THE MOP CLOSET

THEY USED TO live across the street—the boy, his father, and their dog. Their house had a tall gate and a rusty warehouse at the back. Both structures are gone now, having made way for yet another Korean convenience store, the third one to pop up in our neighborhood. Every night, the convenience store's sign would bathe our once dimly lit street in an unfamiliar glow. The present owners of the property are probably unaware of what had happened there, twenty years or so ago, just before the house was torn down.

The boy's name was Neel. He was my age, and we attended the same school. He was shorter than all of us. His body was frail, practically just skin and bones, and he had pale skin, which made him look perpetually sick. But his anemic pallor didn't quite match his level of enthusiasm. The boy was always enthusiastic. He was the most eager student in class and possibly the entire school. Whenever the teacher would call out his name for attendance, he would jump to his feet with the zeal of a boy scout and point out in his chirpy way that his name was spelled with two *e*'s.

"Neel is the Hindi word for blue," he would explain. After years of repetition, this detail was burned into our memory. He was Neel with two *e*'s. But to us, this didn't matter. Nobody called him Neel anyway. We called him Bangkay, because he looked like a corpse.

Unlike the other boys our age, Bangkay was up and about in the wee hours of the morning. He would buy pan de sal from our bakery at the crack of dawn, just as the rolls were emerging from the oven in our garage. Even at such an early hour, he was already too cheerful for comfort.

"A pleasant morning to you, Mrs. Sanchez," he would tell Mama as she stood behind the bread counter. "One bag of your freshly baked pan de sal,

if you would be so kind." Behind rolls of monay and pan de coco, my mother would spy Bangkay's tiny body through the bread counter's glass. He was so small that his head didn't even reach the countertop. After receiving his bag of pan de sal, Bangkay would thank my mother, making sure to compliment the flowers on her duster. He called them morning glories.

"He talks funny," Mama said, "like he's seventy."

And it was true. Bangkay did have a strange way with words. He always got the highest grades in English class. I did better than most in this subject, but I was a far second to Bangkay. I floated somewhere in the middle of our class, in that unremarkable spectrum our teachers liked to call "average."

In our yearly spelling bees, Bangkay would always be the last one standing. There was one spelling bee in Grade 3 when we were the last two competitors vying for the grand prize. The final word was rheumatic. Back then, I didn't even know what rheumatic meant. When the word was given, I made no effort to spell it correctly. Bangkay, on the other hand, took chalk to blackboard and spelled the word with a triumphant flourish. I watched from the side of the stage as the grand prize was awarded to Bangkay. He raised the trophy above his head, flashing a smile that looked too wide for his face. The trophy was bigger than him. If anyone tried to stuff Bangkay into the trophy, he would probably fit. I knew a lot of people wanted to do just that.

We lived in the part of Malate that never attracted any tourists. Drunkards, snatchers, and prostitutes wandered our streets at night, in the same way that bullies prowled the school corridors by day. Our school was a good training ground for adult life. At an early age, we were forced to understand the dynamics of the human food chain. The world was divided into three groups of people: the prey, the predators, and the apex predators. Adaptation was a skill one needed to learn in order to survive. For most, this skill came easily, like it was born out of instinct. But this skill was completely alien to the socially awkward types, such as Bangkay. Under normal circumstances, Bangkay would have ended up as meat for the predators. But this kid was an odd, infuriating exception to that rule.

Bangkay was often seen with a black dog. It orbited within a few meters of him like a canine guardian angel, deterring anyone who wanted to do him harm. The were some mornings when we would see the dog escorting Bangkay to school as he skipped his way through the gutters of our neighborhood. The hulking beast made up for its master's lack of brawn. It was a burly creature of dubious pedigree. Some said it was a German Shepherd mixed with an askal. Some said it was a wolf. Some said

it was a werewolf. It didn't seem to have a name because even Bangkay, despite his florid verbiage, just called it Doggie. So Doggie it was.

