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PATRON SAINTS OF NOTHING

Randy Ribay

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Kokila





RANDY RIBAY

PATRON
SAINTS
OF
NOTHING



KOKILA

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the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For the hyphenated



This is your story
This is your son These
are our sins
and how
did we ever get here
without them

—Patrick Rosal



IT WAS A DAY OF SOIL, SUNLIGHT, AND SMOKE. Curtains thin as bedsheets glowed gold as roosters called out from the backyard on the other side of concrete walls and single-pane windows. On the floor of the room my father and his two brothers had shared growing up, my mom held me as I held a lifeless puppy and cried. The oscillating fan hummed, blowing warm air on us every few seconds.

I was ten, and it was my first time back in the country where I'd been born. A few days earlier, my family had driven the eleven hours along frightening roads from Manila to Lolo and Lola's house in the Bicol Region.

When we arrived, we found that their dog—an unnamed mongrel chained to the cacao tree out back—had just given birth to a litter of puppies. Only one lived. The mother refused to care for him, so I had taken the task upon myself. I held him close to keep him warm. I tried to feed him by hand, dipping my finger into a bowl of evaporated milk and then offering a drop to the puppy's impossibly small mouth.

However, the puppy would not drink the milk. Maybe because of the grief from losing his brothers and sisters, or maybe because of his mother's rejection. Whatever the reason, his breathing grew shallow. His movements slowed. Each time he blinked, his eyes remained closed longer and longer until they never reopened.

At that point in my life, I had encountered death only in fiction. I

had heard about other people's relatives dying. But I had never seen death up close. I had never held it.

"Listen," Mom said in that moment, hugging me closer. So I did. Baby birds chirped just outside the window. "One thing dies, and another is born. Maybe the puppy's soul now has wings."

Gradually, I calmed down and stopped crying. But I still felt heavy with sadness as the warmth left the tiny ball of brown-and-gray fur still cradled in my arms.

When I finally stepped outside, almost all my Filipino titas and titos laughed. Not in a mean way, I think, but more like it was amusing that a dog's death affected me so much because it was nothing to them. Another day. Another dog. My cousins did not need to have someone stroke their hair and reassure them that death was part of life.

It wasn't long before the family's attention drifted away like the smoke from the garbage being burned a few houses down. My brother and my sister resumed the card game of Speed they'd been playing. My dad and Lolo returned their attention to their bottles of San Miguel. My mom gave my shoulder one last squeeze and then went over to the outdoor kitchen to help Tita Chato, Tita Ami, and Lola finish preparing lunch.

Tito Danilo rested a hand on the top of my head and spoke of finding comfort in God's love, while Tito Maning told me to stop crying and took away the puppy's limp little body. He returned a few minutes later, brushing his palms as if he had just taken out the trash. He moved to pet the puppy's mother as he walked past, but she shied away. He continued on, took out a new bottle of beer from the

cooler, and sat down next to Dad and Lolo. Tito Danilo stood by in awkward silence for a few more moments before joining them, leaving me there alone.

But I was not alone for long.

My cousin Jun walked over and hugged me.

"I am sad, too, Kuya Jay," he said, using the older brother designation, which never seemed right. I had been born only three days before him, and besides that, he was one of those people who moved through the world as if he had been around for a long time. An old soul, as they say.

I almost asked Jun what his father had done with my puppy, what he had done with its brothers and sisters the previous day. But I didn't. We can only handle so much truth at any given moment, I suppose. So instead, I said nothing.

He looked at me with sympathetic eyes, eyes so brown they were almost black. "Do you want to go inside and read komiks?"

I nodded, grateful for the chance to escape from everyone without being by myself.

He threw his arm over my shoulder. We went inside. We read comics.

A few days later, the vacation ended. I flew back to pine trees, overcast skies, and a Michigan winter that could sputter till May. My tan faded. My tongue forgot the taste of tocino and Tagalog. I stepped out of tsinelas and back into my suburban life as if I had never left.





WISDOM FROM ON HIGH

Seth and I are walking across the roof of my old elementary school, which is covered in a layer of round stones that knock together like skulls with each step. A charcoal, overcast night sky hangs overhead, and the air is warmer than usual for mid-April.

We reach the end of the roof and sit down on the ledge. Seth takes up about twice as much space as me because he's basically a bear in human form. The kind of white kid who's been shaving since middle school and who's spent the last four years rebuffing the football coach's recruitment attempts. Meanwhile, I'm the kind of senior sometimes mistaken for a freshman.

We settle in and fall quiet, letting our legs dangle over the west side of the building. It's the quietest side, the one that faces the unlit field that stretches out in the darkness at our feet. The playground and parking lot are to the south, while the neighborhood pushes up against the other two sides of the building.

Even though I'm the one that lives nearby, it was Seth who, in the summer before we started high school, first realized we could get up here by climbing the fence that surrounds the HVAC units. I wouldn't do it that first time because it was the middle of the day

and I was afraid of getting arrested, but he eventually persuaded me to go back later and climb it with him under the cover of darkness. It took a few more trips before he could convince me to sit on the ledge. The school's only two stories high, so if we jumped we'd probably only sprain an ankle or something. But it was high enough to make me feel scared back then, high enough to make me feel philosophical now. It's been our nighttime hangout spot ever since.

Seth swings his backpack around so it's in front of him like a kangaroo pouch and starts riffling through. It's Friday night, so I've got a pretty good guess as to what he's looking for.

Sure enough, a few moments later he pulls out a joint, grinning like he's reuniting with a long-lost friend. He lights it and takes a hit. He holds the smoke in his lungs for longer than seems possible and then exhales slowly, letting the thick smoke unfurl into the evening. He offers even though he already knows I'm going to decline. This time's no different, so he simply shrugs and takes another hit. Not that I have anything against it. My desire to smoke has not yet surpassed my fear of getting caught.

The wind picks up, rustling the leaves of the surrounding trees and tossing our hair. I reposition myself upwind so I won't go home completely reeking of pot. We sit like that for a long time, sinking back into silence as we consider our numbered days. With spring break around the corner, and then only a few more weeks after that until graduation, the future is a wall of fog obscuring the horizon.

"Oh, shit," Seth says, "I almost forgot. Hold this."

He hands me his joint as he roots through his bag again. This time he pulls out something in a white plastic shopping bag. He tosses it

in my lap, and despite only having one free hand, I catch it without falling off the ledge.

“Surprise,” he says.

“What is it?” I ask, passing back his weed.

“Open it.”

I reach inside and pull out a hoodie, soft and smelling brand new. I hold it up in front of me. It’s a deep yellow gold that’s bright even in the darkness, and by the faint orange light from the parking lot lamps I can read MICHIGAN printed out in bold capital letters across the chest.

I force a smile. “Oh, cool. Thanks.”

I refold it, stuff it back into the bag, and set it to the side.

He turns and stares at me for a beat. “That’s it?”

“What?”

“‘Cool?’”

“Yeah. It’s cool. I appreciate it. Thanks.”

“Not going to put it on?” he asks. I can’t tell if he’s actually offended or not.

“I’m good.”

He takes another hit, eyes still on me. “Why aren’t you more excited, dude?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I know I should be. Every other senior at school’s been rocking their future college’s apparel since the day their admissions decision rolled in.

“Still sad because of all those rejections?”

I shrug. Lean back on my hands and stare out over the quiet field.

“Seriously, dude, you’re dumb as shit.”

“Oh, is shit sentient?”

“You know what I mean. Like, out of all the schools you applied to, how many were Ivy League?”

I don’t answer.

“All but Michigan and Berkeley, right?” He shakes his head. “Didn’t anyone tell you about applying to safety schools?”

I try to laugh. “Come on, man. They weren’t completely out of reach. Solid GPA and test scores. Plus, student government.”

He considers this. “Dude. You’re a treasurer.”

“So?”

“Class treasurers don’t get into Yale or Harvard.”

“Some do.”

“Maybe the treasurers who are also Olympic skiers or world champion Irish dancers or something.”

“Whatever. You know how my parents are. I took the path of least resistance because if I didn’t send in those apps, they would have said they were cool with it but they wouldn’t have been. Can you imagine their faces if I told them I applied to some school like . . . I don’t know . . . like—”

“Like, Central?” Seth finishes, smirking because that’s where he’s headed in the fall.

“You know what I mean.”

“You do know they have, like, the ninety-third best comp sci program in the nation, right?”

