

Two Stories from the Day I Was Born

Ino Habana

I GREW UP in Binondo, the Chinatown of Manila, somewhere in the mad tangle of streets that crawled like faulty electrical wiring from river to sea. I was baptized in the Binondo Church, went to school at the Tiong Se Academy, and lit incense sticks at the Kuang Kong Temple every year on my birthday, making me just about as Binondo as anyone could get. Our family lived in two floors of a three-storey building, surrounded by warehouses and a vulcanizing shop. My parents and I lived on the third floor of our building, while my grandparents stayed on the second floor. The ground floor was occupied by our family's intergenerational hardware, Uy Ting Bin Lucky Best Screws, where one could find the finest screws in the Orient. Our hardware was established by my great grandfather, Uy Ting Bin, who came to the Philippines on a fishing boat that sailed from a village in the southern tip of China. Like all the other families in Binondo, we liked to consider ourselves Chinese. But truth be told, our Mandarin was limited to counting from one to ten, and the only place in China we've ever visited was Hong Kong, back when it was still considered British territory.

My name is Winrich Uy, short for Winston Richmond Uy, and I was born in the Year of the Dragon. As I was growing up, my parents and grandparents never failed to remind me of the auspicious lunar alignment during the time of my birth.

Incidentally, our venerable great grandfather was born in the Year of the Dragon too. But if certain rumors are to be entertained about the day I was born, the dragon was not the only supernatural creature holding sway over my destiny. My family tried to suppress this other story, preferring to stick to the official narrative of my birth. Unfortunately for them, I grew up with a rather talkative *yaya*. It was from her that I heard this alternative story, which I had to keep secret, because it was very un-Chinese.

So let's go back to the time when my mother, a newly married wife of twenty-four, was pregnant with me. By her eighth month of pregnancy, her svelte figure had ballooned, forcing her to spend all her days at home, just waiting for me to arrive. She would start her mornings by pacing back and forth in our apartment. With her hand around her womb, she would hum to me, expecting to feel a kick or a tumble in her chamber of amniotic fluid. After completing a few rounds of our apartment, she would sit in the softest sofa in our living room. Amah would then come up the stairs with a teapot of boiling water and suspect herbs, which she would force my mother to drink. Two cups every morning, and two cups before going to bed. "So the baby will be a boy!" Amah would say. Back in those days, there was no ultrasound, so my family had to rely on the gods to make me a boy. Amah was particularly diligent in beseeching the heavens for a grandson, spending her days offering fruits at the temple, until all six and a half pounds of me popped into the world.

I was born at exactly eight o'clock in the morning, on the eight day of August, in the year nineteen eighty-eight. With my birth certificate studded with so many number eights—a ridiculously lucky number in Chinese numerology—Angkong's blood pressure shot up with joy. He was bursting with excitement, so much so that he almost got confined in the hospital room next to mine. The moon, the stars, and even the time itself, had aligned perfectly the moment I was welcomed into the world. It was like my family had won the natal jackpot, and the hero of the moment was my mother. My father, not being half as superstitious as his parents, didn't care much about this. But for my grandparents, it meant the world. They immediately placed my mother atop the pedestal of womanhood. All Angkong and Amah had ever wanted was a dragon baby boy for a grandson. When my mother gifted them with just that, they became the happiest grandparents in all of Binondo. They displayed their gratitude by showering my mother with designer bags, shipped directly from boutiques in Hong Kong. At that time, my mother liked her bags simple enough. But because the Louis Vuittons kept coming her way, she willed herself to love them, in another act of wifely piety. Today, she keeps all her bags in an air-conditioned

closet, because according to her *tai-tai* friends, tropical heat is genuine leather's worst enemy.

As I was growing up, one of my first memories was sitting with my mother in our living room. Amah would come to us with her teapot and force me to drink one of her horrid concoctions. It was bitter, and smelled somewhat like gasoline. There were several occasions when I sprayed the tea back at Amah's face the moment it touched my lips. This would result in an instant slap on the wrists, care of my mother. "So you will grow up strong, and handsome, and rich!" Amah would say. She called it Dragon's Tea, brewed especially for a dragon baby like me. According to Amah, only those born under the sign of the dragon were allowed to consume this kind of tea, or else, it would bring the drinker twelve years of bad luck. Amah put a lot of effort into brewing the tea every morning, considering that I was the only one in our family who was allowed to drink it. If old Uy Ting Bin was still around, he could drink it too, but I'm pretty sure that he would spit it out as well.

