



BLOOD STEW

REIL BENEDICT OBINQUE

THAT NIGHT, WE had the *dinuguan* Papa cooked using the innards of the pig he had earlier slaughtered. If his customer had decided to take the innards home, we would have been sharing what little meat Papa managed to secretly cut from the recesses of the animal's ribcage, the spot the customer would not notice, or the *kinupsan*, extra pig fat that tasted like salted paper soaked in oil.

We sat around the table, all five of us—me, Papa and Mama, my younger brother, and Ate. I sat at the *kabisera* to avoid hitting anyone with my elbows, which I always unavoidably raised too high whenever I ate. Our silence was punctured by the sound of our utensils. Papa hated having conversations when eating.

I watched him lift his spoon toward his mouth. His hand was still trembling, spatters of blood and specks of dirt still on his fingers, for he could not risk washing them and getting spasms, not after they were exposed to so much heat earlier as he was roasting the *lechon*.

I breathed in, deep enough to catch his attention.

Don't do it, I said, almost in a whisper.

He furrowed. Mama, too, stopped eating and stared at me, waiting for whatever I would say next.

What? Papa asked.

The dog, I said. It's my classmate's. Don't do it.

Papa shook his head and continued eating, a smirk on his face. Mama bowed down to look at her plate, anticipating a commotion.

Bayot ka? Papa asked.

I did not answer. I took a spoonful of blood stew, chewing it excessively to prevent myself from crying.

After washing the plate, while Papa was outside smoking, Mama folding the laundry, my siblings alternately playing Snake on Mama's phone, I grabbed a lighter and a mosquito coil and went to the comfort room behind our house.

I was already inside squatting, waving the lighted mosquito coil near my bottom to avoid getting bitten by insects, when I saw through the slits between the planks that made up our toilet the dog walking past, his tail wagging, perhaps smelling food.

I closed my eyes, and my chest tightened. I accidentally clenched the mosquito coil and it snapped, the other half falling into the bowl. I heard Mama's distant voice: Don't get too close. Then Papa's: The sack.

I could smell the feces underneath that ramshackle outhouse, hear the buzzing of the mosquitos feasting on my own blood. There was a growl, then a sound of panic and haste, Papa hissing at my siblings. Then, a groan. A thud. Thump. Silence.

I went out of the comfort room after more than half an hour, having excreted nothing.

Inside the house, Mama had continued folding the laundry; my siblings were unrolling the *banig*.

Where's Papa? I asked them.

They just pouted their lips in a direction.

When I looked at the front yard, it was already empty and dark. But I could see that on the ground, illuminated by the faint light from a distant sodium lamppost, was a piece of bread, half-eaten.

Mama told us not to touch it, my brother said, Papa is just fixing something.

The next day was a Monday, which meant that immediately after the flag ceremony, we needed to head to our garden plots behind the classroom. I was in grade six, and my classroom was farthest from the flagpole, right before the mini forest. That day, I did not have the energy to race against my classmates to our garden plots. I walked as though my ankles were dragging boulders. I clenched the handle of my rusty grass hook, which could barely cut grass but could earn me enough points to stay at the top of our section. My left hand was gripping the rim of the pot of the mayana plant, which my teacher loved to see in our gardens. I was weighed down by my backpack that had five books inside, for I thought that bringing all my books every single time would make me smarter. Everything that day was so heavy, inside and out.

I reached our garden plot with my armpit sweating. I remembered I was at that point in my adolescence when my body started to smell, so I tried to stay away from my classmates who also concealed their odor with the overpowering scent of cheap cologne.

Tending to my portion of the garden silently, I glanced up from time to time, looking for Jude. I saw some of my classmates who were late for the flag ceremony and were asked to sing the national anthem separately. Jude was not with them. I continued pulling out the weeds unthinkingly, my head conjuring the dog's face the night before, the black circle around its eye, the tiny bald spot on its forehead that it loved to rub against my leg. I read in one of our textbooks that cyanide was so poisonous no one had ever lived to describe its taste. It was like I was going to faint.

Then, I saw Jude walking toward our garden plot, bringing nothing but his belt bag. Our teacher, hands on her hips, stared at him questioningly, but Jude just walked past her, and she could only tsk.

I wanted to look at his face longer and try to decipher his emotion, but I did not want him to catch me and perhaps read the guilt on my face. I just tried digging a hole in our garden plot where I would plant the mayana.

