

# A Lost History of the Indio

**Lakan Umali**

MOTHER SPAIN WAS under assault. Her faithful servants around the world were abandoning her, one by one, lured by the devil's riches and empty promises of freedom. Vultures eyed her lovingly. New empires sprung up from across the Atlantic, eager to snatch her jewels and territories with their bloody talons. From the balcony of his *bahay na bato*, Fray Horacio Werfell looked at Barrio Lazaro, and gave God thanks for the town's comforting silence, disturbed only by the sound of a light drizzle. In the months prior, he had heard so many pieces of unsettling news. Printing presses distributed pamphlets and newsletters containing scandalous content. Parties among the educated classes were being used as fronts for subversive meetings. A novel, recently published abroad, was being circulated among the inhabitants of Manila and its nearby environs, and spread the most insidious lies about Spain. Vandals threw paint at churches. Rebels captured poor friars and cooked them over fires, dancing to their screams as one danced to the music of the flamenco.

Even Barrio Lazaro was not immune to this disease sweeping the entire colony. He knew the faithfulness of his flock. He knew it. He had not spent a decade cultivating its people, as a farmer tends to his soil, to see the fruits of his labor bear worms. Yet, whispers reached him, of demonic forces congregating beyond the River Liwa, in the wilds of Mount Caridad. A deranged murderess led a small band of mad men. His faithful servant Julio had informed him of the rumors. This woman conducted profane rites in the old ritual grounds of the pagans, delivering masses and communion as if she were a rightfully anointed priest. These natives

were becoming restless, Werfell thought. He longed for the days of discipline, when *indios* could be whipped within an inch of their lives for impertinence.

Sometimes, they even grew bold enough to leave their mountain lair. They conducted raids against poor priests and merchants, ambushing them on the dark road to civilization. The worst of it, he thought, was that some of Barrio Lazaro's citizens were sympathetic, even supportive of their cause, according to Julio and his friends. Farmers underreporting how many chickens, carabaos, pigs they owned, to be able to donate the excess goods to the *tulisanes*. Strangers coming and going into town to supply them with intelligence. Heretical thoughts spreading throughout the populace, words that should never be uttered, like *filibustero*, *kagawasan*, and *independencia*.

He took a sip of tea, brewed from the bitterest tea leaves to be found in the Southern Tagalog region. He winced at the taste. His fellow priests had urged him to allow his body rest in his old age. Before, he often practiced flagellation, sleeping on stones, and wearing a hairshirt. But the Franciscan physician advised him to avoid these punishments. So, he was offered a position, away from the decadence of Manila, in a quiet village of his choosing. Fray Werfell picked one of the more storm-racked areas for penance, and indulged himself with bitter food and beverage, so he could still somehow continue mortifying the flesh in his own little way.

The smell of rain and champaka wafted into his bedroom. The tree had been only a tiny sapling in his first year, but over time, it grew taller than his own home, its leafy branches heavy with white flowers. The natives had advised him not to plant such a tree when he arrived. They told him that it would only tumble when storm-season came. But he ignored his flock's surprising lack of faith; God would keep the tree sturdy during his stay.

But he was growing old; he could feel the sluggishness in his cells. The champaka tree would outlast him, would outlast the next friar. But it would hopefully not outlast Mother Spain's glory, which he ached to secure. Even though his joints pained him, even though he suffered from the most vivid waking dreams—visions of the Holy Mother in the sky at sunrise, demons at his bedside taunting him—which would have been deemed as miraculous in his youth, but as signs of dotage in his current state, he would still sacrifice whatever could be sacrificed.

He moved to his study desk. He surveyed the books on the shelf above, plentiful enough to cover half the wall. Many of the books sprung from Werfell's pen; ecclesiastical writings, philosophical tracts about the nature of divinity, tax records and censuses. He even wrote a small text of fables to educate the children. It was

such a success that the Archbishop of Manila sent him a personal commendation and advised other priests to follow his example.

Now, the Archbishop had given Werfell an even greater task. He looked at the thick, empty book that stood near the top of the pile on his desk, second only to the Bible. He took it, felt the fine leather of the cover, his hands tingling as he sifted through page after page. He imagined the beautiful, blank pages filled with his script. Not just his script, he thought, but God's script. For the Archbishop had assigned him to write *The History of the Indio*, the canonical history of the colony, to be used in every schoolhouse from these islands to Spain. It would be the crowning moment of not only his priesthood, but of his existence on this earth. His head swam with all the wonders that would await him in this life and the next.

The wedding, attended by nearly everyone in Barrio Lazaro, the tiny church throbbing with god-parents and well-wishers. Crowds following the couple to Conching's Panciteria, the only venue in the small town big enough to host the celebratory feast. The couple showered in rice grains. Showered again in coins. Kisses. From Armando's sisters, cousins, patrons, sycophants, ghosts. Carina's lips chafed. The night could not arrive any sooner, when they were both in bed.

He fell asleep soon after. Carina snuck out of bed and walked outside. The air was tolerable. She made her way to the River Liwa, lifting her nightgown as she crossed its waters. She hiked through the slowly rising forest, which clung to the mountain's slopes. She had so frequently climbed this trail the past year, since she first arrived, that she could tell where she was going by the rocks that scratched her feet, and the leaves that tangled themselves in her hair. The small fires of the enclosure gleamed in the distance.