Aside from my parents, my grandparents, and myself, our building was also home to our two maids. Yaya Delia cooked our meals, while Yaya Ising did our laundry. Of the two, Yaya Delia was generally believed to be the more talented one, with her lemon chicken giving the best restaurants in Binondo a run for their money. She was a tall, reed-thin woman, whose hair was always kept in tight bun. I was secretly afraid of Yaya Delia, because she looked sharp and unapproachable. Yaya Ising, on the other hand, was plump all around, even down to her toes, which exploded like spring rolls from the straps of her slippers. Because of her rotund shape, I forgot that her name was Yaya Ising, and started calling her Yaya Taba instead. Eventually, the name caught on, until even Amah started calling her Yaya Taba. Both our maids were spinsters who hailed from Capiz. They had been with our family for a long time now, and had known my father from back when he was still studying. When I came into the world, Yaya Taba was assigned to look after me. Amah didn't want to entrust my care to Yaya Delia, because she wanted the latter to focus her energies on making lemon chicken.

Yaya Taba was the earliest friend I could remember. Although my entire family just worked on the ground floor of our building, a few flights of stairs made a world of difference. In our third floor apartment, I had a TV, toys, and a bedroom all to myself. I loved making a mess. Yaya Taba would clean up after me, which I thought as her way of playing. When I finished dirtying my bedroom, I moved on to the living room, then to the kitchen, then to the laundry room at the far end of the apartment. I liked the laundry room best, because of the bubbles that would rise from the basins as Yaya Taba scrubbed away at our clothes. The laundry room also had a radio that

was forever tuned in to dramas where people were either crying or shouting at each other. The radio sat on top of Amah's sewing machine—an antique Singer, which had been given to her during her wedding day. Since it no longer fit our apartment's décor, the sewing machine had been banished to the laundry room, where none of the visitors could see it.

On nights when my parents were out on dinner parties, I was left at home with Angkong, Amah, and our two maids. Since my grandparents were asleep before I was, and I didn't take to Yaya Delia very much, I had only Yaya Taba to keep me company. It was on such nights that I heard the story.

*

The tale starts way back when Yaya Taba was a girl of thirteen, as plain as plain could be, neither pretty nor ugly, but already showing signs of plumpness. She barely talked, barely laughed, barely got angry, and was content to move through the world as unobtrusively as a tiny snail. It was an uneventful life in their remote village in Capiz, until the day she entered the convent. This wasn't because Yaya Taba was particularly pious, or that her parents were trying to separate her from a bad suitor. Rather, it was because of a threat. Yaya Taba's father owed their neighbors, a family that lived on top of a nearby hill, a sum of money he could no longer pay for. It just so happened that this family was descended from a line of witches. Capiz was known for its witches, and worse, its aswangs. They were everywhere, often disguised, and walking among the regular folk.

When Yaya Taba's father said that he could no longer pay his debt, the family of witches threatened to extract it from him at an infinitely higher cost. Yaya Taba's parents knew exactly what this meant. To keep their daughter safe from the claws of black magic, they thought it best to spirit her away into the next town, where she could hide behind the holy walls of the convent. With her mother by her side, Yaya Taba left their village early one morning, right before dawn. They trekked through rice fields and rivers until they reached the next town, just as the roosters were starting to crow. As they approached the convent, Yaya Taba's mother told her to be brave, assuring her daughter that she would return when everything was safe. Two veiled nuns then emerged from the convent, and shuffled Yaya Taba inside. As the convent's wooden doors closed behind her, she looked back at her mother, wondering if she would ever see her again.

The convent was a world of mossy adobe walls, which enclosed a small flower garden. It moved at its own gentle pace, which Yaya Taba took to with a lot of

ease. She spent the next few years cloistered away, tending the flowers in monastic silence. But while she was under the watchful protection of our Holy Mother the Church, the witches from on top of the hill wasted no time in collecting their payment. Tragedy struck, one year after another. On the first year, Yaya Taba's older brother went for a swim in the river and was devoured by a black crocodile. On the second year, her father was bitten by a red-eyed dog and expired several months later from a fever wracked with convulsions. On the third year, her mother vomited blood after eating corn and wasted away from an illness that caused her hair to fall off in large clumps. Yaya Taba received news about her family from the priest who said mass in their village every other week. With the news flying at her heart like arrows from the outside world, Yaya Taba sank deeper and deeper into the chambers of the convent, taking comfort only in its flowers. At night, she dreamt of evil's bony hands, crushing the bodies of her family, then reaching across the rice fields to smash the convent's walls.

