

# SLAUGHTER STORY

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An assassin shot another man in Davao City. The victim dies, while the assassin escapes on a motorcycle. How do you present this as a work of fiction?

A young human rights activist—let’s call him Andres—was shot dead by an unknown gunman. There were three witnesses. One was a European who fled the country. The others could barely construct an account good enough to solve the case. The police tried to link the shooting with cases of what the press called “summary killings” in the city. When investigators considered the Death Squad’s pattern of targeting only drug-pushers, fashion designers/drug-pushers, twelve-year olds working for drug pushers, rapists, gang members, and shoplifters, it did not seem likely. The victim was known for peace advocacy work. Despite being involved in demonstrations back in college, he had a spotless National Bureau of Investigation record. The story made the headlines of local papers, but after a week it had been completely forgotten.

The story can concentrate on the events surrounding the killing, and for the climax you can build the narrative up to the actual shooting. This will follow a unified sense of time, brisk pacing, an action-packed plot, et cetera. Don’t forget that everything inside the story will have a function, which results in the preconceived effect. The witnesses may push the narrative forward.

The three female witnesses:

1. A social worker from Davao.
2. A representative from the Commission on Human Rights in Manila.
3. A woman from Spain who belonged to a non-profit organization looking after nations in the “developing world.”

Andres was supposed to drive these women to a public forum about death penalty and human rights violations at a public auditorium, the woman from Manila supposedly their guest speaker. They were leaving a tourist hotel moments before the shooting. Andres was about to open the door of a red Expedition when a man appeared out of nowhere—as they always seem to—and shot him four times, at close range. The hit man had the long muscled-up body of a decathlete, a buzz haircut, and badly sunburned skin.

After hearing gunshots, the Spanish woman ran back to the hotel lobby and hid behind a large sofa. Let’s call her Socorro. The two other women, who had been waiting for her outside, watched in horror as Andres’s body crumpled on the pavement. The forum speaker from Manila—we’ll call her Cecile—had left her speech on her bed. Watching the gunman escape on a motorcycle, Cecile only had one coherent thought: drive Andres to the nearest hospital. Andres’s fellow social worker—we’ll call her Amy—also had a clear, pragmatic mind. She went back for Socorro in the lobby and took her to the Expedition.

Though Amy and Cecile screamed for help, not a soul came to their aid. People had an idea what was going on, but they were too petrified to get involved. Cecile and Amy had to carry Andres to the car, Cecile’s bright magenta skirt now smeared with blood. Socorro, who had just arrived from Cebu after

attending another forum, could only chew on her nails and stare absently at her companions as they dragged a dying man into the vehicle. Cecile drove. Amy gave directions. Before reaching the hospital, Andres died inside the Expedition.

They left Andres at the hospital and went to the forum. Before she went on stage, Cecile tried to wash the blood off her skirt in the restroom. When finally she had to face the audience, she found out that she'd left her speech at the hotel. She recounted instead what had happened to them that morning, an incident that oddly reaffirmed the theme of the forum. Later when she joined the audience, who received her with rousing applause, Cecile sat next to the president of a prominent university. "Bad luck," was all he managed to say.

Amy faced the reporters. When asked for descriptions, the first thing she told them was that the killer's skin looked badly sunburned. Meanwhile, Socorro took a cab to the airport, having just bought a chance passenger ticket to Manila on her cell phone.

At 5 p.m., the forum ended. Cecile decided to stay at Amy's place. They only found out that Socorro had gone when hotel staff called to ask them about a large travel suitcase left inside the Spanish woman's hotel room.

Work from this exposition. Add more details that could sustain a workable plot. Make the Spanish woman a more believable character.

Socorro had been with her organization for nearly fifteen years. Assigned to the Philippines that month, she secretly dreaded an assignment to Mindanao. She had read in a magazine about the Abu Sayyaf terrorists, decapitating local and foreign hostages. Of course she was a well-educated European who had earned a bachelor's degree in social psychology in Paris. She would never join an international organization doling out funds to

NGOs in the Third World if she lacked devotion. But Socorro was a woman of textbook bourgeois upbringing. In spite of her affiliations, she still had the capacity to freak out. Her father, a wealthy banker from Madrid, did not permit Socorro to date until she finished her master's degree in economics. Her mother, an Irish-Italian Coco Chanel loyalist, did not allow pets inside their mansion in Seville.

