

Outsider

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BABAG HAS NOT CHANGED MUCH in the nine years I've been away. The sharp tartness of nipa vinegar still welcomes me the moment I enter the *barangay*. The coconut trees cast long shadows on the streets. There are newly paved parts of the road now, but swamp still sprawls everywhere. The chorus of crickets and frogs, the line of firewood occasionally left on the sidewalks to dry, the half-naked children playing on the streets—it's all the same.

Manang Gloria greets me the moment I alight from the *trisykad*. She has streaks of gray in her hair now, still pulled into a tight bun that seems to almost rip her scalp. She helps me with my stuff and guides me to her house where Tatay's wake is being held, which is only across the street from our old house. Tonight is the last vigil.

"You look so much like him now," she says with a guarded smile.

"Not really," I say. "I'm better-looking."

She lets out a quiet laugh and says, "I read your book. We all did, actually. It was interesting."

"Thanks, Manang."

In front of the house are rows of plastic tables and chairs, coffee-stained Styrofoam cups strewn about, a wide orange-and-blue trapal tent overhead, and some people busy playing *tong-its* and *hantak* with an air of willful ignorance. Every now and then, there are hesitant laughter and restrained celebrations of victories from some of the players. Most of these people are strangers—outsiders. Tatay was a *kagawad* after all. I've always wondered why he got elected since he knew next to nothing about governance.

The weighty smell of flowers and candles assault my nose as I enter the house. The smell of absence and grief. Relatives I haven't seen in years greet me, some of them I have already forgotten.

Still, I smile, *amen*, and follow Manang to the room where I am to spend the night.

After getting settled, I come out and approach Tatay's casket. It's one of those typical cream-colored caskets with embossed fleur-de-lis patterns airbrushed with gold, propped on a collapsible metal stand. Next to the casket are flower stands from relatives and some politicians and candles in tall brass-painted holders. In the backdrop hangs a black blanket with names written on ribbons with permanent markers—the family tree. I find my name below Tatay's.

I peer over the casket's glass window. I see Tatay for the first time in a long, long while. I struggle to recognize him. His face is caked with makeup. The creases around his eyes and on his forehead look deeper than I remember. He looks so peaceful it almost seems artificial—like he's faking it, though I don't know for whom. He looks different from the framed picture of him atop the casket. He looks absolutely swollen.

Manang approaches me and puts her hand on my back.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"He sure has grown fat," I say.

"Tomorrow, during the procession to the church, you're one of the pallbearers. I hope that's okay."

I think of it for a moment and nod. How heavy could the dead be?

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Before, Tatay was the beloved *barangay kagawad*; and before the cancer, he was a *tig-ihaw*, a butcher. He worked at the slaughterhouse in Port Poyohon regularly, but whenever there were occasions, he would go around the *barangay* with services

to offer. Tatay must have been good at his job, since he earned the patronage of most of the more well-off families in the *barangay*. He'd also decided early on that I needed to learn his craft.

The first time Tatay asked me to slaughter an animal was on Kapitan Paeng's victory party. Kapitan had just won the *barangay* elections for the third time, and he'd arranged for a feast. He asked Tatay to help him with the preparations.

We were in Kapitan's kitchen. Surprisingly, it wasn't too lavish for someone of his stature. Tatay had rinsed and prepared the chicken for the kill. He handed me a short knife, and we stood over the kitchen sink. A small basin was set below the chicken for the blood. I watched Tatay move with such deft and efficiency, not knowing this was the day. Tatay gripped both of the chicken's legs with one hand and clipped the roots of its wings with the other. He then looked at me and said, "Whenever you're ready." We stood there for about three minutes, not moving or saying anything.

Tatay was a well-built man. He had a hint of a beer belly, but his arms were bigger than my head. His gait commanded respect even from those he just met for the first time. Every time he spoke, there's a directness to his voice that made everything he said sound like an order. As I stood there, the knife in my hand, Tatay loomed beside me.

"Do it, Carlo," he said. "Do it now. Don't be a coward. Grab the head and run the knife on its neck. Quick and easy."