“That is certainly impressive.”

He flips me off. I shake my head and laugh.

When I texted my family the news this afternoon, right after I found out, I could virtually hear their collective sigh of relief at the

fact that I was finally accepted somewhere. My sister, Em, replied first with, “Fuck yea, baby bro” followed by, like, fifty exclamation points. Mom messaged, “Oh, honey! We’re so proud of you! (And watch your language, Em!)” while from Dad I got a “I mean, it’s not Harvard . . .” joke that wasn’t fully a joke. My brother, Chris, still hasn’t responded.

“I never wanted to go to any of those schools anyway,” I say, answering Seth’s earlier question. It sounds super defensive, but it’s true. I’m not sure what I want to do. For some reason, that’s not okay. Everyone acts like seventeen-year-olds who don’t have their career path mapped out are wasting their lives.

I consider telling Seth all of this, but he wouldn’t get it. Despite his slacker stoner vibe, he already knows he wants to get his computer science degree then become a code monkey for Google or Facebook or whatever company becomes our new digital overlords.

Besides, Seth and I have been friends for a long time, but we never get too deep into things. We hang out, play video games or basketball or whatever, and that’s pretty much it. If something’s bothering one of us, we never really talk about it. We give each other space until things are cool again. Like sophomore year, when Seth’s parents were going through their divorce. He never brought it up beyond mentioning once that it was happening, and I didn’t push him to talk about it. There were a few months where the slightest thing would set him off, like kids leaving their lunch trays on their tables instead of throwing them away or someone failing to bag their dog’s shit on a walk, but he eventually returned to his old self. If I had tried to get him to talk about it, it would have made things worse.

Jun really was the only person I've ever talked to about these kinds of feelings. We used to share all kinds of things back when we used to write each other letters. Actual letters—not emails or texts or DMs.

Now that I think about it, Jun should also be graduating this year—assuming he went back to school. I wish I had a way to find out what he's up to. But I don't. I messed that up a long time ago.

I stand up, walk over to the south side of the building, and sit down on the ledge overlooking the playground. The swings sway slightly, and the wind whistles through the tube slide. I look down at my feet as I kick the backs of my heels against the bricks.

Seth eventually sits down next to me. He's done smoking, but the stench still radiates from his clothes. His parents know, but they don't care, which blows my mind.

A few moments pass, then Seth chuckles to himself.

"What?" I ask.

"You know the Unabomber went to Harvard, right?"

"Yeah. And tons of the buildings are named after eugenicists."

"So it's a good thing you're not going there."

I sigh. He still thinks that's what's bothering me.

A bird or a bat flits past overhead. A dog starts barking somewhere in the distance. The wind picks up again but doesn't die down this time.

Much to my relief, Seth finally lets the college thing go and starts rambling about this top secret mod he's been working on for this first-person shooter we like to play. Without telling me what the mod does, he goes on and on about the specifics of the coding and all the iterations he had to try before it worked. None of it makes sense to

me because I'm no programmer. After several minutes of this, he finally reveals that the mod replaces the rocket launcher with a cat and the rockets with babies.

"So, the cat . . . launches babies?" I ask.

He nods, cracking himself up.

"That doesn't make any sense."

"That's the point."

"I don't get it," I say.

"Exactly."

"I don't get you."

Seth considers this. "Does anyone truly get anyone, Jay?"

"Deep," I say sarcastically. "Nothing like wisdom from on high."



UNANSWERED

I sleep in on Saturday because I've got no plans beyond gaming with Seth later tonight after he finishes his shift at the sock store. So after what I'll generously call brunch, I shuffle downstairs in my joggers and an old T-shirt, sink into the living room couch, and fire up my PS4 to make some progress in this one-player game where you battle massive robot dinosaurs in a post-apocalyptic Earth.

I don't know how many hours into this session I am when my dad's suddenly standing behind me like he's learned to apparate.

"Jason, can you pause your game for a second?" he asks.

"I'm almost at a checkpoint," I say.

"Jason . . ." he starts and then falters. He tries again. "Jason, I have something important to tell you."

"Hold on." I know I'm being an ass, but I'm pretty sure this is probably going to be about college or something and I don't really want to talk about that anymore. Plus, I'm in the zone fighting this mech-T-rex that's already killed me, like, a million times.

"Jay," he says.

I slide down a hill and draw my bow and arrow, triggering the slow-motion mode. I release two arrows in quick succession. Both hit

the beast's energy core, drawing heavy damage and narrowing its HP counter to a sliver.

"YES!" I say.

"Your Tito Maning called." He pauses. "Jun is dead."

My fingers slow, but I keep playing. I'm not sure I heard him right.

"Wait—what?"

Dad clears his throat. "Your cousin Jun. He's dead."

I freeze, gripping the controller like a ledge. I suddenly feel like I'm going to be sick. On the screen, the mechanical creature mauls my avatar. My life drains to zero. The camera pans upward, mimicking the soul's skyward path.

The words finally land, but they don't feel real. I was just thinking about my cousin last night. . . .

"That's impossible," I say.

I sit up and shift so I'm facing Dad. He's still wearing his nurse's scrubs, and his salt-and-pepper hair is disheveled like he's been running his fingers through it. Behind his glasses, his eyes are bloodshot. I glance at the time again. Mom's at the hospital, and he should be, too.

"I thought you'd want to know," he adds.

"When?" I ask, my chest tightening.

"Yesterday."

I'm quiet for a long time. "What happened? I mean, how did he . . ."

I can't say the word.

He sighs. "It doesn't matter."

"What?" I ask. "Why not?"

"He's gone. That's it."

"He was seventeen," I say. "Seventeen-year-olds don't randomly . . ."

He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "Sometimes they do."

"So it was random? Like a car accident or something?"

Dad puts his glasses back on but avoids looking at me. He says nothing for a few beats, and then quietly, "What would it change if you knew?"

I don't answer because I can't. Doesn't the truth itself matter?

I should be crying or throwing my controller down in anguish—but I don't do any of this. Instead, there's only a mild confusion, a muddy feeling of unreality that thickens when I consider the distance that had developed between Jun and me. How do you mourn someone you already let slip away? Are you even allowed to?

Since I don't know, I mirror the disturbing calm of my father, as I always do. We share the space, the silence. But on the inside, I'm a plane with failing engines.

"He's gone," Dad repeats after some time. "That's it." And then a nervous laugh escapes his lips.

I try to process the information. Jun is dead—his life has ended. And here I am, sitting in my living room on the other side of the world, a can of Coke on the coffee table, playing a video game on an enormous, wall-mounted flat-screen TV, college on the docket.

Dad wanders away.

"Wait," I call after him, "can we get there in time for the funeral?"

He stops. Over his shoulder: "There won't be one."

Confusion hits me like a wall. "Why not?"

"Your Tito Maning doesn't want to have one. The way he died . . . it wasn't . . . it's not our concern."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

But he's already gone, probably retreating upstairs.

Left alone, my confusion turns to anger, which starts to grow with nowhere to go like the roots of a plant in too small a pot. I finally drop the controller and bury my face in my hands. I take a few shaky, deep breaths. But my heart continues to race. My jaw stays clenched. My stomach remains knotted.

I think of all the letters we wrote each other over the years. What did his last one say? I don't even remember.

But this I'll never forget: I left it unanswered.



HOW HE LIVED

Not sure how long I sit there. I don't remember turning off the console, but at some point, I realize the TV screen is blue, searching for input. Like a zombie, I drag myself upstairs. The door to my parents' room is closed.

I knock. Dad doesn't answer.

I knock again. Nothing. I try the handle. It's locked. I sigh. "What happened to Jun?"

Silence.

"Dad? Please, tell me," I say, my words too thin, too pleading. Like a stupid little kid.

Still nothing. Is it possible he's on the other side of the door, covering his face with his hands and crying quietly? Probably not. I've never seen him cry once in my life.

Giving up, I retreat to my own room. I reach under my bed and pull out the Nike shoebox way in the back behind some old board games and the worn-out camo-print book bag I used in middle school. I brush dust off the lid and then open it. The smell of old paper and ink blossoms beneath my nose.

After my family's trip to the Philippines when I was ten, Jun wrote

me the first of what would become many letters over the years. This shoebox contains all of them stuffed inside haphazardly, each one written on the kind of yellow paper from a legal pad. I dump them out and sort them chronologically as I search for the last one. Can it really be possible that the person who sent me all of these is no longer alive?

