



LOVELY

BENJIE AND HIS family lived on a street that was always described as bad. His father worked as a clerk in the city's engineering office, and his mother sold lotions and creams to the women of the neighborhood. Their apartment had a garage that was enclosed by a low, rusty gate. A car would have been parked in the garage if their family had been rich enough to own one. They owned a flat-screen TV though, and a brand-new washing machine, which not everybody on their street had the luxury of owning. Benjie's parents always stressed that despite living on a bad street, they were good, respectable people.

Benjie's family occupied the third in a row of four apartments, all of which were in varying states of disrepair. Apartment A was where the Bautistas lived. They had three sons, born one year after another, with the youngest being around Benjie's age. Apartment B was vacant, thanks to a portion of the roof that had caved in due to seasons of rain and rot. It has since been tenanted by a family of cats. Apartment C was where they lived, and Apartment D was where she lived.

She called herself Lovely, but everybody said that that wasn't her real name. There was nothing remarkable about Lovely's appearance. She was probably in her fifties and looked very much her age. She dressed in loose dasters and held her hair up with a plastic clamp. Every morning, Benjie would see her stepping out of her apartment as she fanned herself with a torn piece of cardboard.

At night, Benjie would always hear music drifting out of Lovely's apartment. A somber crooning would make its way through the unknown crevices of the aging wooden walls and settle like a cloud in their kitchen. Benjie could hardly understand any of the lyrics. Years later though, he

learned that the songs were Visayan love songs from the 1960s. They came to him from across sea and time and filled many of his childhood nights.

Benjie liked Friday nights the best because that was when the magic happened. When his parents were asleep, Benjie would sneak out their door, wanting to catch a glimpse of Lovely—the other Lovely—as she emerged from her apartment’s door. Unlike the Lovely he saw during day, this other Lovely was different. She had hair that looked like a big cloud of curls. It was blond most of the time, but the color changed every other week. She liked to wear sequined dresses—silver, gold, green, and red—that made her look like a tropical fish shimmering with all the colors of the sea. There were some nights when Lovely would put aside her sparkly gowns and emerge from her apartment dressed like an Egyptian queen or an Arabian princess. It all depended on the occasion.

Benjie first saw this other Lovely on a warm Friday night in May. He was sitting on the steps outside their door trying to escape from the heat inside their apartment. The clouds had been heavy with rain that entire day, but rain never fell. He was playing with his toy airplane, zooming it back and forth on the still breeze, when he caught a glimpse of a ghostly figure from the corner of his eye. His airplane froze in midflight.

From the apartment next door emerged a pale-faced Japanese woman who looked like Lovely but wasn’t quite her. She was bundled up in robes that looked suspiciously like the curtains from Lovely’s living room. Benjie stared at the woman from behind the low concrete wall that divided their apartments. When she caught him staring at her, she produced a fan from somewhere in her robes and covered her face. “Are you a duwende?” she asked, her eyes unblinking from behind the half moon of the fan’s white fabric.

“No,” he answered, bringing down his airplane from its interrupted flight.

“If you aren’t a duwende, then what are you?” Lovely asked, taking a step closer. The fan was fluttering in her hand.

Benjie wasn’t sure how he was supposed to answer. “I’m a boy,” he replied.

“A boy,” she said, narrowing her eyes. Then she closed the fan with a snap. “How dull. It would have been much more interesting if you were a duwende.”

Benjie stepped back. Her painted face looked unnerving. She tossed the fan into one of the folds in her sleeve, making it disappear.

“Why are you still awake?” Lovely asked. “Boys like you should already be asleep at this time of the night.”

“Why are *you* still awake?” Benjie retorted.

Lovely let out a small chuckle. “Because I’m not a boy,” she declared. Then she twirled, allowing Benjie to examine her appearance.

“You’re a girl?”

“I’m a magician,” Lovely answered, “and unlike boys and girls, magicians like me don’t need to sleep.”

Benjie regarded her with suspicion. He had never seen a magician before. “If you’re really a magician,” Benjie said, “that means you can do magic.”

“I can turn that thing you’re holding into something else,” Lovely replied. “What is it anyway?”

“It’s an airplane. Papa got it for me from the mall. He said that it was a bit expensive.”

“A dreadful thing,” Lovely said, her eyes rolling. “Would you miss it if I turned it into something else?”