One morning, Yaya Taba was summoned to the convent's outer courtyard by one of the nuns. There, by the great wooden doors, she saw a crone, whose body had been mangled in to the shape of a hideous shrimp. The woman was veiled to hide her grotesque form. From behind the veil, Yaya Taba could see a wrinkled face and a pair of aged eyes. She drew back at the sight of those eyes, for she knew without a doubt that this wretched creature was her mother. In a cracked yet familiar voice, her mother told her that the witches knew where she was hiding. She must go away—as far away as she could. Yaya Taba couldn't understand what was going on, still taken aback by her mother's wicked fate. Then her mother pressed into her hands the last of their family's savings, telling her to waste no time, and sail for Manila. She kissed the back of her daughter's hand. Her lips were cold and sharp against Yaya Taba's skin, like the scales of a fish. It was a sensation she would never allow herself to forget, for it was the last kiss her mother would ever give her.

The following morning, Yaya Taba packed her things and reluctantly bade goodbye to the convent and its garden of flowers. When she reached the port, she was struck by the sight of the sea. She had never seen the sea before. The blue expanse gleamed before her, endless and empty, causing fear to bubble in her gut. She didn't know if she was more afraid of the witches on the hill or the journey that would take her away from everything she had known and loved.

It was the height of summer when Yaya Taba set out for Manila. She boarded a ferry that carried provincial folk like herself to the destinies that awaited them in the city. As the ferry set off to sea, she stood on its starboard deck, watching the island of Capiz shrink in the horizon. From behind the island's faint outline, she noticed a

curious gathering of dark clouds. The clouds rose above the island like a fist, which then rolled across the summer sky in a rumble of thunder. The clouds travelled fast, with lightning crackling in their bellies. Soon, the darkness was right behind the ship, sending forth wind and blinding sheets of rain. Yaya Taba rushed into her cabin in the belly of the ship, certain that the witches had spotted her with their far-seeing eyes. She climbed into her bed and wrapped herself in a blanket. It was a two-day journey across the archipelago, and for those two days, Yaya Taba sat immobilized, uncertain if the ferry could weather the storm. With a rosary clutched to her heart, she felt the vessel's every pitch and yaw, as walls of water rose around them. It was as if the talons of the witches were clawing at the surface of the sea in an attempt to drag her back to the shores of Capiz. Thankfully, the dark clouds peeled back as the ferry entered the mouth of Manila Bay at dawn on Easter Sunday—a day which Yaya Taba still blessed.

She was delivered from the evil the moment she reached Manila, but her mother was not. After calling and leaving messages at the post office nearest their village, Yaya Taba discovered that on the very day she had set foot in the city, her mother's body had been found in their hut, broken and gangrenous, with but a few strands of hair remaining on her head. Upon receiving news of her mother's death, Yaya Taba sat by the pier for what seemed like an entire week. She did not eat, nor did she sleep. She just gazed out into the sea and imagined the island from which she came, floating somewhere in the invisible distance. She was the farthest she had ever been from home. But since home no longer had her brother, her father, and her mother, she wasn't sure if it could still be called home. It was then that she realized she was alone in the world.

Manila loomed around her like a jungle, only it seemed more forbidding than any jungle she had ever seen. Yaya Taba attempted to navigate its streets with tentative steps, but she found her feet retreating to the spot on the pier where she had mourned her mother. Day after day she would set out, only to return to the pier, weaker in spirit, and more afraid. Soon enough, hunger got the best of her. It was her empty stomach that thrust her into the winding streets of the city, sending her scrounging for food, and anything that could be called a shelter.

Yaya Taba spent her first few years in Manila living off the kindness of churchgoers, who milled about a tree-lined plaza after mass every Sunday. She was later able to find work as a janitress in the parish office, where she scrubbed the floors and polished the windows in her unobtrusive, provincial manner. This started a series of similar jobs that would send her in and out of the households of Ermita, propelled by the referrals of kindly church ladies she had met. Some of

these jobs lasted years, while others lasted no more than a few months. She went where work would take her, spending the best years of her life tumbling through the city like a puff of dust, swept to and fro by forces more powerful than herself. No longer young, she found herself in Binondo, when a former employer referred her to a friend who was looking for a laundry woman. That friend happened to be Amah.

When Yaya Taba met Amah for the first time, she didn't ask for much in terms of salary and other benefits. Amah hired her without batting an eyelash. She liked Yaya Taba's timid, deferential air. A few months into her employment though, it was that same timidity that Amah began to complain about. "Too polite. Too nice. No fire in her belly!" Despite Amah's protests, Yaya Taba managed to keep our laundry clean. That was all that Amah really expected of her, and so Yaya Taba stayed on.

