Creek

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There was something in the news a while back about a boy from the slums who had drowned in the Pasig River. It had been raining hard the day before and the boy was playing with his friends when he slipped and fell into the water. His body was found hours later in a garbage pile along the riverbank, quite a distance from where he must have drowned. I remember thinking how everyone must be blaming the boy's parents. The reporter interviewed the mother. She says she was asleep when it happened, exhausted from a ten-hour shift at the nearby brassiere factory. I guess I could *see* how everyone watching the news might think it was her fault, that she did not do enough to keep her child safe. I felt bad for the mother. She was crying and wailing while being interviewed, clutching a framed photo of her son, beaming in his brown preschool uniform.

I would have cried too, if it had happened to me. If you don't cry, if you don't show how distraught you are, people will think there is something wrong with you.

When I was a little girl growing up in the province, children were less coddled, allowed (more or less) to play without adult supervision. We lived in Laguna, in a sprawling subdivision intended as a housing project for government employees during the Marcos years. My father, an engineer at the provincial public works department, knew all the homeowners, not only as neighbors but as coworkers since all of them worked at the Provincial Capitol. It started out as a closely-knit community, at least until the developer pulled out in the middle of the project because of some legal dispute, leaving almost half of the project unfinished. The undeveloped area was still largely forested and a creek ran through it. There was no cable TV back then, or Internet, or other things that kept children at home, so we were mostly outdoors climbing trees, playing in the streets, riding our bicycles.

It was the creek that drew most of the children, especially on those long summers. The water ran clear and cool from the adjoining property—also a large, vacant tract of forest land—and branched out into riffles where you could stand on the creek bed and watch the water part around your feet then meander downstream to a natural pool where you could sometimes go swimming.

Although I was tall for my age, the water in the pool went up as high as my chest and I had to hold on to the large, sharp stones to make sure I did not lose my footing. During the rainy season, water overflowed along the banks and made it impossible to swim. Some of the kids, perhaps out of boredom more than adventurousness, would still go anyway even in the middle of a typhoon, which would worry their parents to no end. Neighbors would organize themselves haphazardly into search parties and look for their kids along the creek then spank them all the way home. As with many other things back then, you were allowed a broader leeway for mischief but go too far and the consequences were often severe.

I was eleven when the province decided to build the new government center which would end up displacing many families living in the center of the capital city. To convince these families and households—hundreds of people, including children—to consent to the development, they were promised relocation in our subdivision. Photographs of our erstwhile paradise, a row of tiny, low-cost houses with proudly well-kept lawns, were passed around during public consultations, next to a consent and waiver form awaiting their signatures.

I still remember clearly the day they all moved into the subdivision. They had to be bused in by shifts since there were so many of them. Several families, including some from our street, decided to move out of the subdivision weeks before. We all felt betrayed that our idyllic community was about to turn into a "squatter relocation site." When the first wave of families moved into our street—with their pots and pans and straw sleeping mats—and occupied the once-loved houses of our former neighbors, my father could not help but shake his head in disgust. His deep disappointment was later on exacerbated when we found that the government had let many more families into the subdivision even after all the houses had been filled. They were assigned undeveloped plots of land, given nipa and other light materials, and told to build their own makeshift homes. My father had three daughters, and it

seemed more and more like a good idea to establish a home somewhere else. However, he felt that a move on our part would reflect poorly on the new government center project and embarrass the governor so we stayed on.

It was the same year that I met Celso and Manny. Manny was twelve years old, the son of a woodcarver and the middle child of a brood of five. Celso was two years older. I knew very little of Celso's family, other than that his family occupied the house left by Engr. Manaloto, my father's former colleague. Celso had an intense, brooding demeanor and looked unusually strong and tall for his age. A scar ran down his right cheekbone, which Celso said he got from a street fight, but Manny confided was from a smack on the face with a bottle during one of his father's drunken episodes.

Manny had known Celso even before they moved into the subdivision. They used to live on the same plot of government land from which they were evicted to give way to the provincial hospital. Manny was often bullied because of his height so he stuck close to Celso for protection. In return, Manny would give Celso cigarettes which he pilfered from his mother's sari-sari store.

