

Short Story

Houseboy

Standing side by side, Lem and his brother Dan hold on to the truck's rickety railing, with Mama sitting amid the jumble of their household things in boxes and crates. Lem is short and frail-looking and secretly proud of the first faint hairs of manhood on his upper lip while Dan is wiry and brims still with a child's carefree, bouncing innocence. They laugh and thrill to their railing's perilous tilting as the truck wheezes through the hubbub of vehicles and stevedores at the pier. Mama hardly notices; she sits on a *baul* praying the rosary, her lips whispering the words over the mysteries. From time to time her eyes stray to the hired jeepney ahead, alight with decor like a Christmas tree, where Papa waves at them as he leads the way to their new apartment in Sampaloc. The jeepney's footboard displays a sign which reads "Kiss Me Tender," and Lem can just make out half-buried among the luggage and crates the shadowy figure of Tomasa, their housemaid. Facing the brothers on the truck, balancing himself against an old *aparador*, is Rufino, their houseboy, his mouth nervously twitching as he clutches the leash of their frightened pet dog, Petrel, whose stubby tail wags uncertainly.

The truck rumbles up Quezon bridge across the Pasig. "Look, Pino," Lem calls to Rufino across their clutter. In the dark undulating waters beneath them, an oil slick glimmers like the remains of a drowned rainbow. But on a sudden, their eyes flood with light as they reach the top of the bridge and a panorama of the city heaves into view.

O, never have they seen such a show, tall buildings bright with neon lights! Everywhere they look, the lights write in big sparkling letters, one at a time as though spelling carefully each word, but sometimes, flashing whole phrases out of the dark, as if the city wishes to speak with them. Everywhere a fiesta of lights! There, a man appears with a long beard and points with a dazzling scepter to a crystal dome pulsing with stars—and then, as man and dome blink out, a blaze of letters unscrolls a command: "FOLLOW YOUR DREAM." And there, too! a woman traipsing on golden sandals, they can almost hear her laughing as she

scatters flowers like rubies and pearls across the sky. No alphabet unfurls her mystery. The brothers consult each other on who she may be, what she may be telling the city, but cannot agree on her scripture. For Lem the night sky has lost all its stars, and in their place scrolls of *santilmo* run wildly about the city's roofs.

Rufino is aghast, shaking uncontrollably even as Petrel moans and snuggles against his feet. He leans hard on the *aparador*, his mouth agape, the sounds of his astonishment tumbling 'Ooy! oy, oy!' his eyes wildly dilating at every flash and glare of image and word in the electric dark. The brothers themselves can find no words to shape their marvel. Their eyes only fill with the new sights shimmering around them with strange promises. The truck lumbers past Quiapo church down Quezon boulevard. On either side the movie houses and department stores are ablaze with the pride of commerce and a kind of open sensuality which the brothers dimly sense as sin; and spilling over the sidewalks, cluttered with stalls and goods on the pavement, are crowds of people like apparitions in the electric flood. And as they look, now here, now there, the brothers long in vain for sight of their familiar *tartanilla*, the sound of the *cochero's* clucking tongue and rattle of his whip's handle against spokes of the wheel . . . The dust and fumes of the roaring traffic bring them back to themselves as they drive past F.E.U. which they recognize with a pleasant shock from postcards that Papa has sent to Cebu. They speed down wide-laned España, coruscating with the same electrical sky-show, and suddenly, they are right at the very gate of a green apartment block on P. Noval, a cool depth of verdure bathed in light from a row of street lamps. Over a dark grove behind a wall they spot the high tower of U.S.T., stark and massive like yet another postcard come to life in the illuminated dark.

The brothers clamber down the truck and race to see their new home. The gate opens into a small enclosed space with a few potted plants, the front door gives on to a brightly lit sala with gleaming white walls from where a stair leads to the second floor; they scurry upstairs and find two bedrooms with green Venetian blinds, and a narrow corridor to the common toilet, and down again, they notice a bodega under the stair, and after the dining room and kitchen, a maid's room which

must be Tomasa's sleeping quarters, and an enclosed yard for laundry. *Oy, what a great place!* still smelling of fresh paint, clean and well-lit, so different from the dingy and leaky house they rented on F. del Rosario in Cebu.

AFTER PRAYERS, the brothers split between them the wishbone to see who would be lucky, and Papa takes his favorite *obispo*, that soft crunchy butt shaped like a bishop's hat, while Mama serves each one his steaming bowl of *mishua*. "So, boys," says Papa, smiling and leaning back in his chair, "how was your adventure at sea?"