It was rumored that Doggie had already killed a man. The number rose to three depending on the version being told. It happened on a dark and stormy night when Bangkay was walking home from school. A notorious snatcher wanted in our barangay blocked his way in one of the alleys. Bangkay walked past the snatcher as he smiled his clueless smile. Without knowing it, his backpack was slashed open. The snatcher made a move for Bangkay's wallet, but before the man could reach it, Doggie jumped in his path. The fur on Doggie's back bristled like spikes. As Bangkay walked on, the beast lunged at the snatcher. It latched its jaws on the poor man's neck and ripped out his vocal cords. There was a spurt of blood that smeared the walls of the alley. The snatcher tried to free himself from Doggie's bite, but he was tossed around like a ragdoll. In another version, it was an entire gang of snatchers armed with ice picks. But it really didn't matter how many the snatchers were because they all ended up dead in the end.

"It's true," said Chito. He was my fat classmate, and he sat to my left. "If you walk down the alley, you can still see the hardened blood on the walls." Chito would know, since their house was within a few steps of where the ill-fated man gurgled his last. His grandmother was even selling barbecue by their doorstep the night that it happened. She got splattered all over and was not pleased.

Tolits, my seatmate to the right, believed that Doggie was some kind of supernatural beast. His family had recently transferred from Capiz, where he claimed that all the rich people were either aswangs or had aswang blood. These aswang families were said to own a pet that looked like a cross between a dog and a goat. "It's a sigbin," Tolits whispered to us during recess. He said it quietly, like he was actually scared. Tolits claimed that his older brother was once chased by a sigbin through the streets of their town. "Doggie looked at me this morning," he said in between bites of his sandwich. "I think it knows I can tell what it really is."

"Cool," Chito said.

"Bullshit," I said, secretly thinking it was cool.

But Doggie wasn't the only odd character in Bangkay's company. Although Bangkay was a common fixture in our neighborhood, nobody had ever seen his mother. We all knew who his father was, and we also knew that his father looked nothing like him. The man Bangkay called Papa was a dark-skinned fellow with a beard and a white turban. He went

around on a red motorcycle carrying all kinds of household goods. Most of the time though, it was just umbrellas.

"Bumbay," we would snicker whenever Bangkay's father rode by on his motorcycle. Mrs. Miranda, the fourth grade teacher, said that it was impolite to call Indians bumbay, in the same way that it was impolite to call the Chinese instik. She said that we should address Bangkay's father as Mr. Gonani. Our class nodded in silent agreement. We settled for a happy medium though, calling him Mr. Gonani whenever he could hear us but reverting to Bumbay whenever he couldn't.

The women of our street subscribed to the theory that Bangkay was a kidnap victim. They had many other theories, all of which were formulated in the shade of our bakery at five o'clock in the afternoon, when our pan de sal was being sold at half the price. They said that when Bangkay was a toddler, he was hauled off on Mr. Gonani's motorcycle like a piglet on its way to the fiesta.

"It's all the mother's fault," said Kagawad Minda, our former barangay kagawad who insisted on keeping her title despite being out of office for the last three years. "She listed the boy as collateral for a loan, and when she could no longer pay for it, that bumbay took him as payment."

"I heard it differently," Auntie Pearl cut in. She was our street's returning OFW, now an expert in all things American. "The mother probably sold the poor boy so she could process her US visa."

"He actually smells nice, you know," Tita Lulu said. She was ninang to all the kids on our street, including me. Every Christmas, she would send her many godchildren dedicated pictures of herself posing next to a Christmas tree in her living room. That was all we ever got.

"You actually smelled him?" asked Kagawad Minda. "As in, under his arms?"

"They had sex," Mama mumbled through puffs of her cigarette.

Tita Lulu was at the opposite end of the bread counter and didn't hear a thing.

In school, stories about Mr. Gonani were more far-fetched. We told these stories on the sides of the basketball court, while students from the upper grades sweated it out in the heat of the noonday sun. Some of the kids at school claimed that Mr. Gonani's warehouse was actually a prison. There were ten, twenty, or maybe even thirty children in there, chained by their ankles to a large table where all they did was assemble umbrellas. If they fell asleep on the job, Mr. Gonani would rub curry into their eyes and

force them to do long division instead. If he grew tired of their crying, he would drag them to the basement, where they would have playtime with Doggie. Most of them never came out alive.