"Quick and easy," I repeated.

The smell of whetstone and manure hung still in the air. Sweat formed a slippery film between my hand and the metal handle of the knife. The blade could fly off any minute. If I weren't strong or quick enough, it'd take more than one slash. The chicken, unable to flee, squirmed and writhed. I couldn't help but stare at it. *Does it understand what was going on? I thought. If so, to what extent? Do chickens know of death?*

Perhaps it was because of the thinning air around me or the coldness of the metal in my hand that I froze in place.

"Give it to me," Tatay said, grabbed the knife off my hand, and shoved the chicken in my chest. "Here."

Now tasked to hold the animal, I emulated how Tatay did it. The chicken's strength took me by surprise. I had to draw out every ounce of strength from my nine-year-old body to keep the chicken still. A moment of ease could mean trouble.

When Tatay finally did it, I looked away.

The warmth of a chicken in the throes of death was disarming. The seizure and the labored screeches all the more so. I felt the animal's strength dwindling right in my hands—like a balloon losing air. I loosened my grip, more and more by the second, until the chicken was still.

That day, Tatay and I went home with a gulf of silence between us.

I wasn't ignorant enough to be against killing animals for food. I knew that it was a necessity. Meat was a privilege. Meat on the table meant a good day at work. I wanted to learn how to do it as Tatay did as much as I wanted to understand why he wanted to teach me. He made no fuss. It seemed so easy. Tatay said it was because I was a coward that I couldn't bring myself to run that knife on the chicken's neck. It was not uncommon for him to call me names. Later, I'd found it odd that we took care of a pig that remained nameless until its last day.

The pig was given to us by Kapitan Paeng. It was a payment of sorts for the services Tatay offered during his party. It was no bigger than a housecat when we took it in. It had sparse black fur and a small dent on its snout that made it look funny. We hitched the pig to one of the house's foundations in the *silong*.

Tatay gave me the task of feeding and bathing the pig. I woke up each morning before the first peek of sunlight and went to the marsh behind our house to gather *tangkong* to feed the pig before I prepared for school. I did it religiously. The only time I remember missing my task was when I woke up later than I should have. I had gone spider hunting with my friends the night before. When I got out of bed, sunlight had already broken into the window. Tatay had gone for work it seemed. I rushed down to the *silong* to feed the pig, only to find the small basin from which the pig ate already filled with *tangkong* and leftovers.

All day, I waited for Tatay and prepared myself to get an earful. When he got home, however, he didn't say anything.

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Tatay wasn't one to remind me of my chores. He left me to my own devices when it came to my schooling. When he first ordered me to slaughter an animal, he expected that I knew how to do it, given that I'd already seen him do it many times before. He assumed that I already knew all these things. Perhaps it was because of that trust that we didn't talk much. He only talked when he told me what I should cook or when he needed my help to compute the bills we had to pay. Those times, I marveled at the things he didn't know how to do and did them all. We didn't go out a lot either. The first time I'd gone to the mall was with Manang Gloria when I was ten. I couldn't complain, though, since he provided me with everything I needed: food, *baon*, money for school fees, and other necessities.

The only real conversation I remember we had took place on a summer morning. When I woke up, I went straight to the *silong* and discovered Tatay already feeding the pig with freshly picked *tangkong*. I could hear his indistinct muttering. I sneaked behind him to listen closer, but he fell quiet the instant he noticed me. Surprisingly, he didn't leave.

I crouched beside him and remained quiet for a few moments. Whatever I wanted to say stayed as lumps in my throat. The best I could say was "It's grown so much over the past two months, Tay, no?" as I rubbed the pig's head.

"You know, anak, pigs can understand people, more than everyone thinks," Tatay said. "They are very intelligent beasts."

We stayed there and watched the pig munch on the *tangkong* calmly in the low light of dawn. When Tatay finally stood up, he said, "I'm going to work. Good luck at school today."

Years later, I found out that that day was my mother's birthday.

