

“That is the work of the Kapre,” the old housemaid, said. But Maggie could not see it.

“Why would anything so large live in a tree, and not a cave or under a bridge?” Maggie asked, even then, as a little girl, trying to understand the physics behind the supernatural. “Wouldn’t the branches break?”

“How do I know what a kapre weighs? How can anyone know?” Rowena answered.

Maggie later told her father about the banyan tree in their garden, about Rowena’s story. Jack promptly sat the woman down at the dining table across from Maggie and made her recant.

“These are just stories, little one,” the old woman said perfectly still and slightly red-eyed.

Maggie was excused from the table.

“Lies. Satanic lies,” Jack said, which Maggie heard as she made her way to her room.
It wasn’t long after that time that flyers for a missing girl went up. Maggie remembered the pale green paper and fuzzy photocopied picture. A high school student from St. Mary’s.

And then, soon, another, a Chinese girl of ten, from a few houses down, disappeared as well. Maggie had played with her once in the playground of the nearby community park. They’d pushed for each other on the swings. The girl’s family offered a five-million peso reward.

Ten was not far from eight, which Maggie would soon be. And despite having been reassured by her father and mother once again that some of the locals were slaves still to their superstitions, deceived as they were by the devil, she could not keep herself from thinking that the disappearance of those two girls might have something to do with the dark resident of the banyan tree.

One afternoon, while her parents were away, Maggie found Rowena in the kitchen, salting fish.

“Does the kapre take people for good?”

“There’s no kapre. Just stories,” Rowena said.

“Yes there is, and it might take me.”

“The kapre will not take you.”

“So there is a kapre!”

“The kapre will not take you because there is no kapre,” Rowena said, rubbing the rock salt on the fish with a little more vigor before wiping her brow with the back of her hand.
“Yes there is,” Maggie said, close to tears as she left the kitchen.

A few weeks later, a body was found. It was the high school student. Authorities claimed to have someone in their jurisdiction, a man in his late-thirties, a construction worker who, rumor had it, stuffed the bodies into large metal pipes, breaking bones and sawing off limbs when necessary, before sealing them up on either end and placing them in obscure locations at various building sites. The part about the pipes turned out to be false, but the bodies were found, entombed under slabs of concrete near the places that the man had worked his odd jobs.

Maggie’s father showed her the front page of the newspaper with the picture of the man behind bars. He placed one hand on the back of her neck as he tapped the paper with the forefinger of his other hand and said “See, Maggie? No monsters.”

Maggie finished her coke and laid the bottle on the grass. She stepped close to the tree and placed her palm on its trunk. It was rough, but cool to the touch. She looked up into the web of branches and vines. She shut here eyes as her mind turned. The phrase began to form, first in the darkness behind her eyes, then took shape in her mouth. It had been a long time since she’s said anything in her second language. It fumbled past her lips like a wet stone. *Nan diyan ka ba?*—Are you there?

Under any other circumstances, Maggie would not have been persuaded to attend her father’s church. Or any church for that matter. But when he asked her over breakfast one morning whether she would join them in praying for his health, she found that she could not say no. She realized that this was manipulative on his part, a scheme to possibly
get her back in the fold. And normally, she’d have met this with dismissal. But this time it was different. *If he dies without my having gone at least once, I’ll hate myself,* she thought.

And so she went.

The exterior of the building on the corner of West Avenue and Ligaya Street was now a cool pale blue. The last time Maggie had seen it, it was covered in a badly blotched coat of cream paint, peeling here and there to reveal the gray of the concrete walls. The old marquee, which had been a creaky, dilapidated thing for as long as she could remember was restored to a respectable degree and now framed the title Apostolic Church of the Holy Fire, a bill that would never have to come down since they’d “driven the devil from the building,” as her father put it. It had originally been a movie theater, a two-hundred seater that played B-movies in the nighttime, Filipino horror and skin flicks, at twenty pesos for admission. In the eighties, her father’s growing congregation decided to rent the space on Sunday mornings to hold church.

Earlier that morning, her mother told Maggie about Mr. Lo, the building owner, who had joined the congregation some years back and, apparently having experienced a genuine, honest to God conversion, offered his property for transformation into a house of the Lord. “He’s just so grateful,” she’d said. “There are times he doesn’t even accept the rent money.

“He’s grateful? For what?” Maggie asked.

