



O P E N
F I R E

AN ANTHOLOGY BY THE TIME OF ASSASSINS

**EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
IVAN EMIL LABAYNE**

Open Fire:
A short story anthology

The Time of Assassins Literary
Guild

FreeLipiniana

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The Time of Assassins Literary Guild

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EDITOR'S NOTE

*

Prior to our informal feedback session somewhere along Taft, one mundane Manila evening, I haven't met—even added as FB friends—any one of the contributors to this debut anthology. What goaded me into travelling from Baguio to meet them is this gushing verve I discerned in the collected drafts they first sent me online. Apparently encountering a willful display of creativity—to tell stories, to get published, to be read—I could not balk. It is one thing to write with diligence and perhaps a sense of duty; it is another thing to request for criticisms to be delivered, wanting refinement before the words get out there, seemingly sturdy on the page.

*

Several C words can describe our feedback session: collegial, convivial, even congenial, but instead of seeing Sandra Bullock images, one can fancy Hemingway clinking glasses with someone and not boozing alone, or Marx and Engels when they first commented on each other's works. At one point, Ramzzi actively defended his use of the passive voice for its musicality, against my default preference for the active, a predilection activated less by my literary than copy-editor persona. There is no shortage of stories about young writers treated harshly by their “seniors,” established names in the scene, usually during workshops: Tula ba 'to? Wag ka ng magsulat, magtanim ka na lang ng kangkong! I would like to believe that we were able to attain something far from that fiasco, fodder for literary gossips, symptomatic of feudal relations in the literary community.

*

All but one of the stories had a considerable fondness for bleakness. Churches were being destroyed in *The Mourning Star* only to reveal something more sinister in the last one standing. Nothingness became not an existential bluff but a defense mechanism in *Lightless*. On the mellower side of bleak, there are *A Court of Rats* and *What Prowls in Alabang*: two strangers—a Rat and an ex-Rat—commune with the help of Ayn Rand, instant coffee and *Gatsby*; a BPO worker ambivalently played with the familiar trope of the sunrise. Going by crude categorizations, *Travel Experience in Bicol* can either be a favorite or a bummer, the odd one out. But in a collection with stories speaking of being doomed “whether you've made a name for yourself or not,” or of a God acting like a “voyeur with the might to create a history for his own pleasure,” it is not just fitting but fascinating to have a funny piece, fiddling with the seriousness of the rest.

I guess I can bet that the captured reader can see the connections in the stories, mostly unplanned, if at all. The drivers compared to “maniacs in a drag race” in one story link with the “vehicles [that] blocked and shadowed each side of the road” mentioned in another. The Yabbadabba-doo that would wake the character in one story would be the sound of metal sheets colliding in another. One does not need to die to feel the lack of

vitality in life. One can be in the busiest of cities and still feel entrapped or powerless. Or conversely, one can be in a different place and not feel “mocked or scolded for my blunders.” Somewhere in the stories, I am sure you will find yourself hooked, seeing from a distance your attitude at work, your view of the poor, your general outlook in life, and prompting you to examine your own positions.

And some can argue that that is the minimum aspiration for fiction, if not literature in general, and following that, this debut anthology deserves at least an initial consideration, then perhaps a further reconsideration.

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Postscript:

To conclude How to Read Lacan, Zizek quoted from Beckett’s *The Unnameable*, “in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” In relation to this, I recall the sharp contrast in Kafka’s *Give It Up!*, where the police, asked about the way, gave the unlikeliest, titular response, then “turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.” Being an optimist, I read the stories as subscribing to neither temperament—pointless persistence or gleeful resignation. All the doses of despair in the stories are offset by the feverishness in writing, asserting itself as the more potent disease. And isn’t it better to be infected by this?—this willfulness of words, wrangling against the world’s seeming inconsistencies and inequities, wanting to approximate order even in the indelicate balance of writing.