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I don't remember much about my mother aside from two things: that her name was Marina, which meant "from the sea," and that she smelled like church during Flores de Mayo. I don't recall much else. Some nights, in my sleep, I find myself haunted with vague images of her: the heft of her hand on mine, the lilt of her voice when she called me "anak" instead of my name, and her slight body falling to the ground while hanging the laundry. To this day, I am unsure whether those were real or my mind simply filling in the blank spaces.

Tatay hadn't told me much about my mother. In fact, he had a habit of not telling me anything of significance. I only found out from Manang Gloria that my mother had died when I was about four years old because of a heart complication.

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Dinner has been uneventful, so I decide to visit our old house. It now looks different from what I remember. The *pawod* roofs are dilapidated. The coco lumber walls have lost their reddish-brown hue. The bottom edges of the walls have darkened and grown algae—must be because of the swamp that overflows on high tides. I step on the floor as lightly as I can, yet the floorboards still creak.

The last time I've been here was the night before I left Babag for college. I haven't had the chance to go home after then. Even after I graduated, I immediately found a job at a publishing company that kept me too busy to go back. Besides, unlike other parents, Tatay wasn't one to pressure me into going home.

I go down to the *silong* where we used to hitch the pig. Aside from vague rope burns on the post, not a trace of it is left.

I remember the night before the Pista ni San Agustin, which happened to fall on the same day as my birthday. Tatay and my uncles were out in the veranda, drinking *tubâ*. With his booming voice, Tatay asked me to buy some chicharrón from the store. When I came back, he offered me a glassful of the *tubâ*.

"Try it," he said. "It's your birthday tomorrow."

I took the glass and carefully studied Tatay's expression. Were ten-year-olds supposed to do

this? I wanted to refuse, but my uncles egged me on. "Come on, be a man," they said. Tatay stared at me as though he was searching for something. Maybe a son. I couldn't disappoint him again, like I did with the chicken, so I downed the *tubâ* in one long chug. They all laughed at me, including Tatay. The sweet vinegar-like taste made me gag, but what I couldn't stand the most was the smell. It stuck to my clothes until I slept.

The morning after, Tatay woke me up for the first time. The residual smell of the *tubâ* was disorienting. I staggered to the kitchen and followed Tatay. People were gathering in the *silong*.

"What are they doing here, Tay?" I asked.

"We're going to have *lechon*," he said.

Before I could say anything, Tatay dragged me with him to the *silong*. The people, who I now realized were my uncles and some neighbors, all greeted me a happy birthday. In a confused and dazed state, I walked up to them.

Tatay handed me a steel pipe. It had dents everywhere, and the tips were already chipped. He then said that meat tasted better when the animal is agitated before it's killed. I'd learn only later that this wasn't true.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Since it's your birthday, you have to do it," he said.

When what he meant dawned on me, finally, he was already holding down the pig with my uncles. There was a sharp ringing in my ears. The sun had already washed the land with warmth, yet a sudden coldness wrapped my body. I wanted to vomit.

I looked at the pig. It knew what was about to happen. I was sure of it. The pig was struggling, but it couldn't overcome the strength of four men.

"One huge swing on the head," Tatay said.

The mud under my feet unsettled me. It felt as though I would fall with just a gust of wind. The pig shrieked, and it sounded to me like it was crying. I closed my eyes.

"Look at it," Tatay said. "Show it some respect and look."

"I don't want to," I said. "Please, Tay."

He only stared at me. They all did.

The back of my eyes started to sting. I waited for Tatay to say that this was all a joke. I wanted

for him to laugh the way he did when I drank the *tubâ*. I remembered our conversation in this same place and how warm it felt. It was the first time he called me "anak."

I prayed that the pig understood that I had to do it, that there was no other way. There was no other way. The people around me are cheering, telling me I can do it.

Finally, I yelled and swung the steel pipe. I hit its cheek, and the pipe flew off my hands. The pig's cry was deafening. I covered my ears. The pig wobbled but didn't fall.

"Again, on the forehead," Tatay said, louder now.

I picked up the pipe. I did it again. Right on the mark.

With a loud thump, the pig's knees folded into the mud. Its cries were different now, much quieter, much more resigned. The folds on its face sunk even more. The white of its eyes turned red. Its black fur and the stream of blood that came out of its snout glistened. The pig finally fell.

