

No great consequence hung in the balance. But then it was not my future that made me nervous. The short of it: I lost my composure. I lost my bearings. The answer, and all of the answers, froze in my memory and grew stale behind my tongue.

I could not find my voice until decades later, when I visited my alma mater on a Jubilee year. Perhaps I had been asking for it, coming round again, quite out of my way. In a strange way, despite all that had happened, I was quite drawn to the old school.

Mr. Castello was a bent figure coming at me slowly in some passage or corridor when I turned from looking at photos of the old class. He had turned into an old man standing feebly in my path. How I had known him before hardly mattered. His hair had turned white and sparse, he had given up his horn-rimmed glasses for steel-wire ones, and he had lost the moustache. He was shorn of his old telltale features. I almost did not remember him, and I didn't think he would remember me, either, after all that time.

"Are you an architect now?" he asked me.

"Not quite yet," I told him.

"You failed those orals, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes I did."

"I never thought I would see the day," Mr. Castello said, with a voice so faint it was almost like a breath. Then he turned and walked away.

As for Raymundo, I could not find him at the Jubilee. I never bumped into him at any of the rare chance reunions I have had over the years. I only heard of his exploits and his failures through others, and learned of his death through the papers. He died younger than a man of his natural gifts should, but older than he ought to, considering that I can only guess what he had really gone through. Old age, for men like me, is merely wasted on the act, or should I say, the art, of pure remembering. Today's paper, today's memorial on the page, this evidence, would constitute the whole proof and the rest would be immaterial.

After all the graduation revelry, before our parents to claim us one last time, Raymundo and I made promises to schedule a rendezvous at one grand city or another. It was the first time in a long time I had really taken a good look at him, his expression worn down, his manner softened since our first days in school, his shoulders narrowed and his muscles slackened since his last days as a champion swimmer.

The next, and the very last time I saw him was as a much younger man, in the complete silence of the class photograph I discovered in the pile of old school junk I'd been promising to sift through and sort before leaving for university. The sleeves of his sweater are tied around his neck. He wears a scowl to protect his eyes from the sun. The shadows of the afternoon show his high cheekbones, his sharp nose. I have just met him here, I think, and we have just sneaked a cigarette, one of many in my youth.

~oOo~

Charlson Ong

The Vet



"You don't understand, Dr. San Diego, this is an emergency. She's feverish, her eyes are turning blue."

"It's a usual reaction to the drug, Mr. Legazpi. Google is doing fine. Bring her to the clinic in the morning."

"What if she goes blind?"

"She won't go blind."

"I had a Japanese pitch that went blind. We fed him tuna. His eyes turned blue."

"She won't turn blind, Mr. Legazpi."

"How can you be so sure? Her eyes look blue."

"I'm her doctor, Mr. Legazpi. Your dog is fine, nothing to worry about. Don't panic."

"I'm not panicking and she's not my dog. She's Luisa's dog! She's her pet! Her first! She's only ten years old, doctor."

"She's five months old, Mr. Legazpi, a difficult but manageable age."

"I'm talking about Luisa, I'm talking about my daughter."

"I'm sorry sir, but it's three o'clock in the morning and I have a full day ahead. Please, you must hang up"

"I can't hang up! She's feverish. What if..."

"Sir, if you don't hang up I will have to report you to the police. Please, I will attend to you and your dog in the morning"

"And what's the worst that can happen, Doctor?"

"She won't turn blind."

"They'll put me away? Lock me up? You think that's the worst that can happen to a man?"

"No Mr. Legazpi. I'm not reporting you...I don't want to, just hang up, please."

"And what good will that do?"

"I will be able to sleep."

"Will the world be safer for vets if they put me away? Will the children stop crying over their dogs that may go blind?"

"No one's going blind. I'm hanging up Mr. Legazpi. Please don't call back. Get some rest. You need to sleep."

"How? How in the world can I sleep with all this?"

"Try valium. I'm sorry, I'm not supposed to...You have a doctor, sir? You see a psychiatrist?"

"Valium?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have....I treat animals sir, I mean lower forms, I mean non-human forms."

"Dogs."

"Cats. Once, a monkey. I did work in a stud farm, though, as a resident."

"You lived in a farm?"

"Trained at one...for my degree."

"I grew up in a farm. My father worked as a farm hand. He helped raise poultry, and pigs, ducks. We never saw a vet. At least I never did."

"It wasn't in vogue then, I guess. That's why many of the animals died or caused diseases to people."