– Ivan Emil Labayne

THE MOURNING STAR

Eissenn Tronco

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I

The moon looms like the great eye of god over the world he abandoned. The sky is fully dark and starless Only the moon survived the curtain of heavy clouds. Beneath the silent observer a dog sniffs the carcass of its mother. When the stink permeated its nose, it cried. For the dog knows and feels. And as if the sky too, despairs for the dog, it let its tears escape as well. The dog stayed awhile with the bitch that bore it, hoping for another playful bite, hoping to feel the warmth of her snout a final time. The dog climbed the flight of stairs to the church roofing itself from the cry of the sky. It didn't bother to dry itself. It would watch from a distance as her mother's rotting flesh is cleaned piece by piece from the pavement. The dog will not sleep until the rain carries its mother to her final resting place: the drain.

II

The inside of the church still holds all the holiness and horror it witnessed for all the decades it stood. The benches are old and chipped; some carry bulletholes from when the church served as an execution ground during wartime. Every sabbath people will sit in the benches with unease; the history of the church would play in their heads and tiny creeping fear would climb the length of their spine. An old woman who visits the church every Sabbath comment that the creaking of the floorboards were the sobs of souls in unrest. Trapped and haunting the old church. The most infamous case of these trapped souls that lost their earthly flesh inside the church were a family of five. The story which the village would tell on nights such as these to scare the kids to sleep. It was more than six decades ago when they were made to kneel and pray for their lives in front of an altar. The mother clung a rosary to her chest as she mumbles for help, a call to wake her from this nightmare. The father, in all the years he worked hard, that which the thickness of his palm is evidence, had never felt so useless. He can only let his tears fall now for his family. If only he could take them far away from this anguish and wipe the stains of torment from their now ruined eyes. If only he could shield his family from the horrors of this world and take it all for himself; let his daughters pick flowers once more, dread a foreign thought from their young minds. If only he could wrap his arms around his only son one more time and bathe his face with a hundred kiss like he never did since he was two. The family cried and begged for their lives but the armed men only laughed in reply. The first to die was the girl of seven. She was shot in the temple. The father, out of rage and desperation, stood up and lunged and bit the cheek of one of the armed men. But before he could take a chunk of it the father was forced into submission. The father screamed and cursed and continued to fight still. Bestowed to every father soon as he hears the first cry of his baby daughter is this egg of incredible hurt, a capsule of great burden waiting to be cracked, waiting to leak and spread and poison a good man to desperation. The father was filled with this infernal vigor. The rage, the spirit that fuels this man now, however, only afforded him more pain. The father died last. Pinned down, he watched his wife's head leave her body. He didn't even see the

machete swing; he only saw her and then what was left of her. The two children were sprayed with bullets. Their last words were screams of help, a cry for him.

Boots rained on the father's head until it was nothing but spread gore on the floor. If one is to look closely, the old woman said, you can still see parts of his skull still planted in the floorboards.

III

The earliest happy memory he had was during the demolition of the last church in the city, one of the very few left in the world. He was with his father who, for thirty years, wed his fingers with the ivory keys of the church organ. It was a huge event that a lot of people attended. There were stands that sell popcorn, cotton candy, peanuts, ice cream, smoothie, lemonade, balloons, stickers, patches, t-shirts, puppets and toy cars made of tin. There were street performers and there were little kids selling rosaries and bibles. A group was protesting and handing out pamphlets that promised hell. It joyed him to see familiar faces from school. The fat kid who eats glue, had a balloon tied to his wrist. He saw the four-eyed school mute resting his face on a rail looking sullen. The bully had busied his eyes with the movement of the cloud. A loud horn blew, signaling the beginning of the event. Everyone gathered from a distance to see yet another house of worship meet decimation. The boy watched closely as the wrecking ball rammed the church and an excavator helped it put into ruin. Applause came from the crowd as the destruction of the church slowly revealed a view of a corporate building in construction. Like weeds growing from burial grounds, a death of an old god paved way for a new one. In lieu of cathedrals sprouted corporate buildings. A new house of worship for a newfangled god. When the deed was done and the dust cleared, he saw from the crowd the most beautiful face. It was Beatrice. In the classroom he'd always find himself staring at her. The waves of her hair and the way it looks with the touch of morning light was to him, more fascinating than the travels of Magellan. Whenever their eyes met the wind is knocked out of him. It was like that time he rode his bike downhill and he was going so fast he lost control of the steer. The bike wobbled and both ends of the handlebar hit him in the chest that left a mark for weeks. The seconds after were excruciating for he couldn't breathe. But with Beatrice it was the good kind of breathless. Though the way Beatrice take his breath away was a good-kind of being winded, even as young as he was then he was sure that Beatrice would be the end of him.