"There was a great storm," the boys chorus. "Dan was sea-sick," Lem reports, "he threw up the whole night." "*Oy*, so did you," retorts Dan, "I saw you rushing to do it in the toilet."

Mama cuts the boys' story. "It isn't nice," she says, "to tell of such things while we're eating."

"The waves must have rolled over our ship like whales," Lem resumes, calling back to mind the dark heaving ocean. "Our cabin kept swaying like in an earthquake," adds Dan. "We just kept rising and falling with the ship," Lem continues. *Ay!* each time they sank again, it felt like it would be the last time, but oh! how he wished it had been possible to stand on deck with the captain in all that primal rage of sea and wind. The only porthole in the cabin was blind with furious seawash. "I saw Mama throw something into the sea," says Dan.

"It was awful," says Mama, "the whole night. Then someone opened our cabin door by mistake. I just let go the Miraculous Medal in the wind."

"Thanks be to God we're all together now," Papa rejoices, touching Mama's cheek where a tear recalls her dread. "But the Maritima has seaworthy ships, not one has ever sunk. Ah, but you boys, you can have

this adventure again.” He fishes out two books from a box beneath his chair. “This one, *Treasure Island*, is for you, Lem., and this, *Captain Horatio Hornblower*, for you, Dan.”

The brothers examine their books and argue which would have the most exciting episodes, but since they cannot settle the issue, they declare a truce and join Mama who is supervising Rufino and Tomasa unpack their household things in the sala. They help pry open the crates and untie the cords around the cardboard boxes, anxious to collect their comics and marbles from one or the other unmarked box. “*Aguy!*” cries Tomasa, a line of blood quickly forming across the back of her hand, caught by a protruding nail between the boards of a crate. Instantly, Rufino puts his mouth to her hand as though a poisonous snake had bitten her. “Pino!” Mama frowns disapprovingly. “What are you doing? Go, get the Mercurochrome in the medicine bag.” The brothers laugh. “*Oy Pino, ha?*” they tease as Mama applies the red liquid to Tomasa’s cut.

Both Rufino and Tomasa are practically members of the family where their own childhood passed, and both, before Papa left with Tomasa for Manila to teach Spanish at F.E.U., have regaled the brothers at night with stories of spirits and animals from unchronicled ages in the womb of creation. At times, the brothers imagine that Rufino and Tomasa are the first man and woman on earth in their forest home. But to Lem’s secret imagination, waking up in the morning with a guilt-ridden sense of his aroused manhood, Tomasa appears like a maid of strange dark beauty, and then, he would feel not a little envy toward Rufino.

Rufino comes from Cagay, a village two days’ journey into the hinterland from Papa’s hometown of Barili. He is tall and lean, with thick unruly hair, and taut muscles run like mice under his skin, but his arms and legs are overrun with strange dark blotches as if forest moss grows over his body. Sometimes he reminds Lem of the solitary coconut in their backyard on F. del Rosario raining rhinoceros beetles on a summer day.

But most striking are Rufino's eyes which have a haunted look as though some wild animal spirit were always calling out to him. He seems averse to light; even now, as he and Tomasa lug their things up the stairs, his eyes are half-closed as if to weave about him the forest's sheltering dark.

Tomasa is seventeen, two years younger than Rufino. She has long dark hair which smells of some fragrant herb unknown to the brothers. Her breasts seem like fruit of the chico tree which Lem, trembling for sinfulness in his imagination's cave, traces under the bright flower prints of her blouse. He recalls secretly that sometimes on F. del Rosario, while he and Dan are hurriedly dressing up for school, Tomasa would just come in to make up their bed and he'd quickly turn and face the wall to hide the sign of his morning's unbidden maleness. But Mama's story about her is quite tragic, how when she was barely seven, she lost both her parents in a mudslide in Doldol. Her uncle then brought her down to Barili to serve with Tia Bebang, Papa's unmarried sister, in the *convento* where Papa's brother was the parish priest. Doldol is two hills further inland than Cagay. During the Occupation, when a *juez de cuchillo* was bruited about in Barili, Papa fled with his family and other townsfolk to the hinterland. Even now, the foot-trails to Cagay and Doldol are difficult and gorged with leeches that rain down on one from the thickets and overhanging branches. After the War, whenever Papa needed servants, Tia Bebang would send for a farmer's son or daughter in Cagay or Doldol, for Papa is known there as a fair and kind-hearted man.