At this very moment, are the letters I wrote him sitting in a box somewhere, never to be opened again? I'm not sure how many I sent. Definitely not as many as Jun because I wasn't great at replying. I might go two or three months before sending one, but Jun's arrived twice a month like clockwork. Every now and then, I'd ask again if we should message each other over email instead because there was almost always a season's lag between when they were sent and went they'd arrive. Plus, I think I would have replied more often online. At first, Jun insisted we write actual letters because they were more real. But later he revealed that Tito Maning didn't allow him or his sisters to have social media or even their own email accounts.

Eventually I find the letter I'm looking for, the one dated the December when we were fourteen, shortly before Jun ran away from home.

But I'm not ready to read it yet, so I set it aside and reread a few at random.

Soon enough, my cousin feels alive again. His voice rings in my ear, and his face floats in the paper just beyond his words where he swam in the kind of feelings and thoughts most people spend their lives trying to mask from others or from themselves. I remind myself that he's dead, that I'll never have the chance to write to him again—but it's difficult to drop an anchor in that reality.

I start to feel untethered. I grab my phone and begin to text Chris, but I decide to call instead because I need to hear another human's voice. Except he doesn't pick up. Ever since he got a new boyfriend, he's been MIA. So he's probably out with him or busy doing whatever a subsea engineer does on a Saturday instead of answering calls from his little brother. I glance at the time and decide to try my sister next, figuring it's late enough in the day that she's probably recovered from whatever college party she was at last night.

Em answers midway through the fourth ring, just when I'm about to give up.

"Hi, baby brother," she says, voice groggy. I'm glad to hear it. Things were pretty rough between us for a long time. But after she moved out, I actually found myself missing her sometimes.

"Hi, Em."

She clears her throat. "What's up?"

I draw my knees to my chest. "Um . . . did you hear?" It's possible that Dad texted her the news already, but it's equally possible he didn't. Our family doesn't talk much, and usually anything important is passed along in fragments so that it feels like we're playing that telephone game, except a sadder, real-life version.

There's the sound of shifting at her end of the line. I imagine her tangled in the sheets, blurry-eyed and stretching. "Um. Yeah. I texted you back right away, remember? But if you want to hear it from me directly, fine: congrats! But that means we're rivals now."

I'm confused for a moment, then I realize she thinks I'm talking about me getting into U of M. "No," I say, "I mean . . . yeah. Thanks. But that's not why I'm calling."

“Oh?”

I run my hand through my hair. “Jun is dead.”

There’s a long silence at the other end, long enough that I pull the phone away from my cheek to check if I lost signal. I haven’t. I’m stunned by how hard this news has hit her. I didn’t know they were that close.

“Wait,” she finally says, “is that one of those rappers you’re into?”

“What—No,” I say. “Our cousin Jun. Tito Maning’s son?”

“The one who lives in the UAE?”

“No,” I say. “That’s Prince. He’s, like, twelve. Jun is—was—my age.”

There’s nothing from the other end.

“The one who ran away from home?” I try.

“Oh, yeah,” she says, though I’m unconvinced she actually remembers which cousin I’m speaking about. “Him. Sorry—I’m hungover.”

I don’t say anything.

She sighs. “Well, that sucks, man.”

“Yeah. It does.”

“You were pen pals or something, yeah?”

“Yeah. We were.”

“So what happened?” And this is the right question but not the right tone. It feels more like she’s asking out of curiosity than out of compassion. It’s the same tone people use to ask about a fight at school.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Dad wouldn’t tell me.”

“Go figure. What about Mom?”

“At work still.”

“Maybe he OD’d,” she suggests.

I shrug, even though she can't see me.

"Murdered?"

I close my eyes. "I don't know."

"I bet it was suicide," she blurts out. "You know how some Catholics are weird about that."

I rub my eyes. This isn't even real to her. "Look, Em, I don't know. Maybe you're right, but it's not a joke, okay?"

"Chill. Didn't say it was, baby bro," she says. "Just trying to help."

"Great. Thank you. I feel so helped."

"Don't be a dick. You called me."

I don't say anything. But I'm reminded why we had trouble getting along growing up.

There's silence on the line for a few seconds. "Whatever. Anyway, you're going to love college, dude. It's, like, infinitely better than high school. Nobody forces you to go class and you can party as much as you want. You buy any Wolverines gear yet? State's way better at football, by the way. And basketball. And pretty much everything else."

I'm quiet for a couple beats. "I've got to go, Em. Sorry I woke you up. I'll let you go back to sleep."

"O-k-a-y?" she says, drawing out the word like she has no idea why I'm upset. "Thanks for telling me about Jun, I guess."

"Yeah."

"Take care, baby brother . . . and I'm sorry this happened."

The thing is, she's not. Maybe she's sorry I'm sad, but she's not sorry he died. She didn't know him like I did.

Did anyone?

"Bye, Em." I end the call as she starts to shout something that

sounds like, “Go Spartans!” and then I stare at my phone, wishing there was someone in my contact list I could call who would understand what I’m feeling. Someone like Jun.

I find Seth’s number, but decide against it.

I close my blinds against the early afternoon sun and climb into bed. Still fully clothed, I pull the sheets up to my chin and stare at the ceiling. I feel like there’s a heavy, oversized bolt lodged in my center that I have no idea how to remove. And each time my thoughts go to Jun, the bolt turns and burrows deeper.

I want to be held. I’m seventeen years old, but I want someone to hold me like how my mom held me when I was a little kid.

Why is this hitting me so hard? Yeah, Jun and I wrote each other. But then we didn’t. I don’t know a single thing about his life in the last few years. He never reached out to me, and I never bothered trying to find him. I only knew that he ran away because my dad casually dropped that fact over dinner, like, a month or so after it happened. All of us—including me—were just like, “Oh, that’s so sad,” and then went on with dinner, went on with our lives.

I reach over to the floor and pick up his last letter. I take a deep breath and reread it for the first time in years.

26 December 2015

Dear Kuya Jay,

I have not received a reply from you in three months. In that time, I have sent you six letters counting this one.

Maybe you have moved and forgot to give me the new address? Maybe they were lost in the mail and did not make it to you? Or maybe it is that you are too busy over in America. Now that you are in high school, you probably do not want to spend so much time writing letters to your faraway cousin anymore. Maybe you have a girlfriend. If so, I bet she is pretty and smart. Maybe you play on a sports team. If so, I am thinking it is basketball because you are a very good point guard. Much better than me.

As for me, cousin, malungkot ako. In English: “I am sad,” or, “I am down.” But translation is hard—perhaps “tired,” the larger way you use it, is the better word. Tired of my nanay caring only about what others think of our family. Tired of my tatay believing he always knows what is wrong and what is right all the time just because he is a police chief. Tired of the kids at school talking about music and TV shows and celebrities like any of it matters. What is the point, you know? People are sick and starving to death in our country, in our streets, and nobody cares. They worry instead about grades and popularity and money and trying to go to America. I don’t want to be another one of those people who just pretends like they don’t know about the suffering, like they don’t see it every single day, like they don’t walk past it on their way to school or work.

I wonder, do you ever feel like this?

Anyway, sorry to annoy you with yet another letter. I am thinking that maybe you do not want to do this anymore.

*If you do not reply, it is okay. I will leave you alone. But
know that I would like it very much if you responded.*

Sincerely,

Jun

Guilt, shame, and sadness swirl in my stomach. Yet I reread it a couple more times, forcing myself to face the sorrow, face the fact I never tried to find out where he had gone after he ran away from home, never tried to understand why.

I search his words for clues that might reveal what my dad left unsaid, that might point toward one of the grim ends Em guessed. But the letter says no more than it says. I fold it and place it back with the others, then close the lid as if to a coffin. I turn onto my side so I'm facing the wall and let the tiredness, the sadness, overtake me.

Malungkot ako.

Eventually, I feel myself drifting off to sleep. As I do, I think about how even though there's a lot I don't know, I do know it isn't right for Jun's family to deny him a funeral. No matter how he died. No matter how he lived.



AN IMPROVEMENT TO SOCIETY

I wake to the sound of the garage grinding open. My room is pitch black, and when I check the time on my phone I find that it's almost five in the morning. There are a few texts from Seth from last night that I ignore. Downstairs, a door opens and shuts, then footsteps shuffle across the floor. I almost drift back to sleep when I remember Jun is dead. For a moment, I wonder if I dreamed that conversation with Dad, but then dread settles into my heart and I know I didn't.