When their eyes met that day among the wreckage of the church, he found himself losing balance and swore he heard wedding bells, though they did not exist anymore. He had a taste of the future and made up his mind then that if Beatrice is to bring the end of him it would be a consequence he would gladly accept. She smiled at him before disappearing into the crowd. The boy froze trying to process the situation, as he etched the moment in his brain and deep into his heart.

On their way home he felt his father's hand tighten, he felt it tremble. He remembered that same slight hand convulsion during one of his parent's arguments. It was their last argument, the day her mother left. He watched from behind the door of his room. He felt invisible watching from the small opening. It must have been hours that they were

screaming at each other though he remembered the fight go on as far back as he could remember. The boy saw his father clench his fist and he saw it shaking, it's as if it was beyond his father's control. The boy recalled a bottle flying just shy of her mother's face and landing on wall behind her. A shrapnel hit her calf and he saw blood run from the wound. He looked at her mother's face and realized he wasn't as hidden as he thought. The boy saw his mother looking at him. That was the last time he saw his mother's face.

The father drags his son from a gathering crowd watching a magician do a levitation trick. The magician would horribly fail. The boy would forget most of what happened that day. Towards the void of memory will go the faces of his friends along with their names. The boy would only remember the church, before and after its desolation, the smile of Beatrice and finally the loudness, the crack and then the screech of the magician.

Years would pass and many hours of those were spent inside his room alone. Many days would be spent healing his bruises. The boy's father had demons locked away and the key to their release was alcohol. On days his father is to let them take over, the old man would blather tales of Bach, Beethoven, Davis and Dylan. Once the father had drunk himself sober, he would then proceed to teach the boy to play different instruments: the guitar, the piano, the sax, the drums.

The boy would often play with fear for the price of minuscule mistakes was his father making a canvas of his body, the buckle of the belt as paintbrush.

On some days his father would ask forgiveness before the altar of The Last Church. He would watch his father cry as he begs for absolution. It was not the boy's clemency that he seeks. The boy would know freedom – or what was close to it –at the age of fifteen. Before he left for school his father called out his name and, for what felt like first time, gave him a hug. “You'll be alright, son.” He says as he sends his boy off with a kiss on the forehead. The boy found this highly unusual. He had this stinging feel that his father would die that day. If my father is to die today, he thought, he'd surely go to hell. And if there is a hell, hell would surely spit him right back. My father is safe, he thought.

That day he kissed Beatrice for the first time. He felt a great weight lifted off his shoulder. The boy felt so light he could fly. He went home that day wearing the brightest smile he has ever worn. When the boy got home the house reminded him of the day of demolition. All the instruments he learned to play, that which earned him some recognition and bruises growing up, all laid in ruin. It's as if a great storm brewed and happened within the confines of the household alone. All was in wreck save for a guitar case with a note that reads:

“Dear Son,

When you make this wail

May the world share your pain.”

Inside the case was a white Fender Stratocaster. In the other room the body of his father hanged and slowly swung still. For the rest of that day his smile never left his face.

IV

This cramped room; a representation of his ever-shrinking world. He is here inside the confession room of The Last Church. But his mind is a lightyear away from pasts long gone and recent. Embraced in his arms is a bleeding Stratocaster with its thick crimson dirtying the floor. He plucks a string as he rocks back and forth playing a rhythm akin to water drops from a faulty faucet. A shadow disturbs his dreaming.