Benjie paused to think. He wanted to know if she really had magic, so he decided to test her. “Here,” he said, handing the toy airplane to Lovely. “I’ll watch.”

“I’m not touching it,” she said, throwing up her hands. “Just put that awful thing on top of the wall.”

Benjie did as he was told. He positioned the airplane in between his mama’s potted bougainvillea shrubs and watched Lovely extend her hands over the airplane. Her brow knotted as she mumbled words that Benjie could barely understand. Then her body started to jerk, like she was being possessed. Just when Benjie thought he could see beams of light streaming forth from her palms, Lovely stopped.

“Too much effort,” she scoffed. “Not worth ruining all this makeup.”

“I knew you weren’t a magician,” Benjie said with a triumphant smirk.

“You win, little boy,” Lovely shrugged. “Now off to bed with you and I’ll be on my way.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“Out where?”

“Out there.”

“Because?”

“Too many questions, and I have too much to do! Now go on inside



before I tell your parents that you've been out."

Lovely pushed open the gate of her apartment and stepped out into the street. The fan appeared in her hand once again, and she twirled it with a flourish. "Goodbye, little boy," she said as she made her way down the street. In her bulky robe, Benjie thought she looked like a marshmallow that was learning how to walk. After a few steps, Lovely turned and looked behind her shoulder. Benjie was still there. Using her fan, she pointed at their door, commanding him to go back inside.

Benjie gave out a dismissive grunt and decided to call it a night. This was surely no magician. On his way in, he reached out to grab his toy airplane from on top of the concrete wall. To his surprise though, his fingers didn't touch a toy, nor did they touch an airplane. He had to take a closer look. In between the potted bougainvillea shrubs sat a folded paper butterfly. It was right where his airplane had been. He picked it up and examined it under the streetlight. Then he turned to see if he could still catch a glimpse of Lovely, but the street was empty and she was nowhere in sight.

Benjie spent the remaining weeks of that summer looking forward to Friday nights. From his bedroom window, he would spy Lovely slinking out of her apartment dressed in something both outrageous and beautiful. He would have wanted to go downstairs every time he saw her, but she always appeared at around ten o'clock in the evening, the same time that Benjie was just beginning to doze off.

The music was clearest in his bedroom. It played in the background as Benjie drifted off to sleep. The plaintive love songs were his nightly lullaby. They allowed him to slip into a world of fighter planes, butterflies, magicians, and dresses that sparkled like tropical fish.

*

Benjie placed the comb on the ledge above the bathroom sink. It was the first day of the new school year, and he was dressed in a crisp white uniform. He applied hair gel for the first time that morning and combed his hair repeatedly until it was perfectly parted to the side. The bathroom door was locked since he didn't want anybody barging in on him. It was the longest time he had ever spent in front of the mirror, and somehow, it felt wrong. But Benjie was in grade three now, and he needed to look the part. On the breast pocket of his shirt was a patch bearing the number





three. He wore it with pride, knowing that he was no longer one of the little kids. He smoothed the last strand of hair by his ear and smiled at his reflection in the mirror.

It was still dark outside when Benjie stepped out of their front door. He was greeted by the early morning breeze and the faint smell of rice being fried in somebody's kitchen. Jeepneys and tricycles were already rumbling in the distance. Just as Benjie stepped out of their apartment, Lovely emerged from hers.

"Ate," he called to her. He wanted to show off his sleek hairdo. But this was not the other Lovely who went out every Friday night. This was the Lovely who dressed just like everybody else and fanned herself with a piece of cardboard. He waved at her. She stared at him. She didn't seem to know who he was. "Where's my airplane?"

"Airplane?" Lovely asked. Her hands on her waist. Benjie didn't like this Lovely very much. Her face resembled a pan de sal that was in a constant state of frowning.

"My toy," Benjie said. "The one you turned into a butterfly. Remember?"

Lovely shrugged her shoulders and plodded out into the street.

Then Benjie felt a small twinge of panic. "Did you steal my toy?" he called after her. "Hey!" he called out again, but Lovely was too far to hear him.

For much of the day, Benjie sulked in his seat at the back of the classroom. It wasn't how he envisioned his first day of school to be. As he moped, Benjie observed his classmates. He knew most of them from the previous school year. The boys were all rowdy, and the girls liked to talk too much. He didn't feel like making friends.

That afternoon, Benjie walked home from school by himself. It was his first time to walk home without a companion. In previous years, his mama would fetch him by the school's gate. Now that he was in grade three, she said that he should be able to take care of himself.

