

## Infestation

In the front yard of my aunt's house I shrieked as Alex brought a rock down on the large, iridescent beetle, laughing wildly at the indistinguishable splat that remained, and that's when grandma Isa came outside brandishing a broom almost as tall as she was. She said something quickly in Cebuano, which I could not quite understand, but by her tone I could tell it was grave. The dramatic and over-the-top inflection Filipinos use when they're talking about something serious is ironically amusing. I think she could see the laugh I was trying so hard to choke back, as she waved the broom a couple times in the air, speaking quickly once more and pointing at the forested hills behind the house. In the midst of this, Alex had stuck the beetle pulp with a stick, flinging it towards grandma Isa, who was then on the verge of convulsion. My mom and auntie Jessa had to come outside to diffuse the situation, and by the time everyone settled down, the sun had sunken behind the wooded hills.

Mom grabbed and twisted Alex's ear, fully fed up with my brother's troublesome antics. I'd only experienced the ear twist a few times and then quickly grew out of the punishment, but Alex was probably numb to it by now. He simply laughed and ran into the house.

"Why can't we be outside anymore?" I asked my mom.

She did not answer for a moment and I gave her a nudge.

"It's disrespectful to be making noise at night," she said. "Especially outside."

"Why?" I asked.

"The elders say this is when the spirits come out." Mom never said things like that back at home.

When we got back inside, Dad was hunched over the dining table, going over the plans for tomorrow. His blueprints were rolled out and the dining room light fixture lit the papers

poorly. When he saw us come in he told us about a phone call he'd just received from home. Uncle Jake, who was housesitting, had found wood shavings on the floor in our living room. A termite infestation.

"They're all burrowed inside the walls," he said. "An exterminator is going to have to tear a hole in the wall to fumigate."

Mom and Dad discussed the issue, and I headed to the bathroom to shower and brush my teeth. When I got out, I peered out the living room window at the front yard and saw grandma Isa. It looked like she was setting something out under a large banana tree, but I couldn't make out what.

That night I was woken up by Alex, who'd erupted into a fit of coughs. I thought he might have choked on his own snore, if that was even possible.

"Jeez Alex," I said, patting on his back to try and help. "Are you alright?"

"Something—" He coughed again. "Tickling my throat."

It only got worse. I saw my father's form rise from his futon, coming to usher Alex out of the room. I sat there and waited for them to come back. When they returned, Alex was holding a glass of water and his eyes were bloodshot.

"Go back to sleep," Dad told me. "He'll be fine."

As I lay back down, I glanced out the window and caught a glimpse of the banana tree in the front yard. Something was stirring beneath it. Startled, I quickly rose from my futon again and shimmied towards the window. The broad leaves of the tree swayed with the night breeze. Nothing was there.

"Ellin," my dad said. "Go to sleep."

The following morning, I went to see what grandma Isa had left behind the previous night: a small bowl of oil, a boiled egg, and a plate of food from last night's dinner. I wasn't familiar with the customs around here, but I knew this was an offering. I'd seen something similar at the wake of one of my mom's relatives back home. Grandma Isa probably thought the spirit of some ancestor was going to kill us in our sleep after Alex's grand outburst.

Alex made it a point to always be pissing at least one person off. This morning he had already managed to get my mom and dad in a sour mood. He'd been bouncing off the walls after dumping a bunch of sugar into his instant coffee, which no one noticed he'd made until it was too late. I watched quietly as he tore a cushion off one of the dining chairs and attempted to start a pillow fight. Mom grabbed him by the back of the neck, and that's when Alex slapped her hand.

"Don't hit your mom," Dad said, looking rather severe.

"That hurt!" Alex said.

"Then you better stop messing around," Mom said.

After that he started complaining about a cramp in his neck, but no one was taking him seriously anymore. When Mom finally started ignoring him, he took one of the uncooked ant larvae from the kitchen and squeezed it so the juice squirted in her face. By the time she and Dad were supposed to leave for the construction site, she'd employed the ear twist so intensely I thought she might really take his ear off.

My parents and several workers were expected to have a school library built by the end of the following week. Dad owned a construction company back home and, as I once heard him say, "Charity looks good." We'd fundraised and collected boxes upon boxes of used children's

books when we were still in the States. When I asked my mom how the kids would be able to read in English, she told me that, nowadays, most schoolchildren in the Philippines learned English. It was one of the country's official languages. I thought that was odd, but I didn't care to ask further.

During this trip to the Philippines, my parents built small libraries for a few elementary schools in Pampanga, Pangasinan, Batangas, and Iloilo. The final library was meant to be built in Cebu, where my mom was from. I couldn't wait for them to get this over with so we could finally go home. I'd had just about enough of the province and its mosquitos, who seemed so far evolved they knew how to get past a mosquito net. I'd been eaten alive every night for the past month and often wondered if it would be more pleasant to sleep on a bed of poison oak.

Alex and I were subsequently left at the house. It wasn't difficult when Mom wasn't around, but it was inconvenient. I struggled to understand my family's dialect and only knew words and phrases that Mom often said. I sometimes resented her for failing to teach me Cebuano. It didn't seem right that I couldn't even speak to my own family.

The only relatives here who had passable English were my auntie Jessa and my cousin Bea, who was being sent to a considerably nice private school on Mom and aunt Jessa's dollar. Her parents, uncle Joshua and auntie Christine, lived up on the hill behind auntie Jessa's house and didn't have much money. Bea came down to visit us after lunch. She brought with her a large bag filled with peanuts.