THE BROTHERS' school days at F.E.U. pass very quickly because their hearts lie elsewhere. They are teased for their Bisayan accent during the first week or so, but soon that embarrassment lies buried in the camaraderie that flourishes from the common suffering in the classroom. Lem remembers desperately forming the words, "*Nagisi, sir!*" [Sir, it's been torn!] as he holds up his half-sheet of quizz paper to Mr. Babay, their English teacher, and his classmates jeering, "*Ay, Bisaya, Bisaya gid!*" But for Lem, it is simply an act of self-defense because Mr. Babay is very strict and decorous, and being effeminate, given to pinching his students near the crotch whenever anyone misbehaved in class

or dared answer with a wild guess. Why, it does not seem so long ago!—their lesson is the anecdote, and they read one, “The Mad Dog.” Then Mr. Babay asks, “Why is the story an anecdote?” and no one can answer. He proceeds to call each one, obviously delighting in the prospect of pinching so many bewildered delinquents; and so it happens, and without hope, from the first row to the next, each one’s dumb-founded silence or shake of his head promptly rewarded with a pinch somewhere near one’s little cowering manhood. Kiko, a skinny boy, is next in the row of penitents, and as Mr. Babay turns to him, he squirms in his seat like a hapless worm and quavers a last despairing answer, “Sir, because the dog is mad.” At that, the class roars with laughter, and even Mr. Babay, breaking into a wide smile, takes pity and foregoes the pleasure of pinching the mad reader of the day’s anecdote.

But Kiko soon becomes the brothers’ best friend because, silent and morose, he seems somehow to share their alienation in their new surroundings—the din and bustle up flights of stairs among rowdy classmates, the dusty harum-scarum of jostling pedestrians, vendors, and jeepneys. To Lem, Kiko is like a shy animal which prefers the wild solitude of those forests that at times he finds himself roaming in his dreams with his pet dog Petrel. So, the brothers often share with Kiko their *baon* for lunch and sometimes, when they have pooled their savings from their allowance, those brightly colored comics of the Phantom and Nyoka and Captain Marvel with their delightful smell of fresh print. They find out only very much later that Kiko, who is very secretive and quick-tempered about being teased as *Kalansay* [Skeleton], never brings any *baon* to school. More than once too Kiko has nearly been mauled in fistfights at recess, but for the brothers who faithfully stand by him. But Kiko never seems grateful, nor even seeks their company. The brothers would look for him at recess and invariably find him alone playing with a few faded marbles in the shade of the camachile tree outside the school cafeteria.

Unless it is Friday, when the brothers have their physical education class at the gym, they are off from school at 4 in the afternoon. They

usually walk home directly, at times with Kiko who, from a few remarks he has dropped, seems to live with an uncle much farther off near the railroad tracks. It isn't so much the mysterious peril of the city as simply Papa's discipline that confines the brothers at home. Yet, as soon as they arrive from school and Mama has served them their merienda of fried bananas or hot *dinoldog*, they would postpone their schoolwork to as late an hour as possible toward evening, and delve instead into their storybooks—the Swiss Family Robinson, the Knights of the Round Table, Zane Grey, the Classics Illustrated—or else, draw on their large sketch pads the imaginary heroes and cartoon characters of their reading frenzy.

There is no radio at home, TV is still unknown. Sometimes, when the brothers tire, they would go and “direct a movie” in the bodega. The bodega, which at night also serves as Rufino's sleeping quarters, has a small attic under the stairs with a single weak electric bulb. They would climb there, while Mama is busy preparing for supper, and put on a stack of old magazines an empty shoebox with a transparent sheet of paper across its wide mouth; lighting a candle behind this paper screen,—the very thing that frightens Mama so!—one would manipulate carton figures of heroes and animals pasted to little sticks, and the other watch the shadow play. But in that attic is also Lem's most guarded secret; he would, as often as he could leave Dan to his own diversions, ensconce himself there between the *palo china* boxes, and read guiltily as much as he could of his first big novel, *Gone with the Wind*, and read over again marked passages which seem to secrete all the dark mysterious passions of human beings.