“For our leading him to the Lord, of course. For ”
It was this sort of language that scraped against the inside of Maggie’s skull. No one talked like that. No one in the real world, or at least, the world that Maggie had been living in, no one she actively associated with, certainly no one she liked. So the knowledge that she’d sprung from the womb of this anachronism, this puritan woman, who, when speaking of hellfire and brimstone, meant actual hellfire and brimstone weighed heavily on Maggie, and her mother’s voice, which echoed in her head in the short drive to the church made her want to jump out of the moving van, oncoming traffic be damned.

They pulled into the parking lot and quickly made their way to the entrance where they were met by a cadre of smartly-dressed young ladies who handed out the Sunday program. Maggie had been one of them years ago, and she found herself surprisingly pleased at the sight of these girls because she’d hated the duty.

“Good morning, Pastor Jack, Sister Penny,” they said almost in unison.

“Is this your daughter?” one of them asked, a girl who barely came up to Maggie’s chest, but whose figure suggested that she was at least in her mid-teens.

“That she is,” Penny said.

“She’s so pretty,” chimed another.

“No, look at all of you!” Maggie said. “I’ll bet boys keep bumping into walls around here—you’re all head-turners.” Maggie knew the compliment had been lame the moment it left her lips, which made her feel ancient. It was something her father would have said.

“We better hurry on inside,” her dad said. “We can mingle later.”
The three of them weaved their way through the flock of parishioners, all of whom regarded Maggie with some mixture of curiosity and excitement. Some of them, no doubt, probably remembered her as that tall freckle-faced teenager, the girl described by her parents as “possessed of too much spirit,” and one who, in a complete fabrication promulgated mainly by her mother, insisted on completing the rest of her studies back in the US. Then there were a few of them who probably knew the truth.

As they entered the worship hall, Maggie took note of how much brighter everything looked. Originally, the theater seats were divided into three sections, split by two aisles that ran the length of the theater. Now the parishioners took their seats on white plastic chairs where the battered old seats used to be, and the filthy maroon carpet that stank of stale soda was gone, replaced with pristine white marble. The walls were covered in simple white and blue striped wallpaper and now a small stage rose where the silver screen used to be. Maggie was impressed.

Jack and Penny walked ahead, greeting people as they made their way to the stage. Maggie lingered by the entrance. Penny turned around to look for her. Maggie signaled that she would look for a seat in the back. Her mother shook her head and motioned for her to follow, and then turned her back to Maggie before her daughter could refuse. The woman was insufferable. Maggie wasn’t about to Penny treat her like a child. She set her down on a chair in the back row.

The people who filtered in all took glances at her, the towering red-head. They had their Sunday faces on—sanguine and polite. Maggie nodded and smiled and offered shy, near inaudible “hellos.” The hall was nearly full. Maggie scanned the front rows,
where she though Penny would be, and indeed, spotted her mother talking to a young man in an immaculately pressed, white, short-sleeved polo.

Maggie felt something crawl up from the pit of her stomach, something spiky like a hedgehog bumping up against her insides as she observed the man’s dark brown skin, his angled cheekbones, his bright wide smile. Her ears tingled, and her jaw loosened, dropped down slowly, apparently independent of her control. Close your mouth, she told herself. Close your mouth.

Anjo. It was Anjo that her mother was now giving a big hug and pecks on the cheek. Maggie watched from afar as Anjo said something that made her mother laugh, a laugh that made her throw her head back. A joke. They shared jokes now.

But the joke was on her. God, or fate, or the universe was having a laugh at her expense. And it was a good joke. A breathy chuckle escaped Maggie’s lips. She had to admit, the cosmic irony was something that she could appreciate. And the added twist, what really gave the joke its potency was that Anjo, apart from his hair which was now trimmed short and no longer the tousled nest she’d loved to dig her fingers into and the pair of rectangular tortoise shell glasses that sat on his nose, hadn’t aged a day.

She felt her shoulders pull back, her stomach tighten, her neck lengthen so as to smooth out the hint of a double-chin. She clenched her buttocks. She felt an aching desire to shrink back into the girl she’d been, the girl whose skin his fingers drew circles on, who grew limp in his embrace, who could float up to ride his back in play where she
enjoyed the feel of his forearms around her thighs, pinning her legs to his torso to dangle at his sides.

Her mother waved at her, once again, motioning for Maggie to come up to the front. She saw Anjo lift his head to peer in her direction as though to catch her face in a crowd, as if she didn’t already tower over everyone.

“What the hell is happening?” Maggie groaned to herself.

He waved at her too. She felt her hand come up to do the same but it hovered in a funny pose halfway up, a crook in her wrist like a sorceress casting a spell.