"We grew this up the hill," she said. "There's a large crop this year."

"You mean we grew *these*," Alex said. "Are you stupid?"

I told him to get lost and he did. He ran off towards the other side of the farm where the pig pens were, no doubt finding someone else to disturb.

“Sorry,” I told Bea. “He doesn’t have any manners.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “My mom said he’s going to be in trouble anyways.”

“Really?” I asked, not at all surprised, but curious. “In trouble for what?”

“I don’t know,” Bea says. “I saw her and grandma Isa talking this morning and then I asked what they were talking about and she told me Alex is going to be in trouble.”

I thought for a moment, about Alex squishing that poor beetle last night and what my mom said afterwards.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I asked her.

“Yes, but I’ve never seen one,” she said. “Do you?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “But last night my mom said that grandma Isa said that spirits come out at night.”

“Oh that,” Bea laughed. “That’s just a thing old people say so kids do not play outside at night.”

“But grandma Isa put out an offering too,” I told her.

“Really?” she asked. “Where?”

I took her to the banana tree. Sure enough the offering was still there, though it looked like the only thing that touched it were the dogs. The boiled egg was gone, and what was left on the plate of food was now teeming with flies.

“Maybe he really did make someone mad. Grandma Isa is old and a little bit—” She made a gesture suggesting grandma Isa was not altogether there. “But she doesn’t make offerings for no reason.”

I was beginning to feel uneasy, and seeing insects scuttling across a plate of rancid food wasn’t helping. I thought I’d seen something moving out here last night. I entertained the idea of

telling Bea, then thought better of it. It was probably one of the dogs, or the shadow of something the wind had disturbed.

“Who would be mad at Alex though?” I asked, picking up a long stick and tracing spirals around in the dirt. “I mean, if grandma Isa really said the spirit thing just to scare us.”

“Well, offerings are usually put out for spirits,” Bea said, “but not all the time. Cebuano people believe in kulam.”

“What’s kulam?” I asked.

“What’s the word?” She hesitated for a second. “Magic?”

“Like with wands?” I asked. Bea laughed and I felt an unseen distance between us. My mom had never mentioned anything about magic over here, though I wasn’t really surprised. She had zero interest in anything fantastical. Still, I wondered why she’d decided to come out here and build libraries full of English books, but never tell me anything interesting about the Philippines.

“I don’t really know how to explain it to you,” Bea said. I couldn’t blame her. This wasn’t the kind of topic they’d likely cover in her English classes.

“Well, have you ever seen anyone do, uh, kulam?” I asked. She stood for a moment in thought.

“No,” she said. “Not exactly, anyways.”

Bea lowered her voice as if someone might be listening to her. “When uncle Dominic was still around, auntie Jessa thought she got pregnant. They didn’t tell a lot of people about it because sometimes it doesn’t, you know, work out.”

I nodded my head. I was under the impression Bea knew everything that went on around here, and the adults weren’t really aware of it.

“But this was worse,” she continued. “Grandma Isa kept telling auntie Jessa that she was not pregnant and auntie Jessa got really mad. They wouldn’t stop fighting about it and grandma Isa had to live with us for a while.”

Bea thought about her words for a moment, tucking a lock of black hair behind her ear. I had a feeling she was about to tell me something that no one around here dared to bring up, and I leaned forward to make sure I caught every last word.

“Well, auntie was having regular, um, indications of pregnancy, like throwing up in the morning and sometimes feeling nauseous. But her stomach was growing faster than normal. Grandma Isa would go down to the house and bang on the door and tell auntie to listen, but she refused. It took four months, but auntie Jessa finally figured something was wrong and climbed up the hill to my house. My mom said her stomach looked like she was seven months pregnant. She collapsed before she could get to the front door.”

Bea paused and I looked at her expectantly. “Then what happened?”

“I don’t really know,” she said. “Auntie Jessa said she could feel something moving inside her.”

I must have looked horrified, because Bea nodded and paused for a moment. “My mom made me leave the room after that. They had to take her to an *albularyo* and they wouldn’t tell me what happened. But whatever it was, it was *bad*. Auntie didn’t leave her house for a month. When I saw her again, she was whiter than you.”

“What’s an *albularyo*?” I asked, struggling to pronounce the word.

“A witch doctor,” she said.

I felt nauseous. This was the kind of thing you heard about in some fairy tale, not in a story about your own family. My rational side told me that auntie Jessa probably had a

miscarriage, but the side of me that heard tales about things like the Jersey Devil was thinking up worse and worse scenarios.

“And they thought magic did that?” I asked Bea.

“Not all magic is good,” she said.

Sure I’d heard of dark magic, but there was something else she wasn’t saying. Auntie Jessa had been afflicted for four whole months. And there was something *moving* inside her.

“My mom once told me that there are people out there who learn magic so they can hurt other people.” Her voice got so low I had to strain to hear it. “They call that kind of magic *barang*.”

“*Barang*?” I repeated.

Bea shushed me. “We’re not even supposed to say it out loud. We might attract the—” She stopped herself and picked up the stick I’d drawn with, smoothing the dirt out with a swipe of her foot. She etched eleven letters into the soft ground.

*Mambabarang.*

“That’s who does it?” I asked.

“That’s what I heard,” she said. “Apparently they have familiars who do a lot of the work for them, whatever that is.”

I didn’t ask anything more. I’d heard more than enough.

