

Daredevil

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I SHOULD HAVE known it was going to be one of those horse-shit days.

My cousin Andy, the Master Freeloader, had invited me to lunch at a tony country club in Tagaytay. Over espresso, he told me that the gaming company shares he advised me to buy last month had tumbled in value, leaving a black hole in my finances.

Resisting the urge to rip his heart out, I looked around the perfumed surroundings and wondered. Who among those government-official types in Ralph Lauren shirts and Cartier sunglasses surrounded by bodyguards, and those yuppies in Burburries that matched their toddlers' had been similarly duped? And who among them had been "in" on it all the time, and could now buy another BMW?

Before I could figure things out, my agent called to tell me that negotiations for my contract renewal had snagged. So, I just felt the need to get back to the choking pollution of Manila and vent on a tennis ball, a punching bag, anything.

I floored the accelerator of my week-old Land Cruiser. Then it happened. Faster than any referee could say "Foul!" A biker came hurtling toward us out of nowhere and the next nanosecond, he banged against the bumper and was hurled toward the shoulder of the road, like an airball. With Foo Fighters blaring from the Blaupunkt speakers, I couldn't hear what could have been a scream from the man.

My first instinct was to slam the brakes.

"Go! Go! Go!" Andy screamed.

Years of conditioning, doing exactly what Andy says, prodded me to accelerate. Then I slowed down.

"We have to go back and help him," I said.

"Why?"

"Because we have to," I said in a monotone.

"It was his fault, man. Besides, scandals drag down a player's market value."

"But I hit him. We have to go back."

“Are you nuts? You know how people enjoy seeing celebrities make mistakes?” The veins on Andy’s neck throbbed.

“Listen, all we need is a *padrino* to help us ... guarantee our safety,” I said.

“And then what? Come on, celebrities are easy prey for opportunists.”

Yeah, opportunists like stockbrokers, I wanted to say. If I hadn’t been too occupied with my stock market losses, I was sure I could have avoided the biker. “Will your dad help?”

“Do basketball players sweat?” He wore a smirk I hadn’t seen since we were kids.

I had that coming, I supposed. How dared I doubt Tito Noel, my dad’s brother, who had helped raise me and my sisters as best he could, after Daddy died when I was eight?

“You think he’s home? I’d like to go see him right away.”

Andy shook his head. “He’ll be back very late. Don’t worry, I’m sure the biker’s alright. I bet the *istambays* already took him to the hospital or wherever.” I had to remind myself that Andy was not like this before he worked with tons of other people’s money in a stockbrokerage firm.

He had helped me get my athletic scholarship in college. He never doubted that I would make the team and had pushed me on. He gave me his brand new rubber shoes when mine was crumbling from too much practice. He shared his *baon* with me. He practically acted as my waterboy/towelboy during practices and try-outs.

At 5’8”, I was short even for a varsity player. But I worked harder than anybody else in our team, and I got drafted to the PBA. I became known as a shooting guard. If I were white and over six feet, I could be Stephen Curry. In my dreams. But right now, I was having a nightmare, and only Tito Noel could save me.

Early the next morning, we went back to Barrio Lugmok with Tito Noel. I felt sick from lack of sleep. I kept seeing airballs and thinking about what had happened to the man. Would he become a cripple? Would physical therapy work? I also thought about the look on my uncle’s face. I could not tell if it was disappointment or disgust. I wouldn’t blame him either way. I was a disgusting disappointment even to myself.

The police station was barely awake at nine o’clock. The desk sergeant was having coffee and *pan de sal*. Another one was reading the newspaper. The other desks were empty. Either they were all on patrol, or still asleep.

“What?” The sergeant growled, brows furrowed so deep he looked like a mastiff irked at having his feeding time interrupted. He squinted at Tito Noel, then almost drowned in his coffee when he recognized my uncle’s face from the calendar hanging below the President’s poster. “Season’s Greetings from the Commission,” it said. My uncle’s craggy face glared down as if trooping the lines.

The sergeant ushered us into the Chief’s office, grovelling all the way. I had a

feeling he would wipe our asses if we asked him to. With his bare hands. I slouched, kept my head down and deliberately kept my cap on. Andy swaggered into the room.

Captain Bautista saluted and bowed for good measure, showing the greasy strips of his combed-over hair. His marble eyes shifted from Andy to me, to the walls with his diploma and family pictures, to the statues of the Blessed Mother and Sto. Niño on a side table, everywhere, except directly at Tito Noel. Wiping the oily-looking sweat from his forehead, he finally addressed my uncle, "We're honored to have you, Sir." But it sounded like a plea for clemency, for some unknown crime, like being on a drug lord's payroll, moonlighting as a politico's private goon, or abetting smuggling.