I need to speak with Mom. She's always able to extract information from Dad that nobody else in our family can, so if anyone knows more about what happened to Jun, it's her.

I throw the covers back, and head downstairs through the dark house.

She's in the kitchen, back to me as she puts a kettle of water on the stove for her post-shift cup of chamomile tea. Her blond hair—which I definitely didn't inherit—is tied back in a ponytail, and she's still in her scrubs like Dad was. They work at the same hospital, where she's an oncologist and he's a NICU nurse. When Chris, Em, and I were younger, they used to work opposite shifts so that at least one

of them could always be on family duty. We rarely saw them together beyond one day a week and family vacations. But after I finished elementary school, they aligned their schedules, and as we grew up, they grew closer.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, looking a mess in my wrinkled clothes.

She stops what she’s doing and turns around. Her weary face transforms into a picture of sympathy in a heartbeat. She crosses the space between us and wraps her arms around me. “I’m so sorry about Jun,” she says. “I know you two were close. If I could have, I would have been here sooner.”

Earlier I thought that I wanted someone to hold me. But now that someone is, it doesn’t make anything better.

Mom kisses my forehead. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine,” I say, but that’s not what I want to talk about. I shed her arms and back away. “Why aren’t they giving him a funeral?”

She hesitates, like she has an answer ready but is having second thoughts about going with it. Eventually, she says, “You know how your uncle is.” Then she turns around and busies herself with prepping her tea.

“Yeah, but—”

“His family doesn’t want to talk about it. We should respect that.” She closes the cabinet door hard, like a full stop at the end of her sentence.

But I need to know more. I need to know what happened to my cousin. Maybe only for the sake of knowing—but maybe because I need to hear that it wasn’t my fault. That, whatever happened, a few more letters from me wouldn’t have made a difference.

“You know the reason—don’t you? You can tell me. I’m not a kid anymore.”

She rests her hands on the counter but doesn’t answer.

I think about the words in Jun’s final letter, the part about how everyone pretends like they don’t see the suffering around them.

“So we’re just going to act like this didn’t happen? Like Jun didn’t even exist?”

After a beat, she turns around to face me and crosses her arms. “If that’s what’s best for his family, then yes.”

“Do you lie to your patients?” I ask.

She raises her eyebrows. “Not to my patients, but sometimes to their families, yes.”

“You serious?”

She nods. “Sometimes my patients want me to lie for them. Nothing out of line. Mostly they want me to say something in a way that will give their loved ones relief. Or at least, something that won’t leave them with too much despair.”

I shake my head. Unbelievable.

“If I have a patient who is dying slowly and painfully, and he asks me to tell his family that he won’t suffer in his final moments, what am I supposed to do?”

“If they ask, tell the truth.”

“Even if the truth does nothing but cause the family anguish?”

“They deserve to know.”

“Or do they deserve peace?”

I say nothing.

She sighs. “You aren’t going to let this go, are you?”

“No.”

“Just like your father . . .” she says quietly.

Except her comment confuses me because he lets everything go.

“It’s not going to do anything for you,” she says. “Except cause you more pain.”

“I know.”

The teakettle starts whistling. Neither of us moves.

Finally, Mom breaks eye contact and removes the kettle from the stovetop. She pours the water into the waiting mug, drops in the tea bag, then pushes the mug toward me. “Careful. It’s hot.”

“Thanks.”

She glances toward the entrance to the kitchen. Then she takes a deep breath and asks, “Do you know what *shabu* is?”

“*Shabu*?” I repeat, testing the shape of the unfamiliar word in my mouth. It sounds like it could be Tagalog, but I’ve never heard it before. I shake my head.

“It’s what they call meth in the Philippines,” she says. “A cheap high. Easy to find. Devastating.”

My stomach flips. “Oh.”

“I don’t know everything,” Mom continues, “only what your dad tells me, and I can tell he doesn’t know the full story either. You know how his family is. But, in this case, I don’t think he wants to know any more.”

“What do you mean?”

“After Jun ran away from home, he started living on the streets. At some point he started using.”

I stare hard at my untouched cup of tea. A lump forms in my throat. “Overdose?”

Mom shakes her head.

I look up. "Then what?"

"He . . ." She trails off and looks around again as if to make sure Dad isn't within earshot. Then her eyes land on mine and soften. "He was shot." She pauses. "By the police."

"The police?"

She nods.

"Why would the police shoot him for using drugs?"

She takes another deep breath. "Duterte."

I wait for her to say more.

Mom blinks. "Rodrigo Duterte? President of the Philippines?"

I know she's waiting for understanding to dawn on my face, so I look down, feeling like a fool.

"You don't know about him? About the drug war?"

"I've read a little," I say, so I don't look completely stupid. But the truth is, I never made it past the headlines.

"Really, Jay, you should pay more attention to what's going on in the world outside of your video games."

"Sorry," I mumble. But it's not like our family is the model for current events analysis. There was another major school shooting a few weeks ago, and "It's so sad" and "It really is" and "I'll never understand those people" was the extent of my parents' conversation about it over dinner. They didn't even ask how I felt.

"Duterte was elected back in 2016," Mom explains. "One of those 'law and order' types. Said that if he were elected, he could eliminate the country's crime in three to six months."

"For real?" I ask.

She nods. “Blamed drugs. Said he had a plan to get rid of them, and once he did, there wouldn’t be any more crime.”

“And people believed that?”

“He won by a landslide.” She lets that sink in, and then goes on. “Once he was president, he ordered anyone addicted or selling to turn themselves in. If they didn’t, he encouraged the police—and the people—to arrest them . . . and to kill them if they resisted.”

“Execution without a warrant or a trial or anything?”

Mom nods.

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“The government determines what’s legal.”

I shake my head as I think of Jun dying because of some batshit-crazy government policy. “And they’ve *actually* been doing this?”

“You really haven’t read any articles about this online or learned about it in school at all?”

“How many people have died?” I ask instead of answering.

She shakes her head. “Some think over ten, maybe twenty, thousand. But the government says only a few thousand.”

Only.

“And Filipinos are still okay with this guy?”

She takes a deep breath. “Jay, it’s easy for us to pass judgment. But we don’t live there anymore, so we can’t grasp the extent to which drugs have affected the country. According to what I’ve read, most Filipinos believe it’s for the greater good. Harsh but necessary. To them, Duterte is someone finally willing to do what it takes to set things right.”

“So I’m not allowed to have an opinion? To say it’s wrong or inhumane?”

She puts her hands on her hip and flashes me a look that signals I should check my tone. Then, in a low voice, says, “That’s not what I’m saying, Jay.”

“What are you saying?”

“That you need to make sure that opinion is an informed one.”

There’s obviously no way to argue that point without sounding like an idiot, but knowing that doesn’t dissolve my newfound anger. “So what’s *your* informed opinion?”

“That it’s not my place to say what’s right or wrong in a country that’s not mine.”

“But you lived there. You’re married to a Filipino. You have Filipino children.”

“Filipino *American* children,” she corrects. “And it’s not the same.”

“Then what about Dad—what’s he think about Duterte?” I ask, not sure I pronounced the name correctly.

“He’s just glad you and Em and Chris grew up here.”

I don’t know what to say, so I take a sip of the tea, which is bitter and lukewarm. I remember how during sophomore year, my English class read *Night* by Elie Wiesel while we learned about the Holocaust in World History. After we finished the book, we read the author’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. I don’t remember the exact words, but I remember how he said something about how if people don’t speak out when something wrong is happening—wherever in the world—they’re helping whoever is committing that wrong by allowing it to happen. Our class discussed the idea, and almost everyone agreed with it, even me. At least, we said we did. Never mind the fact we all knew most of us didn’t even say shit when we saw

someone slap the books out of a kid's hands in the hallway. In fact, the most outspoken supporter of the idea during the discussion was a kid who did that kind of dumb stuff all the time and thought it was hilarious.

It strikes me now that I've never truly confronted that question before, that I never had to. But I'm left to wonder, did my parents' silence—and mine—allow Jun's death in some way? Was there anything we could have done from the US?

The answer doesn't matter anymore, though. It's too late.