Anjo turned to his left, where, seated in the front row was a young woman and a little boy. He said something to them and they both turned to face Maggie, the boy kneeling on the seat and pivoting all the way around, hands on the backrest. The woman was pretty and light-skinned. The boy had soft, large eyes. There was no mistaking whose son he was. Then both of them, mother and son, smiled warmly, as if to say “We don’t know you, but we’re sure we’ll love you.”

Penny waved again, signaled with both arms this time. “Come over here,” she mouthed.

Maggie tried to move her feet but her whole body was still tense. She could not move with everything—neck, shoulders, stomach, buttocks—pulled tight, pulled in, as she tried to impersonate the sixteen year old version of herself. The ridiculousness of her circumstance washed over her and she felt something hot and electric rumble in her diaphragm. The edges of her mouth twitched.
Suddenly, there was the sound of bass guitar snapping out a rhythm. The other instruments began to fill in the chords of the song, bright and up-tempo. Penny signaled something new to Maggie “Fine, just stay there then,” her hand said.

Anjo leapt up the stairs to the stage and snatched up a mic from one of the stands. God is in the house!” Anjo roared into the mic. He was the worship leader.

The congregation exploded in hollering and applause. Some of the younger people jumped in place and threw their hands up in the air. The worship hall thrummed with energy. Maggie felt the vibrations in her bones, the inside of her skull, and yet, she didn’t sing, she didn’t dance. She bent forward and leaned on the backrest of the chair in front of her. She kept her eyes fixed on the stage, on Anjo whose face shined under the hot lights, ebullient, on fire for the Lord.

After the service, Maggie stayed in her seat. Her father’s sermon was based on Jesus’ temptation in the desert. Maggie could not remember any of the points made, the lesson to be learned. Everything that transpired in that last hour was somewhat blurry, as though she’d been looking at things underwater. She did her best to focus on her breath, to brace herself for what she knew was coming.

As the congregation filtered out of the hall, Anjo strode up to her with a great beaming smile on his face. Maggie’s pulse sped. He gave her a big hug. She stiffened at his touch, tentatively wrapped her arms around him.

“Hey…” she said.
“Goodness, it’s been forever!” Anjo pulled back and examined her. Maggie felt her cheeks flush.

“It has, it has.”

“Are you here on vacation?”

“No…um, dad…”

“Oh, right, right. I’m so sorry.”

“Well, he looks a lot better than I thought he would.”

“He’s doing great. Still, I wish you were here under different circumstances.”

“Me too.”

“How long will you be here for?”

“About a month, I suppose. But that could change, because…”

“Right, right. Of course…” Anjo’s countenance took on an added gentleness. He smiled at her, saying nothing for a few seconds when The young woman and the boy came up behind him. He seemed slightly flustered at the quietness of their approach and stuttered slightly when he said “This is my dear friend, you guys, Auntie Penny’s daughter. Her name is Maggie.”

“I’m Clara,” the young woman said. She had a perfectly oval face, a button nose, a small red mouth and unblemished skin. The face of a child. “Introduce yourself,” she said, looking down at her boy, nudging him gently. Clara shot an apologetic look at Maggie.

“That’s alright,” Maggie said. She squatted down and extended her hand to the boy. “Nice to meet you…”
“Angelo,” the boy whispered behind his teeth as he shook her hand.

“Angelo.”

Dowager Palace, the dim sum restaurant across the street from the church had been a family favorite since Maggie was a child. The owner, Mr. Li, a corpulent, retired stockbroker from Hong Kong, enjoyed the novelty of having a Caucasian family as regulars, so much so that there were times they ate for free. They’d patronized the place so often that Maggie avoided steamed pork buns and shrimp dumplings the whole time she lived in America. But biting into the greasy wontons now, and having the garlicky filling melt on her tongue reminded her of just how sublime the simple dishes here could be. This tiny bliss was all that mitigated the awkwardness of sharing a table with Anjo, his prim, fresh-faced wife, and their beautiful boy.

The boy was determined to achieve some degree of control over his chopsticks. Anjo pleaded with him to use his fork, holding it up for the boy, but Angelo simply took it and set it down next to his plate. This display of defiance elicited laughter from everyone at the table.

“That’s a strong spirit, right there,” Jack said.

“Too strong,” Anjo replied.

“No, that’s good. You just need to know how to keep him in check,” Jack added.

Maggie’s brows furrowed at this. However innocuous, it still felt like betrayal. She might have interjected with a snide remark, but there were other things to preoccupy her at the moment. She found herself seated next to Clara, who, for a woman her size and
appearance, possessed a surprisingly ravenous appetite. There was an ease with which
she consumed her food in the present company, which left Maggie with the impression
that this was not the first time Anjo and his family shared a table with her parents.