There, stirring a pot over glowing embers. Agueda. While she cooked, a small crowd of women listened to her speak. They sat on the forest floor, their heads tilted up at the former *hermana mayor*, her dark mouth uttering heresies that they all imbibed with gusto. She spotted Carina moving toward her, and gestured for the group to take the pot and leave.

"Congratulations," she told Carina. "I'm sorry I could not pay my respects."

Agueda stood up. Her curly hair crowned around her head, made her appear taller than she was. The two women walked away from the camp. They reached a spot where nothing glimmered but starlight. Carina placed her shawl on the ground before sitting down. Agueda dug her fingers in the soil.

Settled on the forest-floor, rested from the long hike and the brief lecture, they embraced. The last time Carina had seen her, the woman had been untying a blindfold

from her eyes, wiping the twigs and clumps of dirt that had fallen on her garments, during her journey inside the cave. Agueda had led her to the mouth, where she then had to make the rest of the trek alone, blindfolded, her feet traversing the slippery rocks within, her hands cut by the sharp edges of the walls, until she reached the pool of water at the cave's bottom. There, she lingered until she heard the cacophony of voices. They asked her many questions—about the nature of the islands before the coming of the Spaniards, the last words of Christ on the cross, the configuration of the heavenly host after the ascension—and once they were satisfied with her answers, they led her back to the cave's mouth, where Agueda waited, and brought her to light.

“How was your wedding night?” Agueda asked.

“Reminded me of horseback riding,” Carina replied, and they both laughed. She asked about the current state of the camp. Agueda replied that the two biggest pests were mosquitoes and the wandering Spanish sentries, although she preferred the mosquitoes, since they only extracted blood. And unlike the mosquitoes, who laid eggs, the Spanish threatened to beget something far more sinister. The image of Fray Werfell came into Carina's mind, nursing a gaggle of babies suckling from his assorted bibles.

“Werfell has been sending his servants all over the province,” Agueda said. “My people are scared. They have family members who have told me that Werfell's servants come to their houses, demanding to see boxes, books, old photos. They are even asked to go to the friar's quarters, where he asks them the most intimate of questions. If they show any signs of refusal, they are threatened to be stripped of their lands, honor, even their children.”

“Maybe he is conducting some sort of census?” Carina said.

“To what? Find the new Jesus, Mary, and Joseph wandering among us?” she said. “Well, it would make sense. Only the Second Coming of Christ would save Spain.”

Her tone was playful, as if Spain were a haughty *doña* that Agueda enjoyed ridiculing. Carina wondered where she gathered the irreverence to make such comments. She knew that mystics were not very famous for their skill at mockery. Perhaps mockery was one of the few traits that remained of her annihilated soul.

“I feel a sickness,” Agueda told her. “A spiritual sickness that I have not felt since I came here, to Mount Caridad.”

Carina pressed her to elaborate, but Agueda only shook her head.

“It pains me to describe it. It is like a dryness, something that even communion with God does not seem to quench.”

“Maybe this is a sign from God to commune in a different way?”

“Maybe. Times are moving too quickly, Carina. Events are being shaped that even your wood-carver’s hands cannot control. I can sense it in the air.”

Carina could not understand what pained Agueda. Around her, she could smell nothing but the musky forest, earth still fresh from rain. The river gurgled far away. Its waters functioned as boundary, everything beyond seemed of little significance; prying friars, towns swept in monsoons and rebellion, marriages of affection and convenience. For the moment, she imagined the world whittled down to the two women in the forest clearing.

Fray Werfell had been so overwhelmed with excitement when he was first given the project, he even thought of conducting all the necessary footwork, of traveling to the national library in the capital to gather the relevant literature, of interviewing the necessary persons. He tried booking passage to Visayas and Mindanao, to create an overview of the indio across the colony’s 7000-something islands. After all, the indio manifested himself through many sights and shapes and sounds. Fray Werfell wanted to experience him in all his permutations.

But the Archbishop of Manila, upon hearing of Werfell’s plans from Julio—who had sent word to Manila once he saw how entranced the friar was in his fever-dream—immediately rode to Lazaro to order him to desist from his foolish endeavor. He was nearing seventy, the Archbishop scolded Werfell. In earlier times, Werfell would have been looked down upon for having lived to such shameful old age. They sat in the friar’s bedroom, drinking tea brought to them by Julio, who fell on his knees and slathered the Archbishop’s rings with kisses, and stopped only when the rings dripped with his saliva.

The friar bristled at the admonition. But his mood lightened when the Archbishop told him to take care of himself, because he was one of the few brilliant men left in the Church. He had rarely ever received such praise. His companions and superiors at the seminary and later, at the order, always viewed him with some distaste. It may have been because of his German ancestry—his grandmother had moved from Hamburg to marry an Asturian woman—other pure-blooded Spanish Catholics thought he carried the sin of Martin Luther with him. He speculated this unfounded bias might have been the reason for his failure to climb the ranks of the clergy. Talking to the Archbishop, he realized that this was his moment. *The History of the Indio* would cement his position within Church history as a man of true learning and wisdom.

The Archbishop had been considerate enough to bring a treasure of materials with him, to start Fray Werfell on the right path. Pigafetta’s journal of his journeys

with Magellan, papal decrees, materials from the Archivo de Indias in Seville, Gaspar de San Agustin's *Letter on the Filipinos*, Francisco Combes' *Historia de Mindanao*, and boxes and boxes of papers to enrich *The History of the Indio*. They occupied boxes, arranged in several rows, stacked almost as tall as he.