I could just imagine that Binondo was a confusing world for Yaya Taba. With its open gutters, Chinese signs, watch emporiums, and teahouses, Chinatown was a far cry from the rest of Manila, and even more so from her distant island home. Binondo was a frenetic maze of commerce, energy, industry, and superstition. Oddly enough, this troubled quarter of the city gave Yaya Taba a feeling of protection against the monsters that haunted her childhood nights. It was probably the incense smoke that covered the rooftops in a fragrant shield, or the dragon dances that drove away malevolent spirits with the sound of firecrackers and clanging of gongs. The supernatural war between the land's primeval demons and the haloed saints of Christianity seemed a world away from the dizzying crowds of merchants, hawkers, porters, and cooks, all rattling the day away in their incomprehensible, staccato speech. It was like Binondo was a limbo for the beasts that huddled in the shadows of the jungle. They simply didn't exist here, or at least they chose not to. Yaya Taba said that throughout her many years with us, she had only seen one aswang in Binondo—just one—and it happened to be perched on our roof.

*

So now we come to the best part of the story. It started on a windy night, a few months before I was born. Yaya Taba was looking out her window, as Yaya Delia slept on a cot beside her. Their room was next to the laundry room and faced the alley that ran along the back of our building. From where Yaya Taba slept, she could see the jagged rooftop of the warehouse behind us. A craggy water tank rose from the sea of corrugated metal, clawing its way to the sky. Behind it was the full moon, shining

bright and yellow. That was when she saw it—a spindly creature perched on top of the water tank, its bony limbs silhouetted against the moonlight. It was hunched like a bat, and appeared to be searching its surroundings. Yaya Taba froze in her cot, and quickly reached for the rosary that hung from a nail in the wall. She knew exactly what the creature was.

She turned to wake Yaya Delia, “Aswang,” she whispered. “Wake up!”

Yaya Delia was stirred from her sleep, but when they both looked out the window, it was once again just the water tank, and the moon.

With rosary in hand, Yaya Taba bolted from her cot to make sure that all our doors and windows were locked. She scrambled from ground floor, to second floor, to third floor, drawing the curtains where there were curtains, and hanging up laundry where there were none. As she fumbled in the dark with locks and keys, she remembered her village in Capiz, the rice fields under the moonlight, and the jungles beyond where winged creatures perched among the limbs of ancient trees. She remembered the family of witches that lived on top of the hill, and her own family, all gone now, victims of a deadly curse, that appeared to have found her at last after all these years. She mumbled the prayers she had memorized in the convent, and a more archaic prayer her mother had taught her, to be recited if ever she found herself alone in the jungle when darkness fell. Over the next few nights, Yaya Taba couldn’t help but stare at the water tank behind our building, alerted to even the slightest shadow that moved against the moon. She woke one night from a nightmare of blood, entrails, and bat-like wings, with the name of the aswang on her lips. She told me that it started with an S, but refused to say it out loud.

“What’s an aswang?” I asked Yaya Taba, as I played with the radio on top of Amah’s sewing machine.

“A demon,” she replied. “It eats your heart, or your liver, or your intestines. During the day, it looks just like you and me, but at night, it turns into a dog with red eyes, or a bird without feathers, that looks something like a bat.”

“So the one that you saw on of the water tank looked like a dog or like a bat?”

“Of course it looked like a bat. A dog wouldn’t be able to climb that high.”

I looked at her with eyes squinted, trying to imagine a dog making its way up the water tank. Then I imagined that same dog with bat-like wings, flying instead. “So did the aswang fly away after you scared it?”

“Wait,” she said, “the story isn’t finished yet.”

So I let her continue, and after numerous retellings, I had memorized the tale, with all its accessory dramatic pauses.

The roof deck of our building was where Yaya Taba hung our laundry to dry. When dusk settled, she would walk up to the roof deck, and stand there, surveying the landscape of rusted roofs that surrounded our building. She would close her eyes as she listened to the sound of the city, parsing through the noise of jeepneys and stray dogs, trying to listen for the aswang. From her childhood in Capiz, Yaya Taba knew that the aswang made a distinct sound, like a cross between the chirping of a bird and the clicking of a gecko. She also knew that aswangs were tricky. When the sound was loud, it meant that the aswang was far away, across the rice fields maybe, or deep in the jungle. But if the sound was faint, it meant that it was close by. If the sound was barely audible, the aswang was deathly near, like on the roof, or standing at the foot of the bed.

Aswangs usually lurked around homes with pregnant women. According to Yaya Taba, an unborn child was an aswang's favorite snack. Its scent could turn them blind with hunger. A hungry aswang would climb on top of a hut and extend its snake-like tongue through the thatched roof. Its tongue would then search for the doomed mother's womb. Once found, it would pierce through the mother's belly button, and suck out the fetus until nothing was left. Yaya Taba said she had seen one such incident when she was a young girl. A woman from their village let out a howl of horror at the first light of day. They found her in a pool of blood, clawing away at her deflated womb. The village called for the priest, certain that it was an aswang's doing. Before the priest could arrive though, the woman had screamed herself into madness, and plunged a knife deep in her gut.