Toward six, as the cool evening air begins to flow through the apartment like a breath from deep forests that Lem imagines around the city, the brothers would impatiently await their father's arrival. By then, they shall have rushed through their schoolwork from their imaginary adventures in the bodega, at such speed as Mama, sometimes checking on them, would reprove them for. Almost always, a little before the hour, Papa would just come in quietly, hang his old *bustipol* hat from a nail on the wall, smile affectionately at Mama, still bustling about the dining

table, and nod his head toward the brothers reading comics on the sofa for their orders to Rufino. *Which will it be tonight, sons*, a lift of his eyebrows would ask, *what flavor?* There is a wide field of choice among soft drinks in the small Chinese grocery down P. Noval—Bireley's, Clicquot Club, Mission, Coca-Cola, 7-Up, Sarsaparilla. Each night the brothers would sample a brand or flavor, or return to a favorite drink. This after-supper ritual, to which the brothers look forward all day, has become since their first week in the city, the family's way of celebrating another day's quiet, uneventful end. Then Mama would be her most radiant self, beaming with happiness and pride over her home.

A SENSE that each day would always pass the same way as yesterday fills Lem with a vague discontent. All perilous quests, all riddles—shall he only read about them? The whole world seems content, and he imagines the mountains bearing patiently the forests on their back, and the seas rolling ashore and withdrawing, endlessly, moaning around the land. And the days repeat themselves and so lose their memory, and only seem full as when one eats without joy and the hunger turns into emptiness in the pit of one's stomach. Or so it feels to Lem, at night as he lies in bed, watching the lizards stalk the moths and other ghostly insects cavorting about the fluorescent light; and sometimes, deep into the night, the mournful hooting of a distant train seems to pierce through the forest in his dream...

The brothers, sensing each other's listless spirit, conspire to go out by themselves, explore their neighborhood, do something—even perhaps go to a real movie during Papa's siesta on a Saturday. Why not? Their classmates often talk of the many movies that they have seen, and to avoid ridicule, Lem and Dan usually just fall silent or pretend following their classmates' excited recounting of "The Crimson Pirate" or "The Broken Arrow." O, what adventures they would see on that wide screen in technicolor; what stories would come alive before their very eyes! They can hardly wait for the next Saturday. They already know from Kiko, not far from P. Noval a few blocks down España is a movie-house called Mercury. "What is now showing?" They dare not ask Kiko;

they simply check the movie page. A double program! and surely, a lot of cartoons between them. The first movie, “Bird of Paradise,” promises a volcano’s resplendent eruption, and the other, called “Apache Drums,” is so much more exciting, for Lem is fascinated with the Indians, their wildlife lore, their ferocity and fearlessness, their great wanderings as a people over trackless lands full of peril and wonder. He has in fact found a public library in Lepanto, and there often, on a Saturday, he would read. Papa never allows them to go out by themselves after school, but has made an exception for the library, actually a short walking distance from P. Noval. Lem knows all the tribes, from the Arapahos to the Zunis, he has sketches of their weapons and wigwams and wampum beads, he has travelled many times in his mind with their war parties, their shamans, their buffalos. So now, as Lem contemplates the movie page, those Apache drums sound again the redman’s rage and grief over those vast prairies where the paleface creep in their covered wagons. The next Saturday now seems to Lem the highest good, the pinnacle of desire.

But a big problem confounds the brothers. Every evening as they wait for Papa and their soft drink ritual, neither Lem nor Dan can muster enough courage. O, no! it cannot be put so directly, “Papa, Dan and I will go see a movie this Saturday.” No, some scheme must be found; perhaps, next Saturday they can pretend a trip to the library, or perhaps Rufino can help, he can go with them look for some required school things in the stores, or some presents for a classmate’s birthday. Or—but it would be lying! Perhaps, then, they can just confess it later on a Sunday in San Sebastian, they’ll just be sorry afterwards, truly sorry for having to lie, and Papa will never know.

So the brothers scheme each day without hope. At night, Lem imagines in desperation that a forest spirit will take the matter to hand, the same *agta*¹ who, in Rufino’s stories, sleeps at the bottom of mangrove swamps and rescues lost children from the wilderness. But as he remembers the story, there is grave danger with this *agta* who is ugly and deformed, matted with hair from head to foot; he is helpful only if the

¹ This *agta* is Rufino’s invention. In Bisayan folk belief; the *agta* is a giant black as midnight who stays in a tall tree, wears a hat, and smokes a pipe; he is helpful for so long as one does not offend him or take him for granted. (F. Demetho, Si.)

children can look on him without fear and offer something afterwards like a parting gift, a top perhaps that has survived many trials in the dust, or a slingshot that has brought down many birds, or anything at all that they truly value as though it were a part of their own body. Otherwise, since he has a nasty temper and such monstrous strength that he could uproot trees with his bare hands, he tears and devours the hapless children. *Ay*, the brothers often wonder, can they pass the test? will he ask them for his name which Rufino mysteriously refuses to tell?