We spent a whole summer together hanging out at their storefront, sitting under the eaves to get away from the sun. Sometimes Manny's mother would see me—"Engr. Fernando's pretty little girl"—and offer me a cold Coca-Cola. She was a nice lady, always smiling at me and asking about my parents, but the look in her eyes would turn into a mix of concern and disappointment every time she saw Celso. "Manny used to be such a good son until he started running with that boy," she told me one time when Celso was not around. She warned me to stay away from Celso or she would tell my father the kind of company I had been keeping. "You are just a baby, and Celso is almost a grown man," she said. "It would be a pity if something happened to you."

I indignantly told her to shut up and mind her own business. I was sitting on the small wooden bench she kept for customers, and she was standing in right front of me. She put her hand on her chest and wore a pained and surprised look—like she had been shot by someone she cared about. "My father would never believe you," I shouted at her. "He has a lot of important friends. If you keep meddling in my life I'll make sure that they throw your whole family out on the street!" I would always hear my parents complaining about our refugee neighbors—how unclean they were, how they let their garbage pile up in front of their houses, how the subdivision had no security

guards and lampposts because they would not pay the monthly dues. I knew how the original homeowners hated them, all the bad names they were called behind their backs: thieves, deadbeats, squatters.

At the same time, I knew, even then, that there was something inherently immoral in the words that just came out of my mouth, the same way I knew that stealing and cruelty were wrong, but I only had a child's meager understanding of the dynamics of class and of the devastating power of words. What felt clear at the time was that I could not allow Manny's mother to dictate upon my life more than I could our housemaid. Her face turned red and she opened her mouth as if wanting to speak but, instead, she slunk back inside the store, defeated. Needless to say, she stopped offering me free Cokes, but she also stopped pestering me about Celso.

Manny never knew about my encounter with his mother although I doubted that things would have changed between us if he did. After all, I was the daughter of a government official. My family owned a house and the piece of land on which it stood. They were mere "guests" of our community, subject to expulsion at a moment's notice. So Celso and Manny continued to be my cheery playmates and bodyguards who, in turn, treated me like their spoiled little sister.

We started going back to the creek at the end of May when the first rains came. Just a few weeks before, the creek bed was almost dried up; the spots where water used to pool now looked more like muddy puddles. After a few days of continuous rain, however, the creek started to flow again.

Nothing attracts children like water: the shimmering relief of it, dark and languid beneath the surface, boisterous and frantic above. I liked to walk around the shallow portions and feel the cool water and the small, smooth pebbles under my bare feet while the boys raced paper boats or went swimming. Many times at the creek there would be other children, dark-skinned and gaunt, most of whom I had never seen before. They were the children of transients or new settlers who had come to live at the "tent community" on the undeveloped portions of the subdivision and who used the creek for bathing or for washing their clothes.

It was drizzling the morning the incident happened, the tail end of a typhoon that battered the entire island of Luzon for almost a week. The wind had knocked down the power lines so there was no electricity in the neighborhood. My father forbade us from playing outside. The night before,

I just stayed at home playing with my sisters amid the steady hiss of our Coleman gas lantern while we rode out the worst of the storm.

I awoke that morning and saw Celso waving at me excitedly from outside our wrought iron gate. I slipped out of my sleep clothes and put on a shirt and a pair of shorts and sneaked out of my room, careful not to wake my sisters, then out the back door. Celso held his umbrella for me and he began walking quickly in the direction of the creek, as I tried to keep pace with him.

"Listen," Celso said. "Manny and I … there's something we found in the creek that we want you to see."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Is Manny there right now?"

Celso explained how he and Manny had been up very early picking up mangoes that had fallen from the trees during the storm the night before. "Manny had the idea of washing the mangoes in the creek since it was nearby," Celso said as he helped me down the muddy, slippery trail that led down to the creek. "When we got down we saw something that looked like a bundle of rags washed up along the side. We walked up closer to see what it was."

By this time, Celso and I were already walking along the creek. In the distance, I could see Manny squatting over something. As we drew closer, I saw what it was and I screamed. It was the body of a small child, around three, four years old: a girl. She was probably playing in the creek the day before when she got caught in the current and drowned.

Celso shushed me. "It's alright, Luisa," Celso said. "I just want to show it to you. So we can decide what to do with it together."

The body was face down in the mud. Manny stood and backed off so I could get a better view. Manny's face looked very pale. I looked to the side, and I saw that he had already lost his breakfast. I trembled as I approached the body, and I started crying.

