Potpot

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IT WAS LATE in the evening at Potpot's wake and Charito was busy serving soda crackers and instant coffee to the few guests inside the cramped living room. She was talking with a new arrival–Indang Undang, a distant aunt from Lubao–when they were rudely interrupted by the screams and hysterical laughter of three neighborhood children running away from Potpot's coffin. This had been going on since morning: their game of creeping up ton Potpot and, upon viewing her now shriveled remains dressed in a shiny aquamarine dress her sister had worn to a barrio debut many years ago, breaking into a run to the screen door.

This game was something Potpot would have been familiar with when she was still alive. If you ran into Potpot on a moonless night in the alley going out from the compound to the street, the one too narrow even for tricycles to pass through, Potpot in her duster and curlers and night cream, you would run in the other direction too.

"Idiot," Potpot would have said, the fat in her arms jiggling with fake two-fisted outrage. "It's just me!"

"I thought her casket would have to be much . . . larger," said Indang Undang.

It was the cancer, Charito replied. No, something about diabetes, complications from three decades of being a large girl. She wasn't very sure. But as soon as she heard the news from the doctor at the Provincial Hospital that she had stage five

renal disease, she just stopped eating, as though the prognosis itself crawled out of the doctor's mouth and flicked the off switch on the feeder belt of fatty and salty excess that fueled Potpot's desire to live.

Never mind that the appetite goes way before one gets to stage five—at least that's what the studies say. Before going into the doctor's clinic that day, she even stopped by the hospital *carinderia* for their famed *sisig* and *bopis*. She ate very daintily, taking the time to mix her condiments thoughtfully and spooning the soy sauce, *calamansi*, and red onion mixture gently into the minced pork cheeks, brain, heart, and lungs. She savored how the acidity cut through the steaming rice and chargrilled, gelatinous goodness upon entering her salivating mouth. She finished off this meal for the ages with a menthol cigarette and a second Coke.

Most people like being alive. They work their way from the spark of denial upon hearing the fatal news through to acceptance. Some of them even circle back up to second-cycle denial. Such is the evolutionary imperative to survive at all costs. One person is confronted with the realness of death that will surely also claim us all in the end, and the family rallies around her and says: "We'll fight this thing!"

Not for Potpot. Potpot hears the Doctor say: "It's bad, you should prepare for the worst," and boom: she decides to die. The Japanese war planes were still warming up their engines, cooing in the bosom of an aircraft carrier in the Pacific, and here was Potpot already taking down the flag, folding it up into a neat little package, ready to give it up at a moment's notice.

Force feeding Potpot was as effectual as feeding coins into a vomit machine. She would not hold anything in. Relatives from abroad begged and pleaded for her through videocall to drink more than just a glass of water a day, to no avail. Near the end her arms had to be restrained to stop her from tearing out the tubes from her dextrose bottle.

"Nobody gives up just like that," Indang Undang said, snapping her fingers for emphasis. "It goes against the laws of nature."

And what about a week after that doctor's visit when Potpot let out all the animals in the compound? Not just the dogs and the goat, but even Koyang Erning's fighting cocks and the monkey named "Ungga Ayala" that belonged to her cousin the policeman. Potpot even bought a bolt cutter from the hardware store on the other side of town to unchain Ungga from the horizontal bar which had been his home since he was old enough to crawl and screech from end to end, able to move only in a straight line as though trapped in a world of only one dimension.

The animals roamed the compound, scrounging for food scraps, frightening the birds, while the ownerless cats observed the chaos coolly from their perches. Though

thoroughly gassed and seemingly half-dead from hunger and dehydration, Potpot chased all of them into the alleyway to get them out onto the street and sweet, sweet freedom. "Shoo!" Potpot shouted, all the while banging two frying pans against each other to scare them all into running.

Needless to say, every single one of them was dead within a few days. The fighting cocks, brave warriors who had known nothing but mortal combat, now rested peacefully as stringy and gamey *afritada*. The two dogs, White and Brown, turned out to be too belligerent and intoxicated with freedom to be adopted as pets so they had to be put down. The nameless goat had no chance at all, its final thoughts nothing but a microscopic lesion of an electrochemical impulse, cooked into stasis, locked for a few hours in a head inside a stock pot.