I rehearsed what I was going to say to start a conversation. Jude, why are you late? Jude, where were you last night? How's your dog, Jude? Jude, I'm sorry.

Pst, he said, and I looked up to find him squatting across the garden plot from me. Did you see Max last night?

I shook my head, maybe a little too abrupt, and bowed down immediately. I hoped he planned on asking everyone that question.

Okay, he said. Can I borrow your grass hook?

I made sure our teacher was not looking before I gave him the tool, my hands trying not to tremble.

Jude was one of the “boys at the back.” While the group had a reputation for being unruly, Jude was the quiet and smart type. He was seated in the last row only because he was among the tallest in our class. Jude should have graduated three years ago along with my older sister had he decided not to drop out, which would probably explain why he knew more about adding dissimilar fractions than the rest of us.

Ate had a lot of stories about Jude, and I had a feeling she used to like him a lot. She told me Jude could reach the top of a coconut tree in less than a minute, that he had broken an arm after falling from one, that he never attended Christmas parties. She told me about the death of Jude’s father, and how she almost witnessed it.

When I arrived, people were starting to crowd around the body, and the *tanod* was trying to cordon the area off. Jude and his younger brother were there standing frozen, she had told me, gesturing at the floor as though it was the crime scene.

In one version of her story, Ate guessed it was because Jude’s father was a *shabu* pusher that the death squad killed him. In another, he was a member of the NPA. My mother, on the rare occasion when she talked about the incident, believed Jude’s father was once part of the death squad and had to be killed because he already knew too much about their operation, that he spent his younger years in the city before deciding to live in our sitio to hide.

No one really knew the death squad’s target, my sister once said. She leaned forward and said in a soft voice so that Papa would not hear us, Our teacher told us they kill beggars your age.

She meant to scare me, but I just nodded as though she were teaching me a science lesson.

Regardless of why he was killed, how he was killed was clear.

Right after dropping off Jude and his younger brother, when he was cranking up the engine of his *habal-habal*, just as his sons had turned to the school gates, Jude’s father was shot in the head by a riding-in-tandem, an unusual sight in the sitio. It was swift, my older sister said, and in the blink of an eye, the assassins were gone, and everyone was so stunned no one dared to chase after them.

But they're really not supposed to be chased, Ate told me, you just let them go.

She said there was a lot of blood on the ground, spatters of it on the *habal-habal's* seat. She swore Jude's sleeve also got stained.

It was like every time Papa slaughtered a pig, she said, with blood everywhere.

It took minutes before Jude and his brother started screaming and wailing, and the *tanod* tried to stop them from approaching their own father's body.

Then, we were all called to the principal's office, all of us students who were there, Ate said, we sat there inside the small office, probably while they were putting the body in a bag.

Papa overheard this and gave her a furious look, telling her to stop talking and help Mama fold the laundry instead.

I thought about this as I washed my grass hook clean, getting ready for our first subject. Jude was talking to one of the boys at the back, maybe asking them if they saw Max the night before.

It must have been awful, not knowing everything about your father's death, all those unanswered questions, about why and who. Ate said after the burial that no one offered to investigate, and Jude's mother herself never sought an investigation. The sitio moved on, and the school's only response was to repaint the "This school is a zone of peace." slogan on its walls.

For the rest of the day that Monday, I glanced back at Jude from time to time, only to see him staring through the jalousie window or napping throughout the subject. The day ended, and Jude decided to go home straight, refusing to join his friends' spider fights.

That week, I never interacted with Jude again, except when he asked me to write his science notes for one peso per two pages. As if to appease my guilty conscience, I wrote in tiny cursives so that he would not be paying much. He never asked me about Max again, and I never had the courage to talk about what my father did. He spent his days staring off into the distance, sometimes craning his neck, as though whatever he was looking at was slowly walking farther and farther away, away where he could no longer see it.

It still scared me how swiftly Papa could pierce the swine's throat with his knife. I tightened my grip around the creature's limbs, each of my

hands holding a pair, as they twitched the moment Papa pulled the knife out, letting blood gush out of the slit. When I could no longer feel any movement, when the swine's neck drooped over the edge of the rock, I let go and went to get the large pot of boiled water.