"Like me?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insinuate..."

"You're right. It must have all started out back then...some infection, a microbe, a virus from a pig."

"You should see a doctor, sir. I'm not competent."

"You *are* a doctor."

"A veterinarian. I'm not licensed to treat people."

"Why not?"

"I didn't train for that."

"What's the difference?"

"A lot...I presume."

"Like what? What makes us so different?"

"It's a matter of the law, Mr. Legazpi. I'm not allowed to prescribe medicines for you."

"My wife used to take valium. My ex wife. Luisa's mom. We're not divorced. I mean, they don't allow it here. It's a matter of the Law, too. I guess. We're separated. She lives with her folks now. I live in the shop where I sell balloons. I don't need a shop really. People can just call me up to blow helium into them...the balloons, I mean, and deliver them to the parties. I pick up Luisa every other Saturday and take her to a party with clowns or to bring Google to you, she's always sick, the dog, that is."

"There's nothing wrong with the dog, sir. I think the problem might be elsewhere."

"Where?"

"It's not for me to say."

"Who should?"

"Who should what?"

"Say?"

"What?"

"Where?"

"Where?"

"The problem is?"

"I don't know, please."

"Who does?"

"What?"

"Know?"

"Your pastor, your shrink, a spirit medium, I don't know. Call up someone else, please. I deal with animals, lower forms, that is. That guy who gives advice on broken hearts or something, his phone number is in the papers."

"Where?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure."

"You don't know a whole lot do you? For a doctor?"

"I'm a vet."

"You say that like it's a curse."

"You are behaving badly, sir. You're a good client but..."

"Google is."

"Who?"

"Google's your patient. The dog is."

"I know but you pay the bill. You've done a lot for my practice Mr. Legazpi. You were my first, Buena mano."

"It was Google."

"Okay. And I do want to help but I don't how. I'm not equipped to."

"What would you need?"

"For what?"

"Equipment? What would you need?"

"God, I don't know. You need some kind of counselor, I guess. Marriage counselor perhaps..."

"I'm separated."

“Well maybe you need to get back together.”
 “Why?”
 “I don’t know. I’m just saying. You sound...”
 “How? Doctor?”
 “Like. Well, like you’re lonely. You’re panicky, somehow.”
 “You’re an animal shrink?”
 “No! I’m not a behaviorist.”
 “But you do know animals, right? Lower forms.”
 “Sometimes I can tell when they need to be put under.”
 “Under what?”
 “Anesthetized.”
 “Put to sleep.”
 “It helps.”
 “Who?”
 “Me. Makes my job easier.”
 “Maybe I’m closer to Google than you think.”
 “I don’t understand.”
 “I think I’m really a lower form. A trans-specie. A dog trapped in a man’s body. Is there a cure for that, doctor? A drug? Some operation?”
 “Sir, you’re stressed. And you’re infecting me.”
 “So its infectious?”
 “No. I mean, I wasn’t...This really isn’t my field, Mr. Legazpi.”
 “Once I took a pill you prescribed for Google.”
 “NO! Don’t do that! You should never do that!”
 “Made me feel great after a while, really smashing. I realized then how close I was to Google.”
 “What was it, Mr. Legazpi? What did you take? Do you remember?”
 “Something blue. No, red. Blue and red, I think.”
 “Calmex?”
 “Best thing I’d had in a long time. Anti-depressant was it? Nicotine? Morphine?”
 “Anti-flea.”
 “Really? So you try to get the fleas drunk or high?”
 “The drug does contain a small dose of toxin that kills fleas. Not enough to hurt a human, unless you took a bagful. But you really shouldn’t do such things, Mr. Legazpi. Don’t play with your health.”
 “Why not? Maybe I’ll get myself some more.”
 “No! Please, I’m warning you. Promise me you wont do that, sir. You have to promise me, Mr. Legazpi.”
 “Or what?”
 “Or...I’ll have to report you.”
 “To whom?”
 “To...the authorities.”
 “To the Board of Veterinary Medicine? To the Department of Health? To the Secretary of Lower Forms?”

“This is no joking matter you sick man! I don’t give a shit what you do with yourself but don’t drag me into this. Don’t die on me. Go drown yourself somewhere.”

“And what would be the point of that? What would the papers say? Man slips, drowns in pond? Who’d care? Who’d know that the dead is trans-specie? But, ‘Balloonist overdoses on anti-flea drug,’ now, that’s a winner, right? What do you think?”