There was a night when Chito, Tolits, and I tried to break into the warehouse just to see if the rumors were true. We knew that if we were discovered, we would become the latest additions to Mr. Gonani's assembly line of doleful children. Either that or Doggie would shred us to bits. We were illegally drunk on our first bottle of beer, which Tolits had smuggled out of their *sari-sari* store. Emboldened by the alcohol, we walked across the street with the confident swagger of men and stood in front of the gate. It loomed before us like the gate of a fortress. We didn't know if we should ram it open, climb over the top, or find some gap where we could squeeze ourselves through.

After a round of spirited arguments, it was decided that Chito, being the fat one, needed to lay down his life for the cause. We planned to use him as a human battering ram. Tolits and I were convinced because, according to all the movies we had watched, the fat friend always had to die.

Chito protested, of course, bemoaning the kind of human beings we were. He launched into a long and impassioned argument, which only got him worked up. With tears welling in his eyes, Chito leaned against the gate. It creaked open. That was when we realized that the gate had been unlocked this entire time. I shoved Chito aside and gave the gate an extra push.

Inside was a driveway that led to the warehouse at the back. The warehouse was dark, except for a solitary light bulb that hung above its entrance. One by one, we stepped through the gate and made our way up the driveway. Each step we made was carefully planted, as if we were tiptoeing across a drawbridge with Jurassic crocodiles underneath. Then all of a sudden, a sensor went off. Sirens on the gateposts whirled red and started to screech. Then a light from one of the upstairs windows turned on. A turbaned head popped out of the window. "You boys get out of my property!" came Mr. Gonani's funny-sounding English. He shook an angry fist in the air. Then from inside the warehouse, we heard Doggie. The echo of its growls made the walls of the warehouse tremble. We knew we had to run for our lives.

It was a mad dash back to safety. Chito stumbled as we spilled out of the gate, and Tolits stumbled over Chito. I could just imagine Doggie's jaws snapping at our heels as we ran across the street. When we reached my house, I opened the front door, and everybody rushed in. All three of

us collapsed on the floor of the living room. We looked at each other's panicked faces. Chito was flushed, and Tolits was pale with fright. Then we doubled over in laughter. For weeks after that, we would imitate Mr. Gonani as he raged at us from his second-floor window. "You boys get out of my property!" we mimicked in the best Indian accent we could manage. The joke never seemed to get old.

One Friday night, Tolits and I were in our living room watching "X-Men" on Channel 2. Right when things were getting exciting, I heard a noise that I thought sounded like a cry for help. It seemed to come from the house across the street. Tolits said that it was just from the TV. On the screen, Washington DC was being terrorized by an army of evil mutants. There was a lot of screaming going on. After a few minutes of explosions and buildings toppling over, Tolits and I heard a howl. This time, we were sure that it didn't come from the TV.

We went up to my bedroom so we could get a clear view of Bangkay's house. When we opened the window, the howling became louder. The house across the street was dimly lit, and we could barely see anything. We were pretty sure though that it was Doggie. The howls were long and steady. The sound sent shivers down my back. But the more I listened, the more it sounded less frightening. The howls started to sound sad, even mournful.

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After that night, we started seeing less and less of Bangkay. From being the school's most overeager student, Bangkay began to tally one absence after another. I guess we didn't notice this until the first day of our exams when Bangkay was nowhere to be seen. It was no secret that Bangkay looked forward to exam week as much as everybody else looked forward to the start of summer vacation. His absence was peculiar.

"He could be dead," I guessed.

"Murdered by Mr. Gonani," Chito said, slamming a fist down on his desk for emphasis. "Because he couldn't make enough umbrellas."

"Or maybe Doggie just killed him for fun," Tolits added.