"Never go into the jungle after dark," Yaya Taba's mother would always caution her. "That's where they stay. Among the old trees." Little did her mother know that the evil she had warned her daughter against would leave the shadows of the jungle, and come to their very doorstep. Now, after many years, it had managed to cross islands and seas, to visit her once more in the heart of the city.

Yaya Taba didn't know if she should tell my mother, or my father, or my grandparents about what she had seen that night. She wasn't even sure if our family, with our bearded gods robed in red, knew what an aswang was. But the thought of a vicious creature devouring the child in my mother's womb was too much for her to bear. So one day, Yaya Taba told Amah about the aswang, in as plain a manner as she could. She knew that Amah was the real boss of our household, and also the most superstitious member of our family.

To her surprise, Amah was quite receptive to her story. She was sure though, that something must have been lost in the cultural divide between them. Amah couldn't quite understand that the aswang was a fearsome beast that wanted to feast

on the soup of my unborn flesh. She understood it more as a ghost—a hungry ghost to be exact—which would curse our family with misfortune if it was not prevented or appeased. Because Amah had her own way dealing with things, she dealt with this problem in the best way she could think of.

Enter Aunt Joy, Amah's mahjong friend from the temple. Aunt Joy was the source of all the herbs Amah tossed into her notorious teapot and was a feng shui expert who trained in Taiwan. Yaya Taba told me that my father couldn't help but scowl the morning Amah brought Aunt Joy to our building. She came with a parade of assistants bearing incense sticks, golden trinkets, glass baubles, and jade figurines. They even brought a geomancer's compass the size of a pizza, which was covered in a blanket of red velvet. When Aunt Joy made her entrance into our family's life, my mother was almost due and was forbidden by Amah to rise from bed. So the women of my family met in my parents' bedroom, as Yaya Taba watched from a respectful distance, not understanding a word that was said. A few minutes later, Yaya Taba watched in amusement as Aunt Joy's entourage of assistants climbed up and down my parents' bedroom, installing a vast menagerie of clinking charms in the nooks and crannies determined by the geomancer's compass. After that came wind chimes that looked like miniature pagodas, eight in total, which were strung in a line by the window, and one last chime of chandelier-like proportions, which was suspended above the bed. Then it was time for the grand finale. Aunt Joy retrieved from her bag a large roll of red paper, which she unfurled on the floor with much ceremony. She then produced a brush and inkwell, and started writing an indecipherable Chinese character on the piece of paper. The paper was later on taped against my parents' bedroom door as a powerful glyph meant to stop evil in its tracks.

"No hungry ghost will be able to enter the room, so long as this piece of paper is on the door," Aunt Joy said.

My mother kept the red piece of paper, which I tried reading when I was old enough to read Chinese. After turning it right side up and upside down several times, I recognized Aunt Joy's messy scrawl as *shuangxi*, the character for double happiness. I've seen the character many times before but only at weddings. If I wasn't mistaken, the character was meant to wish newlyweds a happy married life. I never knew that it could also be used to ward off evil. Either that, or my mother had been quite possibly scammed.

"The hungry ghost didn't eat you, right?" my mother asked, after I insisted that Aunt Joy's magical character was a fake. "If that happened, you wouldn't be so sarcastic today."

I nodded in reply, although I still wasn't convinced. I even asked my Chinese teacher what the character meant, and she told me the exact same thing.

"You're alive," my mother continued. "That means that it worked. Besides, I wasn't the one who paid for it. It was Amah."

I didn't know how much it cost Amah to upgrade the spiritual security of our home, but I guess she would have paid any amount to make sure that no hungry ghost foiled her dream of having a dragon baby boy for a grandson. Incidentally, Aunt Joy became one of my godmothers during my baptism. As my godmother, she would gift me with a red money envelope every year on my birthday, on Christmas, and on Chinese New Year. But out of all the money envelopes I received, Aunt Joy's always had the least amount of cash. When other envelopes were stuffed with multiple five hundred or one thousand peso bills, hers contained a lonely one hundred pesos. "Aunt Joy is my most stingy aunty!" I once declared on Chinese New Year, eliciting laughter from the entire room. She was seated across the table from me. I noticed her cheeks flushing red, as she popped a dumpling into her mouth. After that, my mother gave me a thrashing in the bedroom.