Bea let me keep the bag of peanuts and headed back up the hill to her home. I went inside the house and found auntie Jessa making suman in the kitchen. I couldn’t stop thinking about what Bea said. I didn’t think she was lying, but auntie Jessa never showed any signs that she’d gone through something like that. Whatever *that* happened to be. She gestured at me to come to

her and I stood beside her at the counter. She showed me how to wrap the sticky rice in banana leaves, and when my mom and dad came back, we had two plates stacked high.

I sat on my mom's futon before bed and combed my damp hair. Mom was there too, legs stretched out and reading a book on World War II. I put the comb down and looked at Mom for a second, reluctant to ask her questions about things she never told me. But I wanted to know.

"Hey, Mom," I said.

"Hm?" She didn't look up.

"Is it true that auntie Jessa had a bad pregnancy?"

She set the book down immediately and stared at me with a grave expression. "How did you hear about that?"

"Bea told me," I said.

"I don't know how Bea knows about that," Mom said.

"So it happened?" I said.

"Five years ago your auntie had a phantom pregnancy," she said. "Which happened at the same time as a terrible infection. Your grandma thought to take her to a quack. She could've died."

"But Bea said that grandma Isa thought someone did that to auntie. With magic." I was only aware of how ridiculous it sounded after it came out of my mouth.

"Excuse me?" Mom said.

"That's just what Bea said," I said.

"Bea's been listening to my mother's superstition for far too long," she said. "Don't you go getting this nonsense in your head too."

Mom brought the book back up to her face, as if to tell me the conversation was over. I felt bad for upsetting her. That role was usually designated to Alex, though he was being oddly quiet that night. When he came into the room, he crawled onto Mom's futon too and told her that his neck cramp hadn't gone away.

"Is it that bad, honey?" she asked.

Alex nodded.

"We'll get it checked when we go back to Manila," she said.

I could not fall asleep that night. I sat on my futon and watched out the window, waiting for someone to show up at the banana tree, but of course no one did. Alex snored quietly beside me, his open mouth taking in the night air.

I knew it was a bad idea to bring up Auntie Jessa's pregnancy with my mom and I was going to suffer the consequences. I was dragged along with Mom and Dad to the construction site the following day and there was nothing I could say about it. Mom didn't want me hearing any more stories and scaring myself, so I sat in the back of Uncle Joshua's pickup truck, bumping along a long dirt road and telling Alex to stop using my shoulder as a mountain for his Godzilla action figure.

When we got to the construction site, one of the workers came up to the truck and my mom rolled down the window. The worker spoke to her in broken English and I wondered why he didn't speak to her in Cebuano like everyone else. I soon came to the realization that "everyone else" was just my family, and all of the construction workers spoke to my parents in English. I supposed it was easier for my dad that way, but then he ended up talking to them with an accent too and the whole thing was embarrassing to watch.

I climbed out of the back of the truck and into the bed where I could stretch my legs out and have a decent vantage point of the site. I ruffled through my backpack and pulled out one of the magazines I'd taken from the living room. It was a Filipino edition of Cosmopolitan. Everything was still written in English, but I didn't really bother to read the articles. I flipped through the photos looking for the girl from the cover. She was really pretty. Light skin, dark hair, tall thin nose. She didn't look very Filipino to me, but she didn't look White either. I wondered if she was like me.

"Ellin," I heard Alex say. I looked up from the magazine to see him peeking at me from the side of the truck.

"What?" I asked. "Coming to annoy me?"

"No," he said, struggling to climb up. I set the magazine down and grabbed him by the hands, pulling him up into the truck bed.

"Where's Godzilla?" I asked him, picking a red thread off of his shirt.

"Inside," he said. "What are you reading?"

"Cosmo," I said. "Girl stuff."

"Gross," Alex said.

"Super gross," I said, continuing to flip through photos of the girl on the cover.

"Ellin," he said.

"What?" I said.

"My neck hurts."

"I know," I said. "Mom told you we'll get it checked in Manila."

"I don't want to wait," he said.

"It's just a few more days," I said. "You probably have a swollen limp, uh, lymph node."

“What’s that?”

“Never mind,” I said. “It’ll probably go away on its own anyways.”

But it did not go away, and as the days progressed, Alex’s neck became increasingly bothersome to him. By the end of the week, he’d woken up with a large lump on the side of his neck. He cried, a sight I was not used to, complaining about the pain.

“Did you guys eat anything weird this week?” my mom asked me, touching her fingers to the lump. Alex recoiled beneath her touch and yelled at her for hurting him.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I wasn’t watching him all the time. We had some peanuts that Bea brought over from their crop.”

Mom shook her head and inspected the lump once more.

“Maybe it’s an allergic reaction to some plant?” Dad offered.

“It’s been bothering him for awhile though,” Mom said. “And getting worse.”

Without missing a beat, grandma Isa barged into the room, sparing herself the trouble of knocking first. I had no idea what she was saying, but it felt a lot like, “I told you this would happen.”

“Alis,” my mom said. I was familiar with this word from childhood. She was telling Grandma to get out.

Grandma Isa wasn’t deterred in the slightest. She ignored my mom’s command, speaking quickly at her in Cebuano. The only word I could pick out was *albularyo*, which gave me a vague idea of what was going on. Dad sat next to Alex on his futon looking stunned.

“What the hell is going on here?” he said, standing up. Dad towered over grandma Isa, but she didn’t seem to care, shuffling past him towards Alex. If the situation wasn’t so serious, I might have laughed.