Our class had many speculations as to why Bangkay didn't show up for our exams. There was the theory that Bangkay was strapped to an operating table because Mr. Gonani was trying to make a duplicate of his exceptional brain. Someone else ventured that he was abducted by a spaceship being piloted by people from his home planet, or that he walked into an interdimensional

portal, never to be seen nor heard from again. To our dismay, our teacher announced that it was just chickenpox. They told Mr. Gonani to keep Bangkay at home in order to spare the school from an epidemic.

It was only after a month that Bangkay started going to school again, but his attendance was irregular at most. Despite being absent for most of the week, he still managed to ace all of our tests. When he did attend class, Bangkay's hand would be up in the air, waving at the teacher with an annoying eagerness. Not only was he at the top of the class in English, he was also the best student in math. How anybody could be good at both subjects escaped me. By then, we were convinced that Bangkay had a clinical abnormality in his brain. When he emerged from his mother's womb, the nurse had probably dropped him on his head.

One Thursday afternoon, I was invited by one of the upperclassmen to play basketball with them. They were missing one player and needed a sub. They chose me because I was one of the taller boys in our batch. It was my first time to receive an invitation to play with the big boys. I saw this as a step-up in the human food chain. That afternoon, I played with everything I had. The game was rough, and I scraped a knee along the way. Our team lost by just two points, but I managed to show the older boys what I was capable of. I got a couple of high-fives at the end of the game, which I took as an approval of sorts. When the game ended, I knew that I was already getting ahead of the pack.

We finished at around five in the afternoon. Most of the other students had already gone home, and the school was quite empty. Before leaving, I went to the restroom behind the basketball court to take a leak. When I entered, I heard something banging inside the mop closet. I thought that maybe a cat had managed to get itself trapped inside. I kicked the door open to see what it was.

Standing in the mop closet in nothing but his saggy underwear was Bangkay. Above him was a window from which somebody had hung all of his clothes. He was trying to reach the leg of his pants, but since he was so short, every attempt to grab it was futile. He looked like a mouse squirming against the wall in an impossible attempt to scale it. On his pale back, I noticed welts. Some of them looked fresh. Others had already turned into scars.

When Bangkay realized that someone had opened the mop closet's door, he turned around, folding his bony arms across his chest. He was trying to hide his nakedness. He looked like the skeleton in our science

textbook with all his ribs poking out. "Thank you for opening the door," Bangkay said after an awkward pause. There was relief in his voice, but I could also detect a hint of shame. "I am truly relieved that you have come to rescue me from this rather unfortunate predicament. I know that we don't converse much in class, but if you would be so kind as to reach my clothes, please?" He said this with his eyes fixed on the floor.

As I stood in front of Bangkay, I sensed an absurd kind of weakness. The boy stank of it. He looked pathetic in his saggy underwear, and it incensed me. I knew that his situation couldn't be helped. Then in a fit of disgust, I pushed Bangkay back inside the mop closet. I did it because I was revolted by him. I also did it because I could. Then I shut the door of the mop closet, flicked the latch, and walked away.

It could have been the excess adrenaline from the basketball game or plain boyish aggressiveness that caused me to shove Bangkay back into the mop closet. Until this day, I cannot really say for certain what it was. I never told anyone about this incident, not even Chito or Tolits. The only other person who knew about it was Bangkay. I went to bed that night with a sinking feeling in my gut.

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When Bangkay stopped going to school altogether, our neighborhood's curiosity turned into concern. Our teachers asked us about him, but since he had no friends in school, none of us could provide any information. Because I was Bangkay's closest neighbor, our teachers assumed that I would be gracious enough to check on him. When Mrs. Miranda asked me to drop by his house, I just stood there and listened to her. I didn't even nod. I didn't want anything to do with Bangkay. But I guessed that there was really no escaping it. His house was right across the street from where we lived. It stood there like a jagged spike rising from a landscape of squat wooden homes, a monument of sorts to something that I would rather not speak of.

I did check on Bangkay though, but not because Mrs. Miranda asked me to. I did it out of curiosity. I knocked on their gate one afternoon while I was on the way home from school. As I stood there waiting, I already felt the urge to leave. What if Bangkay opened the gate? I really didn't know what I would say or do. Luckily, that moment never came. I pressed my ear against the gate, thinking that I would at least hear Doggie barking. But even Doggie was silent. Their entire house was silent.