The brothers are lost, helpless with the simple words that shape so clearly their wish; how can they ask, they already know what Papa will say. But then one evening, as Papa and Mama chat in the sala and the brothers glumly drink their beverages, they learn that Papa would have to fly to Cebu for a weekend congress of teachers of Spanish. Where before Lem's mind went in circles, each scheme always turning dark like a tree at night, Papa's trip suddenly lifts the cloud of gloom in the apartment—as though he and Dan, trapped in some dark wood, have burst upon a sunlit clearing! It has simply happened, a magical snap of the spirit's fingers, and the way is suddenly clear, for Mama isn't a problem. She may at first demur and sadly shake her head, especially since Papa would be away, but finally, if they press hard and suggest that Rufino accompany them to the movie, the brothers are sure she would drop her anxiety with a sigh. *O, sigé na*, she'd say, take Rufino, but be careful now, *ha?* don't run when you cross the street, don't ever try any of those icedrops, et cetera!

SATURDAY IS still three days waiting, but the brothers are already excitedly rehearsing their scene with Mama. But what adds a special flavor to their plot is Lem's latest discovery. "I asked Pino this morning," Lem tells Dan as they walk to school, "we were just feeding Petrel. 'Pino, have you ever seen a movie?' 'No,' Pino shakes his head, he doesn't even know what it is! Then I say, 'Okay, we'll go to Mercury this Saturday,' but Pino just gives me a blank look." The brothers laugh, and Lem feels a kind of superior pity toward Rufino.

One late afternoon, Lem leaves Dan to their drawing project for the World History class exhibit. He climbs to the attic in the bodega and is about to turn on its weak light on the ceiling when he hears the door below creak softly, as though a thief were intruding. A pale shaft of light shoots across the floor. It is Tomasa! She stands as though lost. Lem crouches as he looks over the attic's edge. What if she should climb up the ladder, searching perhaps for something that Mama needs in the kitchen? But she is standing very still like a tree, exactly as in legends a tree holds still when it is bearing fruit or when birds alight on its branches. What will Dan say if he should claim that now he understands why sometimes on a sudden a tree seems to hold its breath, all its leaves hushed by an invisible power? But Lem's thought flickers out as, with a start, he sees Rufino slip in, gently closing the door behind him. In the dark, he takes Tomasa into his arms and kisses her in the mouth. They embrace a long time in absolute silence. Then Rufino, still drinking from her mouth, unbuttons her blouse and caresses her breasts, and their bodies sway as in a dance. It is all very still on a sudden in the bodega as though it were a forest just after a terrible storm and all its creatures were still hiding in fear. Lem can hardly breathe, he feels hard and faint with his rising manhood. Tomasa is moaning low like a wounded animal as she presses herself against Rufino and her hands wildly search his body. Then abruptly she pushes him away, touches his face as though to ask forgiveness, and quickly slips out. Rufino waits a little while, leaning his head against the wall, and then leaves Lem to the fever of his own heat in the dark.

MERCURY THEATRE is tumbledown and crowded, hot as a stove, stifling with cigarette smoke. Though the sign at the ticket booth reads, "Standing Room Only," the brothers buy their tickets and hardly containing their excitement, rush inside where the darkness and press and sweaty smell of human bodies feel like a restless tangle of undergrowth in a muttering forest. They inch their way, squeezing through yielding walls of flesh, and from time to time, look over the crowd's heads and shoulders for fleeting glimpses of the movie. Soon Lem is able to see a little better in the general darkness, and notices a small figure snaking between jostling bodies, softly calling, *'Mani, mani! Yosi, boss, yosi!'*

The boy-figure is vaguely familiar but Lem loses sight of him in the press of people ceaselessly bumping and shoving for an unobstructed view. But then, as he looks again to his right over someone's shoulder, he recognizes Kiko. He is about to call when he trips over someone's foot, and loses him again in the throng. *Kiko!* A strange feeling of sadness overcomes Lem. He suddenly seems to understand Kiko's moroseness in school, and senses something terribly amiss in his wilful escapade.