The Holy Spirit filled him with industry. Fray Werfell took to the project with such a fervor that Julio and his servants thought him possessed. His beleaguered limbs found a second life. He hurried around the room like a man in his prime, opening newly acquired books and reports from the field, gathering pen and ink to take note of relevant excerpts. He hopped and skipped and jumped and did all sorts of exuberant movements with his feet, that it seemed less like he was writing a book than performing a dance.

Words spurred more words and images. Fray Werfell found himself in a web that spanned the entire breadth of the universe, connecting history and ritual and myth and fruit and anything that had ever been created or touched by the hands of the indio. The walls of his bedroom became filled with maps of the islands, notes on indio divinities, sketches of flora and fauna in various states of fertilization. And when the walls of his bedroom were completely covered, he took to covering the walls of his *antesala*, *sala mayor*, and *cocina*. His entire house became a timeline of the development of the indio. In the kitchen, the drawing of Maka-andong, a giant from eastern Samar, loomed over Julio as he cooked the day's breakfast, threatening to consume the rice and pork *tocino* of the entire household.

Werfell found himself particularly interested in tricksters. Unlike the lazy, indolent native who waited under the guava tree for fruit to fall into his mouth, the trickster presented him another side of his subject he had not paid much attention to.

He enjoyed the story of the crafty monkey and the gullible crocodile. The monkey, wanting to get to the island of bananas in the middle of a lake, tricks the crocodile into ferrying him across. Arms full of fruit, the monkey pretends to cower when the crocodile threatens to eat him. The monkey says, oh no, I've left my heart in the forest! And he points to the fallen guava on the opposite riverbank, its red flesh exposed in the sun. You must take me back, or you won't get to taste my heart. So the crocodile ferries him to the other side, where the victorious monkey skips away with his reward, leaving the foolish crocodile fuming over his defeat.

There was also the Meranaw trickster Pilandok. He fools his enemy, Bombola, into believing that the sky would fall, and ties him to a tree, where Bombola dies of thirst.

These tales of deception, thought Fray Werfell. The indio is obsessed with them. He thought that these stories provided vast insight into the workings of native psychology; he imagined the would-be leaders in the capital and abroad, thinking themselves to be these folk heroes, tricking the Spanish out of their gold, using their honeyed tongues to lure followers. Not today, *pendejos*, thought the friar. He then crossed himself for thinking such foul language.

*The History of the Indio* colonized his life, even in his sleep. He dreamed of talking animals, fevered landscapes pulsing with ripe fruit and reptile teeth, the collapsing blue of brittle skies. At the pulpit on Sundays, he raged against deception, surprising the residents of Barrio Lazaro with his sound and fury, which now had direct signification. Before, he needed tolling bells to wake him from his languor and finish the homily. Now, he rained syllables and fricatives on his flock, his fire burning away the deceit that might have congealed in their souls.

But he needed more. The Archbishop's resources were not enough. There were so many gaps within the written histories that needed to be filled. After all, the devil might snake into one of those gaps, planting his poison in the reader's mind.

He sent Julio and his servants to scour every library from Batanes to Jolo. Wherever there was a man of God, Fray Werfell wanted one of his men there as well, to inquire of any papers that might pertain to his project. Julio protested of their lack of manpower—how could he and three other servants search the entire archipelago? They would be old men when they returned, and who would care for Werfell in their absence? So the friar sent a request to the Archbishop, asking for more. More time, more resources, more, more, and more. Weeks passed with no reply.

The friar resigned himself to the sorry output he had produced—whose notes already filled half the walls and floors of his house—until Julio came one morning bearing a sealed envelope with the stamp of the Archbishop. He told Werfell to expect parcels to arrive, bearing gifts from every diocese dotting the isles. He told him to also expect around a dozen men, who would be under Werfell's beck and call, armed with enough provisions to explore whatever waterfall, valley, volcano, and tribe the friar would send them to. He even offered to send Werfell a typewriter, but Werfell found that something he had to decline; he could never master those dreadful things. And the pain from writing reminded him that he was doing a heroic task.

Carts rumbled down the narrow streets of Lazaro, causing the town's woodcarvers to leave their workshops to see the cause of such commotion. Workers carried crates and boxes into Fray Werfell's house. His new servants arrived, and the friar scattered them to the winds; to the heathens in the Cordillera mountains, to fire-shrouded Siquijor, to the fertile lands of the south, rich with minerals and belligerent Moros.

He gave them all a list of questions to ask inhabitants, and a checklist of information they were to gather. They ranged from generalities to questions about the minutest details; the migrations of certain birds, constellations of particular tribes, even mating positions of various cold and hot-blooded animals. One must not be too delicate in these matters, he thought. Meanwhile, he sent Julio and his servants to inspect the closer surroundings.

The weeks and months flew in a white-heated flurry of pages read and written. When he was not at the pulpit or at the confession, Fray Werfell was in his house, scribbling in his notebooks, finding the right word to put in front of the right word, thinking of the perfect sentences to both convey information as well as the greatness and love of Mother Spain.