Jun is gone. And apparently to most people he was nothing more than a drug addict. A rat transmitting a plague that needed to be eradicated. It all still feels so absurd, so unreal.

As tears well in my eyes and a new wave of nausea roils in my stomach, I put down the mug and turn away from Mom. I rest my elbows on the counter and cover my face with my hands.

"Are you okay, honey?" comes Mom's voice from somewhere far-away.

I shake my head.

She starts rubbing small circles into the center of my back, but I shrug her off and head up to my room. I sit on the floor, and then press my back against the closed door, hands shaking. My eyes gravitate toward the shoebox under my bed.

Shot.

By the police.

For doing drugs.

Not for robbing or attacking or killing.

For doing drugs.

Now he's dead.

Dead.

Maybe he was reaching out to me through those words, and I let him slip away. I stayed silent. If I had written to him more often, been more honest, would it have helped him work through some of his problems so he wouldn't have run away from home? Maybe if I tried to find him, I would have. Maybe he wouldn't have become an addict if someone were there for him.

Maybe he wouldn't have been killed in the street by the police, his death tallied as an improvement to society.



A NARROWER COUNTRY THAN EXPECTED

I didn't think the Internet would ever fail me, but here we are.

It's Sunday night. I'm at my desk hunched over my laptop, ready to chuck the effing thing out the window.

My parents think I've holed up in my room all day to do homework, but let's get real. It's spring of my senior year, and I've already been accepted into college. Besides, Jun's death has me looking at things differently. Like, if I complete the assignments or not, what does it really matter?

No, what I've been doing is trying to find out more. I expected the info my mom gave me to get rid of that nagging feeling I had inside, but it only aggravated it. When, where, how did it happen exactly?

I need to know this level of detail.

Why? I don't know.

Truth is a hungry thing.

Maybe it's because everyone else is so willing to pretend that it didn't even happen that I'm starving for certainty. Or maybe it's my penance.

Unfortunately, after hours of devouring information about the

drug war, I haven't come across anything about the recent death of a "Manuel Reguero Jr."—Jun's legal name. Since Jun was the son of a high-ranking police officer, I expected an obituary at least.

I click, scroll, skim, repeat. I keep trying different phrases and combinations with no luck. I even try using Bing, which apparently still exists.

Of course, I've found tons of articles, videos, and social media posts about the drug war in general that I check out to get up to speed on what's been happening the last few years. No matter the source, most follow the same flow: They describe the drug and corruption problems, Duterte's solution, and the mounting body count. Few include the victim's full names. Most suggest that these killings are crimes against humanity, including a note about the international community's condemnation—but inaction.

It's the photos that hit me the hardest, though. A woman cradling her husband's limp body. A crowd looking on, emotionless, as police shine a flashlight on a woman's bloodied corpse. A couple, half on the ground and half tangled in their moped, their blank faces turned toward the camera and sprays of blood on the pavement behind their heads. Sisters gathered around their baby brother's body lying in its small casket. A body with its head covered in a dirty cloth left in a pile of garbage on the side of the street. Grayish-green corpses stacked like firewood in an improvised morgue. There's even a short video of grainy security cam footage in which a masked motorcyclist pulls up next to a man in an alleyway, shoots him point-blank in the side of the head, then drives away.

In high definition, I see the victims' wounds, their oddly twisted

limbs, their blood and brain matter sprayed across familiar-looking streets.

In every dead body, I see Jun. I want to look away.

But I don't. I need to know. I need to see it. These photographers didn't want to water it down. They wanted the audience to confront the reality, to feel the pain that's been numbed by a headline culture.

Most of the Filipino sites I can find in English accuse the foreign media of overestimating and sensationalizing. They praise the president for decreasing crime and drug use and improving the country in countless other ways as well. Criticisms are few and far between, which makes sense after I learn about a senator named Leila de Lima. She was apparently one of the most vocal critics of the drug war and chairing the investigation into the extrajudicial killings—and then was imprisoned on drug-related charges based on Duterte's accusation. So the majority of the opposition I find online comes from anonymous blogs or social media accounts like this one on Instagram called GISING NA PH!, which contains post after post of Filipinos holding photographs of their loved ones who the police murdered.

It's crazy and sad and shameful that all of this has been going on for the past three years, and I basically knew nothing about it.

I'm still lost in the rabbit hole when there's a light knock on my door. I minimize the browser, open a random English essay, and swivel around. "Yeah?"

Mom enters, dragging Dad in by the wrist.

"Hey, honey," she says. "We wanted to check in on you. See how you're doing."

I can tell Dad would rather be somewhere else. His eyes dart

around my room, landing anywhere but on me. Mom catches his eye and gives him a look meant to urge him to speak, but he only offers a small shrug.

When I was younger, I spent a day following Dad around the hospital for a bring-your-kid-to-work kind of thing, and I remember being shocked at how friendly and comforting he was with the anxious families of the babies under his care. He was a different person from the quiet, distant man I lived with, saying all the right things in the perfect tone. It was like he used all his compassion on strangers and ran out by the time he came home.

I turn back to my laptop and type nonsense sentences into the doc like I'm actually working on this essay. "I'm fine."

"Would you like to talk about how you're feeling?" Mom asks.

How I'm feeling?

I don't know. Why does it matter? I want to go back to reading more about the drug war, to finding information about Jun. I need to *do* something, not sit around talking about feelings.

I shrug.

"It's important to process your emotions about these kinds of things," she says.

I say nothing. It doesn't escape my notice that she can't even name it.

An awkward amount of time passes, the clacking of my keyboard the only noise in the room. They're probably having a nonverbal debate behind my back about whether to push me to talk or let me be.

Eventually, Mom sighs and then walks over and kisses me on top of the head. "Don't stay up too late."

"I have to finish this essay."

“There are more important things in life,” Dad says from the doorway, speaking for the first time.

I want to laugh aloud since this is the exact opposite of all they’ve told me my entire life—that school, my education, should be my number one priority. After all, it’s why they brought our family to the US. But I hold it in and say good night.

They pull the door shut as they leave. A few moments later, I can make out the soft sound of muffled whispering from the other side. Quietly, I get up and press my ear against the door just in time to catch Dad say, “I just don’t understand him.”

When I walk in late to AP Calc on Monday morning, my teacher, Ms. Mendoza, blinks with surprise from where she’s standing at the board reviewing the problem sets. Everyone’s staring at me weird as I make my way to my seat, I guess because I’m the kid who usually gets the perfect attendance award almost every year.

“Sorry,” I say, slinking into my seat. “Overslept.”

Which is true, but I could have made it on time if I had rushed. After reading about what’s going on in the Philippines yesterday, though, I didn’t feel the usual sense of urgency this morning.

“Oh,” Ms. Mendoza says. “Just put the homework on your desk, and I’ll come around and check it in a moment.”

“Didn’t do it,” I say.

I’m not sure if there’s an audible gasp from my peers, or if I just imagine it. Everyone in this class does every assignment.

Ms. Mendoza gives me a curious look, as if gauging whether I’m being sarcastic or not. I don’t look away.

"You can listen, then, I suppose." She returns to the board and picks up where she left off.

A few moments later, I feel a pencil jabbing me in the back of my shoulder. I shrug it off without turning around, already knowing that it's Seth.

"Dude," he whispers. "Why didn't you answer any of my texts all weekend?"

I don't respond.

"You okay? You look like shit."

"Screw you," I whisper.

He puts his hands up in mock surrender and leaves me be for the rest of class.

But as soon as the bell rings, Seth's giant, hairy self is looming over my shoulder. He follows me into the hallway. "Dude?" he says.

"Dude," I reply sarcastically.

"Seriously, what's going on? You didn't log in to the game Saturday night. You didn't answer any of my DMs all weekend. You were late to school today and didn't even do the homework. And now you're acting like a zombie dick."

I stop in the middle of an intersection. Kids stream all around us, clearly annoyed. Seth looks uncomfortable since he's doing most of the blocking and tries to shepherd me toward the wall. But I stay where I am. "A zombie dick?"

"Yeah," he says. "Not, like, a zombie's phallus. I mean you seem spaced out like a zombie, but you're also being kind of a dick. This isn't like you."

"Oh. I get it." I start walking again, making a left turn down the next hallway toward the school's main entrance.

“Jay—where you going?” Seth calls after me.

“Not feeling so well.”

Seth jogs over. “You going to throw up or something?”