After what seems a very long struggle in the dark, groping and pushing, during which time the brothers lose Rufino, Lem and Dan finally find themselves standing near a lighted sign which says, "Men." It isn't a very good viewing post; each time the door swings open, a strong forlorn draft of urine and male secretions assails their nostrils. But at least from there, they often have a clear view of the movie, although they are hemmed by a crowd which keeps breaking for others to pass through.

Then Lem thrills to the sight of colonists trapped in an old church. The menfolk crouch around the floor and aim their muskets at the high church windows, the women are huddled together in a corner with their whimpering children. All are waiting as the war drums roll their wild terror. Then the drums all suddenly cease, an ominous silence falls, and like a thunderclap an Apache brave bursts out from a window, letting out a bloodcurdling war-cry, and leaps at the fighters below, swinging his tomahawk. He is shot dead, but then another painted brave lunges from the other window, and still another, and the arrows fly, and the women shriek in terror. Pandemonium of smoke and fire and falling bodies. But the fighters survive the attack, although a few lie still in pools of blood. The war drums sound again, rising to a threatening crescendo, and the women cringe and weep, and then again, the drums suddenly stop. Lem tenses, waits for the terrifying outbreak; the church's massive door is even now fast burning down! Then he hears a sharp bugle call, the colonists look at one another in disbelief, and the U.S. cavalry charges down the hill in a thunderous cloud of dust, the Apaches scatter with desperate cries to their Sky Father. So the movie ends with the weary survivors filing out of the burning church to welcome the proud troopers.

The lights come on and people rise from their seats and with a noise like a great wind through a forest, others rush to take their place, some even clambering over the seats like panicked antelopes. The crowd along the aisles mill and shove in slow-motion stampede for the exits. Spotting a woman with a young girl preparing to leave, Lem inserts himself between jostling bodies and, in the narrow space along his row of seats, works slowly toward the woman along a tricky underbrush of feet and legs. A man from the opposite edge of the row bounces forward and takes the young girl's seat, roughly pulling her aside by the shoulder; he ignores the spate of obscenities from the girl's woman-companion, and then saying, "Here, take this other seat," nods at Lem with a twisted smile, an unshelled peanut in a corner of his mouth. Dan, who is behind two other boys scurrying after Lem, retreats toward their original post of odors. The man now seated beside Lem is short and dark, with a little scar on his cheek, and smells like rotten papaya. "Take some," he offers Lem boiled peanuts wrapped in a newspaper. Lem politely declines, sensing something rather strange about the man.

Soon the lights fade out, and the brothers have a lightsome run of Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse, and then a newsreel on world events and sports in black and white. Lem worries a little about the time but then, the other movie, "Bird of Paradise," comes on. The brothers are all eyes for the brilliance of color and sweep of seashore and mountain, and Lem remembers the beaches in Cebu. He is not able to catch all the English words, but the story as it runs is clear enough. The islanders are similar to the Indians, but gentler in their ways and peaceable; perhaps, Lem imagines, like Humabon's people when the Spaniards came. And white people like the young hero seem to want to dwell with the natives; in fact, the hero falls in love with the island chief's daughter and marries her. In the ceremony, the young lovers kiss and make love in a small hut while the natives make merry outside with drums and dances. Lem watches intently with bated breath, as though he were again spying on Rufino and Tomasa. He feels his manhood stirring again, the same invisible power which warms his blood. Then he senses with a start a hand on his thigh, like it only dropped from

the man's arm-rest beside him, but then, it crawls snail-like, pressing a little, and grows warm. He glances at the man beside him, and the man meets his look with a tender gaze, his thick lips pouting. With a swift rough movement, Lem stands, spilling the man's hoard of peanuts on the floor, and heads for the end of the row where Dan throws him a questioning look. "Let's go, Dan," tapping him on the shoulder, his voice trembling. "It isn't over yet," Dan whispers. "No," says Lem, "we promised Mama, before six." "Ay, just a little longer," Dan pleads. "No, no!" Lem shoves at Dan, "let's go look for Pino!