"What are we going to do with it?" I asked Celso.

"Celso said we should bury it," Manny answered. "I already told Celso how crazy that was. Somebody's going to be looking for this kid. If they find out …"

"Shut up, Manny!" Celso shouted as he grabbed Manny by his shirt and shook him with his big, strong arms. Manny lost his balance and fell into the mud.

"Celso," I said through my tears. "I want to go home."

"You will, Luisa," Celso said. "I just need you and Manny to help me with this one thing. Look, nobody's died here at the creek before. Once people get wind of this our parents will never let us back here."

I was looking at Manny. He was sitting where he had fallen, hugging his knees and crying. Neither of us was convinced by Celso's explanation but we went along with it anyway. Celso approached the dead body and knelt beside it. He turned it over and washed the mud and grit off its face. Then he started praying while swaying from side to side. It was a weird prayer that sounded foreign and vaguely Arabic, but I had the feeling it was all just gibberish, some kind of glossolalic chant he must have picked up from one of those spirit-possession movies.

My heart jumped when he snapped out of it and looked right at me with his intense, deep-set eyes. Celso had been growing a mustache and, in his sleeveless shirt that showed his muscular arms as he sat in the light rain, he seemed like a full-grown man. "Will you help me, Luisa?" he asked. I nodded my head nervously. Celso turned his head to Manny and ordered him to get a fallen tree branch and dig a hole up at the embankment, behind the bushes. Manny, now dazed and emotionless, did as he was told.

It took only a few minutes for Manny to dig out the loose, wet earth. Celso carried the body and gently lowered it into the hole. All three of us shoveled dirt over the body with our hands, our clothes drenched with rain and sweat. I was exhausted. We all sat around the grave we had made, silent and motionless.

Celso made us promise not to tell anyone as he worked to conceal the grave by placing rocks and leaves over it and erasing our footprints. If somebody were to find out about it, he said he would know it was us.

My parents and sisters were about to take their lunch when I got home. My mother was fuming mad to see me in my soiled, wet clothes especially after my father had specifically told me not to play outside. They had been looking for me all morning. I went to my room to change and while I was changing I could hear her and my father fighting about what to do with me. I decided I was not in the mood to eat and spent the day in bed.

A week later, I was back in school. I kept myself busy with schoolwork, even taking up special classes in the afternoon to make the time pass faster. It was an exclusive private school and after that strange incident with Celso and Manny, I was glad to be hanging out with girls again, especially those my age. Months passed without me seeing Celso or Manny. I never returned

to the creek. The fact that the squatter problem in our subdivision worsened exponentially had something to do with it. Some of the new settlers had begun putting up their shanties near the creek. Not only were they using it to wash clothes and dishes—they had turned it into an all-purpose sewage system. For the most part I could not return because of what we had left there. But I discovered that I had a talent for keeping secrets, and the longer I held this particular secret the more distance I could create between it and me.

The day after we buried the girl, a search party went around the creek and the wooded area of the subdivision to look for her. I peeked at them from our window, deathly afraid that they would make a sudden turn to our house bearing proof that I was somehow involved in her disappearance. But nothing happened. We had gotten away with it cleanly.

Months later, my father had had enough of the squatter problem and we moved out of the subdivision. We held out for as long as we could, but all our old neighbors had already left so my father simply gave up and found a house for us in a private, gated community. The day we left I did not even bother saying goodbye to Celso and Manny.

It was after we had settled into our new home that I first encountered the sense of reality "branching out" from that morning at the creek into two distinct versions. As certain as I was that the search party came up empty, that the disappearance was just chalked up to the usual suspects (such as the legend of the criminal syndicate in the area that kidnapped children, deformed them, and brought them to Manila to beg in the streets), I was experiencing, simultaneously and as a passive observer, an alternate life where the search party *did* find the body. Maybe the hole Manny dug was too shallow. Maybe the police used a scent-tracking dog which led them to the spot, I don't know.

What I do remember clearly is an image in my mind of a newspaper report about the police finding the dead girl and how it was suspected that other children living in the subdivision were responsible. In that other reality the trail of evidence would eventually lead to Manny (an article of clothing he had left in the hole he dug, I imagined) and he would have given up Celso and me. I remember, mostly, only vague details. I saw myself in a hospital somewhere or locked up in an old house, my hands and arms strapped to the bed.