She sipped her tea while waiting for Fray Werfell to descend from his bedroom. It was served by Julio—Werfell's faithful steward who looked at her with suspicion. He must have heard the rumors, Carina thought. He even pawed at her bag when she entered, insisting that he inspect its contents, content when he found nothing of value or danger. She looked around the friar's *sala*; surrounding the furniture were mountains of documents. They were also glued to the walls, scattered on the tables, carried by the servants to the friar's quarters.

It had taken months for her to arrange this meeting. She had been repeatedly turned back by Julio, citing the friar's busy workload. She realized that he would not meet her unless she had an offering.

She looked at the framed picture of Fray Werfell looming on the wall in front of her. He had a bulbous nose, nut-brown hair, and a stare that could send children running. He reminded her of the pesky friar who often came to her parents' garment shop, extracting taxes after the official ones had been paid—money which went nowhere, judging by the state of the streets, waterways, and buildings of the capital—and buying cloth at a scandalous discount. He later became the closest confidant of the weasley Juancho Villaflor, the *alcalde mayor's* favorite son. After the incident at Consolacion Montelibano's debut, they had formed such a disdain for Carina that they would not cease until she was defeated, bedded, and wedded. So she ran to a place where she knew no one, and where her talents were enough to speak for her.

The sun had nearly set when the steward called for her to go upstairs. She climbed the steps to the antesala, a mirror of the ground floor in its chaos of documents. She entered the friar's room. She was surprised to find it a paragon of neatness. Books were arranged in shelves. In the center, there was a large round table, with neat stacks of papers towering on them. At his desk, the friar hunched over a book.

On the floor beside him, there were rows of empty ink pots and discarded dip pens.

Carina greeted him. He turned around, his face failing to register who she was until she introduced herself as the *cabeza de barangay's* wife. At this, the friar greeted her back, and she moved toward him to kiss his ring. He told her to sit on one of the chairs facing the large round table. He took the seat beside her. On the desk, she spied a book, almost as big as a chess-board. It was opened, and she saw that its contents were filled with golden parchment paper.

She retrieved the book from her leather satchel. His eyes grew wide when she showed it to him. He caressed the cover, ran his hand along the binding.

"*The Families of Old Tondo*," he read the cover. "Where did you get this?"

"My father had been working on it before he passed," she said. "Half-completed, I was the only one who wanted it. I thought it could aid your research."

The friar flicked through its pages, his eyes absorbing the various genealogies into his corpus of archipelagic understanding. He had the message, there was no more need for the messenger. Carina knew that her time was limited. She had to use her questions well.

"I have been hearing about your book for some time now," she said. "*The History of the Indio*. What a subject matter! Is it nearly finished?"

Fray Werfell did not raise his head to look at her. "Not nearly. I've sent men to gather information. Only some have returned. And I must still organize what they have collected."

"And how long until the book is completed?"

"Not any time soon, I assure you," he said. He was nearing the halfway point of the book. Carina needed to act quickly.

"And that's the book, on your desk?" she asked. "How do you take care of it, especially in such a stormy place?"

She drifted to the desk. The friar was too busy to notice her. The title was done in perfect, golden script. She sifted through the pages. They were all blank. As soon as the friar noticed her empty chair, he rushed up and led her away from the history.

"As you might have seen, it is blank," he said. "I will only fill it when I know that my drafts have been written perfectly. It could take a year, maybe two."

With that, he rung a bell, and Julio came to escort Carina out of the friar's sight.

Beyond Barrio Lazaro, the country experienced developments which further tested Mother Spain's hold over her colony. The subversive novelist returned from abroad and founded an organization devoted to indio nationalism. The novelist was later arrested and exiled to Dapitan, but the organization continued, and birthed more

cooperatives which sprouted like weeds. The Moros continued to rebel. The pagans in the north continued to rebel. All of Fray Werfell's men gave him these reports, when they had returned from their travels, much wearier, smellier, but wealthier than when they had departed.

Fray Werfell's voluminous history became even thicker. It had been a challenge whittling down the crates and crates of documents to less than five-hundred pages. But now, he received this wealth of information. It was enough to create a whole treasury of textbooks, travel essays, and adventure novels. How he wished the students of the times were not so indolent and impatient. During his school days, he could read the entire bibliography of Goethe in less than a fortnight. Now, boys couldn't even finish the Holy Book without yawning. Disgraceful.

But, he trimmed. And edited. And integrated. And worked until his hands shouted for rest, integrating the new reports, tightening sentences, merging paragraphs and chapters, erasing beautiful but ultimately useless illustrations.

He could not stop. He had heard of mystics who shunned all food and drink, and subsisted on Holy Communion for the rest of their days. The book functioned as his manna. And as shield from God, which he used as defense against the increasingly worrying developments that Julio informed him were ongoing in the capital.

He reduced his hours at the confessional. He breezed through Sunday homilies with the rat-a-tat speed of gunfire. He sent a letter to the Archbishop of Manila, requesting for a companion-priest to take on some of his duties, while he entered the final few stages of writing his history. The days inched forward without a reply.

Gossip spread around the province, of a mad friar who spent all his days writing a labyrinthine book which branched out into infinite variations. In other words, witchcraft.

The second priest arrived just as a line of anxious townspeople began to form outside the friar's home, begging to be given the holy sacraments. Julio ushered the boy inside. The joy of the Archbishop's approval of his request rendered Fray Werfell lucid enough for social pleasantries. The boy had tanned skin and a hefty body.

"My name is Manuel Narciso. I studied at the San Ildefonso Seminary," he said. "But I grew up in Asturias."

