

# FIRST RITES

GINO DIZON

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JUNE 1991:

A girl is waiting by a fruit-stand for her sister Madonna, part-time whore here at Friendship Road, beside Clark Airbase.

Mount Pinatubo is erupting. The GIs are evacuating.

The girl is to take her sister home before she runs away with some GI. (Rumors are abroad: Girls with steady GI boyfriends are eloping with them. To Subic, where they will marry posthaste and board those ships waiting for the Americans, to take them back home, by way of Hawaii, the perfect honeymoon getaway.)

Hah! Just another of their ploys, croaks an old man in rags, atop his throne, a wooden crate. In Friendship Road, he has some kind of authority, by virtue of his age. Also, his access to Blue Seal cigarettes, in boxes just slightly dented or creased (to sell at a cheaper price).

Beside him stands the barber, quietly stroking his beard, eyes half-closed.

Ploy? What ploy? Demands a fat spinster in a flower-dress, the curlers dangling from her hair. In Friendship Road, she has some kind of authority, by virtue of her reputation. Fearsome mama-san of *Uncle Sam's*, bistro by day, casa by night. Though what's so special about her girls, as opposed to, say, those of *Oriental Bliss*, of *Brown Kitten*, or *Blue Lagoon*, only God—and the GIs—know.

Behind her, by the fruit stand, the girl listens, her face opening up, as though this conversation holds a clue to the whereabouts of her missing sister.

The agreement, what else? rasps the old man, spitting smoker's cough. Negotiation, base extension, all of it. Volcano means lower land value. And a bargain with the Philippine government.

At this point, a crowd has gathered. When it's the old man and the fat spinster talking, it's bound to be a discussion of some importance. So the shoe-shiner, the butcher, and the tricycle driver; the watch repairman, the manicurist, and the jueteng woman; the pimp, his apprentice, and the latter's bumbling sidekick; all denizens that thrive and breed here at Friendship Road gather round the old man. Who, for his part, is provoked. He assumes an even graver expression and fumbles for something, something definitive, to say, like the truth.

For a moment the spinster just blinks, uncomprehending. And then prattles on, how she's never heard of such volcano, and right here in Angeles, too. All she knows is, it's already noon, and not one GI customer in sight yet. The barber is solemnly stroking his beard. The girl by the fruit-stand is watching with a perplexed look. Anxiety, fear, uncertainty of the future: she's only beginning to sense, not yet comprehend, the existence of those realms of experience she is yet to enter. Above, on the second floor of this row of bars, restaurants, grocery, haberdashery, the whores are out on the balconies. They're still wrapped in towels, smoking, gossiping, but mostly just wondering. How it's already noon, and across the street, through the wire fence, the parade grounds are still empty.

The old man stands, after a difficult realignment of the spine, to face the crowd. This is a sign; he's come up with something to say. When suddenly two taxis go careening down the street. And screech to a halt, right in front of the crowd.

Ah—a collective sigh—it's Bob and Roy.

The fat spinster makes a movement, as though of one pouncing, breasts and curlers shaking. The old man lightens up and manages to smile, a gummy toothless smile. The barber is stroking his beard. On the balconies, a giddy hush. Only the girl by the fruit-stand lowers her eyes.

It's Bob and Roy, twin pride of Friendship Road, sons of whores and unknown GIs. Handsome twosome, mestizo blood brothers. Their skin an incomprehensible wash of tan, hair tinted with bronze, some say just the color of turd. They're friends. They were boys together. Taunted girls together. Grew the same vices. Now in the same taxi company, driving people in and out of the base. When they marry, they will be each other's best man. When one fathers a son, the first to perpetuate the vice, the other will be godfather. Then their friendship would have come full circle and do justice to this street.

Their news today: *no more work*.

Everyone in the crowd looks at the empty parade grounds, the base, and farther behind the base, the quiet outline of the mountain in question, revealing nothing, concealing nothing in a cloudless sky.

No one speaks. Only silence: a panic to each his own.

But already Bob, so hefty, so full of himself, the man's man that he is, cracks a joke, inciting a riot of laughter in the crowd. And Roy, the leaner and tighter one, is once again relegated to the margin, beside him the fat spinster preening. Bob and Roy are really good friends. But sometimes envy balls the hand into a fist. Because Bob is not joking just for the sake of it. By the fruit-stand is a girl, an adolescent, an entire future only beginning to take shape. She's been throwing glances at Bob, perhaps wondering at such exuberance under the circumstances, or

more simply, just stealing glances at his big arms. So she's taking her time picking her fruits.

Somewhere, something begins. From somewhere deep: a sound. But already sundered from the source, becoming movement—the beginning of new forms—beneath the feet. A faint rumbling. Then the full quick jolt—a tremor.

Screaming erupts from the crowd, and laughter too. Everyone rushes out into Friendship Road, herded by Bob.

In the commotion, Roy emerges from his friend's shadow. He finds his way to the fruit-stand, where the girl is still standing, her face pale, the paleness of nausea. Too frightened to move, she has hardened herself into a statue.

Roy positions himself close to her. He swoops for an unlikely apple. The side of his arm grazes one of her breasts.

And stays there.

Something in the stone-girl cracks. Anxiety, fear, the coming future: the stone in the girl breaks. Still she tightens her face. Denial of any trace of reaction. But the stone of the body does not lie. Inside, a surging, a quake, proclaiming the first rites:

the end of an age.

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