“Forgive me for I...”

The words refused to come out as he zooms back to an hour ago. He swung the white guitar and it opened a skull. Stains of gore remained on the pale guitar which now seeps through consecrated floors. “No. I don’t feel... I can’t ...” the man stutters. He takes a deep breath and said, “I won’t apologize. I can’t feel shame. I don’t need mercy. To live is to hurt, father. They were right to behead the Pope. They were right to burn the churches. What you offer is false hope. The church exists only to sweeten the pain of existence. To live is to hurt. And to love?”

What does love do? Is it to abandon? That is your God’s claim, isn’t it? That He is filled with love and forgiveness for us that drowns in all the misery, in all the horror that he too created? If your God is real then he must be the most wicked. A most powerful voyeur with the might to create a history of torture for his personal pleasure! Wars waged in honor of his name, of his many names. Billions! Billions! Billions of bodies throughout man’s history of violence had called to him for help. To not be forsaken. Yet He replied only with silence. Did you know a family was killed in this church? Just five bodies of what must be hundreds. Just right now, father, a dog is dead in front of his house. He doesn’t care. This church must burn. The world must forget it ever believed in a monstrous, apathetic mute. Do you understand what I am telling you, father? I am giving you a chance to run. Tomorrow I will burn this church and with it the last of His followers. It would mean a great deal to me if you do choose to walk away. It would make me feel victorious. Whatever that is worth. God must die.” The man left the confession room, leaving behind his white Fender Stratocaster. The gore on the guitar has started to dry and crust. The man faces the altar and thinks about his special plan. He thinks of burning flesh and screams of anguish. He so much wants to find joy in what he is about to commit. He pictures her face, the most beautiful face and how he ruined it. God must suffer and beg like his poor creations. And he, too, would give back silence to all the cry. He spits.

“FUCK Y--” his sentence is cut short. A hand grips his neck from behind and tears it open, exposing its anatomy. Blood sprays from his neck and it comes down like red rain before the altar. The priest lets go of the man, letting his body falls to the same floor that tasted the blood of a family and more. The priest’s white robe now resembles a cheap imitation of a Pollock painting. He pauses and looks at the crucifix

in front of him. When the priest is done, he makes his way to the room behind the altar. The room leads to a hallway that defies the church's structure if seen from outside. The walls of the hall are crimson, sculpted with countless faces frozen in pain. The candles giving light to this hall have been burning for a thousand years. The walls breathe and the engrave faces move like waves as the priest passes by. The end of the hallway is a door. The priest enters. What the door keeps is the vastest room no Earthly royalty could match. There are shelves filled with books and treasures that shoot to the sky, the rows of them seem to go on forever. The priest removes his robes. Bright and blinding are the wings sprouting from his back. He spreads his beautiful crystal wings before collapsing to the marble floor. He wipes the man's still wet blood on his face. For all eternity he has been witnessing the world's torment, both man-made and beyond. And that is all he could ever do: Observe. He hears the cry of everyone that is, was and ever will be. All he can do is join in the mourning. He looks up and said, "Father, forgive me." The mask of pure despair hiding the face of the most beautiful angel. The Devil weeps.

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COURT OF RATS
Gab Angeles

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I was only gone for about nine days when the Rats took over the community basketball court in the neighborhood. It was a place for the people of the neighborhood to relax and play a couple of game when they had nothing better to do, a place to socialize with others and talk about their day. It was no big loss to me - I don't play any sport, nor do I know a soul outside my walls, but the view of people from the neighborhood playing and talking inside the court to Rats fighting and screaming against the people of the community and themselves, it was something I could not overlook. I'd let the Rats be if it weren't for those, but to see others fight against their own kin is heartbreaking. Rats have been a long running problem in this country. They take over a nice common area and decide to 'move in.' They don't care who owns the land or that people there use it as long as they live they have no problems taking from other people and claiming it as their own.