I thought of giving it exactly two more minutes. In two minutes, a basketball game could be won or lost. So I forced myself to endure two full minutes under the afternoon sun for Bangkay's sake. I watched the minute hand on my watch tick away for what seemed like an eternity. When nothing happened after two minutes, I felt a sense of relief wash over me. I had done what a good person needed to do. Before crossing the street, I waved goodbye to the house, glad that I could now shake off all this Bangkay business.

One person who couldn't seem to shake Bangkay off though was Mama. I could tell that she was starting to miss our bakery's early morning visitor. Although she wouldn't be caught dead saying it, I knew my mother felt that her days were incomplete without Bangkay complimenting the morning glories on her duster. I teased her about this one time, and she just rolled her eyes.

It didn't take long for the busybodies in our neighborhood to take notice of the silence that had befallen the house across the street.

"Can't we ask the police to check on the boy?" Auntie Pearl suggested one afternoon at our bakery. She fanned herself as she leaned on our bread counter. The sky was overcast, and it seemed like it was about to rain. "The problem with this country is that you don't have 911. For all we know, something might have already happened to him."

"If I were still in the barangay," announced Kagawad Minda, "I would order an investigation straight away. That Gonani is up to no good, I tell you."

"What about the tanod?" Tita Lulu interjected. "Our tanod should just pay them a visit," "I'm sure that would be easy for you to arrange," she said, ribbing Kagawad Minda.

"Your new barangay captain doesn't like me," she replied. "And I don't like him either. He's a cheat."

Mama took a long drag from the cigarette that hung from her lips. "You're all useless," she said as she exhaled a puff of smoke. She slid off her stool and marched across the street. When she came to the gate, she banged at it with an open palm. "Is anybody there?" she called out. Whenever she raised her voice, my mother's throat emitted the strangest sound in the world. Her voice was cracked due to decades of smoking, but it still managed to retain all its shrillness. She sounded like a bullfrog in pain.

Afraid that my mother would cause a scene, her friends tried to peel her away from the gate. Mama banged even louder. When her hand started to

hurt from all the banging, she grumbled in frustration and walked back to our bakery. She lit another cigarette. "He's dead," Mama announced. "I'm sure of it."

"Doesn't he have any friends at school?" asked Auntie Pearl.

"Maybe you should ask your son," Kagawad Minda suggested, pointing at me. I was busy arranging the bills in the cash drawer and pretended not to hear her.

That night over dinner, Mama asked me about Bangkay. We were having fried chicken. Whenever Mama cooked friend chicken, there was always more breading than there was chicken. "Whatever happened to your friend?" she asked as she picked at a piece of chicken leg on her plate.

"He's not my friend," I replied.

"Okay. Whatever happened to Bangkay?" she rephrased.

"I don't know." I said, and asked her to pass the ketchup.

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Then Doggie appeared. It was the night before the strongest typhoon of the year. Tolits saw Doggie just as he was helping his mother board up the window of their sari-sari store. He was about to haul the last crate of Coke to higher ground when he saw a large dog standing across the street from him. It stared at him like a predator that had been stalking its prey for several days. A sheet of rain swept by. It fell hard, like shards of glass on the pavement. Tolits rushed back inside the sari-sari store to escape the rain. When he looked back across the street, the creature was gone.

The flood rose quickly that night, leaving the streets of our neighborhood submerged up to the knee. An electric post fell, causing a power outage that lasted two days. Tolits said that he couldn't sleep the night of the storm. Something was howling just outside his window. He couldn't tell if it was Doggie or the wind.

"That's no ordinary dog," Tolits told us when we were allowed to go back to school. "Its eyes were burning. Like fireballs."

"Fireballs in the rain?" I asked, unimpressed.

"Yes, in the rain," Tolits snapped back.

"Let's hunt Doggie down with a silver bullet," Chito suggested. "My Papa has a gun."

Tolits shook his head. "That won't work."