While Socorro was hiding behind that sofa, trembling as she pressed both hands to her ears, it occurred to her that she was a European staying in Mindanao. Forget about these devoted NGOs. Forget about the report on human rights violations. Her strings snapped so easily she would forget about the suitcase that practically carried her life in the past months traveling across the Philippines.

Socorro boarded a jet back to Manila, told the Filipino correspondents of her international organization not to entertain any calls from Davao, especially reporters inquiring about her involvement in a recent shooting.

Cecile actually called from Davao. Her colleagues informed her that Socorro had booked a trip back to Seville the next day, and no, the Española didn't mention anything about a suitcase. Cecile was then told that Socorro had left for "security reasons."

Socorro spent the night at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, curled up on one of the benches, her legs poking out from a cashmere sheet she had packed especially for the trip. Her flight was at 7 a.m. That night she dreamed of the incident in variations. She dreamed of the shooting exactly as she saw it hours earlier. Then she dreamed that she shot Andres. And lastly, she dreamed that the gunman shot her.

The day she arrived in Spain, Socorro quit her job and finally granted her parents' wish that she run their resort business in Seville. She swore to never set foot on a Third World country

again. Months after leaving the Philippines, she and her cousins boarded a yacht that sailed across the Atlantic.

When Amy and Cecile opened Socorro's suitcase, they found:

1. Unwashed clothes
2. Toiletries.
3. Three pairs of shoes. (One shoe is missing a heel.)
4. Several plastic bottles of aspirin, some already empty.
5. Skin ointments for insect bites in tropical places.
6. Travel brochures.
7. Expensive writing pens.
8. A thick hardbound book written in Spanish.
9. Two acrylic dildos (to Cecile's amazement).
10. A sealed Manila envelope.

The women asked help from a colleague—a young, bearded Jesuit intellectual—to tell them what the book was about. The priest's best translation of the book's title: *The Philippines Forgotten*—an anthropological history of Spain's socio-cultural “falling out” with the Philippines, a century and a half after four hundred years of colonial rule. Amy later told Cecile, “She'll need to forget about this country now more than ever.”

Shift the narrative back to Andres. Find out who shot him and why. You may start in medias res. Or maybe, tell the rest of the story in the “stream-of-consciousness” manner. In telling the story you recreate the continuous flow of human thought. You

can show a great deal of the story by focusing on a single day's worth of events, or even a single hour. Maybe you can stretch the fifteen seconds it took the gunman to leave four bullets inside Andres. If you are up for a truly "rounded" character, focus solely on Andres. Without a character that "yearns for something," the story loses tension. Without tension, nothing defines the theme. Without tension, there is no story.

People were surprised to learn that Andres's parents were still in their late forties. He was their only child. In college Andres ran the student council and became a member of a militant student organization. After graduation he worked for a non-profit. Andres and his colleagues fought against violence, discrimination in various quantifiable degrees, social injustice. One of their projects was to conduct roundtable discussions on human rights violations, drawing particular attention to the slaying of journalists in the country and also, the summary killings of mostly underage youth in Davao City. He was the contact person for the Davao segment, and part of his job was to fetch Socorro and Cecile from the airport, take them to their hotel, and drive them to the 1 p.m. event. Unfortunately, he was shot before he could open the door for his passengers.

Amy had initially thought the Death Squad was behind it. But the angle was dropped when a few of Andres's friends checked with the local police if his name was on the list of possible targets. Only drug pushers, gang leaders, and other delinquents were on the list, no human rights activists.

Andres led his organization's local office in Cotabato where he often worked with his Muslim "brothers." Andres, impassioned as he was about serving the oppressed and the minority, began to embrace Islam. He converted after he had decided to live in Cotabato for good. When Amy first found out that Andres had turned to Islam, she thought, "So that's what he meant when he said he 'embraces his Muslim brothers.'" Needless to say, Andres enjoyed his job. His colleagues admired him for his steadfast

commitment to the Cause. The problem began when Andres and his immediate superior had an argument.

Andres was reluctant about supporting another organization, an environmental group based in Bukidnon that lobbied against the cultivation of genetically modified seeds, specifically the advancing cottage industry of *Bacillus thuringiensis* corn. Andres's division was supposed to aid the campaign against the genetically engineered plant. But the data didn't convince Andres. He was put off by the organization's melodramatic arguments and the lack of evidence that the Cry1ab protein would trigger anomalies in its host organism. Despite his newfound faith, Andres was first of all a magna cum laude graduate from the University of the Philippines where he had majored in biology. He didn't let his team get involved. He froze information drives, a move that nearly sabotaged the NGO's campaign. It happened that his superior's mother had died of bone cancer.