Asturias. Playing with his mother at a beach in Llanes, crystalline waters. The statue of Santa María Magdalena at Plaza Cristo Rey. When he was a child, in a haze of incense, the gentle lady promised to reveal all the world's secrets, if he gave his life to the Church. His home was now filled in pools of island knowledge. He asked the boy if he had ever seen the statue.

“Oh no,” he said. “I came from Asturias, Cebu. I have never been abroad.”

Fray Werfell suffered a sudden weakness of the soul. For a flicker of a moment, he was confused with God’s design; what was this hybrid-nation, its cities and streets a shadow to that of Werfell’s motherland? He had spent the last years writing its history, untangling the mysteries that lay at the heart of its treacherous terrain, its mosquito-infested forests, its volcanic mountains, its tribes, almost as numerous and enigmatic as the stars in the sky. For centuries, Spain had set out to do God’s will and civilize these peoples. And what had been created? He could not see his train of thought’s destination.

But Fray Werfell banished those ideas from his mind, and called Julio to orient Manuel on the immediate tasks to be accomplished. He returned to his room and resumed his work.

The torches lit, their flames licking the gloom away. The *cofradia* gathered in the forest clearing, sitting on logs or on the damp ground. From the cave, Agueda emerged, her figure growing clearer and clearer as she neared her people, who recited little prayers under their breaths in anticipation of the mass.

A girl’s voice cut through the evening cold. A soprano, lilting the afterlife into song.

She carried a statue. Our Lady of Lost Children. Only the shoulders and head of the statue remained, its disfigured face burned and blackened, its features eroded by human error. When Carina had first seen it, she offered to carve a new statue. But Agueda looked at her as if she had suggested pledging fealty to the Spanish. This statue is significant, she explained. It had been one of the few objects that survived after the *guardia civil* ransacked and burned a village in Cavite, one they suspected of harboring mutineers. It had eyes of crystal once, but those had melted in the heat, leaving two charred hollows in the sockets of its weathered face.

Agueda placed the statue on top of a wooden pedestal, in front of the crowd of believers. Carina watched as she stretched her arms in the air, implored God and His Blessed Mother for their benediction in the battle for the country’s soul. She spoke of light. A sea of light that would flood the country, as the storm flooded their towns during the monsoon season. Light that would engulf even the dimmest corner of Spanish rule. She welcomed the newest members of the *cofradia*; Edgardo, the butcher; Soler, the treasurer of the barrio council; and Teresa, the young daughter of Nanay Menang, the town seamstress. Of the three, Teresa looked at Agueda the most fiercely, her gaze not tearing itself away until the blindfold was placed around her eyes.

Carina accompanied the novitiates as they were led to the mouth of the cave. The older members of the *cofradia* entered first, to better lead the blindfolded safely

to the cave's bottom. In the dark, they would find the light; not the false, glittering light of the friar's gold, but the true light of the inner self.

After the ceremony concluded, Agueda approached Carina with some news.

"What do you know of the secret society founded in Manila a year ago? The one sprung from La Liga Filipina?" Agueda asked her.

"They appear true," she responded. "They appear to aspire for what we aspire."

"I have discussed this with some of the members, but I will bring this up on the next gathering. We might join their ranks."

A burning sensation, between her ribs, not unpleasant. Carina thought of Our Lady of Lost Children's missing eyes, how they searched for judgment and expectation.

"You disapprove?" Agueda asked.

"No," she replied. "But you are our leader. Of everyone, it will be you who will most suffer the demands of change."

Agueda clasped her hands. Warmth. The woman's warmth.

"Fray Werfell is writing a book," Carina said.

"I suspected as much."

"It is called *The History of the Indio*. In it, he has gathered all of Spain's knowledge of these islands in a single text. It will be long. It will be boring. And it will be used against us if we go to war. Every one of Spain's generals will have it in his camp, a ready reference."

"What do you propose we do?"

"We still have time. He will work on the book throughout the entirety of the rainy season. And possibly the next. In the meanwhile, we can work out a way to stop that text from ever being finished."

In the days after, the book hovered in the back of their minds. Agueda, meeting with the brotherhood from the capital, meditating on the dirt floor of her dwelling, floating toward the covenant of God, where all were equal under one mother. Carina, in her workshop, in bed with Armando, in mass, listening to Werfell pontificate on Original Sin. The book, fruit of the poisoned tree, must be plucked and thrown where no one may ever find it.

A memory flashed in her mind. An old folktale, told by her mother, where a monkey tricked a crocodile, by claiming a piece of fruit lying on the opposite riverbank was its heart. The monkey escaped through misdirection. The guava, bright red, could be mistaken for a heart at first glance. She knew they had to steal the book, and an idea germinated in her mind on how to conceal the theft.

At the next gathering of the cofradia, Agueda forwarded the proposals of the urban revolutionaries. A new nation, light enough to burn Spain away, but not

without the cost, one that might lead to many members never seeing the light of this earth again. Carina expected doubts. She expected protests about endangering their lives, fuming dissent, some disagreement. Instead, the *cofradia* shouted yes, yes, yes, proclaimed their loyalty to the national brotherhood, one that rained goodness from the heavens. Agueda had to remind them to lower their voices; who knew what night creatures might hear?