Mom was getting increasingly frustrated with Grandma, trying to take her away from Alex. My brother lay on the futon looking miserable. I went to hold his hand.

“Liza,” Dad said. “You want to explain to me what this is all about?”

Mom shook her head. “She thinks he needs to go to a shaman.”

“A shaman?” Dad said, nearly laughing. “Is this a fucking joke?”

I rarely heard Dad say that word. He was not happy.

“I wish,” she said, turning back to deal with Grandma.

When auntie Jessa came in the room, the talking became completely incomprehensible. Dad had given up trying to insert himself.

“He’s not going to an albularyo,” my mom said to auntie Jessa, effectively excluding grandma Isa from the conversation, as she couldn’t speak any English.

Jessa made a conflicted sort of expression.

“No,” Mom said again. “Don’t you remember what happened when she made me go? I got so sick it was unbelievable.”

“That was a mistake,” auntie Jessa said. “She shouldn’t have taken you back then. But this is different.”

Mom was looking at her in disbelief.

“You felt it moving, right?” auntie Jessa asked.

“Moving?” Dad said.

“Yes,” Mom said.

I squeezed Alex's hand in mine and brought the other to the lump on his neck, letting my fingers rest there gently. He murmured beneath my touch.

"I'm sorry, Alex," I said.

But there was no mistaking it. There was a pulsing beneath the surface of his skin. I pulled my hand back quickly.

"Just like me," auntie Jessa said. "He needs to go."

Mom managed to convince Dad to go on to the construction site, telling him she would take care of Alex.

"If something happens to him," he said, not even finishing the sentence. He stood there and shook his head.

"I won't let him get hurt," Mom said. I believed her, and I think Dad did too, though he left reluctantly.

We took uncle Joshua's pickup truck to the albularyo's house. Alex lay across the backseat over my mom and I. When we got there, auntie Jessa knocked on the door, and a man who must have been in his mid-forties opened it up. I'd imagined an albularyo having long hair and a grass skirt, maybe even a necklace made of bones, but he was wearing a polo and flip flops, looking as ordinary as could be. Auntie told him what was going on, and he ushered us all into the house. He took Alex from us and laid him out on a bamboo mat in what I imagined should have been the dining room, touching his fingers to the lump on his neck. Alex screamed and began crying once more.

"Mambabarang," the albularyo said. Bea was right. Grandma Isa and auntie Jessa looked grave, but unsurprised. Mom stood there, either not believing or not wanting to.

The man asked grandma Isa for something, and she produced a small vial of fluid from her bag. It looked like oil. Perhaps the same oil that she'd put out under the banana tree.

The albularyo poured a generous amount of the oil onto his hand and brought it to Alex's neck, coating the protrusion.

I thought at that moment that he might start chanting or cast a spell, but he did not. He went to the kitchen and began boiling a small pot of water, then spoke to Mom in dialect. She looked horrified. I had no idea what he was going to do, but whatever it was, Mom was arguing against it.

"Ma'am," he said, as if she might understand better in English. "It doesn't matter if you believe in it or not. Your son needs to be dealt with now."

"This is crazy," Mom said.

"I've done this many times before," he said. "Just trust me."

He took a knife from a jar filled with what looked like salt, dipping the blade into the boiling water and then letting it cool.

Mom was incredulous. "I'm not letting someone perform *surgery* on him unless it's in a hospital."

"We're too far from a hospital," the albularyo said. "It's going to burst inside him if we don't take care of it now."

"Liza," auntie Jessa said, lifting the bottom of her blouse to expose a small part of her stomach. There was a thick scar running up her tummy, and I could make a pretty good guess about what had happened. She put her shirt down and spoke to my mom for a moment. Mom looked like she might start crying.

“Hold still for a second Alex,” my mom said, unable to look at him. He looked absolutely terrified, and the sight of some strange man holding a knife beside him certainly did not help.

“No mom,” he cried. “Don’t let him touch me. I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to. Stop!”

“Just a little cut and he’s going to make the lump go away,” my mom told Alex, running her hand through his hair and holding his little hand. The albulario looked at my mom impatiently.

“Please calm down honey.” She leaned down and whispered something to him.

“Okay,” he said, tears rolling down his small, pale face.

The albulario knelt beside him and brought the scalpel down gingerly. I couldn’t bear to watch.

I heard Alex’s cries escalate. My mom attempted to console him, but his sobs drowned out her words. After a few moments, I heard her gasp loudly. Alex continued to bawl.

When I looked up, I saw them. There wasn’t as much blood as I expected, and instead of an outpour of red from the wound, there was an outpour of black. I felt bile rise in my throat and I attempted to push it down. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t. The black substance fell to the mat Alex laid on. My skin crawled at the sight. They trickled from the lesion in his neck, scuttling out by the dozens. Small, iridescent beetles.

I couldn’t handle watching as they stitched the wound together, so I waited in the truck as they finished what they needed to in the house. The albulario gave something to help Alex sleep, and I let him rest his head in my lap on the drive back home. The cut on his neck stood out against his pale skin. He really had gotten himself into trouble. He didn’t deserve it.

“Don’t tell Dad,” Mom said to me. “He won’t understand.” I thought she was still having trouble understanding herself.

When Dad got back from the construction site, Mom told him a boldfaced lie, something I’d never seen her do before.

“We went to a clinic,” she said. “A bug laid eggs inside him.”

“What?” he asked, beside himself. “How does that even happen?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know.”