Tito Noel, head of an agency that oversaw police conduct and meted out the necessary punishment for all manner of offenses, let him stew in his discomfort. Captain Bautista continued, "Would you like to inspect the troops, Sir? Is there anything we can do for you?"

My uncle held the police chief's eyes, until he squirmed and he too, would have wiped our asses. I had the uneasy feeling that Tito Noel had done this many times before.

"Yes, Captain, as a matter of fact, you are just the man we need." He made serving him sound like a privilege. And then he proceeded to relate the details of the accident. "The biker swerved from the opposite lane like a homing missile. As if he really wanted to get hit." Tito Noel was quick to emphasize the last point.

The captain's obsequious and guilty look transformed into that of cunning and superiority. Big Chief wants something from Little Chief, his eyes seemed to say. I could almost hear the gears in his otherwise slow brain clicking rapidly into place. How badly does Big Chief want this, and what's in it for Little Chief? Future favors? Lots of future favors, perhaps? A smile quivered on his cigarette-blackened lips. Then just as quickly as it had disappeared, the obsequious look returned.

"Yes, Sir. My men discovered the body yesterday, Sir."

Body. This single word grasped my throat like icy tentacles. I struggled for air. Does this mean I will go to prison, get raped and beaten up there? Will I go to hell? I asked myself. This was worse than the time during my rookie year when I made a ridiculously high jump shot that threatened to result in a career-ending head injury. No, an ISIS hostage facing a beheading would be a closer analogy.

"... the town drunk, actually, so there should be no problem," greasehead droned on, while my uncle regarded him impassively. This inexplicably made greasehead trip all over himself. "I can facilitate things, talk to the widow, she works as an embroiderer in my sister's *jusi* shop. I can make this thing go away." He attempted to be delicate. A baboon drinking from a demitasse, with its pinky raised.

"How much would it cost us?" My uncle's voice was neutral.

“Insurance companies usually pay P50,000 for accidental death, but since it will be listed as a hit and run with no leads ...” he let the words hang.

“We’ll take care of that.” My uncle gave him a bundle of P500-peso bills.

The policeman’s sausage-like hands darted toward the money and grabbed it so quickly, I expected him to lick his forefinger and start counting the bills.

“And this, is for your trouble, Captain,” Tito Noel handed him a bundle of P100-peso bills. “And if you need anything ...” my uncle said.

“Yes, Sir, I’ll call you, Sir.” His face lighted up.

“Thank you,” I said, extending my hand.

For the first time, our eyes met, and I saw a flicker of recognition in his. This was not unexpected. My pug-nosed brown face had been all over TV and newspapers, selling hotdogs and briefs. And yes, I do have a good amount of exposure during PBA games.

“Excuse me, Sir. But your nephew, he’s ... he’s Boogie Marquez of the Boozemen? The Greased Lightning?” he asked, wide-eyed.

Again, I could almost hear the frantic clicking of his brain, calculating how much he had lost by not recognizing me earlier. Maybe Andy was right. I was the quintessential Pinoy common *tao*, a shorty who made good in a tall man’s game, someone the masses could identify with. But what if the underdog ball player had ran over a biker? That would be worth something ... a lot, actually. What had Andy said about people like Bautista? Oh yes, they were Jukebox Commandoes. He said you had to keep on plunking down more and more money to keep them happy.

“Yes, he’s Boogie. Is there a problem?” Tito Noel used hi ex-cathedra voice.

“No, no. It’s just that he’s my sons’ favorite,” he gushed. “May I have his autograph?” He thrust a piece of paper and ballpen toward me, but Tito Noel said, “Perhaps under the circumstances ...”

“Sorry, Sir.” He probably meant about the foregone income.

“Again, Captain, thank you, and if you ever need anything ...” my uncle’s voice was civil, yet dismissive.

“Yes, Sir. And don’t worry, Sir, I won’t say a word.” He turned to me and winked. That wink made me feel dirtier than Pasig River scum.

My feet were like lead dead weights that I had to drag to the Expedition. I should be happy that I was getting off so easily. A human life had cost much less than what the shoe manufacturer was paying me to wear their top-of-the line shoes during a game. And I was not even thinking about the rates for championship games. What was it they had said back at the police station? That because the drunk had been unemployed for so long, his life had no economic value?