As he made his way through the narrow streets of their neighborhood, Benjie couldn't help but think of his toy airplane. He was afraid of what his papa would say, so he was determined to get it back. He planned to confront Lovely as soon as he got home. He needed to sound tough and forceful, like his papa. He thought of what he would say to her. He even rehearsed his lines out loud as he made his way home. But as Benjie pushed open the gate of their garage, his eyes spotted something on top of the concrete wall. And there it was, just like magic. His toy airplane



looked like it had just made a perfect landing in between his mama's bougainvillea shrubs.

"Lovely has magic," Benjie told his parents over dinner that night.

"Who?" his mama asked.

"The lady next door. She took my airplane one night and turned it into a butterfly. It's now back to being an airplane after being stolen."

"She stole your airplane?" asked his papa.

Benjie paused. "I think she did. But she exchanged it for something else. And when I asked for it back, it suddenly reappeared. So I don't think that counts as stealing."

His parents looked puzzled.

"Why don't you play with your classmates instead?" his papa suggested. "Don't bother old people."

"You can play with Jomar and his brothers," added his mama. "Wasn't he your classmate last year?"

Jomar Bautista lived in the first apartment. He and his older brothers had an entire collection of toy airplanes. Benjie's papa said that Jomar's parents were hardworking folk. Just like them, the Bautistas were a respectable family that just happened to live on a bad street.

"But Lovely has magic," Benjie protested.

His papa gave him a stern look.

They ate the rest of their dinner in silence with only the music from the apartment next door ebbing in the air. After dinner, his papa lit a cigarette by the door, his mama cleared away the plates, and Benjie did the dishes. This was how their days usually ended.

Benjie slept in the smaller of two bedrooms. He had a desk, a cabinet, and a mattress on the floor. His mattress was pushed up against one of the walls. Ever since he could remember, Benjie had the habit of picking at the rotted-out ridges in the wall's wooden planks. He had picked at it so much that he could now worm his finger clear through to the other side.

It was through that tiny hole that he discovered the strange world next door. It was a world bathed in a dim, yellow light. If Benjie angled his line of sight properly, he could see a dresser with a large mirror. On some nights, he would see Lovely sitting at the dresser, her back turned to him. He wasn't sure which Lovely this was. She would just sit there and stare at her reflection as songs of love and yearning played on in the background. She was always still. Something about her stillness intrigued Benjie, but he couldn't quite understand what it was.



*

Lovely never went out on Saturday mornings. Instead, men would emerge from her door in the afternoon. Benjie didn't know who these men were, since none of them seemed to be from around their neighborhood.

One Saturday, Benjie and his mama were returning from the market when they saw a man dressed in jeans and an undershirt emerging from Apartment D. The man nodded in their direction. Benjie's mama didn't smile. She didn't even look his way. Instead, she hurried Benjie into their apartment and shut the door behind them. Benjie wanted to ask her who the man was, but his mama walked straight into the kitchen. She fumbled around with pots and pans, trying to look busy. Whenever she acted this way, Benjie knew that she wasn't in a talking mood. So he just turned on the TV.

"Benjie," his mama called after some time. "Jomar is having a birthday party tomorrow afternoon. Mrs. Bautista said they will have spaghetti and some ice cream."

Benjie flicked through the channels of the TV. He didn't want to go to the party. He had been to one of their parties before, and he didn't enjoy himself.

"Benjie," came his mama's voice. "It's Jomar's birthday tomorrow," she repeated.

"Yes," he said, stopping at a cartoon he had never seen before. He didn't bother to say anything else since he knew that he was being given no other option but to go.

The following day, Benjie sat through Jomar's birthday party wishing that he was somewhere else. Even if he wasn't sleepy, he forced himself to yawn as often as he could. The children were herded into the laundry area at the back of the apartment so as to not get in the way of the adults. Jomar's cousins were at the party. There was a big girl with a bowl cut and an equally big boy who breathed through his mouth. Jomar said that the two were twins.

The boy was flying a rocket through the air as it was being chased by a plane piloted by his sister. They circled the laundry area, making laser noises as they went darting by. Jomar and his brothers soon followed suit. They tried to gun down everybody else with their squad of jets. Benjie crouched beside the sink, content to just watch them dogfight in midair.