Outside Mercury, down España to P. Noval, the city is already phosphorescent with neon lights. Rufino hurries alongside the brothers, but no longer seems in awe of the cold electric glittering that wraps the buildings around. "Were you scared, Pino?" Dan keeps asking, but Rufino only shakes his head as they jog, swerving now here, now there, to get ahead of slower pedestrians. It is well past six. The honking of jeepneys and cries of hawkers seem to Lem a distant hubbub. He feels lost, as though he were moving in another time. His thoughts swirl about, and no words can speak to them. *That* stray hand, as he watched the lover's dark bride and felt his own blaze in his loins, now cuts his soul with a strange sense of humiliation, he can hear himself crying secretly in the dark as though he were covered with earth's humus... And then the thought of Rufino possessing Tomasa's body with ferocious hunger fills him with aching desolation, as if he had deeply eaten of a fruit and the next moment, the tree that bore it had been cut down.

"PAPA WILL be home tonight, boys!" says Mama, her face lighting up with the certainty of it. The flight from Cebu the day before has been cancelled because typhoon Elang threatened the Visayas.

Lem and Dan are checking their schoolbags in the sala. It is early evening, and a hard rain is falling, its steady murmur coming through the walls like the hidden sea in the conch shell. Lem has been feeling rather low all day, avoiding Kiko in school just as though he had hurt him in some dim past. *Ay*, what strange torment, all thought in tatters!

Since he will never know that dark deed, how is forgiveness possible? And now, with Papa coming, he feels a weariness more than physical that makes him want to cry where no one will see. Surely Mama, hedging awhile, will finally come around to telling Papa. What then, will he approve? His silence, since the event is past anger, may be even more unbearable than physical punishment.

But Papa is long coming; perhaps, says Mama, traffic is at a standstill in flooded streets; perhaps even, Elang has veered toward Cebu and no flight again is allowed. They wait in the sala as the hour drags, and the brothers listlessly read on the sofa. The table has long been set with Mama's special chicken perdiz. As the wall clock whirrs and tolls seven like a hollow bell, Mama remembers their ritual and calls Rufino. "Hurry, Pino," she urges, "get *na* our soft drinks before Cheng closes shop."

Mama now wears her anxiety like a mourning veil. Her bottle of Clicquot Club only sweats icy droplets on her crotchet work on the side table; even the brothers find their beverages stale. Mama closes her eyes and her lips seem to be moving in prayer. As Lem steals a glance at her, a vague sense that he has wronged her tears his soul. A hard knocking shakes the wall! The brothers simultaneously jump toward the door. The rains lash at them as they open, and a stranger, a tall American in an orange raincoat, accompanied by a policeman, asks, "Is your mother home?" Mama suddenly cries out beside them in the rain's scattering spray.

"Oh, has something happened? *Ay Jesus, Ginoo!* I knew, I knew!—something terrible was coming." The brothers gently shove her inside. The strangers follow, making a pool of water as they stand and wait for Mama to calm down.

Then the American, a Mr. Adams, recounts what has happened, the policeman silently looking on. Rufino stands by the door to the bodega, his eyes fixed on Adams as though he were his quarry; Tomasa sidles up

to him and Lem notices how for a trembling instant her hand reaches out to touch the back of his neck. Mama is sobbing on her chair, and the brothers stand by her and gently rub her shoulder and press her hand as they listen to Mr. Adams. He is driving in the heavy downpour down España on the wrong lane; it is too late to stop when he catches sight of Papa crossing the street. *Ay, Jesus!* cries Mama. He is very sorry, sorry beyond words; he has just arrived from New York, and has only borrowed a business partner's car. He was just on his way back to Manila Hotel, visibility is very poor, the driving rains lash across the street. Lem sees in a flash Papa being flung to the pavement. But it isn't fatal, Papa is still alive, Lem sees his body in the swirling floodwaters along the curb, and the policeman and Adams lift the unconscious body to the police car. They rush to the U.S.T. Hospital, Lem hears the siren wailing, and they wait for the attending physician and the hour ticks infinitely slowly. Papa's wallet identifies him and carries his address but no telephone number. Then the doctor comes, Papa is in pain but safe, he has fractured ribs and the doctor says the patient should be able to go home in a week's time.