The efficacy of Aunt Joy's charms remained debatable, even within our family. My father saw the charms as nothing more than clutter, while Amah hailed them as talismans that brought our family good fortune. Whether as a product of Aunt Joy's efforts or simple biology, I was born without any complications. No hungry ghost came to ruin my auspicious birth, and neither did any aswang. According to Yaya Taba though, the aswang she had seen on the water tank did make a serious attempt to suck me out of my mother's womb. If it had managed to succeed, the golden trinkets strung around our apartment would have just served to make the setting of my grisly death quite ornate.

*

The more I grew up, the more enticing my scent became. Yaya Taba knew that it was only a matter of time before the aswang would come for me. Whenever she would stand on the roof deck of our building, she would hear the distinct clicking rising from the streets all around her. It was loud and audible, so she knew that the aswang was far away. As she surveyed the surroundings, she would mumble the prayer her mother had taught her, hoping that the ancient words would make her brave.

Day after day, she would stand on top of our building, like a reluctant guardian on the walls of a fortress. She was certain that when the aswang would come, it would be crazed with the scent of my unborn flesh. She would have no other

option but to kill it. But Yaya Taba was fully aware that she was no warrior, nor was she anointed with holy powers to combat the pagan beasts of this land. She was a plump, middle-aged laundry woman, whose only aspiration in life was to move through the world as unobtrusively as a tiny snail. She had a sinking feeling in her gut though, that this was probably not going to happen. She needed to be ready, even if she didn't want to be.

Then she remembered a small detail in the stories that her mother used to tell her. Aswangs were afraid of scissors. There was nothing more painful for an aswang than to have its tongue cut off. Some of them would even run at the mere glinting of blades. But Yaya Taba knew that this was no guarantee. If the aswang was hungry enough, it would risk everything just to feed, including its tongue. When she was a girl, her mother had instructed her to pick up a pair of scissors, if ever she spotted a black tongue slithering down the roof of their hut. She should be quick, and cut it. It would fight back, but she should cut it. If only Yaya Taba could muster enough courage to cut it when the time came.

In the days leading to my birth, Yaya Taba carried a pair of scissors wherever she went. She clutched it like a weapon, and also like a prayer. She knew that it was just a matter of time before the aswang would be upon us, but she hoped with a hard and steely hope that it would skip our home, like the Angel of Death during the Passover. As she looked out from our roof deck, she would hear the gecko-like clicking above the din of city, until one night, on the last full moon of September, all was silent.

She knew that the time had come. From her room, Yaya Taba stared at the water tank behind our building. Then, she saw it again—the bat-like creature with its head raised to the sky, sniffing the air for the scent of the unborn. In the light of the moon, she noticed that the aswang was thin. Its skin dripped from the bones of its gangling arms like loose rags. Then the creature looked in the direction of our building, as if latching on to the scent that drifted from my parents' bedroom. It leapt from the water tank, and landed without a sound on the roof of the warehouse. In the light of the moon, she saw it crawling crablike over the rusted metal, making its way to where I slept peacefully inside my mother's womb. Her hands shook as she tightened her grip on the pair of scissors.

After making sure that all the doors and windows of our building were locked, Yaya Taba positioned herself by my parents' bedroom door. From where she stood, she could see the entire length of our apartment. Everything was quiet, except for the ticking of the clock that hung on the wall. She stood there with her knees quaking underneath her duster, hoping that there was no crack in the building through which the aswang could squeeze its tongue. Her eyes darted from one window to another,

expecting to see a dark figure between the creases of the curtains. All was still, too still, and she knew that the aswang was near.

Then she heard a clatter from the laundry room. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as she made the sign of the cross. With her mother's ancient prayer on her lips, she fixed her gaze at the door that stood at the far end of our apartment. Then another clatter shot through the air. It was sharp and metallic, jolting Yaya Taba. She took a step back, half of her heart commanding her to run. But something, a small spark of courage, or curiosity maybe, told her to stand her ground.

The clattering continued. It could have been a mouse, or maybe just the wind. But it could have also very well been the aswang. Without knowing why, Yaya Taba took her first tentative step to where the noise had come from. With the point of the scissors leading her way, she walked the length of our apartment, step by trembling step, as the sound rattled on. Then she came up to the laundry room's door. She hesitated, but after one deep breath, she pushed the door open, already knowing what she would see inside. And there it was—a tongue, black and slimy as an eel. It had forced its way up through the floor drain, and was slithering in her direction.

Yaya Taba jumped aside. She pressed herself against the wall, as the tongue probed left and right on the floor. Her heartbeat was racing, as her grip on the pair of scissors tightened. She knew she had to strike now, and strike quickly, or else she would never get another chance. But striking seemed so difficult, as she felt the unusual bravery that took her across the apartment quickly draining away. She had never struck anything in her life, and the idea of striking a monster, seemed more frightening than the monster itself. The tongue slithered about like a sightless animal, inching its way to her feet. She hopped into a corner, praying that its slimy tip would not brush up against her ankles. But the tongue kept crawling. Closer, and closer it came, until Yaya Taba, out of sheer panic, raised the pair of scissors and snapped at the tongue's advancing length.