After running around in circles, the girl with the bowl cut flopped down next to Benjie. Panting, she asked him why he didn't want to play. The moment she spoke, the rest of the boys froze and stared in their direction. Then they started to jeer. The girl blushed. Benjie just frowned.

"No use, Marie," said one of Jomar's brothers. "Benjie doesn't like to play with airplanes."

"He likes playing with butterflies," the other one cut in. He flapped his wrists and fluttered around in circles.

Benjie felt something strange inside him. A ball of anger was starting to burn in his chest. But before it could ignite, it was quickly doused by a cold kind of panic that caused him to gasp for air. He did play with butterflies. He played with a paper butterfly one Friday night not too long ago. "I have an airplane, too!" Benjie protested as he jumped to his feet. "It's up in my room. I can get it!" But nobody heard Benjie because they had all doubled over in laughter.

Benjie left the laundry area and marched back to where the adults were. He tried to look for his mama, but he couldn't find her. He could feel the tears brimming in his eyes. When he knew that they were about to fall, he slipped out of the apartment unnoticed and made his way back home. Over dinner, his mama asked him why he had disappeared from the party. He said that his stomach wasn't feeling well and that he needed to use the bathroom.

*

That Friday night, Benjie spotted Lovely as she was about to leave her apartment. She was dressed in a shock of white and had a long, fluffy scarf around her neck. Her hair was big and blond. He ran out into the street and blocked her way.

"You told them about the butterfly, didn't you?" Benjie accused.

"And who are you, again?" Lovely asked, stroking her scarf like it was a pet.

"They laughed at me. They said I liked playing with butterflies instead of airplanes," Benjie frowned.

"Then you should have laughed at them, too. Now please get out of my way because I'm running late."

Benjie stepped aside with a scowl on his face. He watched Lovely walk down the street with the scarf swinging behind her like the tail of a cat.



Her strides were long and powerful. When she was a few houses away, she stopped, turned around, and marched back to where he was standing.

“Open your hand, little boy,” she ordered.

Benjie stretched out his hand, not really knowing what was going on. Lovely crouched in front of him and took his palm. One by one, she folded his fingers. First, it was the thumb, then the pinky. She made her way to the middle, leaving all but his middle finger folded. Then she commanded him to raise his middle finger and point it to the sky.

“This is what you show them when they laugh at you,” Lovely said.

Benjie was puzzled. He looked at his middle finger, examining it for anything extraordinary.

“Why?” he asked.

“Don’t you know that your middle finger has magic?” she asked. “Show it to anybody, and they run away! It also makes you feel brave.”

“Really?”

“That’s what I do whenever anybody laughs at me. So when those boys laugh at you, just show them your middle finger.”

Benjie smiled. Lovely got up and smoothed out the creases in her dress. “By the way,” she said, “you should only show your middle finger to bad people. You should never show it to your papa, or to your mama. And please don’t show it to your guardian angel, or to Mama Mary, or to Baby Jesus. If you do, you will die in your sleep and go to hell. Instantly.”

Benjie stood frozen under the streetlight, shocked at the prospect of going to hell. Lovely blew him a kiss and strutted her way down the street.

*

A general assembly was held in the school’s basketball court one Monday morning. It was their first general assembly since the start of the school year. After the singing of the national anthem, their principal stood on stage and announced that the school would be having three special guests for that week. Right on cue, a policeman, a doctor, and a fireman stepped onto the stage. Their principal announced that the three guests would make the rounds of the classrooms for their school’s annual Career Week.

It was shortly after lunch when Benjie’s teacher stopped their math lesson to welcome Sgt. Gomez to their classroom. He stepped in the door with a winsome smile. He was a familiar face in the neighborhood since he was one of the officers who manned the police station near the market.



He liked chatting with children under the santol tree in the police station's parking lot. The boys at the back of the classroom stood up and gave Sgt. Gomez a snappy salute. The girls held their notebooks in front of their faces to hide their giggles. Benjie just sat in his seat, wishing that their class had gotten somebody else.

Sgt. Gomez had a deep and commanding voice. For the first time that school year, the entire class was held in rapt attention. As he spoke, his gestures were firm and precise. He didn't sit down, choosing instead to address the class while standing at attention, straight as an arrow.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Sgt. Gomez asked.

Several hands shot into the air. Benjie didn't raise his hand. The policeman scanned the room. Upon seeing Benjie trying his best not to get noticed, Sgt. Gomez called on him.