The windows rattled, the rain fell like exiled angels, the wind screamed. Julio used a bucket to keep the ground floor from flooding, but Fray Werfell did not cease working on his book. He did not stop. He could not stop. Not until everything was set in order. Not until each sentence formed perfectly, until the drafts were arranged so that every line and page could sing.

And then, only then, did he open the big, black book with the golden lettering, and begin to write.

Carina accomplished her best work in the forest. Armando Sebastian had converted his house's *zaguan* from a garage for carriages into a workhouse, which contained all the tools and carvings of his craft. When he had met Carina and she had displayed her mastery of carving, he built her a workstation of her own, complete with flat-nosed chisels, o-shaped chisels, curved chisels, sandpapers, mallets, and whatever else she needed to mold her wondrous creations. Carina thanked the man. If all her suitors had given her such gifts before, she might have been less discriminatory in her tastes.

They began working side-by-side. But as Carina spent more and more time with the *cofradia*, she found that she felt more at home among the trees than in the former *zaguan*. She explained to her husband that she loved their house, loved her work station, but that it was just so close to the Church, to the friar's quarters, that she better worked in the wilds of Mount Caridad. And Armando, busy with his carvings and duties as *cabeza*, did not have the energy to argue with his headstrong wife. She was smart, and he trusted her.

Carina had known of the *cofradia* and Agueda before she met Armando. When she was still working for her parents' garment shop in the capital, the story of the former *hermana mayor* turned bandit scandalized high society. But in the town of wood carvers, she had found much less noise, and much more peace. There was Armando, man enough to share her talents and match his with hers; and Agueda, fire-spirited woman of the forest, she whose voice drowned out the friar's Gregorian chants and summoned the *diwata* and *ingkanto* from their hiding places.

But for her latest project, Carina needed the safety and secrecy of Armando's zaguan. She and Agueda had proposed several plans on obtaining the book. Scheduling a visit with Fray Werfell and swiping the book when he wasn't looking wouldn't work. Julio checked everyone's bags and belongings upon entrance or exit. Killing the friar seemed morally out of the question, since he was not an active combatant. Causing an accident—Agueda thought of taking an ax to the champaka tree outside his house—seemed needlessly complicated and fantastically messy.

"Did your mother ever tell you the tale of the monkey and the crocodile?" Agueda asked.

"The one about the monkey pretending he didn't have a heart?"

"No, the one where he used a ladder as a bridge, so he didn't have to swim through crocodile infested-waters."

"Are you proposing we sneak in through the friar's bedroom window?"

"Yes. Do it quickly. During a storm, so we're sure nobody else is out. And in the noise, even the friar won't hear you."

Carina thought of several things that could go wrong. She could barge in on Fray Werfell while he was awake. He could have moved his book somewhere outside his house. Some lunatic might also be outside during the storm, for whatever reason, and stumble upon them—wherein Agueda would most likely be unable to talk them out of the situation. Or the wind could be so strong she would barely make it two feet beyond her house.

But she could not think of any alternative plan. So, there she was, in her husband's workshop, carving the rungs for her ladder. Armando arrived, carrying the hammer and box of nails that she requested, looking as if he had swallowed some of the nails himself.

"Love, what's wrong?" she asked him.

"I still don't understand what you're doing," he told her.

"Well, I don't know how many times I have to repeat it," she said. "In the middle of a typhoon, we're going to sneak into Fray Werfell's bedroom and steal a book he's been writing. A book that would no doubt provide useful intelligence for Spain. That sounds like a simple enough plan." The last sentence struck Carina as Agueda speaking with her voice.

Her husband stared at her. As *cabeza de barangay*, he knew the toll extracted by the Spanish on the inhabitants of its colony, the corruption that snatches bread from the mouths of infants. And he read the newspapers from Madrid smuggled into the country, the ones run by the exiles, preaching for a republic founded on egalitarianism. But he also read other tracts. Ones that preached a slow, steady road

to independence, one that involved grueling negotiations, but a lack of lives lost to violence. He couldn't stop his wife. But he could disapprove.

His eyes traveled down to her stomach. So much time had passed since their wedding night, so why was her belly still flat? She knew that he asked himself that question often, far more often than she asked herself. That was a problem for another day.

She laid down her tools, got up, and tiptoed to her husband to kiss him on the forehead. She told him that times were changing too quickly for either of them to follow. She walked to the main house for a glass of water.

In the sala, she found a package from Santa Rosa waiting for her on the low marble table. The parcel came with a letter from the head of the printing house, reiterating what a curious request it was, but with apologies for the delay in delivery. The rains had been terrible.

It was heavy as a brick, thick as narra. When she opened the parcel, she ran her fingers along the smooth, black leather cover, opened the first page to read the golden script, and browsed through its beautiful, blank pages.

The town murmured it would be the strongest storm to ever land. The signs were there; an infestation of roaches and rats and lizards in the streets. All the underground creatures were scurrying to the surface for protection. The cold winds blew all day, and clouds as big as countries formed overhead, their gray bodies always threatening, but never releasing rain. They would break soon, the people thought. And the whole sky would collapse on their heads.

Fray Werfell's dreams tossed him in unnerving circumstances. A behemoth gunship sinking at an unnamed port. Natives charging with bamboo sticks at cannonfire. Beings of wind and light, crawling out of tree trunks and rivers, only to be pushed back to their hiding places by flaming shards of metal. A yellow-tinged man speaking in front of a strange, box-like device, his sonorous voice promising an end to martial rule, while his powdered, pompadour-styled paramour stood solemnly in the sidelines.