That night, Mom and Dad decided it would be best to go home so Alex could be looked at by a doctor and treated properly. They booked a flight for the coming weekend and the following day we began packing up to return to the States. I wondered if we would ever come back to finish what we’d started, or if we even needed to.

“Four libraries,” Dad said on the drive back to Manila. “I think that’s charity enough.”

## Dredge

I don't live in Batac anymore, but my family does. The city isn't too small, but it feels that way. My barrio feels even smaller. It's only half an hour away from the main city, but the drive back always feels like digging up a time capsule. It's largely rural, and many of the roads remain unpaved. Thick foliage surrounds the streets and passing tricycles kick up clouds of dust that pedestrians have grown accustomed to walking through. If you're driving at night during the dry season, you can see fireflies flickering in the dark.

Most of the well-to-do families in the area own large tracts of land and grow crops or raise animals—often both. My own family owns a bit of land and runs a grain store in town. We're one of the luckier households. Some families expect to eat two plates of rice a day and anything more is an uncommon treat.

Despite my circumstances, once I was able to leave the barrio, I avoided going back. My nanay was unhappy with me for quite some time because of this. She planned for me to stay and help run the family business, but I came up with any reason to go. At the time, I figured that my manong, Daniel, would eventually take over the business, and university would be as good an excuse as any to leave. I moved to Baguio after high school to go to university, just far enough away. I needed to make my own path through life. I didn't know exactly what that path was, but I already knew where I intended it to lead: away.

After finishing school and doing a bit of this and that, I'd established a gynecology clinic in Baguio, which made my life more than comfortable. I visited my family just as frequently as I had during university, which is to say, not frequently at all. Some holidays I would return to my hometown, but more often than not, I'd travel with friends, or a few times with a long-term

boyfriend. Vacations took me increasingly father away: Taipei, Bangkok, Singapore. If I hadn't such an aversion to open water, I might have taken a cruise to Japan.

It was only when my lolo had fallen ill that my parents asked me to stay home for an extended period of time. He was considerably old, and everyone knew his time was coming soon, though no one would say so out loud. My nanay stayed at home with our maid to take care of him, and I had one of my doctors take over the clinic so I could help with my family's business.

I'd failed to anticipate the situation I'd be in once I started helping out. My nanay typically ran the cash register and assisted customers at the store, while Daniel did the more physical work. I got stuck sitting at the counter, greeting customers and operating the cash register. It didn't take long for word to spread that the Andradas' daughter had returned from Baguio. People speculated, I'm sure, though they never asked me why.

When Lolo's health began getting worse, Daniel was the only one who brought up his inevitable passing.

"He wasn't doing so well last night," Daniel said. He had finished carrying the new bags of rice from the delivery truck into the store and was sitting behind the counter with me.

"Who wasn't?" I asked.

"Lolo," he said.

"He's getting old," I said, picking at my nails.

"You know what will happen after he passes away," Daniel said, looking at me expectantly. "Right?"

There was something he wasn't saying. "What?" I asked.

"We will have to visit his grave," Daniel said.

"Yeah, I know."

He stared at me as if attempting to telepathically send his thoughts. Whatever it was, he didn't want to say it out loud.

"The graveyard," Daniel said.

"And what about it?" I said. "Just spit it out."

"It's up the hill." He took a moment to think of his words. "Past the lake."

I froze up for a moment before turning away from him.

"Rina?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

"Sorry," Daniel said. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

I hadn't been to the lake since grade six. I was eleven at the time. My class was quite small since the barrio had such a minute population. This smallness made us close, but those who didn't fit in were outcast.

Azazel was one of the unfortunate ones. Perhaps the only unfortunate one. He was an oddity. People around my barrio knew him as the bastard child, though this was something they only called him behind closed doors. The kids in my class were not so forgiving. Marcus Mendoza had taken to calling him *duwende*, which quickly became a source of constant teasing. The kids would walk by his desk every morning after assembly and mutter, "*Tabi tabi po.*" These superstitious words, meant to ask permission of dwarves before entering their territory, became the joke of a bunch of grade schoolers.

Only a few of us didn't actively participate in this, but I didn't blame my classmates for it. Azazel—or Azel, as people called him when they were feeling nice—was strange in appearance and manner. He was noticeably shorter than the other kids in class, which certainly lent a hand in

people calling him duwende. His face looked different from the rest of us too. This unsettled me. I did not like to look at him.

During recess, the boys played basketball on the paved area of the school grounds. Azel was never seen with them. I sometimes saw him walking near the road, picking up things that passerbys had dropped. When it was my turn to sweep the classroom, my curiosity urged me to look inside his desk to see this collection. There I saw a neatly arranged assortment of dull stones, bottle caps, and cigarette butts.

My family rolled and smoked their own cigars, which I never really minded, but I always hated the smell of cigarettes. There was something about that odor. Like smelling gasoline or exhaust fumes, I felt like I may never really recover from it. Someone came into the shop smoking a cigarette when I was organizing sacks of rice. The stench stained the air and I turned my head in disgust to see a fairly tall, good looking man standing at the counter.

“Excuse me sir, could you please smoke outside?” I asked.

“Oh?” he said, turning to see me. “Wow, I didn’t think it was true. You really came back.”

He put the cigarette to his lips and took a puff, blowing the smoke into the store.

“I said, bring the cigarette outside.”

“Friendly as ever,” he said. He produced a set of keys from his pocket and stubbed the cigarette out on a round, metal keychain, letting the ash fall to the shop floor.