Benjie stood up to recite. He had no idea what he wanted to be when he grew up, so he just said what he knew Sgt. Gomez wanted to hear. "I want to become a policeman," Benjie said. He regretted it instantly.

The class snickered and was shushed by their teacher.

Sgt. Gomez smiled and gave Benjie a quick salute. "I'll have to remember you then," he said.

Benjie sank back into his seat. He took out his notebook and doodled for the rest of the day, never once looking up.

"Sgt. Benjie," one of the boys called as Benjie stepped out of the classroom that afternoon. The class had been dismissed, and the students were all starting to go home.

When he turned to look at them, they folded their wrists and kicked their heels up in the air. They laughed and started prancing around like ballerinas. For a split second, Benjie didn't know what to do. Then he showed them his middle finger.

Just then, their teacher walked out of the classroom. She scolded the boys for the ruckus in the corridor. Then she turned to Benjie and saw his middle finger flashing straight at her. She had a look of indignation on her face. He didn't know what to do, so Benjie just ran away. He ran all the way home.

Benjie didn't use his middle finger after that. When he told Lovely about it, she threw her head back in laughter. She laughed so hard that she popped the zipper of her emerald dress and had to make do with a safety pin instead.

*

That year, Independence Day fell on a Friday. Classes were suspended, but Benjie's teachers made up for it by giving them a lot of homework. Lovely emerged from her apartment close to midnight wearing a *baro't saya*, the saya of which resembled a mini skirt. It rose above her knees, revealing legs that looked like a pair of tree trunks.

"Wow," Benjie said, staring down at her bare legs.

"It's the country's birthday." Lovely replied, her arms outstretched. "Have you greeted the country a happy birthday?"

"We did," Benjie replied. "We had a long program in school. All our teachers were dressed just like you."

"Including this scandalous thing?" she asked, referring to the skirt that was cut too close for comfort.

Benjie shook his head. "Their dresses were much longer."

"Thought so," Lovely replied. "I bet those teachers have dreadful-looking knees. Fat ones. Dark ones. Like the faces of pigs."

Benjie stared at Lovely's legs. "Your legs look like the legs of my papa."

Lovely opened her fan with a snap. She glared at him as the fan fluttered in her hand. Despite her narrowed eyes, Benjie could tell that she was trying not to laugh.

"Alright little boy," she said, closing the fan. "Go back inside because I have a party to go to."

"A birthday party?"

"Something like that."

"Will it be fun?"

"A riot."

"Can I come with you?"

"Of course not," Lovely exclaimed.

"Why not?"

Lovely paused. "Adults only. No children allowed."

"How come?"

"Because I say so," Lovely declared. Then she laughed a deep, booming laugh, like the laugh of villains in cartoons. She walked down the street and waved goodbye to Benjie. "Adios patria adorada," she recited, her fan twirling in the air. "Venezuela, caserola, arinola . . . etcetera, etcetera, etcetera."

*

It was in the wee hours of the morning when Benjie was awakened by the sound of fireworks. The Independence Day celebrations in the nearby plaza seemed to be going strong. He got out of bed and approached his window. The night sky bloomed with fireworks of white, blue, and red.

On the street below, Benjie saw Lovely making her way back to her apartment. He was about to greet her but decided against it. Lovely had company. She was with a man. He had a bottle in one hand and couldn't seem to walk in a straight line. Lovely fumbled for her keys with the man half-slumped on her shoulder. Benjie watched from the window, wondering if the man was sick. After they entered her apartment, the familiar music began to play.

Benjie went back to bed. He closed his eyes and tried to go to sleep. For a while, all he could hear were the love songs from the apartment next door. Then he heard a clatter. It sounded as if something had fallen. He heard another clatter a few minutes later. This time, it was much louder. The sound bothered him. He sat up on his mattress and peered into the crevice in the wall.

Through the rot in the wood, he saw Lovely pushed up against the dresser. She had her arms around the man's shoulders, while the man had his hands on her waist. Then the man lowered his pants. Benjie's heart started to race. They were moving together—Lovely and the strange man—causing the dresser to shake in the dim light. It was like they were playing a game, or maybe dancing. It was a strange dance that Benjie had never seen before. Then all of a sudden, the man pulled back and slapped Lovely across the face. It was a loud slap, loud enough to be heard above the music. It didn't seem like they were playing anymore. The man looked angry. He grabbed Lovely by the arm and hurled her aside. Benjie could no longer see where Lovely had disappeared to. The music was loud. It had been turned up louder than usual. Underneath the crooning, Benjie thought he could hear Lovely's voice. He didn't like the sound of her voice. After a while, he could no longer hear her.