It had almost been a week, and, looking at the pig lying there, its limbs tangled, its eyes not quite shut, I could not help but think about Jude's dog. Then I looked at all the blood still trickling out of the cut on the pig's throat, and the first thing that crossed my mind was Ate's story about the murder of Jude's father. If I were Jude, I would be so angry at the world, for I would not know who to blame, and the whole world would be my suspect.

I thought of this and could not look Papa straight in the eye as I carried the pot. I scalded the pig's carcass with the boiled water, and Papa began scraping the hair off, reaching even the creases of the creature's thighs. Papa did everything in quick but calculated motions, making a long cut from the throat down to the stomach, removing all of the organs and cleaning those that he could still cook, skewering the creature with a bamboo pole. I watched when the pig's insides were still intact, and I watched them getting mangled. I watched how, as the animal was hollowed and mutilated, it looked less like a creature and more like an object. I could not help but watch even if it almost made me vomit. The more I wanted to look away, the more I watched.

Next time, you'll do this yourself, Papa remarked as he disemboweled the pig.

He did not know I was thinking of our science textbook as I stared at the dissected pig sprawled to reveal its digestive system, that when he sliced the heart into half, I tried to check where the right ventricle was.

I want to be a doctor, I said very softly that it seemed like I was talking to myself.

He smirked.

Doctor, he uttered. He was pounding pepper against the bamboo pole using his knife's handle. I was folding and wrapping the lemongrass around itself.

I did not respond.

We were tossing the spices in the pig's hollowed-out stomach, slathering the ribcage with just enough salt and pepper. Already, I could imagine myself letting the lechon's juice drip on my fingertip, my closest experience to tasting the food that we had prepared but could not relish.

I asked if I could sew the pig's stomach up. Papa stared at me before nodding. As I made my first stitch, I imagined myself as a surgeon.

You're so slow. Give me that, Papa said, snatching the needle from me. What I could do in a minute, he could in one second even with his eyes closed. I squatted there, watching the pig's cut closing up.

Papa, I called, then he turned to look at me. The dog, what did you do to it?

He smirked again, and at that moment, I wanted to take the needle and pierce his eye, or my eye, just so I could hurt someone.

My classmate is looking for the dog, I said.

He continued sewing up the flesh, not uttering any word. But I knew he was thinking, maybe trying to decide if he should talk back or just hit me to shut me up. I took a deep breath.

Is it dead? I asked.

He paused and looked at me. This time, he really looked at me, really talked to me.

That dog bit off an ear, he said.

Your slaughtered pig should have stayed intact if you didn't abandon it for a minute, I wanted to tell him. Instead, I just said, It's just an ear.

Tell that to my dead sister, he said, and continued making stitches.

Part of me felt bad even though I did not know the whole story. I just knew Papa's sister was mauled to death by a dog when she was still an infant.

I could not speak. Papa, too, was silent. He was almost done closing up the pig's belly.

Where is it, the dog? I asked. Where did you throw it?

Papa did not say anything. He was tying off the stitch, pulling the thread toward his shoulder. He reached out to grab the knife, but before his finger touched the handle, I clasped his arm tight.

Where, I repeated, my teeth clenched.

He yanked his arm from my grip, then slapped my face with the back of his hand. For a split second, everything was black. I could still remember the smell of pepper and lemongrass on my cheek. The smell of filth.

And blood.

What happened to your face? asked Jude.

We were sitting beside each other but looking in different directions. He was focusing on his sketch while I was checking the classroom door,

acting as a lookout. He offered to do my sketches for me if I continued the rest of his notes. He said he was running out of money, and I knew he hated writing because the spiral wire of his notebook pinched into the side of his left hand.

We had already been sitting there for minutes before he managed to ask me about my face.

Nothing, I muttered. He just nodded and continued scribbling.

My face was not as red as it was two days ago, but the mark was still visible. When Mama saw it, she did not ask any questions. She knew who did what and what caused them to do it. Papa did not speak to me after that, and I stayed away from his sight. He looked at me with hate, and I reciprocated, my fist always clenched. We rarely talked, so it was not very difficult not to speak to each other. It was the usual coldness, just taken up a notch.

Jude, I said, this time now looking at his left hand. His fingers were unusually long, and the side of his palm was smudged with pencil marks. Have you found your dog?

He shook his head. I looked away.

A classmate was teasing both of us and making kissing noises. Then he curled up his fingers and started bobbing his head toward the hole as he pushed his tongue in his cheek. My face was blank, and Jude was equally unaffected, or he just did not notice, for he was too absorbed in his sketch.