“Do I know you?” I asked, moving behind the counter.

“You don’t remember me?” he asked, feigning grief.

I looked at him carefully. His dark eyes might have been familiar, but nothing else.

“No,” I said. “I don’t.”

“It’s your old friend,” he said. “Marcus.”

The name took me straight back to elementary school. When I looked at him again, I saw him there. Past the sharpness of the jaw and stern brow, I saw the child I’d known many years ago. How did such a conniving brat grow up to be so handsome?

“We were not friends,” I said.

“Ah ganon.” He set the cigarette on the counter. “You got prettier.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

“It’s a shame your personality hasn’t changed a bit.”

I crossed my arms and hoped that maybe if I willed it hard enough, he would just leave.

The corners of his lips curled up into a sly smile. I hadn’t seen Marcus in over twenty years, but I knew him well enough to know that smile didn’t bring anything good.

“You never got married?” he asked, looking at my hands.

“It’s none of your business,” I said, tucking them behind my crossed arms.

“Maybe it is,” he said. “No kids then?”

“No, I don’t have any kids,” I said, leaning over the counter towards him. “And for the sake of this community I hope you don’t either.”

His jaw got tense but his face didn’t fall.

“Rina,” he said, shaking his head. “You’ve got some growing up to do yourself.”

“I think I’m the only one in this fucking place who grew up,” I said.

“You think you’re better than the rest of us because you left,” he said, turning briskly and making his way to the door. “But we’re the same. You hate to admit it, but we are.”

At that he left the store, his cigarette still sitting on the counter.

Only once, Azel did not return from recess. His empty chair stood out in the crowded classroom. If it was anyone else, perhaps we wouldn't have noticed, but Azel was different. His presence was uncomfortable, but his absence was *unsettling*. Especially since he was almost always the first to return to the classroom once the teacher called. I would often come in and see him organizing his collection of junk in his desk. Not this time.

"Where's Azel?" Mrs. Dumlao asked the class. No one spoke. Perhaps no one knew.

Her eyes scanned over us, surely for some sign of misconduct, but apparently there was none.

"Rina," she said, singling me out among my classmates. "Go outside and see if he's still on the playground."

*Why me?* I wondered. I stood without comment, catching only a few words of Mrs. Dumlao's discontent with the class.

"I know the names you call him," she was telling them as I walked out the door.

Azel tended to linger by the street, but as my eyes searched the area, he was nowhere to be seen. I walked up to the edge of the road and scanned the distance, but as far as I could tell, he hadn't wandered off the school grounds. He wasn't anywhere to be seen on the paved area where the boys often played basketball, nor was he on the lawn near the entrance. I headed reluctantly towards the restrooms, which were located in a separate building some distance from the classrooms. As I got closer, I could hear someone crying. The door to the boys' toilets was propped open with a door stopper. I felt very much like I was intruding somewhere that I didn't belong.

"Hello?" I said. "Azel?"

The sobs stopped abruptly.

I peeked into the restroom. I couldn't see feet on the floor in any of the stalls, but something smelled awful. I stepped away from the doorframe, but the odor lingered. I stood for a moment, the gears in my mind turning. I hesitantly looked behind the open door. In the gap between it and the facade of the building was Azel, his arms wrapped around his torso and a terrible mess all over his trousers. He'd shit himself.

"Dyos ko," I said, choking on the words.

I ran back to the classroom and returned to my seat without a word. I felt dirty.

"Where is he?" Mrs. Dumlao asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I couldn't find him." I was embarrassed. Not for him, but for myself for finding him in such a condition. It was repulsing. I wouldn't be able to purge the image from my mind for days.

When I returned home that day, I asked my nanay what was wrong with Azel.

"He's a bastard," she said. "That's what happens when you have a bastard child, they turn out like that. A mongoloid."

Lolo died on the ninth day after my arrival. They assumed heart failure, but that was the common diagnosis. When I arrived, I'd offered to give some medical advice, but truly there was not much I could do. I think he'd contracted pneumonia, and at his age, I hadn't expected him to make a successful recovery. He passed in his sleep.

"He was waiting for you to come," my nanay said that morning.

"He was waiting for me to come?" I said.

"So he could pass away," she said.

I don't know if I didn't believe it, or if I simply didn't like the idea that my lolo had waited to see me so he could die, but her words upset something inside me. Like in some small way, I was responsible. I felt irritated for the rest of the day.

There was no church in our barrio, so Lolo's funeral proceedings would have to take place inside our own home. The day following his passing, my tatay began burning a small fire out of logs from a tamarind tree. This fire would be kept burning continuously until the day of his burial.

Before guests began arriving at the house to pay their respects, my nanay gathered the family together so we would remember the proper proceedings. We were not to work or clean the house during the wake, even though relatives and neighbors would be coming in and out every day. Each night for nine nights, we would pray for Lolo's safe passage into Heaven.

"The day after the ninth night, we will bury him at the cemetery," my nanay said. I could see Daniel give me a look from the corner of my eye.

"I can stay here and help tita Edna feed the guests," I said.

"All the close relatives will be at the burial, so you should be there too," my nanay said.

"I'm not going," I said.

"Excuse me?" she said, growing red in the face.

"I said, I'm not going."

She laughed a dangerous laugh and Daniel cleared his throat awkwardly at the end of the table. My tatay stood slowly to leave, knowing all too well what was to come.

"You're going if I have to drag you there by your ears," Nanay said. She looked more severe than ever.