Benjie pressed his face closer to the wall. He wanted to see what was going on. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel its vibrations in his chest. Then a blur darted across the tiny hole. Benjie drew back. The strange man was pacing back and forth in the room next door. He was kicking things aside. Then he sat on the dresser, panting. In the yellow glow, Benjie could see the rise and fall of his shoulders. The man's gaze lingered on the floor. It crept up the wall, inch by inch, until it passed



over the tiny hole that Benjie was looking through. The man narrowed his eyes as his gaze met Benjie's. Then he picked up one of the lotion bottles on the dresser and hurled it in Benjie's direction. It crashed into the wall, sending Benjie scampering to the far side of his room. He retreated into the dark and forced himself to become small, so small he could fit into his room's tiniest corner. The sound of the bottle hitting the wall rang in his head like an explosion. He pressed his hands against his ears. He didn't want to hear anything. Nothing at all. But the music from Lovely's apartment continued to play. It played long into the night.

Benjie didn't sleep. Whenever he closed his eyes, he would see the man's face floating in dim glow of the room next door. Benjie would never forget that face. He couldn't, because it was a face he had seen before. He would remember that face for many years to come.

His mama found him the following morning crouched in a corner of his room. He was running a fevered sweat. When he saw her, Benjie rushed to her side and dissolved into tears.

Benjie didn't go to school for the next few days. He spent his mornings sitting by the window of his room, hoping to see Lovely emerge from her apartment, but she never did. After a week or so, the smell got stronger. It was Benjie's papa who reported the smell to the police.

It was all over the news. The body of Lovely, also known as Luisito Amor, was discovered in Apartment D. Reports said that the victim's face was repeatedly smashed by a blunt object to a point beyond recognition. The assailant was still unknown, and there were no witnesses to the crime.

What the reports didn't say was that the investigators discovered a tiny hole in the wall of Benjie's bedroom. They asked Benjie questions as he stood there, clinging to his mama's waist. When they couldn't get anything out of him, the police apologized to Benjie's parents, saying it was a pity that respectable people such as themselves had to be dragged into such a sordid affair. But the investigators would be back. They returned to the apartment regularly, armed with more and more questions with each succeeding visit.

*

Benjie didn't like the cold. The aircon inside the room was set to the lowest possible temperature. He didn't like the room either, since it was



completely bare, except for a ticking clock that hung from one of the walls. He also didn't like the man sitting across the table from them. The man said he was a doctor, but Benjie didn't believe him.

A month had gone by since the incident, and still, the same questions were being asked. Benjie had seen and heard many things. He was also told to say certain things, by both his parents and the police, all of which he didn't understand. His own recollection of the event had become confused. He didn't know who or what to believe in anymore. He wasn't even sure if he could believe himself.

"It was dark in your room," the doctor said, "much too dark to see anything, right?" Benjie couldn't keep track of how many times the man had asked him this question. "I wouldn't be able to see anything if I were there with you."

Benjie felt his mama take his hand underneath the table. She gripped it. He wasn't sure if the gesture was supposed to give him comfort or if it was she who needed the comforting. His papa was there, too, and he looked grim.

Benjie knew what this doctor wanted to hear. For three straight days, he and his parents were made to sit in this cold room inside the police station. For those three days, the doctor would ask him the same questions, over and over again.

His mama had a scared look on her face. It was a look that had seemed to have gained permanence over the past few days. She looked older and tired.

"Well, Benjie?" the doctor asked, reclining in his chair.

Benjie kept his eyes down.

Then his papa slammed his fists on the table. The table jolted. It took everybody by surprise. His papa had an angry look on his face. It was like there was something he wanted to say but couldn't say it. Instead, he buried his face in his hands. Then he wiped both hands across his face, as if he was trying to erase the anger. Benjie was afraid of his papa. He could never really look at the man.

He felt his mama's grip grow tighter. She had bowed her head beside Benjie and began to cry. At first it was a snuffle, then her shoulders began to shake. It was Benjie's first time to see his mama cry. It was a frightening sight to behold, perhaps more frightening than his papa's anger.