Jude, about Max, I said after a moment of silence.

He turned his head in my direction.

What? he asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

I buried my fingernails in my palm. I think Max is dead, I said.

He examined my face as if tracing with his stare the edge of my slap mark or trying to figure out what part of my face he should punch. He opened his mouth to speak but closed it again when he failed to let out a sound. He went back to his sketch, shading the insides of the leaf our teacher asked us to draw.

I did not know if I should have said what I said next. Even now, I wonder what would have happened if I just stopped talking, if I just made him believe that I *thought* his dog was dead. But at that moment, I did not for one second consider the consequences of what I was going to say. I just knew that he needed to know.

It's Papa, I said. He poisoned—

He was suddenly stiff. His hand stopped moving, and I could not finish my sentence. I looked at his sketch. It was done. It was too perfect that I worried our teacher would doubt that I made it.

Our classmate who was earlier teasing us was now inserting his pencil in and out of his curled fingers, desperate to get our attention.

Jude pushed the armchair back quite too hard, almost knocking it down. He walked toward our classmate, swung his left hand, and punched him in the face. I felt the pain and touched my own bruised cheek. My eyes were shut, and I could only hear shouting. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the pencil rolling on the floor toward my feet.

I would not see Jude again until after a couple of days.

When Papa decided to finally talk to me, he spoke the way he did that day he told Mama he lost all his money at a derby. His voice was cold and angry, his desperate attempt to conceal his shame.

Throw the trash out, he said, crushing a cigarette butt with his toe. I already talked to 'Nong Bobong, he added.

I nodded. When I turned my back, he cleared his throat and began speaking again.

Throw it in the pit farthest from his house, he told me. Near the lanzones.

I nodded again, very slightly. I went behind our house and heaved into my shoulders the sack of plastics and flattened tin cans that the *bote-bakal* refused to buy. The last time we burned a sack, our sampalok tree almost caught fire, and the neighborhood was enveloped with the smell of burnt plastic. Mama said it was better if we threw it in one of the pits in 'Nong Bobong's backyard.

'Nong Bobong was an old man who, out of his curiosity, hijacked a plane to China in his twenties to learn about communism. Some of our neighbors said he had gone mad years after his return to the country. I heard that he was now spending his days reading piles of books, building his own religion. Years ago, believing that some Japanese treasures were hidden in his backyard, he spent all his money trying to dig holes deeper than a septic tank or a well or a burial site.

And that was when it dawned on me.

I stopped, putting the sack of trash on the ground after having walked a kilometer. I wanted to leave it there and go back home, my father would not know anyway. But I picked it up, felt that it got heavier, and continued

walking. I heard a dog barking behind me, and I shuddered. In my head, Jude was still sketching my science project, the side of his palm smudged, and I was not saying anything, not revealing the things I knew. I felt the edge of a flattened tin can pressing against my skin, and I wanted it to pierce through me.

When I reached 'Nong Bobong's house, he was in his balcony staring into space as though he was calculating a math problem. I smiled at him, and he smiled back, gesturing me to just go behind the house. Before I could ask him if he saw my father there one Sunday night, I recognized Jude from afar, squatting by the lanzones tree, looking at something in the ground, his back turned in my direction. I could come to him, ask him what had happened even though I already knew the answer. I could tap his shoulder, sit beside him in solitude, stare at his decaying dog. I could say sorry even if it meant getting punched in the face.

Instead, I slowly walked toward the nearest pit, the rustling of the leaves too loud I worried that Jude would notice me. I looked down at the supposed treasure tunnel that was filled with discarded appliances, broken electronic parts, worn-out clothing, junk food wrappers, cans, plastics, rotting fruits. I put my sack of trash down, nudged it with my toe, and watched it roll down to the bottom of the pit. There was a rattling, like the pieces of garbage were woken up from a deep sleep. I was sure Jude heard it. I could see through my peripheral vision someone walking toward me. I fixed my stare at what I just threw, wondering what my body would sound like if it slammed against those objects. I was waiting for a confrontation, for anything physically painful. But Jude just walked past me. Like I was not there. Inside my head, I was saying sorry.

Even now, after many years, I think of Jude, and I sometimes see him in the faces of men I do not know. And every time I do, I apologize, and I apologize, not knowing if Jude, wherever he is right now, has already forgiven me.