The mystery of genetically modified crops gnawed through Andres's otherwise cordial relationship with his co-workers. For the first time in his career Andres received a reprimand. The organization was determined to fight for a safer world, one that was free of mutant crops. Emotionally bruised and sleepless, Andres silently watched as furious residents in Bukidnon flattened themselves out over a hectare of *Bacillus thuringiensis* corn.

One afternoon, Andres was walking to his house in Cotabato City when a man he did not know pointed a gun to his head and demanded that he hand over his cell phone, his 24-karat white gold watch, and his wallet containing five thousand pesos, important documents, and ATM cards. The man had been waiting for him to come home. As they walked slowly to the house, the gun now pressed against the back of Andres's shoulder, the man asked for beer and imported cigarettes. Afterward, he told Andres to lie on his stomach and warned

him not to move until he heard the gate close. Andres felt like a plant being trampled on by a thousand angry feet. That night, he couldn't sleep. He thought of the anti-GMO activists he'd angered when he argued in favour of Bt corn during a public debate.

Days later, Andres woke up a changed man. He smiled more often, greeted co-workers in the hallway, offered to buy everyone pizza. He hit on a nineteen year-old intern named Dolores. One day, his co-workers overheard Andres and his superior having a shouting match inside the superior's office. Months later, the superior resigned, relocated and, soon enough, Andres took over his position, leaving everyone baffled.

Andres proved to be an efficient boss. More projects were implemented, funding raised, evil capitalist schemes exposed, oppressed citizens guided out of the darkness. These accomplishments, however, were eclipsed by Andres's transformation.

He was labeled "condescending" by his fellow activists; "egocentric" by an ex-girlfriend whom he unexpectedly ran into and made a pass at in a regional assembly; and an "asshole" by the nineteen year-old Dolores, who told everyone that Andres could not keep his hands to himself. Dolores was about to turn in a complaint when said asshole was gunned down in Davao City.

During his last months, Andres was suspected of mishandling funds. Several important projects he promised in Cotabato were cancelled, to the fury, disappointment and sadness of his Muslim brothers. He angered many when—instead of helping the expansion of a land reform project for small farmers—Andres bought an Expedition, fresh from the showroom. He was overheard saying, "A quality man needs quality wheels."



If you are not happy with how this character is “developing,” begin again. As one rule of thumb in fiction writing they often say, “If you have planted the seeds right, the story will write itself.” Trust is an important factor. So are diligence and courage when you return to step one. See if you can orchestrate successive events that will eventually lead to Andres’s death, but by doing so, avoid being simply linear. Patch things up accordingly but don’t follow a constricted time progression. Remember that everything rests on action. Go back to your other characters. See how they are doing. If you ask yourself why you are paying so much attention to character instead of plot, remember: Character is movement.

Cecile had known something terrible was bound to happen. She had it in her since childhood, a sort of clairvoyance—a trait she’d inherited from her grandmother in Capiz. Moments before Andres was shot, Cecile remembered how their car passed through a narrow alley going to the hotel, the way the shadows poured from the branches of trees, falling ominously over the windshield, vines like serpents crawling over fractured, defaced walls. She had often caught Amy staring at her while they were inside Andres’s car. Cecile didn’t like it when she was tense around women. When they found a Manila envelope in Socorro’s suitcase, Cecile knew someone was up to something. Her clairvoyance would save her many times from fatal cardiac arrests (her grandfather, her father, and three uncles also had congenital heart disease).

After Andres, the press, the police, Socorro, and the forum, Amy approached Cecile inside the restroom and offered her a place to stay. She pressed gently Cecile’s shoulder, and how Amy was reminded of her college days, those crazy, marijuana-laced nights. After the forum, they drove Andres’s Expedition to Amy’s house. They arrived past six in the evening. Amy was upset when she saw that the table hadn’t been set yet.

Her two teenaged sons were drinking beer with her drunkard lawyer of a husband. "Have you eaten?" one of her sons asked.

"Everybody, this is Cecile," said Amy.

Everybody nodded, stared, and focused back on their beers.

"Death Squad nidale ato, Ams?" asked the husband.

"We don't know," Amy said. "We're leaving it to the police. We're tired."

The women whipped up a late dinner. Afterward, Amy showed Cecile her room. Amy didn't tell her that the room once belonged to her only daughter who died of diphtheria seven years ago. Amy waited on the small veranda facing the street. After taking a shower, Cecile joined her on the veranda.

"Does this happen every day?"

"The killings? Yes, almost every day."