Rats started to appear once we have been *colonized* by other foreign countries and took what was ours. So they did the same thing. They steal from the stores. They are loud at night screaming at each other adding as much profane words to their sentences. They have no respect for anyone but themselves thinking that the world revolves around them and their existence. The basketball court they took over now looked like a castle of the infested: decaying wood and rusting sheet metal for their interiors, and old promotional tarpaulin- which they most likely stole- as curtains, the very flooring of their home are the roofs of the Rats below them.

People grew accustomed to their existence and paid them no mind. They started a riot one night around the neighborhood scratching cars that are parked on the side of the road with nails.

Vandalized gates with amateur profane imaginary, and swear words, screaming at the top of their lungs saying they have the right to exist as much as we do; bystanders were robbed of their belongings. Total chaos, the neighborhood patrol was less than equipped to deal with it. Trying to take control back from people who were born and molded by chaos was no easy feat.

The police were brought in, having received numerous reports of the outbreak and eventually taking back control. A lot of Rats were killed and at the first sign of dawn they were singing a different song. Beaten, they were begging for pity, claiming that they did nothing wrong that this was the fault of the people in the neighborhood for not acknowledging them as humans. When one of the beaten Rat said this to one of the police, he was dumbfounded, enraged, he punted the Rat at the side of the head knocking him out. After that mayhem the Rats knew their place and tried to live amongst the others, but what is done is done. They were constantly harassed whenever they leave their court. Some were with words and others took a more violent approach. When they realized that they were against the community they stopped fighting with one another, which solved one issue – but gossip amongst themselves is another story, somehow rumors leak out and spreads like wildfire making their position all the more difficult.

At night time the Rats would walk around the neighborhood and salvage things from the trash to sell to junkshops not too far from here. I would sometimes watch them from my window and a breath of nostalgia would hit me. My brothers and sisters and I would look in trash of other neighborhoods to look for things to salvage. To us copper wires were gold, they would usually fetch for a high price and if we had money to spare we would treat ourselves to a stick of *isaw*.

One night I heard a loud sheet metal colliding with each other, waking me. Once I'm awake the cold grip of insomnia has me by the throat. I got out of bed and looked outside through the window. I saw a woman pulling sheet metal out of a pile and throwing it inside her *kariton*. I looked at the clock beside my bed, it was two in the goddamn morning. Getting back into bed was useless, so I grabbed my pack of cigarettes and a lighter from my drawer and went outside.

I lit a cigarette and watched her salvage the sheet metal. I could see her complexion, she was by no means beautiful but she was pretty, in a weird kind of way. Her hair reached down the middle part of her back, straight bangs with a small triangular cut at the right side of her hair, she wore a long old faded black t-shirt that goes down to her knees, for all I knew she wasn't wearing anything underneath. I took a long drag of my cigarette and blew it up to the sky. The stars look beautiful tonight. A perk I always enjoy when I wake up in the middle of the night, true, you have no one to talk to at this time of day, but the stars will always keep you in comfort.

'Millions of people die from smoking,' she said, her head was facing me and I could see that there was a smile on her face. 'There are better and cheaper ways to kill yourself, you know?' there is a certain risk when you smoke outside your home at two in the morning. She spoke the truth, there are cheaper ways to kill yourself, but a part of me wanted to live long enough to regret it.

'And there are better times to collect noisy metal sheet.' I said. She let out a few chuckles and started to push the cart. 'Wait, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to lash out.' She stopped pushing the cart and turned around, there is still a smile on her face. I signaled her with my hand to the spot next to me. She followed and stood beside me.

'Why are you out this late at night?' I asked.

'My parents are having sex,' she said, 'they do it while they're next to their kids, they're being unusually loud so I had to step out, even though they saw me walking out of our home they still went on.' I couldn't help but laugh at that idea, the image immediately plastered on my mind, lingering no matter how hard I tried to shake it. 'We're the luckiest ones in the court, on the count that we are the smallest family. Some have at least six children and have an age gap of one year. The parents let their kids out to beg for food from people nearby, which worked from time to time. But after the riot all they bring home are bruises.'