Ungga was the last of the survivors. He had made it as far as Bamban, just a few more dashes to the dense Aeta forest before he was shot by a startled policeman. So many ways to go for escape—up, down, forward, back, side-to-side—but Ungga had frozen for a moment, thinking the uniformed man was his owner. Memories of their complicated relationship flooded Ungga's mind just for an instant, then his back muscles tensed and twitched back to fight or flight mode, but it was too late. The PO1 who shot him must have emptied his entire clip before realizing what he had been firing at.

What was the point of all that?

"Maybe she hated being alive and took it out on the poor animals," said Indang Undang, rubbing her chin like a philosopher or a police detective from the movies wrapping up the plot at the end scene. "She was so sick that she no longer knew what she was doing." But this was not exactly true. It was true that Potpot would not take any food or medicine, true that she sent the neighborhood pets and livestock inadvertently to their deaths, but everything was clearly planned and premeditated, even if in a Potpot kind of way.

"Just kill yourself!" Potpot's third-degree cousin Meldy had screamed at her after her next stunt. Potpot had borrowed all the statuettes and figurines of Jesus, Mary, and the Saints from her neighbors. All of them obliged her, thinking it must be for the heavy-duty calling out to the heavens that she was going to have to do to reverse her body's death wish. Jesus, Mary, and all the Saints, indeed. They would put in the good word for sure.

Potpot brought them, including her own Sto. Niño, out through the alleyway and into the lamplit street, just gently stood them out on the sidewalk, to the annoyance of the tricycle and pedicab drivers who used the sidewalks as their "express lanes." She lined them up perfectly and just left them there, in formation, a perfect little

gallery of wooden and ceramic dolls, all blessed by the Parish Priest so you know they can transmit your wishes and secrets directly to God, just as well as they can scare off burglars and monsters that lurk in the night. A casual observer would think it a procession frozen in time or a rally, a show of force, to protect Potpot's alleyway, along with the shuttered animal feed stores on either side, from malign forces.

But really Potpot just wanted them out of the compound. Passersby waited tentatively, fingered their phones idly, pretending not to notice the loot left out on the street. Once they figured out nobody wanted them, they started swooping in, taking three at a time, running straight to their homes as if rescuing babies from a fire, except they were two bearded medium Jesuses and a large bald St. Dominic.

Meldy could not understand why Potpot would do that: borrow your neighbors' religious icons and leave them out on the street. It had struck her as hateful, satanic even.

"I just wanted to show them to everyone," Potpot explained to her irate relations, not making eye contact. "They were all just cooped up here anyway." She even offered (promised!) to pay them the value of the missing statuettes and figurines. "I'm good for it!" Potpot said defiantly, but everyone knew she was broke and, anyway, she was as good as dead.

Nobody spoke to Potpot after this sacrilege. "She didn't even finish high school, doesn't go to church," an exasperated Meldy told the other residents in the compound. "What did we really expect of her?" No town hall meetings were conducted to thresh out "the Potpot problem," but it was understood among the neighbors that Potpot the simpleton was no longer to be humored.

No longer did they ask why Potpot would sit all day under the mango tree, just sweating it out in her orange duster with the floral print, sometimes for hours at a time without moving. Potpot was fine with being ignored. Eventually, her sweat glands stopped kicking in from the lack of fluids and she would just slowly bake there in the noontime sun, in the heat steaming off the ground, like if the burning monk from the Vietnam War had really taken his sweet time, to self-immolate but super slowly. It was as though Potpot were shutting her body down system by system. In a week, she was gone.

Charito was refilling Indang Undang's cup with three-in-one when the children started creeping up to the coffin again. One of them snuck up so close to the coffin that his nose touched the glass cover. "Yuck, it stinks!" he shouted. The rest screamed hysterically and ran for the door.

One of the runners, the ten-year-old son of Nonoy the *calesa* driver, was so freaked out by the smell that he tripped and fell the wrong way on his arm. A flash

of pain distorted his face and it seemed like he was about to cry, but then his friends pulled him back up and out the screen door.

"It's been like that all day," Charito said.

"These children have no respect for the dead," Indang Undang said. "I blame their parents."

Charito excused herself to fix the mass cards that the children, in their horseplay, had caused to topple over the glass top. As she collected the three mass cards to prop up against the casket's interior panel, she suddenly beheld Potpot's face. It startled her, this gaunt, leathery visage that little resembled her younger cousin. Charito was not sure if the funeral service was to blame (there was only one service provider in town) or maybe even the best embalmer with all the most high-tech equipment, fluids, prosthetics, and makeup could not recreate in death how a fat person looked in life.