"I can't do it," I said. "I can't go there. Don't you understand that?"

"Can't, or won't?" she asked. It wasn't much of a question.

“Do you even remember what happened at that lake?” I said. “You’re lucky it’s not me you’re visiting in the cemetery.”

“Don’t you dare make this about you. What about what *I* went through?” she said, on the verge of eruption. “Have you ever considered it? Ever? Or what lolo, tatay, or your manong have endured?”

I said nothing.

“I wanted you to stay and help here, but you did not want to stay, so we let you go to college. And we worked hard to keep our store going and we paid for you to get an education. And for what?”

“Oh please,” I said. “I give you guys money.”

“You send us money, but you never visit. You never even call,” she said. She looked like she was on the verge of tears. “And now you won’t even attend Lolo’s burial. You break my heart.”

She stood abruptly and went, leaving a heavy feeling in the room. I took a breath and wondered if it wouldn’t be best to leave after the last night of the novena.

Daniel turned to me and gave me a sad sort of look. “I understand why you feel like this,” he said. “But it’s been so long. Everyone else has moved past it, I wish you would move past it too. I don’t like to see you upset like this.”

“Fine,” I said, standing up. “I’ll go so you don’t have to see me upset.”

I shut myself in my room for the rest of the morning. I felt like a child all over again. And I knew I was being selfish. I knew it. It was something that hadn’t changed about me, even if I didn’t like to admit it. I felt the guilt—from the rotten remains of my childhood and the present I found myself in—clawing its way up from the ditch I thought I’d dumped it in.

The last time I went to the lake was a particularly humid day. I remember the stickiness of the air, clinging to every surface in the classroom. During recess, a number of us arranged to go to the lake after class to swim and cool off. The lake never had a real name. It never really needed one. It was the only lake in our barrio. There was a high ledge on one side of it which we would often dive off of. The kids in the barrio knew that the lake wasn't particularly deep, so we had to angle our dives properly in order not to get hurt.

A large group of us walked from the school building to the tall hill which the lake sat atop. No one had swimsuits. Back then, I doubt anyone knew what a swimsuit was, and even if they did, most families wouldn't spend money on such a useless piece of clothing. All of the kids swam in their shirts and underwear.

Those who wanted to dive made their way to the high ledge on the far side of the lake. Some others had already gone into the water where the lake's edge was level with the ground. A crowd of us stood atop the ledge, waiting for James Ragasa to take the first leap. Marcus stood beside him, encouraging him to go.

In a couple of seconds he dove. We heard the splash as he hit the water and ran to the edge just in time to see him come up and wave at us from down below.

"Alright, back up, back up," Marcus said, shooing us away so he could get ready to dive as well. He ran a hand through his hair and looked over his shoulder at the crowd, nearly turning back, then, stood up straight.

"Duwende!" he said.

We all turned back to see Azel lingering at the back of our small crowd. I glanced over my classmates, but everyone seemed to be just as confused as I was. Most of the class was here, but

no one expected that Azel would follow us from school. I turned back to Marcus, who had a nasty smile on his face.

“Does the duwende want to dive too?” he asked.

Azel looked uncomfortable with the attention he was suddenly receiving, but Marcus waved him towards the ledge. Azel took a few steps forward. We all watched, dumbfounded.

“Look at him,” Marcus said, pointing, I assumed, to James in the water. Azel peered down the ledge. “Do you want to do that too?”

Azel nodded his small head. I felt queasy, hoping that this was something less than it was. But he kept going, kneeling down to show Azel how to dive properly.

I wanted to say something then. Something, but I didn’t know what. *This isn’t funny? Don’t do this?* I didn’t want to get involved and I didn’t want to be made a fool of if this turned out to be nothing.

Azel put his arms out to dive and I watched as Marcus reached for him. Whether it was to pull him back or push him down, we never found out, because Azel dove off the ledge before Marcus could ever reach him. I don’t know what his body looked like falling into the water. I wasn’t close enough to the edge to see. But in my mind I see his small body floating down towards the lake. It must have happened fast, but I see it slow. As if he were nothing but a feather.

I ran to the edge of the rock and looked down into the lake with the rest of my class. Azel did not come up right away. After a few seconds, I began to think he wasn’t going to surface. Apparently, others were thinking the same.

“He’s not coming back up,” someone muttered. If it had been louder—if other people had been talking, or if it had been a particularly windy day—no one would have heard her. But it was dead silent. We all heard. I felt a panic beginning to come over the class.

“He’ll come up,” Marcus said. “He’s just messing with us.”

“You idiot,” one of my friends said. There was something frantic in her eyes. “He’s probably drowning.”

I became acutely aware of my own heartbeat. In my chest, my ears. I was shaking.

“Someone go down there,” she screamed.

“He’ll come up.”

“He’s not coming up!”

He was going to die. And it was going to be our fault.

I leapt off the ledge and dove into the lake below.

I opened my eyes in the water, but it was far too dark to see. Azel had gotten down there the same way I did, more or less. He had to be nearby. The bottom of the lake was not too far down from the lake’s surface in this area, which is why we had to be very careful when diving. I swam near the lakebed until my lungs couldn’t take it anymore, then went back up for air.

“Rina?” someone called from the ledge. I dove back down without a response.

I pushed down towards the lakebed again, struggling against the passing of time. As I made my way farther, the side of my jaw hit what seemed like thick branches sticking up in the water. Startled, I reached out into the murky abyss. My hand touched something cold and smooth. A human leg.