'The court,' I said, 'as in the basketball court?' she nodded. 'Besides my better judgment, I don't like asking this question. I think it is more offensive than all of the

slurs out there combined. I have my suspicion, but I just want confirmation from you.’
‘Sure, go ahead,’ she said.

‘Are you a Rat?’ She nodded in response. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’ I took a few steps and she followed suit.

‘I was a Rat once,’ I said to her, ‘but in my case we were different, lucky in fact, my parents were hard working folk. I hardly ever saw them and when I did they’d be too exhausted to even have a decent conversation.’

‘Mine sits around the whole day watching the sky and talk to other Rats. They complain why there is no money around the house and forces me and my siblings to go through garbage to find anything worth salvaging and we sell that to junk shops around here. Basically me and my siblings work to keep our parents alive.’

‘My siblings and I would cook for them to show our appreciation, but that was never enough. It’s an offspring’s duty to take care of your parents once they are capable but we never had the privilege to give them that. My father was wrongfully convicted and died in jail after a few weeks and when my mother caught wind of what happened things changed. She couldn’t see the bigger picture anymore and started to drink alcohol. The entirety of our money went to her drinking, she started taking out her frustration on us. She would beat us, scold us for no apparent reason, I couldn’t help but laugh about it now, she was like a drunken father. Eventually she started to get weaker as the weeks go by; she screamed and hit us less. Before we knew it she just laid down and die.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear that,’ she said.

‘After that my life and my siblings’ lives fell apart.’ I continued, ‘We resorted to crime just to feed ourselves, we didn’t care about each other anymore, we stole from each other when we can, and the only thing we shared was the husk of our home. I haven’t heard from them since I left, I wanted to help them when I stood on my own two feet but when I came back I was too late, some of them were too far gone, some of them died providing a life for themselves. It was a bitter pill to swallow but there was nothing more I could do.’

She stared at me with her round eyes as we walked. She didn’t know my name but she knew why I stand, her gaze has an intense feeling now, I knew what the look in her eyes meant. She found hope in me, as if her dream now were for Rats to live out of their shell of mediocrity and thrive. I was not thriving in any sense of the word, I still have problems physically and emotionally - just like everybody else in this world - that won’t be solved anytime soon. But to her I was the pinnacle of success, yet I don’t feel any difference between me and her.

We found ourselves in front of the court. The two of us were just standing there looking at the court. I dug to my pocket and took out another cigarette and lit it. I had

half a mind to offer her one but after what she said to me she might just be against the whole notion. ‘Depressing, isn’t it?’ she said turning her head to me.

‘People trying to live,’ I said, turning my head to face hers, ‘nothing wrong with that.’

‘It’s getting cold out,’ I said, ‘would you like to come into my house? I can heat us some water and have some instant coffee. Plus you left your cart near my house.’ She nodded. I felt no threat from her, I wasn’t afraid to share my home with her for a cup of coffee. I smoked my cigarette on the way back. I felt a stabbing pain in my heart, seeing the court reminded me of what I once was and what I had to leave behind. I opened the gate to my house and let her walk inside first then followed suite, I have a small open space before getting inside the house, it’s primarily used it to store junk I don’t want to see inside my house. Aside from this space, the place was quite neat. She stood in a corner unsure of what to do next, I guided her to the door and opened it, then she walked in quite hesitantly feeling the environment around her.

The living room was the first thing she saw: my comfortable chair where I liked to read, a small table where I like to put my mug, a turntable I bought out of impulse – it still works but playing the five records over and over again can be very monotonous, but the thing that caught her attention the most is my books. Two book shelves that reach the ceiling filled to the brim of remarkable (and not so remarkable) titles and the pile of books that lay near the shelf. She kept looking at the books I had from the shelf and in the stack I had. She’d pull out one title and place it back where she found it. I went to the kitchen to fix the coffee for the two of us. I heated up some water and watched the kettle burn from the bottom.