I don’t answer. We walk past the front office and out the front doors. Nobody stops us. Who knew cutting was this easy?

“Need a ride home?” he asks, glancing nervously back at the school like someone’s about to sprint outside, grab us by our collars, and drag us back to class.

“Nah.”

It’s a clear spring day. Sunny, but not so hot. Too nice to match how I’m feeling.

I keep walking. Much as I want to be alone, Seth stays with me. Soon we’re beyond the parking lot and the practice fields, then in the neighborhood surrounding the school. As we pass the two- and three-story homes with their manicured lawns and two-car garages, I can’t help but remember those photographs of the drug war. It seems impossible that a place like this and a place like the Philippines exist at the same time on the same planet.

“You’re not actually sick, are you?” he asks eventually.

“There’s so many terrible things that happen in this world,” I say, measuring how much I want to reveal, how much he’d care. “But, like, nobody’s even paying attention.”

He shrugs. “Everyone’s got their own shit to deal with, man.”

“Like what? What do *we* have to deal with, Seth?”

“Finals, I guess. College.”

I scoff. “But what does that stuff even matter?”

“So we can get a good job, man.”

It's the same answer nearly anyone would give. The same answer hardly anyone ever questions. The same answer I would have given just a few days ago. But now it feels like bullshit because I think of my family. My parents, my aunts and uncles—all of them have good jobs but none of them took care of Jun.

"Look, dude," Seth says, "you're clearly in some kind of funk. Maybe you're feeling late-onset senioritis. I don't know. But look at it this way: you've only got to survive a few more days and then it's spring break. We'll play so many video games that not only will this stress fade away, but your eyeballs are going to fall out of your skull. And then after spring break, we're basically done with high school."

We reach an intersection. No cars are coming, but we wait at the light because the glowing red hand tells us to. Seth punches the walk button several times.

"You're starting to scare me, dude. I know we don't usually talk about stuff like 'feelings'" —he puts air quotes around the word— "but if you want to talk, I'm here."

I start to speak but hesitate. The light changes, but we stay on the corner as it counts down to zero and changes back to the red hand.

"My cousin died," I finally admit. A rush of fresh pain fills my heart, but I hold it in.

"Shit, dude. Sorry." He's quiet for a few moments. "No wonder you're getting existential all of a sudden. If you don't mind my asking, how?"

I tell him what my mom told me.

"Whoa." He runs a hand through his hair. "That's wild. Were you guys close?"

Yes. No. Yes and no. I don't know how to answer, so I don't, only shrug and then cross against the light.

Seth follows. "I've read about that guy Duterte. He's crazy as hell. Back before he was president, when he was mayor of some city, he had these death squads that went around killing people they thought were criminals. He even shot a few people himself and, like, jokes about it now."

I keep walking, annoyed that Seth knows more about what's been going on in the Philippines than I did before yesterday's research session.

"Man," he says, shaking his head, "I forgot you're Filipino."

"Huh?"

"You're basically white."

I stop, stung. "What do you mean by that?"

"Sorry, dude," he says, backtracking. "Never mind."

"Tell me."

He hesitates.

"Seth," I urge.

"I don't see color, man," he says. "We're all one race: the human race. That's all I meant."

"No, it's not," I say. And even if it is, that's kind of fucked up. First, to assume white is default. Second, to imply that difference equals bad instead of simply different.

"Promise you won't get offended?"

"No. But tell me anyway."

He lets out an exasperated sigh. "I just meant you act like everyone else at school."

“You mean like all the white kids?”

“Dude, our school’s all white kids, so, yeah.”

Except it’s not. The majority are, for sure, but his generalization—spoken with such confidence, such ease—makes me feel like he’s erasing the rest of us.

Seth goes on. “You talk like everyone else. You dress like everyone else. And you, like, do the same stuff as everyone else. That’s all I mean. Chill.”

“What would you expect me to do?” I ask. “Walk around draped in the Philippine flag?”

Seth rolls his eyes. “You promised not to get offended.”

“No, I didn’t.” I walk away, regretting that I opened up even as little as I did.

“Where you going, Jay?”

“Home,” I say without looking back.

“You want me to come with you?” he asks, like he doesn’t understand why I’m upset. And that’s a big part of the problem. He doesn’t. He can’t.

It’s a sad thing when you map the borders of a friendship and find it’s a narrower country than expected.



LET ME GO

I sleep the rest of the day away. And then on Tuesday Mom lets me stay home because I tell her I'm not feeling well. I'm certain she knows I'm lying since she's a doctor, but since she's a mother, I'm certain she knows that I'm telling the truth.

I've tried asking Dad about Jun a few more times, but he claims to know nothing beyond what he already told me. And I keep doing more research online and coming up empty.

But in the afternoon, I'm binge-watching old episodes of *Steven Universe* and cycling through my social media when I get a DM on Instagram from an account I don't recognize. The message only contains a link, but I'm not about to click on it because it's probably virus city.

The profile pic is a low-res shot of some Filipino guy, and the handle's a nonsense string of letters and numbers without a bio. Dude only follows me, has zero followers, and has posted exactly zero times. Definitely not clicking on this link.

A minute later, I'm thinking about setting my account back to private when I get a second message from the same number with another link.

My finger's hovering over the Block button when he sends a third message—this time it's a photo.

My breath catches. I sit up.

It's a picture of Jun.

He's sitting on a curb and leaning back on his hands in front of a wall plastered in faded advertisements. He's got a stubbly goatee and a few tattoos snaking around his left arm—telling me he's way older here than in any photo I've ever seen of him.

What. The. Fuck.

When was it taken? Who took it?

Where did you get this??? I message, heart racing.

This is your cousin, no? Manuel Reguero?

Who are you?? I ask.

No response.

WHERE DID YOU GET THIS?

Manuel did not deserve to die, he replies. He did nothing wrong.

How do you know??? Who are you???

Several moments pass. And then: I was his friend.

I wait for him to say more, to answer my other questions. But he never does.

I ask again.

As I wait for a response, I swipe back to his profile pic and zoom in on the face. He said he was Jun's friend, and he somehow found me online. I must have met him while hanging out with Jun on that trip to the Philippines, but I can't place his face at all. I take a screenshot and run a reverse image search, but no matches turn up. I Google the profile name, but that's a dead-end, too.

I go back to the conversation, but he hasn't replied. I message him a few more times, but several minutes of radio silence later, I accept the fact that the guy's gone. Hopefully just for the moment.

While I wait for him to respond, I save the photo of Jun to my phone and then open the link from the first message. It takes me to an article from three years ago about Duterte's drug war, one that I've already read. It's partially a primer on what's been going on and partially a journalist sharing his observations and photos after spending a month in Manila, during which time almost sixty people were murdered by the police or by vigilantes.

Jun's friend still hasn't sent another message, so I open the second link. This one also pulls up an article, but one I haven't come across yet.

It opens with a story about a seventeen-year-old boy named Kian delos Santos that police confronted because he was on a list of suspected drug runners provided by his neighborhood. They tried to arrest the boy, but he fought back and pulled a gun. In self-defense, they shot and killed him.

Only that's not what happened.

A CCTV camera happened to record everything. The video showed a group of police officers dragging him into the middle of a vacant lot, hands tied behind his back and a sack over his head. Then, they removed the sack, untied him, and slapped a gun into his hands. They stepped back and raised their own, pointing the barrels directly at his face. The boy immediately dropped the gun and raised his hands to shield his face. His last words according to an anonymous witness: "Please no—Please no—I have a test tomorrow."

There are other stories. Two brothers on their way to buy snacks.

A boy going to meet up with a teammate for their basketball game. Five friends playing pool. A mother out late buying medicine for one of her kids. A teacher eating at a canteen. And more.

All the stories follow a similar pattern: Someone is accused without evidence, they are killed without mercy, then the police cover it up without regret. Of course, the official report reads that the suspect resisted arrest. But this is contradicted by videos, anonymous eyewitness accounts, or forensic evidence.

The government never apologizes. They deny mistakes, asserting that they had reliable information or evidence, and that nobody, not even family members, should assume they know a person completely. “People hide their sin,” one police chief explained.

Of course, the victims are almost always poor and don’t have the means to bring legal action against the government.

The article goes on to talk about the mass incarceration; the imprisonment of Duterte’s political opponents on drug-related charges that lack credibility, such as with Senator de Lima; the system in which police officers earn certain amounts of money for killing specific types of suspects, creating an economy of murder—especially since there are no bonuses for arrests.