Azel’s body was here. I yanked at his foot in an attempt to pull him up, but there was something holding him down in the water very firmly. I wouldn’t be able to hold my breath for much longer, but I was afraid that if I surfaced, I wouldn’t be able to find him again. I felt down the length of his short leg, then along his small torso. His school shirt felt coarse beneath my fingers.

*Why won't he budge?*

His arms, like his legs, were not caught on anything in the water. I felt for his torso again, reaching further down towards his neck feeling the cold flesh, a bit of hair, then—mud.

He had penetrated the soft lakebed during his dive. His head was stuck in the mud.

The water around me seemed to grow colder.

My breath was about to run out. I made to push myself towards the surface to catch my breath, straining to hold out on the last bit of oxygen I had left. But I never made the push. And I never saw the surface. I felt Azel's cold hand wrap itself around my ankle. I kicked against it, but it would not let go. My eyes looked out into murky lake water, the shining surface only a few strokes away. I kicked at the hand with my other foot, the grasp loosening just enough for me to push forward. But my breath had run its course. I opened my mouth and let the water into my lungs.

When I finally came to, I was in an unfamiliar room, surrounded by medical equipment. I'd never seen the inside of a hospital before. Most people in my barrio hadn't. The first person I saw was my nanay, who began crying at the moment she saw me open my eyes. I had been unconscious for three days. When they brought me in, I was already dead.

It was a miracle, everyone said. I didn't know what it was. Now I just consider it a product of the circumstances. James was the one to pull me out of the lake, and a couple kids had already run back for help after Azel failed to surface. They'd managed to get the water out of my lungs, but I hadn't regained consciousness. Somehow, I got to the hospital in time to be resuscitated successfully and avoid suffering from any serious brain damage. Still, I became forgetful and my joints felt stiff for months. There was no physical therapist at the hospital, so I was lucky that I regained full control of my motor skills. When I finally returned to school, no one spoke of the

incident. Whether it was of their own volition or because they'd been instructed to, I don't know. What I do know is that Azel did not return. No one was able to retrieve his body. Maybe they didn't care enough to try. He was unfortunate until the very end.

People from all over our barrio visited the house during Lolo's wake. Many of them I'd never even seen before. After the first couple of days, I couldn't stand to stay inside the house among the mourners anymore. The rooms were full of the scent of food and the sound of condolences. I opted to watch the men of my family tend to the ever-burning bonfire outside the gate of the house. People came and went and greeted us, but no one lingered. I liked it better like this.

"Aren't the men meant to tend the fire?" an unfamiliar voice asked me. I turned to see a small woman standing beside me, holding a covered plate of food from our house. Her hair was disheveled and her black dress was so sun-bleached it appeared grey.

"I'm just watching, ma'am," I said.

"Perhaps that's for the best," she said, lowering her voice. "Men can barely be trusted to flush a toilet."

I laughed.

"What is your name, child?" she asked me.

"Rina, ma'am. Rina Andrada."

"Rina," she repeated, turning my name over in her mind. I waited for her to give me her condolences for my lolo passing, but she did not. She grabbed my arm and stared into my face. "You! You're the girl who survived drowning."

Startled, I pulled away from her and crossed my arms in front of me. No one had brought it up so directly in such a long time.

“Yes,” I said.

“You jumped in after my son,” she said. It sounded like an accusation.

“What?” I could barely push the word through my teeth. I felt my jaw clenching hard. My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms. This woman was going to slap me, or worse, and I was standing there ready to take it.

But she did not. I almost wished she did.

“They told me you dove after him when he jumped,” she said. “You nearly died.”

*I did die*, I corrected in my mind.

How much did Ms. Cruz even know? I never spoke of the incident, and I assumed whatever she was told about the events of that day had been altered to a degree. As far as I was concerned, if no one told her the truth, then what good would it be for me to set the record straight after over twenty years? To tell her, after all this time, that Marcus had egged Azel on to take that leap, that we all watched it happen without a word, that I found his body at the bottom of the lake, head stuck unceremoniously in the worm-ridden mud, would be cruel.

“That doesn’t matter now,” I said to Ms. Cruz. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” she said. I didn’t know what for. This woman had lost her son. The bastard child. Azel. He was quite likely the only family she had, and she didn’t even get to send him off properly. Whatever was left of him was still at the bottom of that lake.

“Rina!” Daniel called from somewhere. I turned and saw him walking towards me from the house. “Nanay wants you to help her inside.”

“Okay,” I said. I turned back to Ms. Cruz. “Please visit us again sometime.”

On the day of the burial, my tatay put out the bonfire in front of the house. Over the ashes, my nanay's widowed cousin slit a rooster's throat. The bird, nerves still warm, flapped its wings and flew up, its blood splattering all over the ground. This meant Lolo's spirit was ready to ascend into Heaven.

"I'm glad you're doing this," Daniel said as we stood around Lolo's casket with the rest of my family.

"Me too," I said. I wasn't glad, really. I was nervous and relieved all at once. But I'd made up my mind. There was so much wrong that could never be right, like mud trapped under my nails that I could never scrape away. But there were still people I could do right by.

"Be careful you don't jam your fingers," Daniel said.

"I've got it."

We lifted Lolo's casket and carried it out of the house, taking great care to avoid hitting any furniture or door frames on the way out, lest his spirit linger. Walking slowly past the blood splatter and cold embers at the gate, we began our procession towards the hill, past the lake, to the cemetery.