Every dream ended with the scene cracking and blowing away in the country's monsoon winds, rendering visible the gray, rain-lashed landscape beneath, stabbed by lightning, ruptured by volcanic eruptions, pillaged by men from faraway lands. Always, the landscape remained the same. No matter how much he tried to will better dreams, he could not escape them.

The storm strengthened, crashed into his house. He woke and tried to fall back to sleep. His room screamed. The howling stole him from rest. He lay in his bed, eyes

closed, praying for deliverance from the storm. Let the evening end. Let me return in the morning to my life's work.

He was surprised to hear the voice of his old school-teacher. In his mind, she talked of Ovid, a line from *Metamorphoses*: God helps those who dare. Spiritual enlightenment can come from anywhere, he thought. Caution gave way to practicality. He needed to wake Julio, nail boards to the windows to keep out the rain, bring up any relevant documents to his room. *The History of the Indio*. It must be drenched by now. He sprang out of bed, fumbled for a candle.

The flame revealed a monster in his bedroom. It was darkness made flesh, its inky tendrils blowing in the wind, its eyes reflecting the pits of hell. In its black claws, it carried The Book of Death, where it would no doubt place Fray Werfell's name next. The creature, upon noticing Fray Werfell staring at its blasphemous form, ran to the window. It sprouted wings and escaped to its lair beneath the core of the earth.

Candle in hand, Werfell sprinted to wake Julio. He slipped, landing on his bottom, which screamed out in pain, in anger at his failure, his weakness which allowed such a creature to penetrate his sacred home. A wind blew out the candle. He was marooned. He crawled down the stairs, the light of the Almighty having abandoned him. On some step, he fell and tumbled down, his bones grinding against their sockets. He reached the bottom and released a loud howl. It reverberated throughout the entire house.

A dim figure neared him. He heard Julio's voice, his sweet and welcome voice, asking him what had happened. The loyal boy, the poor boy. Fray Werfell never imagined spending his twilight hours in a godforsaken tropical backwater, the dearest person in his life being an indio servant who was more like a son.

Something beyond the house called to him. He rushed outside. The cold air whipped his face, and within seconds, he was drenched. In the din of the storm, he heard Julio's voice calling him from the doorway, telling him to come inside. But the storm, the storm was cleansing his soul, wiping away all the impurities that weighed him down, until he would be light enough to glide over the Pacific, and land on the heart-shaped valleys of Asturias.

A loud crash resounded behind him. Julio screamed. The hand of God had fallen.

He woke the next morning on the couch in his sala. His wet clothes had been replaced with dry ones. Julio came in with a tray of breakfast and hot chocolate, and told him to lay down and rest. The boy had deep bags under his eyes, and a long cut above his eyebrow. He surveyed the sala. It was a chaos of broken things, debris and wet leaves on the floor, shrapnel of wood everywhere. He looked at the stair, and saw a trail of dirt leading to the second floor.

“Father, your champaka tree. . . it couldn’t withstand the storm and crashed,” Julio stuttered. “The damage to your roof and bedroom is not so bad. . . I managed to save most of your books. They are drying in the cocina.”

The book. Fray Werfell’s eyes darted around the room. He got up and tried to rush past Julio, to see what had become of *The History of the Indio*. The boy blocked his way, pointing at the low table in front of the couch. He laughed when he realized he hadn’t looked under his nose.

“Fray Werfell, I knew its importance to you. It was the first book I retrieved from your bedroom,” he said. “I thought you’d like to see it as soon as you woke up.”

His hands trembled. He ran his fingers along the spine and leather cover. It was only mildly damp, not soaked. He opened the first page. The perfect golden script greeted him, not a splotch or stain on the page. He breathed in. He opened the next page and had to breathe in again. It was blank. He turned another page. It was blank again. His hands rushed to inspect the rest of the book, and found more baffling, blank pages waiting to be filled.

Fray Werfell put the book down. He felt himself floating, higher and higher, until he reached the clouds, and saw the lime-tipped peaks of the Picos de Europa, waiting to welcome their own boy home.

Ten o’clock. No human being stirred in the streets. The late night suggested it. The storm ensured it. Carina and Agueda were both dressed in black, veils shrouding their heads, blouses, trousers snatched from Armando’s closet, tied around their waists with dark string.

The bag—made of the thickest leather she could find—was slung over Carina’s shoulder. It was one of the newer designs, with a steel, snap fastener that closed so tightly nothing could spill into it. Hopefully, not even rain, Carina thought. Inside the bag was the blank book, as well as a fist-sized stone.

Agueda had wondered about the purpose of the second book. She initially deemed it an unnecessary prop, one that would only slow them down. Carina argued that mere theft would lead to a simple conclusion, with a simple response: search for the stolen object. But a second book, blank pages and all, would muddle the conclusion. How many people had actually seen Fray Werfell’s book? How certain are we that the friar was able to put all his research into writing?

“And if the friar does end up searching for it?” asked Agueda

“Then we throw it to the River Liwa,” Carina replied. “Or burn it as an offering to Our Lady of Lost Children.”

Even as she said it, the words settled bitter in her mouth. So much knowledge, so much learning that could be used properly, if placed in the hands of the right people. She manifested her doubts to Agueda.