"Do you think—"

"No. I don't think so. Siguro, someone was mad at him."

"Is the Davao Death Squad real?"

"I'm not sure. It depends. Motorcycles should be banned in this city."

Silence.

"Socorro was strange."

"I know. What's happening to that suitcase now?"

"Maybe she will call us later, ask for it back."

“There’s nothing in there but junk anyway.”

“But it’s heavy, ha!”

“I know!”

“Well, so much for my first day in Davao.”

“Sleepy na?”

“Oo. Who wouldn’t be after all that?”

Cecile walked into the room and instantly felt relaxed. A gentle wave of energy flowed from the walls, cooling her nerves. She lay in bed, the sheets pristine and crisp with fabric softener. Hardly thinking about it, she took *The Philippines Forgotten* from her bag. Cecile didn’t know any Spanish but the sepia pictures and illustrations from the Spanish colonial era were enough to keep her flipping pages. Just when her eyelids were about to shut, a Manila envelope slipped and fell onto her stomach. She got up, switched the ceiling lights on. She opened the envelope. Why were these records in Socorro’s possession? Why did she leave without a word? Why was she lugging around a heavy book called *The Philippines Forgotten*? Did she have something to do with Andres’s death? Would she ever forget about Andres’s death? Was she a spy? Was her mother really an Irish-Italian Chanel-loyalist who often earned the scorn of PETA? Would Cecile stop asking questions and be able to sleep tonight? Would Amy leave her husband soon? Would her sons turn out like their father? Would they die young like Andres? Who killed Andres? Was it an assassin? Why write a story about dead men and motorcycle-riding gunmen? Why write a story this way? Why write a story at all?

Amy lay sprawled on the bathroom tiles, strips of stone cool beneath her spine. She could feel the heat Cecile’s body had left, the drenched sound of her boys’ laughter echoing from

downstairs. She thought of Cecile today, how she was reminded of a first love in college, the only woman who'd given her pleasure, the woman after whom Amy's only daughter was named—Andrea. As she held Socorro's toy between her thighs, Amy trained her eyes to a spot on the ceiling, imagining Cecile's softly astonished expression inside the speeding car.

Endings are difficult when you write them last. One way is to write the ending before the beginning. It all depends on execution.

After her Atlantic cruise Socorro settled in Seville to manage the family business. She never again set foot in the Philippines. The hardbound book was something she'd found in a used bookshop in Cebu. She picked it up from a dusty rack because, at the time, she was lonely. Socorro had thought a book written in Spanish would cure homesickness, but she never got past the first three pages of prose that sounded like legal documentation. The assassin was never captured. Perhaps it was the mugger Andres encountered in Cotabato. The man wanted to get even when he found out the cigarettes weren't authentic U.S. import.

Amy professed deathless love for Cecile. They eloped to the Netherlands weeks after Andres was buried. A year later, they were able to have a child through artificial insemination, using Amy's eggs, which proved more suitable to the procedure. They named their daughter Andrea, after Amy's daughter who died of diphtheria when the girl was seven. They lived happily every so often. Until Andrea was fourteen, learned how to cut classes, smoke crack, and have intercourse without getting pregnant.

Or

Socorro was an agent on a mission to sabotage political stability in Mindanao. What Cecile found inside that envelope were records of Socorro's phone conversations with several anonymous parties. She hired someone to kill an important

target but was forced to escape when the assassin bungled and shot the wrong man. She cursed herself for having left her suitcase containing phone records and some favorite traveler-friendly sex toys. *The Philippines Forgotten* was entirely my invention. Socorro was not really Spanish and Socorro isn't her real name. Her name is Andrea, and she was born in Guadalajara, Mexico. Andrea's mother, who was a professional boxer, set her on the path to international espionage. Socorro was really the name of Andrea's identical twin sister who succumbed to diphtheria when they were just seven years old.

Amy's confession of love revolted Cecile. She may be psychic but she's not a lesbian. She left the next day and never looked back. Amy and her husband stayed married until a motorcycle-riding gunman shot him while he was walking out of the gate to buy a pint of ice cream. Amy was left to pleasure herself for the rest of her life. The summary killings went on until motorcycles were officially banned in Davao City.

Now what's the moral? Here are three:

1. The impossibility of the real ends where the possibility of story begins.
2. Real events translate horribly in fiction.
3. Look around before you enter.

Forget about the moral. Compression, not reduction, is our true goal. Trust that the reader is on board until the last punctuation. If we are lucky, the story might mean more to someone other than you.

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