It recoiled. Then with a hissing sound, the tongue raised itself from the floor like the tail of a scorpion. She had missed, only managing to nick its side. To her horror, the tongue quaked in the air, its sides bristling with canine teeth. Then its tip peeled back, and from its fleshy core jutted out a tiny face, like that of a wrinkled baby. The face opened its mouth in a scream, and in its jaws were a multitude of spines.

The tongue lunged at Yaya Taba, snapping its mouth like a crazed dog. She parried it aside with the scissors, hoping to slice it with a random blow. But the tongue was too quick. It whipped back up in the air, and again flew in her direction, the impish face screeching as it searched for flesh. Yaya Taba ducked, narrowly avoiding the teeth that grazed the top of her shoulder. The tongue withdrew once more, and

towered above her. At its full height, the tongue almost reached the ceiling. She sat on the floor, backing deeper and deeper into the corner. Then again it dove, its tip shooting through the air, like a spear aimed straight at her face. In the nick of time, Yaya Taba shielded her face with her forearm, wincing in pain as the creature's mouth sank its thorny teeth into her flesh. Stinging spasms shot through her entire arm, causing her to drop the pair of scissors. It fell to the floor, the blades separating from each other in a sharp clatter. The tongue withdrew, its face smiling as blood smeared its mouth. Yaya Taba wanted to curse its mocking grin, but her throat constricted. She was too afraid to even scream.

As she wrapped her wounded arm in the edge of her duster, Yaya Taba watched in vain as the tongue slithered its way to my parents' bedroom. She nursed her arm, shaking from pain, fear, and the crippling realization that truly, she was not brave, nor was she strong. She was just a maid—a fat, aging woman, who wasn't even the most talented maid there was. Already she knew that she was defeated, like her brother, and her father, and her mother were defeated, many years before. Tears came to her eyes at the thought of her family, murdered by dark forces that had roamed the land even before the arrival of angels. How could she even begin to fight? Her mother, withered and bent in their hut, her father convulsing with a fever, and her brother, whose body she was not even able to bury. Through the creases of the curtain, she saw the moon, a yellow eye boring into her core. It offered no comfort and instead told her that she was weak.

On the floor, she saw half of the pair of scissors, shining in a crack of moonlight. It lay just a few inches away from the slithering length of the tongue. She could stab it. Impale the tongue to prevent its further advance. The creature would whip back for sure, sending its terrible face flying back at her. She knew this would happen. But somehow, she felt she owed her long-gone family one last stab. How wicked it would be if she struck true. How wicked and how satisfying. So Yaya Taba got on her haunches and crawled across the floor to pick up what remained of the scissors. She raised the blade in the air, and with one fell swoop, stabbed straight into the black flesh before her.

It wailed. It was a horrid wail that shook Yaya Taba, replacing her temporary strength with panic. She raised the blade and saw the tongue's wriggling length still skewered onto it. She looked across the apartment and saw the tip of the tongue turn in her direction, its crumpled face wild with rage. The tongue raced back to the laundry room, knocking aside furniture, as Yaya Taba looked for something to defend herself with. There was nothing else, except the sewing machine that stood by the window. Upon seeing the sewing machine, she knew exactly what she needed

to do. She raised the skewered section of the tongue, and tugged it to the side of the room. She heaved with all her might, and impaled the tongue's bucking length on the board of the sewing machine. It wrestled with her, almost knocking her over. But she held it down, positioning the slithering thing underneath the sewing machine's needle. And there, by the light of the moon, Yaya Taba began to sew.

She stepped on the pedal of the sewing machine, and sent the needle flying through the tongue. She pedaled fast—faster than she had ever pedaled before. The creature screamed, as the needle punctured one tiny hole after another. It tried to break free, but she kept it pinned down with her hand. Then from the corner of her eye, she saw a bristle of tiny fangs flying toward her face with a fearsome shriek. Just before it could bite into her cheek, she caught the tip of the tongue with her free hand, and slammed it down on the board of the sewing machine. The tiny face screamed as it snapped its jaws in an attempt to free itself. But she pinned it down with all her weight, forcing its eyes to watch in horror as the needle ran in and out of its own flesh. She pedaled furiously until hundreds of tiny holes became a thousand holes, which formed a jagged tear along the tongue's length. The tear grew wider and wider, as Yaya Taba pedaled faster and faster. The creature squealed like a pig being slaughtered, as it watched every painful second of its death. It quaked in her grip, each quake weaker than the last, as the needle did its steady, mechanical work. Black blood pooled around her hands and splattered all over her duster. Then she came to the last sliver of flesh. She ran it under the needle—once, twice, thrice—and when the last sinew snapped back like a rubber band, it was completely severed.