So the drug war continues. The body count rises.

“They are exterminating us like we are rats in the street,” ends the article, a quote from a mother who lost all five of her sons to the antidrug campaign, known as Operation Tokhang locally.

I clench my jaw and fight back tears.

I return to the conversation with Jun’s friend. There’s still no

response, but my eyes land on his second-to-last message: **He did nothing wrong.**

The possibility that Jun died like one of the people from this article transforms my sorrow into white-hot anger.

If that's true, why isn't anyone talking about it?

The article included the fact that four low-level officers were eventually charged for killing that seventeen-year-old, but their punishments were minimal and only happened after massive protests. But what about the other victims who never got a hashtag? What about Jun?

Would there be justice?

Definitely not if nobody even knows what truly happened.

So maybe that's it—maybe I can find out. If his friend is right, maybe there are witnesses; maybe there's video; maybe there's a flawed report.

I stand up from the couch and start pacing the living room. For the first time in a few days, I feel like I have the opportunity to do something that matters. Something real. Something for Jun.

Except I know I can't do it from here, from behind my laptop.

I need to go to the Philippines.

I laugh. That's impossible. I can't just up and fly halfway across the world.

Or can I?

Spring break starts in a couple days, and I don't have plans besides playing video games with Seth. I wouldn't have to miss that much school, and at this point in senior year most of the classes are filler

anyway. I have a passport, so that's not an issue. And even though a last-minute ticket to Manila will be pretty damn expensive, we've got the money.

No, the real problem won't be getting my parents to pay for it.

It will be convincing them to let me go.



GROUNDED

Later that night, Mom and Dad are standing at the island in the kitchen, reviewing the details of the flights I've pulled up on my laptop. I could leave the day after tomorrow, on Thursday, and then return a couple days after spring break. All they have to do is enter the payment information.

"No," Mom says. "No way."

Dad says nothing.

"Why not?" I ask.

"It's too expensive," she says.

"We just bought a Land Rover," I counter.

"Yes, *we* have the money." She gestures between Dad and herself.

"But *you* don't."

Dad laughs.

"It can be my graduation present," I say.

Mom says, "What about the new computer?"

"I don't need one. And this even costs less."

Mom raises an eyebrow. "Weren't you just complaining about how this one keeps crashing unexpectedly?"

We all look at the computer, as if waiting for it to crash at that exact moment. Thankfully, it doesn't.

"It's fine," I say. "That's a quirk. It's quirky and lovable."

"That's not what you're going to say in the fall when you lose a term paper you've been working on for days."

"Everything saves to the cloud now, Mom."

She looks to Dad. He gazes at the screen.

"You guys always talk about how you learned so much from traveling. The best classroom is the world and all of that. How it opened up your eyes and changed your life. How you wouldn't be the people you are today if you hadn't taken some of those trips. You wouldn't even have met if Mom never went to the Philippines. Don't you want me to experience some of that?"

They hold their silence.

"Would you rather I sit around the house all week and play video games?"

Mom sighs, crosses her arms over her chest.

"And remember how much Em matured after she studied abroad in France?" I add, omitting the stories Em told me about hitting the clubs every weekend.

"You want to travel instead of getting a new computer?" Mom says. "Fine."

Dad looks at her. I smile.

She nods, then adds, "But not to the Philippines."

My face falls. "Why not?"

"I mean . . . with what happened . . ."

A tense silence settles over the kitchen.

It drives me crazy that nobody will say Jun's name. But I keep myself in check because getting angry isn't going to get me what I want right now.

Thankfully, Mom senses the discomfort and redirects before anyone has a chance to answer her question. "You should go somewhere you haven't been before. You really enjoyed our trip to England last summer, didn't you? Why not somewhere else in Europe, like Spain? I have some friends in Valencia who live right on the Mediterranean coast. I bet they'd love to host us, and it would be a great chance to practice your Spanish."

"Wait—'us'?" I ask.

"Is there a problem with that?"

A problem? No. *Many* problems? Yes. But I need to tackle one at a time. "Um, can you guys take off work like that?"

"I'm sure we could make it happen."

Dad clears his throat. "Actually, I don't have any vacation days left."

"We can afford for you to take unpaid time off."

"I'd rather not, Dana."

Mom turns to me. "Fine. A mother-son trip."

Suppressing my urge to cringe hurts. But I manage. "As wonderful as that sounds . . . I was thinking I could travel alone."

"Oh?" she says. "Too cool to hang out with your mom?"

Yes. Definitely yes.

"No," I say. "I just think it would be a good way to celebrate graduating high school, you know? Like becoming a man, and all that." It's corny, but whatever it takes. I would never be able to find out the truth about Jun with Mom hovering over my shoulder.

I gauge their reactions and can tell they're still not convinced. I take a moment to go over the Hail Mary speech I've prepared in my head. Of course, I can't just tell them straight up that I want to investigate Jun's death since they've already made it clear Tito Maning's family would rather forget about him completely. But I know a bit of the truth might help me make my case.

"What happened with Jun," I start, "made me realize how little I know about Dad's side of the family, about that side of myself. I mean, we see your relatives in Ohio almost every summer, Mom, but I haven't seen Dad's family or been to the Philippines in almost a decade. I don't speak Tagalog. I can't even name more than a handful of cities in the country. But all of that's part of me, isn't it? Or, I mean, it should be. It's like I only know half of myself."

My parents exchange a look. I can't tell if it's good or bad. I'm afraid what I've said came out more like an accusation than an explanation.

"I understand all of that, and I do think it would be good for you to go back." She uncrosses her arms and takes Dad's hand, lacing their fingers together. "But maybe the timing's not right."

Except I'm ready for this.

"The truth is, Grace asked me to go," I lie.

Dad cocks his head. "Really?"

I nod.

"You've spoken to your cousin since . . . ?"

I look him straight in the eye. "She's been having a really hard time and wants me to hang out with her for a bit. You know, to help her through it. But please don't tell Tito Maning—she doesn't want him to know it was her idea."

“I didn’t know you two were close.”

“We text sometimes,” I say.

“But Maning doesn’t allow her to have a phone.”

“Oh. I meant message. Online.”

He looks at Mom for a moment then back at me.

“She’s having a *really* hard time,” I repeat, hoping he cares enough about his niece’s emotional well-being that it will sway him.

Dad lets go of Mom’s hand and angles the laptop toward himself. He gazes at the screen and drags a finger across the trackpad to scroll the page. Mom leans back against the counter and watches.

“Jay’s almost eighteen,” he says.

“*Almost*,” Mom says.

Dad scrolls up and down the page, making it clear he’s killing time while he thinks instead of seeking information about the flight. Eventually he stops, runs a hand over his mouth, and then makes eye contact with Mom for several seconds.

Something passes between them, and a moment later, Dad pulls his phone from his pocket then turns his attention back to me. “I need to make sure it’s okay with Maning.”

“You serious?” I say.

He nods, then disappears to make the call.

I look at Mom expecting her to protest. But she sighs, mutters something about her baby boy growing up, and then wraps me in a hug.

Though Dad speaks to Tita Chato and Tito Danilo every few weeks, it’s not unusual for him to go months without speaking to Tito Maning. And when he does, his conversations with his older

brother typically last only a few minutes, more an exchange of news than a conversation. I'm counting on their lack of communication to work in my favor now, on him believing my lie that Grace doesn't want him to know it was "her" idea and honoring that, and on Tito Maning's desire to keep up appearances, to pretend that Jun's death really doesn't matter. If he were to refuse to host me, then that would be admitting that it does.

While Dad's gone, Mom eventually releases me from the hug and then asks about half a dozen more times if I'm sure I wouldn't rather go with her to Spain or Iceland or the Czech Republic. Dad rejoins us like ten or fifteen minutes later.

"Is it cool?" I ask.

He nods.

I want to wrap my arms around him, but that's not something we do. So instead, I tilt my head in a gesture of appreciation and say, "Salamat po. Thanks."

"You will stay with family the entire time," Dad says. "You won't go anywhere by yourself."

"Of course," I say.

Dad turns the laptop to face him and starts typing in the payment information. "Go get your passport," he says.

I do and then hover over his shoulder as he enters the last of the information. When he clicks to confirm the purchase, I can't believe this is really happening. A strange, fluttery feeling stirs in my chest. My heart wants to soar, but it's like a bird with clipped wings, the real reason I'm going keeping it grounded.