"So what will?" I asked.

Tolits paused, thinking of an answer. We waited for his response, but none came. Then he said he would need to consult his parents on how to kill a sigbin.

For the next couple of days, Doggie's recent appearance was the topic of our conversations. Tolits was convinced that Doggie was an otherworldly beast. Chito and I played along. We weren't sure what a sigbin was, but neither were we sure what Doggie was. During math class, we explored the many possible ways by which Doggie could be vanquished. Some of the methods suggested involved high-powered firearms, while others involved Fr. Domingo, our old parish priest, and several gallons of holy water. Secretly though, I didn't want to kill Doggie. I would much rather capture it alive so that I could turn it into my pet. How cool it would be to own a monster dog. I found it unfair that of all the masters the universe could have paired Doggie with, it had to be Bangkay.

There was a commotion on our street a few days after the storm. I was coming home from a basketball game, and it was already dusk. A police car was parked in front of Bangkay's house. I ran to see what the fuss was about. Just as I was nearing all the action, the car rumbled to life and started to drive away. The crowd of bystanders parted before the police car as it accelerated in the opposite direction.

"What happened?" I asked Mama, who was standing at our front door with an arm on her waist. She was with her friends.

"It's the DSWD," Kagawad Minda answered. "I called them so they could check on the boy."

"Don't get excited," Mama told me. "Your friend isn't dead yet."

I looked at her, waiting for a more thorough explanation. "Go inside and do your homework," she snapped.

The incident that afternoon kept bothering me. Since I couldn't get anything out of Mama, I planned to use my godson card and ask Tita Lulu instead. The following day, I appeared unannounced in her apartment down the street. Not knowing what had prompted this rare visit, Tita Lulu invited me inside. As I followed her in, I noticed that the Christmas tree she always posed with was still up. It was nowhere near Christmas.

According to her, Mr. Gonani had a little talk with a lady from the DSWD. Bangkay was apparently suffering from severe asthma attacks and was advised by the doctors to stay indoors. "So much bacteria in the air," Tita Lulu said, in a parody of Mr. Gonani's accent. She seemed to find her impersonation funny. Mr. Gonani had also decided to homeschool

Bangkay. "He's really a smart boy," Tita Lulu said. "Honor student all the way. He can finish reading a book as thick as the Bible in just one sitting."

"So," I interrupted, "is Bangkay . . . okay?" I wasn't sure if that was the word I meant to use.

"The boy's a prodigy," she continued, obviously not hearing my question. "And that dog of theirs is still around. Scary as ever. The police couldn't even make it beyond the gate."

"That's nice," I said. Before Tita Lulu could go off on a tangent, I thanked her and said that I needed to go to school. I rushed out of her apartment, fearing that she would invite me to stay for meryenda.

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We didn't see Bangkay for the whole of grade five. That year, the growth spurt hit me. I shot up more than any of my classmates. As a result, the upper graders invited me to play basketball with them more often. I was becoming a regular member of their team and was even gaining attention from some of the girls. Chito was growing in width but not in height. His face had become fertile ground for pimples. It was only Tolits who didn't seem to grow at all. When a new TV was delivered to Tolits' house, we moved our viewing parties to their living room. Chito would supply us with barbecue prepared by his grandmother, while Tolits would steal some beers from their sari-sari store. I brought pan de sal from our bakery, but these were always the last to be touched.

It was the summer of my thirteenth birthday when we had our first close encounter with death. It was late one afternoon when the three of us were walking to the basketball court near the barangay hall. Chito was dribbling a basketball, while Tolits was finishing a bottle of Coke. We turned at the corner of Kagawad Minda's house, where she still displayed her campaign posters from several years ago. There was a short strip of road between her house and the basketball court. Halfway through the road, there was a pile of uncollected garbage that formed a miniature mountain at the foot of an electric post. It smelled of rot. There, scrounging in the heap of trash, was Doggie.