Was that what the drunk who had killed Daddy felt? That being a CEO of a top

500 company, he could run over a clerk crossing the street? Splatter clerk-brains all over the steaming pavement like sisig?

The economic value of a drunk's life depended on whether he drove a Mercedes or pedalled a beat-up bike.

"Next time, you may not get off so easily. Be careful," Tito Noel said with just the right amount of menace that made me feel like a ten-year-old caught shooting baskets in the rain.

"Can we go with Bautista and see the widow?"

Tito Noel's eyes narrowed, then he sighed.

"What are you, crazy?" Andy spoke for the first time.

"I just thought maybe we should give her our condolences."

"They're making it look like a hit-and-run. We've given the police money, precisely so that we ... you, wouldn't be identified," he said as if explaining something to a moron.

"I just have to do this."

Tito Noel nodded. I knew he would understand in the way Andy could not.

"Dad ..." Andy whined. "Oh, okay, don't tell me I didn't warn you, you brainless ballhandler."

Bautista rode with us. He kept admiring the Expedition's interiors. "Smells so nice here," he said, patting the fake señorita bananas that held potpourri. He ran his fat hands over the plush seatcovers. "Ahh, I should have been a basketball player. Next year, I will send my son to basketball camp." He looked expectantly at me, like a dog awaiting table scraps. I simply nodded.

"You know, Berto, the dead man, he used to be a teacher." Without waiting for my reply, he went on, "The best. He was even sent to Manila for a seminar. But he was bypassed for a promotion several times." He clucked his tongue against nicotine-stained teeth. "He used to be good-looking mestizo with fair skin, high bridged nose. He looked like Eddie Gutierrez." Blank stares from us. "You know, the father of Richard Gutierrez ..." Nothing. "The father of Ruffa?" He kept telling us who the hell Eddie Gutierrez was. Bautista sighed, and went on. "Anyway, Berto was the 'Eddie Gutierrez of Barrio Lugmok.' He was a hot item at our fiestas. Then, he became the town drunk."

We let him ramble, and he went on and on, probably mesmerized by the sound of his own voice. "The third time he was passed over for promotion, he complained. The woman who was promoted, they said she was the School Superintendent's lover. But after Berto filed his complaint, she charged him with sexual harassment, and poor Berto was suspended. The next thing we knew, he had turned to the bottle."

I wanted to tape Bautista's mouth shut. The last thing I needed was to put a face to the man I had just killed. Mercifully, we reached the house.

It was about the same size as the small house I grew up in. Monobloc plastic chairs stood alongside wooden ones around a sagging rattan table in the *sala*. It was steaming hot as the exposed corrugated iron roofing absorbed heat from the sun, but I kept my cap on. The body was in the one and only bedroom of the house. The pungent smell of formalin came from beyond the grimy curtain separating the room from the rest of the house. I could make out the shadows of the embalmers.

The widow's stringy hair was pulled back by a rubberband to a scraggly pony tail. Her skin seemed to have shrunk so close to her bones that all her veins showed. She walked with a limp, and had blue-violet bruises on her bony arms.

"I am so sorry," I began.

She sniffled. Then unexpectedly, as if she hadn't heard my words of condolence, she asked, "Boogie Marquez?"

It was so surreal. I clenched my teeth to keep from yelling, your husband just died, woman. You should be grieving. Then I turned to Andy. I saw the dismay on his face, mixed with a look that said, "I told you so ..." Andy had told me that the widow would fleece me for everything I had once she knew who I was.

"I'm so sorry," I repeated.

She shook her head. "He was not an easy man to live with. He started hitting the children when he got tired of hitting me." Five children, of indeterminable gender cowered behind their mother. Scars and scabbed-over wounds peppered their thin arms and legs. "At least now, I don't have to miss work because of broken bones," the widow said.

I bowed my head. I could not look into the children's eyes without thinking about how they would make it through. I knew how tough it could be.

Bautista handed her an envelope. "From Mr. Marquez. You'll need to sign something," he said. She simply nodded.

Before we left, I pressed a wad of P1,000 bills in her hand. "For the children," I said. On the way out, I felt even worse. The silent reproach in her eyes belied her words. It could have been better if she had bawled and cursed me and my progeny to kingdom come. Or if she behaved like a Jukebox Commando as Andy had predicted. At least, I would have assuaged my guilt. Worse, I could not shake off the look of incomprehension on the children's faces.

"That was really stupid, you're giving her ideas," Andy said. Tito Noel shot his son a silencing look.