Worst of all, the children were right: Potpot *did* stink. Most people blamed the embalmer. Perhaps he had scrimped on the embalming fluids, the exotic herbs and spices of his trade that would have masked the stench. Some guessed it was all that sugar from her diabetes drawing multitudes of microbes and worms to her corpse, like ants to candy, but filling her cavities with damp rot. Meldy, still sore from what Potpot did to her Baby Jesus, theorized it was some kind of reverse incorruptibility.

Most likely it was the fact that the wake had been made to go on too long—three weeks already and counting. The *barangay* watchmen smoking near the alleyway would say it was because the family was still waiting for relatives to fly in from Australia and Saudi Arabia. But really it was because of the otherwise illegal card games that the police allowed—an exception that probably dates back to the Spanish occupation—to help the family deal with the loss and keep themselves awake until the wake was over. The mini casino also ensured that there would be enough funds for the food and drinks that had to be served to the guests who were still coming in, though mostly for the gambling and not necessarily for Potpot.

Outside a fight had broken up between two players at the Lucky 9 table, one accusing the other of switching his cards so that the 10 which wins you zero pesos turns into a 9, which wins you all the pesos in the pot. The fight drew out all the people from inside the house, except for Charito, who did not want to leave Potpot's corpse unguarded lest it be vandalized. It also turned out the people outside were not only gambling, they were drinking, too. The police had to be called in.

When it had all calmed down and the police ordered a stop to the gambling and the drinking, there was hardly anyone left at the wake.

The next evening, Potpot's sister gave Charito her day's wages, along with some leftover *pancit* and *pandesal* for her children, and told her she could go home. It was

her last day serving snacks at the wake as the family had been suddenly forced to cut it short and have Potpot buried the next day. They would call Charito if they needed her services again.

Charito made her way out to the street. Maybe it was the full moon, but Charito noticed something written at the entrance of the alleyway that she had not noticed before: a word written on the bare cement in purple marker, in a child's scrawl. *Potpot*, it said. Nothing followed, not even a "was here" to assert that she once moved through this world.

It was a lovely night and Charito did not wish to take the pedicab home. It was a good walk. She felt the cool breeze under her skirt. It rejuvenated her bones. She quickened her pace, hoping to catch her children still awake.

She walked through the row of flower trees that led to the hut where her family lived, moving gingerly so as not to disturb the dog. But even through the fragrant champacas and night-blooming jasmines the dog found her right away. The dog barked enthusiastically, unable to contain herself, as if wanting painfully to tell Charito how her day went. Charito petted the dog, changed her water, and went inside the hut.

Charito found her teenage daughter Neneng reading in a very gentle voice, by lamplight, to her seven-year-old brother. Neneng saw her mother, raised a finger to her smiling lips, then returned to her storytelling.

Charito carefully set down at the table the plastic pancit container she had brought home from the wake. When she opened the lid to air out the contents, the sudden smell of the chicken, carrots, and cabbage sautéed with egg noodles made her mouth salivate and her stomach grumble. She felt grateful that it was given without her having to ask for it. Hopefully, it would keep long enough until breakfast.

She removed her sandals and crept to the only room in their hut, which she shared with her husband. He was asleep on his side, turned the other way, snoring softly. He smelled of gin and cigarettes, which she hated on everyone except her husband. To her it smelled like perfume, his reward after a hard day's work at the sugarcane field.

Her husband stirred when she sat on the bamboo bed. "How was fatty's wake?" he asked.

"Don't talk about her that way," Charito replied. "You did not know her." She was surprised at her own reaction, how jumpy and irate she sounded though she never really spoke with Potpot even before she got sick. Her husband grunted and went back to sleep. Charito took off her bra and lay down.

Charito knew her husband was not being mean. There was something that

did not sit well about the spectacle of a person from a poor town eating herself to excess, to the point of self-destruction, only to choose to abandon food at the end, to squander one's life when many struggled so hard to remain alive. It seemed like an act of haughtiness and contemptuous extravagance. But Charito felt it was not for the living to judge the dead.

"Poor cousin," Charito thought. "Nobody knew you." She tried to but could not sleep so she tried praying instead. Although she had no saints in the house and she was not raised with religion, she imagined her questions would reach Potpot in an afterlife.