We slowed our steps, wary of Doggie's presence. It seemed hungry. From where we stood, we noticed that Doggie had wounds on its back. Some of the wounds looked raw. We weren't sure if the flies were buzzing around the garbage or around Doggie's wounds. For some reason, Doggie

seemed smaller than before—less immortal, but still more menacing than any other creature we have seen.

Then without any warning, stupid Chito hurled the basketball straight at Doggie. It was a direct hit. The ball hit Doggie right on its head. It flinched at the sudden attack. After a few disoriented seconds, Doggie turned in our direction. Saliva streamed from its mouth as it glared at us. Its fangs were bared. Doggie had the look of death in its eyes. We ran, and Doggie ran after us.

I don't know how far we had run or where exactly it happened. All I remember was that I was trying to pull Chito away from Doggie. Some of the neighbors lunged at us, armed with anything they could use as a weapon. Chito was screaming. Tolits stood motionless on the sidewalk with a dumb look on his face. Amid the panicked chorus of human voices, I could hear Doggie's snarls and, on top of that, Chito's voice crying out that he didn't want to die. There was a lot of blood on the pavement. After Doggie had been chased away, I found myself clutching Chito by his shirt. I was clutching so hard I couldn't seem to let go. Chito was rushed to the hospital after that and had to stay for a good three days. His leg was mangled.

We visited Chito after our class. His parents said he was given several rabies shots. Some of the bites had cut straight to the bone. Chito's leg was dressed in several layers of gauze and was propped up on a pillow. His parents managed to maintain their calmness, but his grandmother was beside herself in panic that she had to be sent home. When Chito's parents left his bedside, we were allowed a few moments to pester him.

"So how long do you have to live?" I asked Chito.

He just stared at me, his eyes narrowing.

"Will you ever be able to walk again?" Tolits added.

"Fuck you," Chito mumbled.

"At least Doggie didn't chew your leg off," I said. "It could have happened, you know."

"I heard that people with rabies go nuts," Tolits interrupted.

"I don't have rabies," Chito replied. He said it slowly, his voice shaking with anger.

"I did a bit of research." Tolits continued. "People with rabies become crazy and develop a fear of water. It's called hydrophobia. Then they just die of thirst."

"I don't have rabies!" Chito burst out. His eyes were brimming with tears. Had it not been for his injured leg, he would have gotten up and

punched Tolits in the face. I would have gotten punched, too.

"Alright," I told Chito, stifling a laugh. "Calm down."

Chito scowled and turned the opposite direction. He was in a foul mood throughout his entire stay in the hospital. If Chito weren't so stupid, he could have avoided this ordeal altogether.

The attack on Chito got the entire neighborhood talking. There was a mad dog on the prowl, and it could strike anytime. Kagawad Minda was up in arms about the incident. She probably saw it as a convenient issue she could use to fuel her political comeback. Mama said she made a big deal out of it. Her new battle cry was for a rabies-free barangay. Soon, everybody was demanding the same thing.

When Mr. Gonani was summoned to the barangay hall, all the curtains were purposely drawn so that nobody could peer inside. I tried to look but was shooed away. A serious discussion seemed to take place. This meeting took much longer than expected. When it ended, Mr. Gonani got on his motorcycle and drove off without saying a word. They said that he had agreed to comply with all the barangay's orders. As to what these orders were, we could only guess. Even Kagawad Minda didn't know, and I'm sure that it infuriated her.

Refusing to be left in the dark, she found a way to get her contacts in the barangay to divulge the contents of this private meeting. After much coercion, they told Kagawad Minda that the council had asked Mr. Gonani to put Doggie to sleep. The council argued that the dog was clearly rabid and was a threat to everybody's safety. For Doggie, it would also be an act of kindness. Throughout the meeting, all eyes were on Mr Gonani. They examined his every movement. After everybody in the council had said their piece, Mr Gonani stood up to voice his only concern: "But my son loves that dog. He loves it more than anything in the world."