“Do you trust Fray Werfell to write a truthful history?” she asked. “He most likely shows us on the lowest rungs of civilization, one step away from eating our babies.”

Carina would have liked to continue this discussion, but the a gale of wind slammed against the zaguan window, signalling that they didn’t have much time until the storm became entirely impassable.

The rain was elemental. Carina could barely lift her head to look at the street in front of her. At first, the two women tried to stay close to the sides of houses, so that the *media agua* hanging above windows shielded them and kept them out of direct sight. But they realized their clothes drank the rain no matter what. So, lugging the ladder on opposite ends, they charged along the middle of the streets to the friar’s home.

The lamps were not lit. The moon gave off a pinprick of light. In the downpour, Carina followed Agueda, who carried the front of the ladder, her body’s outline cutting through the night. Carina’s shoulders buckled under the weight of what she carried. She wished for Agueda to slower, to even stop for rest. But the storm would not relent, and neither would she.

Carina glimpsed the wide, open space of the plaza, and the figure of the champaka tree near Fray Werfell’s window. If only she could climb trees, she thought. Then she wouldn’t have had to make this burdensome thing. She shivered, almost dropping the ladder. Agueda looked back, her grip still firm, and Carina forced a nod to gesture that she was still conscious.

Her feet itched, as they lugged closer to Fray Werfell’s house. They set the ladder down and pushed it up to lean against the wall beneath his window. The wind tried to blow them away, but an inner warmth fueled Carina. When she was finally free of the ladder’s weight, her hands burned. She shook the exhaustion away and began to climb.

Werfell’s house was not that tall. Three fully-grown men—European, not Filipino—would most likely be able to reach the second floor, standing on each other’s shoulders. But the climb stretched until the sky. Blisters seemed to form and pop with every rung she completed. Don’t look down. She looked up and moaned when she saw she was only halfway there. Her hand missed the next rung. She slipped. For a moment, the hard pavement appeared dangerously close. But Agueda tightened her grip on the ladder, pushing it against the wall, and Carina caught a length of wood in her hand. She steadied herself.

She did not know what spirit carried her up, but she eventually saw the gray squares of the friar's capiz window facing her. With her left hand, she fumbled in her bag for the rock. She found it and smashed it against the window. The shells gave way. Soon, she made a hole big enough for passage. She hefted herself through the opening, the harsh edges of the broken shells digging against her palms, then against her back, as she tumbled onto the damp floor.

Weak moonlight fell in the friar's room. His figure quaked in bed. Carina was shocked into stillness. He tossed and turned, but he did not get up. She saw the desk to her left, and darted toward it, the sound of her footsteps overpowered by the typhoon. She thrust her hand in the darkness and felt the thick body of *The History of the Indio*. She swapped the two books. Something stirred behind her. The room was suffused in an orange glow.

The friar had woken up. Even in the faint light, she could make out his open mouth, wide enough to swallow the whole storm. She waited for him to move. When he inched forward, she ran to the window, her legs shrieking with every step. She stood before her window, her mind suddenly forgetting how to move. She stuck out a leg, searched for the ladder to steady her feet. She couldn't find it. Where had Agueda gone? Had she abandoned her? Had she been working for Spain the entire time, ready to entrap her in this operation? Her foot shook in the heavy rain. Then, she found a rung. Half-straddling the open window, she climbed down.

Along the way, her hands finally quit, and she fell. Instead of meeting the hard pavement, she instead landed on something soft but firm. She realized she had fallen on Agueda. On the ground, lashed by rain, Carina moved her limbs. Her left arm. Good. Her right. Something was wrong, but it was still attached. Her legs. Responsive. She felt for the bag. It was still at her side. The strap was still around her shoulder. The rain would not stop.

Agueda hoisted her up before she could stand. The two women hobbled away.

The morning after, the townspeople of Barrio Lazaro woke to Julio the servant weeping at the doorway, as Fray Werfell was led by two men to a waiting carriage. The good friar was to be taken to a sanatorium for convalescence. The history book seemed to have been too big a responsibility for the old man and apparently, even after years of research, he had barely written anything at all.

Armando took his wife to the town doctor. During the storm, he said that she had woken in the night to get a glass of water, and slipped down the stairs. She was always so clumsy and fragile, he said. The right arm was not broken, thankfully, but

she did have to begin the relatively short but arduous process of setting right the sprained limb. She needed at least a month of rest.

Agueda did not have the strength to immediately return to her mountain lair. Armando, begrudgingly, prepared her a mat and a pillow in the zaguan. She slept around wood-dust and incomplete statues, their half-eyes guarding her in her dreams.

After the doctor's visit, Carina fell into a deep sleep. Armando went to the zaguan to check on Agueda, who was also still sleeping. He entered the sala, found his wife's leather bag on the low table in front of the couch. He opened it.

Inside, he found a thick, black book. Its cover was damp with rain. The latter third of the book was blank, while many of the pages—where the ink had not completely dried, were a blurred jumbled of words.

But half the book was still legible. The first page was done in beautiful golden script. Soon, he realized it was the most well-executed portion of the book. It was written in Spanish, simple enough for any schoolboy to understand. But the prose was laughable, a mishmash of stories set before and after Spain's colonization. He encountered one story he liked, about a clever monkey and a foolish crocodile, but he liked it only because it reminded him of childhood. He laid the book down and scratched his head. How could the women risk their lives for such junk?