‘I thought,’ she screamed from the other room, ‘that you’d have better taste in books than this.’ I stood up from my seat and went to the living room. I saw that she was holding out a copy of *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand. I let out a smile and a few chuckles.

‘I got that for free at an online book store,’ I said. ‘I regret getting some of the books that lay on that shelf but those were the days that I was still an early reader and the books that were famous was simply a must have. I don’t have the heart to throw out or even sell it. Books are still books.’

‘I go through a lot of junk shops to provide for my parents and I buy a few things for myself, too,’ she said, ‘and the first book I ever bought was *The Fountainhead*. I also bought a dictionary later on when I had the money, it was a horrible introduction to literature. “The first right on earth is the right of the ego. Man’s first duty is to himself.” If I recall correctly if her philosophy were to be summed up into two words it would be called “Rational Selfishness”.’ It was my turn to be amazed, for her to describe Ayn Rand in the simplest form impressed me. Ayn Rand, or any author for that matter, isn’t something that Rats care to associate, all they care about is the local celebrities and their

issues with one another, and if they do read all they look for is their next fill of *kilig*. So this is a breath of fresh air.

‘Did you find all of Ayn Rand’s books in the junkshop?’ I asked.

‘No, The Fountainhead is in abundance,’ she said, ‘but I got really lucky once and found The Great Gatsby, but it had pages missing. My copy ended at the Plaza Hotel. I had to imagine the rest of the book since no one near me cared to read. Do you want to hear my version?’ I nodded, ‘I imagined Gatsby and Daisy ran off into the sunset, realizing that she should be with him, not Tom. That Gatsby got his green light and that he could finally stop staring at the bay yearning for his dreams. I know this sounds naïve but I’m glad my book stopped when it did.’ ‘What’s your name?’ I finally asked her.

‘Illumi,’ she said.

‘Well lucky for you Illumi; I happen to have a spare copy.’ She drew a faint smile and looked back into the assortment of books, I could tell that she was undecided, she was content with her fabricated ending. I looked at her and found the mass market paperback I bought for dirt cheap and handed it to her.

‘Mind if I read here?’ she asked. I nodded my head and pointed her to my chair. She sat down and started to read where she last left off. I heard the kettle whistling from the kitchen. I turned the stove off and opened two sachets of instant coffee and poured it into two mugs, then I mixed in the hot water I heated up, stirred it and gently placed it on the table near the chair. I didn’t say anything, I didn’t want to disturb her reading.

I grabbed the book I was currently reading, and sat down at the kitchen table, the book is a short collection of stories by Dazai. I was down to the last short story of the book, a sequel to the starting story of the collection. The story continued its premise as the last one. Five siblings create a story and each succeeding sibling continue adding their own personal twists. The prequel was about a mathematician down on his luck, now it’s about a love story between the Prince and Rapunzel with her mother intervening. I appreciate Dazai’s style of writing, it was simple with subtle undertones. Reading through the I thought about what me and my siblings have been through since our mother died. We were just like any other Rats on the street, we stole from people, including other Rats, holding them up with a broken bottle, and then we upgraded to knives, then to guns. One day, the eldest of us shot someone on the head for a wallet that only contained fifty pesos. It was the first time he’s killed someone and resorted to drugs as a relief which eventually killed him. That was my sign to leave. To look for honest work and support them through that.

When I came back to the house one of my sisters died, my sister was selling herself to the wrong men and eventually dealt with something she can’t handle. She died naked on a bed of a cheap motel handcuffed and blindfolded with strangle marks on her neck. Apparently the guy turned himself in after a few days but it did nothing to ease the

blow. My remaining siblings wanted nothing to do with me, saying that if I didn't leave my other siblings would have still lived, they needed someone to be frustrated with, and if that united them, so be it. I gladly took my role and left them once again. To be thought of that way by your own family takes its toll.

I finished the story and looked at the clock, it was three thirty now. I grabbed my special mug by the sink, the one that I use as an ashtray, and lit myself a cigarette.