“Is that how you’re called?”

“What?”

“Balloonist? Not balloon maker? Balloon blower? You don’t fly do you?”

“Now you’re splitting hairs. Balloon man should do it.... *Up, up and away in my beautiful, my beautiful ballooon...*”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Mr. Legazpi.”

“How do you know?”

“You sound better. You have a good singing voice.”

“Think so? You sing?”

“No. I’m terrible.”

“You should. You have a good voice.”

“Really? You can tell?”

“Used to be part of a group. Satyagraha. Ever heard of it? Before your time, I guess. We sang mostly jazz, but also did pop covers, OPM, Had some gigs in hotels, front acted for the Lettermen once. Had a stint in Tokyo. *‘It begins to tell round midnight, round midnight...*”

“Wait. Was that the group with the fat guy with distended earlobe?”

“And the bald girl with an eye patch? Okay, okay, we belonged more to the circus. I was the one in red beret. Lasted three years.”

“God, I remember now. My dad loved you guys.”

“Your dad? How old are you? Don’t tell me.”

“Twenty seven.”

“Time flies.”

“So why’d you stop?”

“Distended earlobe got knifed. Eye patch married a Yakuza member. Our lead guitar overdosed on something or other and I moved in with the back up singer.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed you were in a band.”

“Why? What did you think I was? A black balled cop? Insurance broker? No...I bet, memorial plan broker. I mean, the ancient Cadillac- I got that from my father- the dark shirts- masks the paunch- thin hair. No rock star hair, for sure.”

“Banker, I guessed. Some business executive.”

“Really? That’s not so bad.”

“You don’t look bad.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome....Hope you feel better.”

"I told them it would never work."
 "What?"
 "Satyagraha. Who the hell calls a band *that*?"
 "Something to do with Gandhi, right?"
 "Soul something. Non violent resistance. So why a vet?"
 "What?"
 "Why'd you become a vet? I'd have guessed 'lingerie model' or 'swimsuit model.'
 "Flattery will get you everywhere Mr. Legazpi. Well, I guess it was my father."
 "Your dad was a vet?"
 "No. But he wanted me to become a doctor. Any sort of doctor. 'Dr. Maribel San Diego,' he'd call me ever since I was a child. He'd buy me books, stuff I couldn't read, test tubes, science kits, a telescope. He'd sit me on his lap and whisper into my ears: 'My little doll is going to be a doctor, someday and heal her old man.' "
 "Was he sick? I'm sorry, is he still...?"
 "Dead, Mr. Legazpi. Overdosed on some dog medicine I prescribed.....Mr. Legazpi, Mr. Legazpi, are you still there?"
 "Yes. Yes. It just came as a surprise..."
 "I was joking, Mr. Legazpi! I wouldn't kill my own father? Would you?"
 "I didn't say..."
 "Aneurysm. Burst a brain vessel. He was 54."
 "I'm sorry. You miss him?"
 "You miss your wife?"
 "Sometimes. You think separation will end the anger, the bickering, the blame mongering. But it doesn't. You still go home to the same accusation and guilt every time except that there is no face, no body to hang it on."
 "He drove me to school everyday, Mr. Legazpi, everyday of my life, of his life. No school buses, or taxis, or public transport, or car pools for his *unica hija*. He drove me from my first day at nursery to my last day at vet med school. He drove me to take the board exams and drove me to my oath taking. He took me to my junior prom and my graduation ball. He drove me everywhere. He drove and he drove. And he never taught me how to drive. He said it was too much for me to worry about such things when I was studying to be a doctor. I'm not even sure if he did anything else other than drive me, wait for me then drive me there, here and everywhere. 'Anything for my one and only, anything for you dear,' he'd say when I felt I was imposing, that he was driving me too much, too far. 'Anything for you, sweetheart.'
 "That's what we do, doctor. That's what fathers do. We drive our daughters, drive them to school, drive them to the mall, drive them and their pets to the vet, wait for them to heal, to grow so they can feed us poison."

"I didn't kill my father, Mr. Legazpi. I said it was a joke."
 "If you say so."
 "I see you've made up your mind about me, sir."
 "I don't know you Dr. San Diego. I don't know you at all."

 "I will you see then, tomorrow, sir. At ten?"
 "Yes."
 "Good night then, Mr. Legazpi. Or should I say, good morning. In any case, please get some sleep. Things always seem better after a good sleep."
 "If you say so, doctor. If you say so."

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