

PRACTICAL ARTS

MARY JESSEL B. DUQUE

I told Lester that if I caught him stealing again, I just would have to kill him.

I had just taken a leak in the bathroom a few steps outside my door, and when I went back in, my cousin Lester's first words to me were, "Kuya, I didn't steal anything."

I was away two minutes, and had flung the door to my room open and there he was, rushing to meet me from where he stood in front of my desk. My eyes darted to confirm the laptop that Linda gave me for Christmas was still there. It was. My wallet was also there, an open black question mark hanging between Lester and the door that I closed behind me.

"What are you doing here?" My hand closed around the *yantok* Mindoro beside the door, where it should come in handy, just in case.

"I need to hide from Papa. I stole the tires off the pedicab and sold it. He wants me to buy back the rubber linings." I leaned the cane back against the wall. Maybe there's no need for this. This is my cousin after all.

I sat on the chair that used to be part of our living room set. The blue upholstery foam had been rotted out by floods, back when the water pumps downtown couldn't do anything about the water rising from the estuaries of the river. When the rains came, the waters rose, invading our houses, bringing in murky water, tadpoles, half-rusted cans of Gusto corned beef, and everything else that people threw out their windows and into the river, everything else that no one in the city ever wanted. Dead rats, dead fish, and one time, even a dead baby in a box of Converse sneakers. That one brought in the tabloid reporters.

Angel found in box. Like every child was really one, innocent. Not in this part of town. Not like this one standing before me.

His shoulders strained from the too small T-shirt he wore and favored. Tough Thugz, said the white script that melted against the black wall of his chest, only the letters were a little rough around the edges. The melting letters were not deliberate, but the result of an amateur effort at silk screening, a class he had taken last summer at my insistence. A slim slice of his stomach showed between the hem of his shirt and band of his briefs, the black strap with metal studs that was his belt, and the army shorts that sat low on his hips. When I had him walk back to the lighted part of my room, I saw that the shirt was really a faded kind of brown. It was the brown of blood that had escaped the body too long, the iron escaping into the sidewalk, burrowing deep and slowly turning into rust, seeping into the dust and concrete of the streets.

"Please, let me stay," Lester said. I couldn't see his face. He stood with his back against the fluorescent light, the only one in the apartment since the one in the kitchen got busted and I never had the time to change it. I tried to look him in the eye, to gauge his sincerity, but the length of hair covering his eye didn't allow me to do this. "Look at me," I said. He ran his fingers through his hair, gave me a glimpse before he fixed his gaze on the battered Neo on my desk.

I didn't have to turn around to know what he was looking at. Just before I stepped out to the bathroom, I was chatting with my girlfriend online. Linda wanted to know when I would join her in Singapore, where she had been working for the last 10 months, drumming up computer codes for the Chinese. But it was only August, a few months into the school year. The high school was always short of teachers, and I had a contract until May, and was only after that—Linda cut our conversation, again, by signing off. The webcam informed me that "Linda stopped broadcasting," and what was left was Linda propping her chin up with her hands, a frown creasing her forehead. I pulled the lid of the computer closed. Would have to deal with that another time.

"Look here," I told Lester. "I didn't steal anything, you did. That's not my problem."

"But he's going to beat me if you send me out," he said. I was only too familiar with what went on two doors down, where Uncle Bien lived in the big house with his second wife and three other children. Uncle Bien had been living with Emily's family in the Visayas, after his first wife ran off with another man and all their children. Grandmother didn't like Uncle Bien's new wife. But after my mother threw up her hands in frustration, no one else wanted to be at the receiving end of my grandmother's overturned bedpans and oversized bed sores, no one but Emily and Uncle Bien. So when it was all over, they simply never left the house, moved out the too heavy wooden furniture, moved in a boatload of Emily's *kababayans*, and charged rent. But even with that and the regular disappearance of too heavy wooden furniture, they were always running short on money and happiness and ran a long tab of disappointments and five-six. When there were no furniture or appliances left to sell, Uncle Bien took to throwing what was left at his wife, and throwing in a few punches at his children for good measure. Times were hard. Uncle Bien made sure his family got the point.

"*Gipit lang talaga ako, Kuya,*" Lester said.

"You should have thought of that when you exchanged the bicycle parts for money," I said. Uncle Bien ferried women with market baskets, fetched children from their homes and delivered them to their school's gates. On days when his knees creaked too much, Lester steered his father's *pedicab*, avoiding fast cars across Quirino Highway.

It was Lester's turn to take out the *pedicab* earlier today. It was a slow day, Saturday always was. In the afternoon, Lester headed home, parked the cab under the mango tree, handed in the day's fare, 60 pesos all in. His father gave him 20, and then he took off.