“So…are we expecting an addition to the family?” Penny asked with an eye to
Clara’s plate. The couples burst into laughter again. Angelo paid them no mind and
stabbed at the dumplings he could not pick up. Maggie watched him intently, charmed by
the child’s concentration, the intensity with which he approached his task.

Clara drew a napkin to her mouth, and took a sip of water. She turned to Maggie
with a soft, inquiring smile.

“So how do you and Anjo know each other again?”

Maggie chewed her food a little longer than she needed to. She could feel her
mother’s eyes on her, sensed that Penny was about to answer for her.

“Youth group,” Maggie finally said. “We were in youth group together.”

“Wow. So a long time.”

“Yes,” Maggie said, as she dabbed her lips with a napkin.

Maggie waited until the evening to talk to her mother, waited for her head to quit
reeling, for the feeling of something solid under her feet to return. She wanted there to be
words when she opened her mouth, something intelligible, and not the tangle of sound
that she felt bubbling up from her chest.

She found her mother seated at the round, antique wooden table in the kitchen, not
reading the good book, not preparing lists as she was wont to do—for prayer requests, for
donations, for birthdays in that month—but hard at work on a crossword puzzle. Her mother spied her figure lingering underneath the arch of the entryway.

“What is a ten letter synonym for ‘disastrous’? Starts with a ‘C’,” she asked.

“Why didn’t you tell me about Anjo?”

Her mother looked up from her puzzle. “What do you mean?”

“Why didn’t you tell me Anjo still goes to your church?”

“Our church.”

“Just…” Maggie held a hand up, palm facing her mother. Her eyes shut for an instant and then opened again and seemed to focus on something on the tile floor.

“It’s been thirteen years, Maggie.”

“Fourteen, and that’s not the point.”

Her mother set the pencil on her page, closed the puzzle book and rested her hands on the cover. “What is the point?”

“The point is you send me away—“

“For a time. We asked you to come back a year later. And then the year after that. You refused.”

“I loved Anjo.”

“Oh, Maggie, I doubt that.”

Her mother looked away, looked in the direction of the stove, the window next to it, and regarded the bonsai sitting on the sill. Maggie watched the muscle on her mother’s neck straighten out, the s-shaped curl of hair around her ear vibrate, her mother’s shoulders loosen as she let out a sigh. It struck Maggie that somehow, her mother too
appeared unnaturally youthful, her skin firm and luminous, miraculously well-preserved, like one of those saints who escape decay postmortem. Perhaps it was the humidity here, the moisture in the air, and the slower days. And with her hair grown long, much longer than at any time Maggie could remember, her mother, quite amazingly, appeared younger than when Maggie had left over a decade ago.

Suddenly Maggie found herself defused. She was unable to proceed, could not counter with anything hot and pointed. She could not now say that her mother never knew what it was like to be desired, to be lusted after, when at this moment, even under the harsh white lights in the kitchen, it dawned on Maggie that her mother had perhaps once been a beauty, a soft, pink, sprightly young thing. No wonder her father had married her while they were still in college. He probably couldn’t keep his hands off her. She pressed her palms over her eye sockets. “Was he a member the whole time?”

“The whole time?”

“The whole time I was away.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

“Then? Goddamnit, mom. Come on...”

Her mother’s eyes narrowed at her outburst. The crow’s feet finally surfaced.

“Your father saw him at a party a few years ago. A child dedication. You know how it is around here, Maggie. Everyone knows everyone.”

“So dad told him to come back to church.”

“I suppose, something like that, yes.”

“That’s crazy.”
“No, providential. There are no accidents, Maggie. The Lord moves--”

“Don’t.”

“You’re overreacting.”

“I’m overreacting? You remember attacking him, don’t you? You remember telling his parents that you were going to call the cops on their son for defiling your daughter? You remember exiling me across the planet?”

“That was a long time ago. And it was for your own good. God forbid you got pregnant.”

“And what about the two of you—you’re best friends now?”

“He was a foolish boy. You were a foolish girl.” Penny’s lack of emotion as much as the words themselves drove a spike through Maggie’s gut. “He’s grown up, Margaret. He’s grown up.”

Maggie felt her back touch the cool brick of the archway. She laced her fingers and hung her arms around her neck. “You should have told me,” she said and then walked away. She stopped after a few steps, rested her hands on her hips and tossed her head back. She stared up at the ceiling. “Breathe,” she told herself, and she did, long and slow. “Calamitous,” she heard her mother say from the kitchen.