THINGS INSIDE

4 March 2012

Dear Kuya Jay,

I decided I want to be an astronaut when I grow up. We learned about the planets today in science class, and I wish I could see them for myself. Even though most everyone wants to visit Saturn because of its rings, I would fly to Jupiter. Did you know it has a storm that is thousands of kilometers in diameter that has been going on for hundreds of years? If I could go into the middle without being killed, I think that would be so beautiful to see. And if I got bored, I could go to one of its many moons. Teacher said one of them has water, and where there is water, there will be Filipinos.

I told Tatay at dinner, and he said it was stupid, that everyone knows the Philippines has no space program. Maybe it will one day, I said. Then I pointed out how we were some of the first people to cross the oceans, so why couldn't we be among the first to cross space? He shook his head and said I have been watching too many American movies. The

Philippines will never have a space program, he said. When I told him that I will move to a country that has one, he said no, that I was born here and I would die here.

After dinner, Grace told me she did not think my idea was stupid. She said she would like to visit Neptune. But when I told her how cold Neptune is, she switched her answer to Venus.

It is fun to dream about, but I think Tatay is right. So maybe you could become the astronaut instead. And if you're a very good astronaut, maybe they will let you take someone along and you could choose me. We could go to Jupiter, or we could go wherever you want. Anywhere but this planet.

Sincerely,

Jun

I am on the floor next to my bed rereading one of Jun's letters after dinner—still in disbelief that my parents have agreed to let me go on the trip—when there's a knock on my door.

"Can I come in?" Dad says from the other side.

I put the letter away and slide the box back under my bed, wondering if he's here because they've changed their mind. "Sure."

Dad enters, pushes aside some clothes draped over my desk chair, and takes a seat. He leans back and looks around. I wait for him to say something. Finally, he points with his lips at the poster of Allen Iverson on the wall above my bed—one of the very few recognizable Filipino habits he's retained. "That's new, yes?"

I shake my head. Iverson's still wearing a Sixers jersey in the picture. He used to be Jun's and my favorite player.

"Oh," he says. He looks around. Taps the statuette of the Forsaken Queen from *World of Warcraft* that's on my desk. "But this is, right?"

"Sure," I say, even though it was a Christmas gift from him and Mom three years ago. Another thing shaded with Jun's ghost because when we were in middle school, he snuck out to an Internet café so we could play online together a few times. He was terrible, of course, but I didn't care.

"I knew it." Dad goes back to letting his gaze wander, and I go back to waiting for him to say why he's here.

Eventually, I can't take it anymore. "So what's up, Dad?"

"What's up?" he repeats. "That's a very American phrase, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"You're very American. Like your mother. No accent like me."

I shrug.

"That's why I moved us here. I wanted you, your brother, and your sister to be American."

"Mission: accomplished." I draw my knees to my chest, seeing this for what it is.

"You may not speak Tagalog or know as much as you would like about the Philippines, but if we stayed, you wouldn't have had all the opportunities that you've had here."

I don't say anything, but I wonder if Jun would still be alive if our family had remained or if his family had joined us in the US.

"It's easy to romanticize a place when it's far away," he goes on, making this officially the most I've heard him speak at once in a long

time. "Filipino Americans have a tendency to do that. Even me. Sometimes I miss it so much. The beaches. The water. The rice paddies. The carabao. The food. Most of all, my family." He closes his eyes, and I wonder if he's imagining himself there right now. After a few moments, he opens them again, but he stares at his hands. "But as many good things as there are, there are many bad things, things not so easy to see from far away. When you are close, though, they are sometimes all you see."

I want to tell him that I understand, but I don't because I don't. Instead, I ask, "Like what?"

"Just be careful and keep that in mind," is all he says, rising to leave. "I forwarded the flight info to your email. You'll be there for ten days. You'll spend three with Tito Maning, three with Tita Chato, three with your lolo and lola, and then one more with Tito Maning since he'll take you back to the airport."

"What about Tito Danilo?" I ask.

"He was assigned to a parish in Bicol a few years ago, so you'll see him when you are with your lolo and lola."

"Thank you, Dad," I say. "I really do appreciate it."

He stops in the doorway. "But, Jason, you must promise one thing."

"I know," I say, "stay with family at all times."

"Well, yes, but that's not what I was going to say. You must promise not to bring up your cousin while you're there. It will be too painful for them. Too shameful. They want to forget. To move on. Honor that."

“Of course, Dad,” I say. “No problem.”

He searches my face for the truth. Satisfied, he nods and leaves.

I may not have learned to speak my native language from him, but
I learned to keep the most important things inside.



LIKE A FOG

I stay home from school again on Wednesday to prepare for a trip that does not feel real. I message my teachers to let them know I'll be out and to ask for work, and then I make a checklist of all that I need to bring. I select books; charge my electronics; and download music, TV shows, and movies onto my phone for the long-ass plane ride. I text Seth to let him know what's up. I DM Jun's friend again, but he's still MIA.

When Dad comes home from work, his car is loaded with stuff he picked up from Costco. I help him unload everything.

"*Pasalubong* for the *balikbayan* boxes," he explains.

"Huh?"

"*Pasalubong*: Gifts for the family. *Balikbayan*: One returning home."

I nod, vaguely remembering this happening before our last trip to the Philippines.

He sets up two cardboard boxes in the living room and then lays out everything he bought: clothing, medicine, toiletries, SPAM, ginormous tins of coffee, toys, school supplies, a couple pairs of shoes, and more. There's no way it's all going to fit in two of those boxes.

He starts methodically filling the first one, and I wander over and

start with the second. He keeps glancing over and frowning. After a couple minutes, he stops what he's doing and tells me, "Like this." He gestures toward his box. "You need to put the heavier stuff on bottom."

"Oh." I begin unpacking everything to start over, ashamed.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Will you get the scale, please?"

I back away and let Dad finish.

After both boxes are full, Dad weighs them. One is bit over and the other a little under the fifty-pound limit, so he swaps a few items until both are good to go. He then tapes them shut, writes Tito Maning's address on the sides in large letters with permanent marker, and binds them with nylon rope for good measure. He pats one and says, "For Maning and Chato." And then the other. "For Danilo and your lolo and lola."

When I think I'm finished packing my suitcase, Mom comes in and makes me run through my checklist with her to ensure I have everything. It's all there, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm forgetting something important. After she says good night, I pull Jun's letters from the box, bind them with a thick rubber band, and shove them inside my backpack.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep. When I do, I dream what I think is a memory. I am ten and back in the Philippines. I have spent the day at school with Jun, and now we are walking back to his house. Everyone's wearing the slacks and short-sleeved Barong of their school uniform, even me since I borrowed Jun's clothes. We're laughing because one of his classmates looks like a giraffe when he sticks out his neck, then everyone goes their separate ways at an

intersection. I try to follow Jun, but he tells me I can't and picks up his pace. I try to follow him through the afternoon streets, which are crowded with people and cars and jeepneys and motorcycles. It's not long before I lose him.

We arrive at the airport in a predawn hush. My parents wait with me in a long line of Filipinos, each bearing their own balikbayan boxes. When it's my turn to check in and my boxes get weighed and tossed onto the conveyor belt, it strikes me that even though Dad took care of them up until now, I'll have to claim the boxes by myself in Manila. They'll be my responsibility.

I hug my parents. Dad holds on to me longer than I expect, and when we separate it looks like he's about to say something but stops himself. I say good-bye and head through security without looking back, relieved to be on my own at last but also feeling kind of adrift thinking about the long journey ahead. Detroit to South Korea, then South Korea to Manila. Almost twenty hours in all.

My flight is one of the first of the day, so the airport is still waking up. The terminal's halls are filled with bright, fluorescent light, but more workers than passengers. Most of the shops and newsstands are closed. The only place with a line is Dunkin' Donuts.

I find a seat right next to my gate. Through the windows, I watch the crew get comfortable in the cockpit and the flight attendants start to prep the plane. The handlers load the luggage into the cargo hold, my boxes somewhere in there. The sky lightens, but with the clouds I can't distinguish east from west.

The gate gradually fills with people until it's standing room only. As we begin to board, the knot in my stomach tightens. And as I make my way down the ramp, onto the plane, and into my seat, Jun's ghost follows like a fog.