For the next few days, I scoured the broadsheets and tabloids for any sign that media had gotten wind of the accident. There was nothing, not even in the blind items in gossip columns. Yet, I still felt uneasy. I couldn't erase the image of scabby-legged children from my mind.

In a couple of days, my contract was renewed. That season, I played like a madman. “He’s like a man possessed,” sportscasters would say, as I shot across the court, stealing, passing, and executing jump shots.

“He’s a daredevil,” others would say, clucking their tongues at what they called my heroics: barreling against players twice my size, and jumping up to throw a ball that I could have thrown from the ground.

“He’s defying the laws of gravity, it’s like magic,” my fans would say. Then they’d try doing the same things in their street-side courts.

Some people, including my manager and Andy were telling me to slow down. I already had the megabuck contract. Why risk everything in an injury?

“All it takes is one bad fall,” my manager cautioned.

Andy was more blunt. “Do you have some kind of a deathwish?”

Maybe they were right. But the higher I jumped and the riskier it became, the more I felt alive. Up in the air, I could almost forget the scabby-legged children. Maybe at some subconscious level, I really wanted to get hurt. Incapacitated. That way, I would be punished now. And maybe if I suffered enough, I would be free from eternal damnation. But instead of being punished with a string of bad luck, I was being pelted with good luck.

Endorsements poured in. Sports commentators loved me. They stopped calling me Greased Lightning, and called me Daredevil, instead. Emphasis on *devil*, I told myself. I went to the usual parties and met the usual bunch of basketball groupies throwing themselves at me like demented basketballs. Andy enjoyed all the reflected glory. We even double dated at times. I was seeing half a twin, Andy the other half. They were daughters of a high profile General. “At least if we run over another stupid drunk, we won’t have to worry at all,” Andy quipped. I wanted to strangle him.

Everything was going so well, I knew that I was headed for a big fall. After all, wasn’t all this reverse karma? Some drunk deprived me of a father, and now, I had deprived some kids of a drunken father. It was enough to make my head spin. It just wasn’t right. Wasn’t fair. You couldn’t kill a man and still get a multimillion peso contract plus a boatload of product endorsement deals.

So, I started secretly giving money to the widow. Voluntarily. But that had not helped me a lot. I still felt that I was going to be punished. Big time.

Retribution became my biggest fear.

Then came the Championship. It was a bruising see-saw battle. With barely five seconds to go before endgame, we were trailing by one point. The ball was with the other side, and they were just playing for time. Just when they could taste victory,

I stole the ball and ran like crazy. Even before I reached the midcourt, I knew I had to take a shot. Our rival's guard, a humongous, well-built man with muscles of steel hulked before me. I knew that a collision with The Tank at the speed I was going, would mean a few broken bones. All mine. But so what? I still did a running jump and I threw the ball with everything I got, barely avoiding The Tank.

I followed the ball with my eyes as it sailed toward our goal. It was a coast-to-coast shot with just about the same chances of sinking in as my chances of playing with the Golden State Warriors. Then the shot went in as the buzzer sounded, and all hell broke loose. Our rival's people, who were getting ready to spread their Championship banner and release their team-color balloons were edged out by our own people. My teammates carried me on their shoulders. Sweat had never smelled so good.

Sportscasters played the shot in slow motion countless times, calling it a Hail Mary shot. The sad part was that I said the prayer only afterwards.

I received a bonus that could feed a family of four for a year. My pictures were all over the sports magazines. Talk show hosts of both sexes were inviting me out to dinner. Women I didn't know were sending me text messages and gifts. My Facebook account nearly crashed due to the large number of friend requests.

Then the widow came to see me. She looked different. Her hair had been cut short and colored a brassy brown. She still limped. Not because of broken bones, but because of her impossibly high platform shoes. She wore pink lipstick. After the usual congratulations, her eyes outlined with blue eye shadow, became shifty. They flitted from the trophies, to the team photos in my den.

"I don't know how to start," she studied her long silver nails. "But you see, Junior, who looks exactly like my dearly beloved departed Berto ..."

Dearly beloved departed. The drunk who beat his wife and children had become beloved in death. I almost puked.

"He, they ... need so many things in school, and now that I'm alone ..."

So the monthly allowance I had been sending her was no longer enough. Before she could flood the room with her tears, I gave her some more money.

She came back for more, as expected. A full blown, certified Jukebox Commando. The whole thing was getting quite expensive. On the upside, I could now tell myself that I was not the only evil person in this sorry, sordid story.

Funny, but I still could not stop making those gravity-defying jump shots.