LEM DREAMS Papa's homecoming. Surely he must already know, although in the hospital he is gentle toward them—and know not only about their movie-going with Rufino! On the third night after the accident, he and Mama retrace their steps back home from the U.S.T. gate because it suddenly occurs to Mama that she has not turned off the gas stove and Tomasa may just be too busy with the ironing to notice. Lem finds their door open and mama is angry. "Tomasa!" she calls, but no one seems at home. Lem is suddenly uneasy with a vague foreknowledge. "Pino! where are you?" Mama calls up the stairs. The house seems deathly still like a storm-struck tree. Tomasa then comes out of the bodega with a terrified look on her face. Her hands hang like dead branches by her side, she is looking down at her bare feet. She turns her face from Mama. "What have you been doing there?" pursues Mama in a rage, and pushing her roughly aside and entering the bodega, screams at the sight of Rufino shivering, as though he were cold, in the shadows. "*Ginoo!*" she screams and shoves Lem out into the

light. Tomasa runs sobbing to the kitchen. Mama sinks on the sofa and seems ready to cry, and then collects herself, saying low and trembling, "Lem, you are much older than your brother, you must not say anything about this to him." She straightens up and goes to the kitchen, and Lem hears her calling for Tomasa without anger. He feels a monstrous darkness sweep through the house. With dread and a strange exaltation, he pictures to himself the secret lovers frolicking like wild animals in a forest cave. He waits for Rufino to come out of hiding, but Mama returns with a small basket of fruits from the kitchen, and pulls him to the door, and they go out and hurry back to the hospital.

ON PAPA'S first evening at home, Mr. Adams drops in with a sandalwood box of rare Havana cigars. He has never missed a day of visiting with Papa in the hospital, with Babe Ruth and licorice sticks for the brothers. Papa is very polite with him but their talk lags as the brothers pretend to read in the dining room. Lem is sure that Mr. Adams would soon stop visiting.

After he leaves, Papa calls Mama to the sala and beckons for Lem and Dan to come too. "Well," he says, looking at them tenderly, "what drinks shalt we try tonight?" Lem suddenly feels like crying; only, Dan is by who looks quite abashed. Then Papa calls Rufino and the brothers are glad for the diversion of the ritual. "We'll go with Pino," says Dan suddenly. "No, Dan, you stay," says Papa, "I have something to tell Mama, and you and Lem should hear it." Rufino takes impassively each one's orders and as he leaves, Lem sees his shadow flung upon the wall. He almost cries out and Mama gives him a frightened look. For a fleeting instant to his mind's eye, it isn't Rufino or his shadow crossing the room but a dark spirit from the swamp asking for his name! Mama taps Lem's hand, saying, "Your Papa knows, he isn't angry but very sad that he has not thought of the danger and *gaba*²...the temptation in the house." Papa only looks on, smoking his first Havana from Mr. Adams, and seems to be quietly considering the words to speak. Then, as

² In Bisayan religious folk belief, *gaba* is a curse that one incurs for evil or culpable neglect, so that inevitably one suffers a misfortune as punishment.

though he were only speaking to Mama, he says, "It is time for Rufino and Tomasa to go back to Cebu." Mama nods her assent with a grave expression. "The *Don Julio* leaves this Friday." Rufino and Tomasa banished! Lem sees in Dan's face his share in the lovers' guilt. Dan already knows, but Lem has carefully omitted the details that, though they enflame his blood, also seem to quell it in shame. He senses his own forgiveness from, Papa's gentleness with them, but a desolation of spirit sweeps through him.

For the next few days Rufino and Tomasa seem distant to Lem like strangers. He can hardly bear their silence, they move as if bound. Or as if they have lost their name and no one could call. Like two shadows that take flesh and then vanish, for a moment human, and the next, mute presences of beings that inhabit the forest. Lem wishes it were already Friday, and they were gone!

After school, the brothers come home to a gloomy silence in the house. It is Friday. The only bright news for Mama is Dan's third prize in the World History project for his drawing of Henry VIII. After kissing Dan, Mama says to Lem, "I've been missing Petrel." Lem heads straight for the kitchen and out to the laundry yard where some clothes are still dripping on the hard, bare ground. "He must just have slipped out the door," says Lem. "Or jumped over that wall," says Dan, "I've seen him do it, going after a cat." Dan points to their next-door neighbor's wall. "He has been quite restless," observes Mama, "and howls at night as though he were seeing ghosts." "O, are there really ghosts, Mama?" Dan teases. She does not take the bait, and turns to Lem. "What can be the matter with Petrel do you think, Lem?" she asks. Lem is silent. "Ask me, Ma," from Dan, a little peeved, "I've an idea." "Okay," says Mama, "is the dog just ailing?" "No, Mama," says Dan, "he misses Pino, and perhaps still sees his shadow." Lem keeps his own thought to himself, he sees Petrel, forlorn speck of brown among jostling crowds, roaming in the city's warm, phosphorescent dusk.

4-29 Nov. 1995