But that is not *this* reality.

Here, I grew up like any normal teenager. I was sent to Manila to study. I took up accountancy in college and worked at a large accounting firm for

a year before transferring to a shipping company. I met Greg there. He was the manager of our finance department. We got married, had three children. Greg asked me to quit my job and stay home to take care of our boys so I did. Sometimes I look back on the twenty plus years we have been married and I can honestly say that many of them had been happy and fulfilling. I admit that I was not always easy to deal with (especially with my "episodes") and I'm lucky that Greg had always been very patient with me. So when the boys grew up, had their own lives, I let Greg alone to do whatever he wanted. He could play golf all day, keep a mistress, have children with another woman if he wanted to start his life over. I suppose he deserved as much.

The "episodes" stopped when I was thirty-nine years old. Before that, I would have visions, on a more or less regular basis, of myself under some kind of hospice care, tended by strangers in white uniforms. The visions worsened and turned violent after I had children. I would sometimes be watching my sons sleep then see, in another world, myself pressing a pillow over a child's face, smothering it, long enough until the writhing and the kicking stops. The horror of it was so much that I resorted to self-medicating with sedatives, just to fight off the anxiety that the violence and suffering I knew I was responsible for—that I knew I was capable of—would spill over into this life.

Sometimes the visions would be of me, surrounded by doctors and other patients. I could smell the bleach on the white linen sheets, sense the bitter aftertaste of medicine in the back of my throat. It was another life, another world overlapping with the one I was occupying. I could only imagine the humiliation that Greg had to endure all these years, bringing me in and out of the hospital to see all sorts of specialists, all while we were trying to raise our sons.

Then one day I awoke and knew for certain that my troubles were over. I lay down in bed night after night trying to bring it back, to conjure that other, terrifying world I had grown so accustomed to but I drew a blank. I realized that, in that other branch of that morning by the creek, I was dead at the age of thirty-nine.

My youngest, Darren, had been a sickly baby and he almost died of pneumonia when he was three months old. By the doctors' account, Darren's heart stopped for a full minute before they were able to revive him. I felt Darren was special, that although he would never remember how it felt like to leave this world for another, he had been touched, like his mother. And so, of all my boys, I loved him the most.

I thought I could someday talk to Darren about the things I had seen, about what happened there at the creek, that he and I would come to some special understanding, but Darren grew up closer to Greg than to me. He loved sports and adored his older brothers. He goes to college now, and I only see him on Wednesdays when he comes home to have his laundry done.

Then yesterday I see this thing on the news, about a man named Rodney Gulanan arrested for the murder of three people—two teenage boys and a woman in her twenties. The victims were found wrapped in plastic and buried in his backyard in Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya, where Gulanan was an incumbent municipal councilor. The only reason it made the news in Manila was that the killer happened to be a local politician. When they showed a photo of the man, the first thing I noticed was the scar on the right side of his face, faded but still quite prominent. His face was onscreen only for a few seconds but it was enough for me to get a clear sense of his face, his eyes. I knew it was Celso.

So I change into my jeans, leave the house, and get on a bus to Vizcaya. I don't know what I'm going to do exactly. The evening news said the police are expecting many more bodies to surface since Gulanan had admitted to killing at least fifteen more. The headlines today screamed "First Filipino Serial Killer Detained in NV Jail!" My initial plan had been to go there and pretend to be his lawyer just to gain access to him. I knew I would not be able to hold the charade for very long but I just wanted to be close to him for a few moments, just enough for me to look him in the eye and see that glint of recognition. Something happened that day in the creek, some mystery of time and space, some great horror unlocked. I need Celso to acknowledge his part in this.

The bus stops at a canteen in Santa Fe where all the passengers get off the bus to have instant coffee and *goto*. I go down as well to stretch and use the toilet. The air is cold. I had slept most of the way, and it is only now that I notice we are on top of a mountain. I open my shoulder bag, fish out my shawl, and put it around my shoulders. The canteen is poorly lit. I see a little boy, around three years old (you get good at guessing children's ages after you have three of your own) walking around, looking for his mother. I see that he is straying perilously close to the highway, oblivious to the trucks and buses making their way through the light fog. As I approach the boy, I realize I am a complete stranger here, that I have all the freedom to do anything I want.

But that is another person in another world, and she is gone.