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Chito was discharged from the hospital three days after the attack. His leg was still wrapped in several layers of gauze, which needed regular changing. He had to depend on a pair of crutches. My stomach couldn't help but turn whenever I imagined what his leg looked like underneath all the bandages. Within a few days of Chito's return, we moved our TV parties to their house. Since he was bedridden, I was sure Chito would eat himself to obesity. Luckily, that didn't happen. It took a full three months before Chito could

walk without his crutches. When the bandages were removed, the flesh on his leg was uneven. The doctor said he would never be rid of the scars.

That was the night I heard the gunshot. I heard it shortly after dinner. It was a single shot. The sound ripped through the night like thunder. It lingered in the air. I could feel its echoes creeping underneath my skin.

It took me a while before I could collect myself and walk to my bedroom window. From where I stood, I could see the street below. Some of the neighbors emerged from their homes with tentative steps. They were curious, but I could tell that they were also afraid. Across the street, Bangkay's house looked the same. It was as if nothing had happened. I rolled down the blinds and turned away.

A crowd would start to form in the next hour or so. They would gather in front of Mr. Gonani's gate, searching the rusty facade for an explanation. Rumors would be passed around multiple times, until one or two of them would begin to take on the guise of truth. The police would arrive shortly after that. They would weave their way through the crowd, pushing aside this man who claimed to be an eyewitness and that woman who said she was the first one to the scene. The police would make their way to the gate, and then they would knock. Then they would wait. Maybe the gate would creak open. Maybe it would remain closed. Maybe the police would be left with no other option but to force their way in. But I didn't need to see any of that. I stayed inside my room, sitting rigid at the edge of my bed for the entire night.

The following day, the house across the street was cordoned off using strips of yellow tape. Those who passed by couldn't help but pause to take a look, only to be ordered by the authorities to move along.

When Chito and Tolits dropped by that afternoon, they told me that the police had taken Bangkay into custody. But I already knew that. I knew it from the moment I heard the gunshot the previous night. How cruel it was that a regular afternoon in basketball court had joined us together, Bangkay and I, like a pair of monstrous twins, both cursed to share in each other's monstrosity. I knew the poison that ran through Bangkay's blood, because the same poison ran through mine. I felt its chill running through me, even in the very marrow of my bones.

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There was no sign of Doggie after that. Although there were rumored sightings here and there, I would like to believe that Doggie, the monster

of our childhood, simply chose to disappear into the night like the supernatural creature that it was. The house was left abandoned for several years. Nobody even bothered to take down the yellow tape. After falling into disrepair, a portion of the warehouse's roof sagged like a derelict smile. I could see it every day from my bedroom window, until that morning the roof decided to come crashing down.

My friends and I bungled our way through the next twenty or so years. It's hard to recall the exact moment when we realized that we were no longer boys but men. Chito eventually got married and is now about to migrate to Canada with his wife and son. He was able to find work as a nurse in some private hospital. His despedida is in a couple of weeks, and I wouldn't miss it for the world. He still walks with a limp after all these years. Tolits is now living in a condominium with a swimming pool. He finished a degree in computer science and has found gainful employment with a software company. He has a new set of friends who like to hang out in places that I can't afford to go to. I don't see Tolits as often as I would like. As for me, I've stayed behind, just drifting from one sales job to another. The most recent job I had was with an insurance company, where I managed to scrape together enough money to buy myself a secondhand car. I park the car next to the bread counter in our garage, where Mama and her friends still gather at five o'clock every afternoon to discuss other people's affairs.

My days are monotonous. Before going to bed, I would grab a beer from the kitchen and stand by my bedroom window. I would roll up the blinds, half expecting to see a rusty warehouse across the street, rising from a row of squat wooden homes. Instead, I would see the Korean convenience store and one or two of its customers drinking on the sidewalk. I'd need to remind myself that the world has already turned since then.

I never manage to get a lot of sleep. No amount of alcohol can seem to do the trick, so I'm left with no other option but to get used to it. My nights are never easy. I would always see it in the darkness just before going to sleep, in the way I know I would see it in some future hospital bed where I would close my eyes for one last time. It would be there, as it had always been there, ever since that Thursday afternoon in the basketball court's restroom. How clear it would be, and how final—the inside of the mop closet's door, inches away from my face, closing on me, shutting me in.