Tatay stabbed its neck with a knife to punctuate the slaughter. Its torso expanded and contracted, weakly, with a cadence that only reminded me of the chicken that I helped slaughter.

I could see the people smiling and laughing and Tatay mouthing something to me, but I couldn't hear them. I couldn't hear anything. There was only the ringing that was louder than it had been earlier.

I did it, I thought to myself. I finally did it.

When Tatay approached me, I dropped the pipe, turned around, and ran. I didn't care where I was going. I ran, furiously, my feet getting heavier from the mud. I found myself in the middle of the street.

The *dayo*, outsiders, crowded the sidewalks with motorcycles and *trisikad*. Coca-Cola and San Miguel *banderitas* hung placidly overhead. The smell of charred rice and *afritada* wafted in the air.

A parade was quickly advancing towards me. The marching band toiled in the morning heat, banging away at drums, faces crumpled but happy. Behind them were gaudy floats that represented each *purok*. A horde of people walked among them in mad swirls of dance and laughter,

as though at that moment, everything was perfect.

It didn't take long for the crowd to swallow me. I looked behind, and through the moving sea of people, I saw Tatay gesturing me to come, wearing a smile that reminded me of all the good things I'd done.

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The handle of the casket feels flimsy in my hand. It seems like the screws are about to fall off, and the casket with it. This, the glaring sun overhead, and my black polo are turning the three-hundred-meter march to the San Agustin Chapel into quite an undertaking. My uncles are carrying the casket with me, but that doesn't make things easier. The dead is heavy as it turns out.

The closer we get to the chapel, the louder I hear "Tanging Yaman" blaring through the chapel's speakers. I haven't been to many funerals, but it seems like this song is the official anthem of the dead.

Waiting for us in the chapel are people dressed in black already in the pews, a parked jet-black hearse, and a few jeepneys and multicabs commissioned for the journey to the cemetery.

The church echoes with sobs and sniffles, but I don't participate. My stomach doesn't feel too good. I feel judgmental stares boring holes through my shirt now damp with sweat. I sit in the frontmost pew with my aunts and uncles. Behind me are cousins and other relatives, some with names I already forgot a long time ago. Most are still crying, some just red-eyed. In the aisle near the altar is Tatay's casket with some of the flower stands we brought. A distant aunt behind me is hysterical. She keeps hitting the backrest as if reprimanding me for not being as devastated as she is.

I don't bother to say anything. I let her be. I let everyone be.

As the Mass starts, I feel as though I drenched myself with water. I shift around in my

seat. Perhaps noticing my discomfort, Manang Gloria leans into me.

"Not too long after your mother—you know—your father came to me one night, crying, drunk," she whispered. "He asked me how he could be a good father. I mean, how should I know? I told him he shouldn't ask an old maid like me. But he didn't listen and pestered me all night. He could be annoying like that sometimes."

I shift in my seat and try not to look at Manang's eyes.

"He missed you, you know, when you were away. I kept telling him to ask you to go home, but he said you were too old to be told what to do and that you've grown strong enough to be on your own. Even when he got sick, he didn't want us to tell you."

Manang is trying to catch her breath between hiccups.

"The day he died, he also asked me if he'd been a good father to you," Manang continues. She doesn't say anything after, perhaps to wait for me to say something.

"He wasn't bad," I say. "He tried his best in his own way, I guess."

"What do you mean?"

"For one thing, he did teach a ten-year-old kid how to kill animals. I didn't understand it then, I don't understand it now." I say this in jest since I don't know what to say. I am not expecting an answer.

Manang is quiet for a few moments. I look at her and a half-smile forms in her lips.

"Well," she says, now sitting upright and looking forward, "that's the only thing he knew."

The Mass starts. The priest is making the sign of the cross and saying something, but I don't hear a word of it. The people on the pews dissolve into vague shapes. Sunlight pours through the stained-glass windows of the chapel. For a brief moment, I drift off in the immensity of things. It is warm. ■

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