The ordeal was exhausting. Somehow, Benjie had the feeling that this was all his fault. The events of the past few days were a confused blur by



now. But amid all the confusion, one thing was clear to Benjie from the very start—he was the only one who could make things better. He needed to make things better so his mama would stop crying.

So he blurted it out—the words he knew the doctor wanted to hear. “I didn’t see anything.”

The doctor sat up in his seat, suddenly alert. “Say that again?” he asked after a pause.

“I didn’t see anything.” Benjie said, enunciating every word with care. Silence choked the room.

“Good boy,” the doctor said.

“Good boy,” his papa said soon after.

Benjie waited for his mama to say something, but she didn’t.

The man across the table smiled. “Now, all those horrible things you mentioned about Sgt. Gomez,” he said as he folded his hands on the table, “you know that Sgt. Gomez is a good man, right?”

Benjie straightened himself in his chair and nodded.

“He even went to your school to talk about being a policeman.”

“Yes, Sir,” Benjie said.

“Would you say that he’s a good man?”

“Yes, Sir. A good man.”

The doctor smiled. He rose from his seat to shake Benjie’s hand. It was a firm handshake, like the handshake between gentlemen. He clapped Benjie’s papa on the back and smiled at him. He turned to Benjie’s mama and gave her a nod. Then he opened the door and showed the family out of the room. “Thank you for your time,” he said to nobody in particular.

Another policeman met them at the door and walked them out of the police station. Outside, it was already getting dark.

*

Over the next few weeks, people came to clear the apartment next door. Their landlord wanted all of Lovely’s belongings thrown away so as to erase all traces of the event that had happened that night. Benjie watched as piles of sparkling dresses were carried out the door and tossed into black garbage bags. He felt that Lovely was disappearing from the world, one dress at a time. After a few days, the apartment was empty. The floors and walls were all scrubbed clean, and Apartment D was put up for rent.





But nobody wanted to rent the apartment. People talked. It was close to impossible to keep the events of that night a secret, so the apartment remained vacant for a long time, and their street retained its reputation as a bad street.

*

Benjie remembers that Friday night well. It crosses his mind quite often, whether he likes it or not. It was the week before their quarterly exams. He was supposed to be studying, but didn't feel like it. He was sitting by their doorstep, whiling the time away, when he noticed something curious on top of the concrete wall. There, in the space between the bougainvillea shrubs, was a fan. It was a white fan. The people who had come to clear the apartment next door must have left it on top of the wall as they rushed to dispose of all the other things.

Benjie walked to the wall and picked it up. Using both hands, he unfolded the fan until it spread out before him like a half moon. The fabric was slight, like the wings of a butterfly. Benjie's hands began to tremble. Then, with a snap, he closed the fan and clenched it in his fist. He felt a pounding in his chest.

Benjie made his way back inside their apartment. He marched into the bathroom and shut the door behind him, making sure that it was locked. In the bathroom, Benjie was alone. It was just him and his reflection in the speckled mirror. A boy whom he had known all his life stared back at him from not too far away. Tonight though, the boy looked like a different person.

Without knowing why, Benjie approached the mirror. Rib by rib, he opened the fan. Then he raised the fan to the level of his eyes. The white fabric covered half of his face, from his nose down to his chin. His eyes gazed out from behind the edge of the fan. The strange boy in the mirror regarded him with frightened eyes.

Benjie thought back to that night—the rotted-out hole in wall of his room, the somber music, her face, and what they had done to her face. Then he looked at his own face and into his own eyes and thought of what they had done to him. From behind the fan's delicate fabric, Benjie could see tears gathering in the eyes of the boy. Then his eyes began to rage. At that moment, Benjie felt a kind of excitement he had never felt before. The fan felt good in his hand; it felt sharp, like it could cut. It felt like





power, and like rebellion. Benjie thought of all the people who had hurt him and all the hurt he wanted to inflict.

A lot of things went through Benjie's mind that night as he stood bent over the bathroom sink, his body wracked with a convulsion of sobs. He had waged many wars since then, both noble and irrational, against others and against himself. The boy in the mirror would never understand those future wars, their reasons and their cost. But now that he had emerged from them, Benjie allowed himself a moment to look back to that long-ago night. He had felt something that night as he took in the sight of it all—the young boy in the mirror, the half moon of the fan, and everything that the fan could and could not conceal. Benjie now knew what it felt like, the moment he closed the fan and put it away, seeing himself for what felt like the first time. It felt like truth.