The tip of the tongue jerked in her grip, the wrinkled face belatedly realizing that it had been sawn off from the rest of its body. It wriggled with the last streams of life flowing through it, until the face fell wide-eyed and limp on the board of the sewing machine. The rest of the tongue retreated into the floor drain, as Yaya Taba heard the sound of distant wails. With the tip of the creature's tongue still pinned underneath her hand, Yaya Taba leaned her back against the window, panting heavily. She couldn't let go until the first light of day.

"You killed it!" I would say. Yaya Taba could only muster a shy smile. "But wait, what happened to Yaya Delia? Did she help you kill it?"

"She's useless!" Yaya Taba would joke. "She slept through the entire night. Good for nothing!"

"Amah says she's good at making lemon chicken." I would rebut.

"But not at killing aswangs." To which I would nod profusely, in admiration of the unlikely hero of our household.

The following day, Yaya Taba tossed what remained of the aswang's tongue in a pot and boiled it until it bubbled into a stew. She then flushed the stew down the toilet and watched it swirl away into the sewers. That day, a young woman was found dead on our sidewalk. Her tongue had been cut out. The police were stumped and dismissed the case as yet another one of the city's unsolved crimes. The news reports said that the woman was from a nearby boarding house and was a recent transferee from a village in Capiz.

After her ordeal with the aswang, Yaya Taba wrapped her wounded arm in fresh bandages. Upon seeing her forearm, Amah asked her what had happened. She said it was a cooking accident, to which Amah replied that she should really just leave the kitchen work to Yaya Delia. She then gave Yaya Taba a bag of orange powder, which she was to apply onto the wound two times a day.

"Can I see your wound?" I would ask Yaya Taba whenever she finished the story. She would extend her forearm, on which I could detect two scars shaped like tiny crescent moons.

"Is it still painful?"

"Not anymore," she would reply.

"So are you an aswang, too? Because you got bitten, right? When you get bitten by a vampire, you become a vampire yourself."

"Maybe," she would say, "and that's why you should clean up your room. Or else I'll get mad, and transform into an aswang, and eat your liver."

"If you turn into an aswang, I think you'll be the dog-looking aswang, and not the bat-looking aswang."

"And why is that?"

"I've seen lots of fat dogs, but I've never seen any fat bats."

Yaya Taba would scowl at that comment, but she eventually learned to laugh it off.

"So when will you teach me how to kill an aswang?"

"No need," she would answer, "I already killed the only aswang in Binondo."

*

A couple of weeks after that, my mother went into labor. I came into the world as a lucky, dragon baby boy. It hasn't been lost on me though, that it could have been a very different ending. I've always understood the day of my birth through two stories, an official one adorned with golden Chinese trinkets, and an unofficial one, with tropical guts and gore. Since I wasn't around to verify these stories, I guess I could believe any of them, or none of them, or both.

Yaya Taba is old now, still a plump woman who isn't of much use in the kitchen. She still listens to dramas on the radio, although recently, soap operas on TV have been vying for her attention. When I graduated from grade school, Yaya Taba gave me a graduation present. It was a tube of candy-flavored toothpaste, my favorite since I was old enough to brush my teeth. When I graduated from high school, she gave me a book she picked up from a Chinese bookstore. It was a Chinese translation of Noah's Ark. I taught her how to read and write Chinese once, and she has since mastered how to write the character for chicken. When I graduated from college, she gave me a red money envelope, with one hundred pesos inside. It was a single hundred peso bill, similar to what I would normally receive from Aunty Joy. But somehow, Yaya Taba's money envelope seemed to contain so much more. When I married Jane three years after college, Yaya Taba was present at our wedding. During the reception, she was seated at the farthest table in the restaurant, practically hidden from the rest of the guests. She moved about in her unobtrusive, snail-like manner, but from where I sat on the stage, I could see her clearly. She was wearing her first ever *cheongsam*, bright red with embroidered golden flowers, which I had ordered especially for her.

Jane is pregnant with our first child, and we live in what used to be my bedroom. Every day at dusk, Yaya Taba would hobble her way up to the top of our building, despite her host of arthritic joints. She would lean against the ledge of our roof deck, looking out into the familiar sea of rusted metal. I would join her sometimes, after my day of work at the hardware store. I would stand by her side as she keeps still, listening to the sound of the city, with a pair of scissors clutched in her hand. I would stay with her until darkness fell, and the street signs of Binondo are all lit up.