I thought about my siblings and wondered how they were doing now. Most likely they hated me, and that's okay.

Whatever unites them and helps them stand on their feet I'll take it. I took a long drag and exhaled the smoke, I peeked at Illumi, and I could see that there were tears streaming down her face. Gatsby must be dead by now. I took the final drag of the cigarette and killed it inside the mug. I took steps near her and saw that her coffee was untouched, she was most likely too absorbed in her reading. I expected as much.

Illumi closed the book and set it on the table. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffed her nose. She let out a shaking sigh and looked towards me. 'In the end,' she said, 'whether you've made a name for yourself or not, we are all doomed.' I almost regret showing her the book, to a degree ignorance is bliss, but ignorance is the one thing I cannot stand.

She stood up from her seat and returned the book where I pulled it out, her eyes were still wet. A part of me wanted to fix what I did but I realized that there is no need for that. I watched her sob and wipe her tears away. It was a painful lesson for her. She turned around and said she had to go back home. I nodded and walked with her but when we were out of the gate I rushed back in and grabbed the copy of *The Great Gatsby*. I handed it to her and she stood there not knowing what to do with it. We pushed her *kariton* until it reached the front of the court.

'My father said that books bring nothing to the table,' she said, 'not food, not water, nor shelter. I assume everyone in the court agrees with his philosophy. As much as I want to believe that there is hope for them, I cannot. That is why I find you so exceptional. You've strayed from the rut that Rats are initially born in. It's true you don't have much and in by no means I would call you rich. But you've done what is near impossible for Rats.' I thanked her for she said about me.

There was a shadow walking out of the court, from the physique I could immediately tell that it was a man. He looked from side to side and the shape of his head landed on the two of us. He seemed dead sighted and filled with rage, he marched towards us and I could see he was wearing an old tattered grey tank top, shorts, and flip flops; he was fairly middle-aged.

'Putangina ano ginagawa mo sa labas gitna ng gabi,' he said, *'buti hindi ka pa pinapatay ng katabi mo.'* Illumi sighed at the sight of him. *'Sagutin mo ako, puta ka. Wala ka bang pake kung namatay ka ngayon? Paano kakain kami? Yung mga kapatid mo paano kakain?'* *'Mag isip ka nga din Pa!'* Illumi shouted, *'nag eenjoy kayo ni mama habang gising pa ako satingin mo gusto ko yun makita? Tignan mo nga yung*

tanginang kariton mo, nag-halukay ako habang nag eenjoy ka, kelan mob a huling hina- ' He slapped Illumi on the right side of her face causing her to fall down, the book flew to the open street. Her father noticed it and picked it up.

'Ito yung ginagawa mo sa gitna ng gabi?' he said, *'nag babasa ka? Puta wala kang maabutan diyan, kahit singkong duling wala bibili nito-'*

I cut him off, I grabbed him by his shoulder enough to turn him around. I struck him as hard as I can below his chin, knocking him out. I couldn't control myself anymore. Rats turn their heads when something requires thinking. I know this myself, I was once a part of them. They blame everyone around them for them being like that, they avert their eyes from themselves thinking that they are perfect in the godly sense. They don't work on themselves and want everything to be fed to them. It is disgusting.

I liked to read even when I was a Rat, and was ridiculed by it. Most of the ridicule came from my siblings. People who were supposed to support me in my ambitions but made me into a laughing stock. They repeatedly asked me to make their noses bleed with the new words I was learning. Rats are the way they are, but that doesn't mean I have to accept it. A naïve side of me wanted to believe they could strive, and be open-minded to things besides money. That's why I Illumi's father deserved that punch. It's a reminder that they are forever doomed.

LIGHTLESS
Ramzzi Fariñas

Freelipiniana

“She would come in to our *pawalo* with bruises on her face.” As my aunt quickly chewed the adobo and rice in her mouth, she continued, “And when we, the *babbalasang*—the young ladies praying together with the elders, our eyes couldn’t be kept closed for long. We couldn’t help staring at the black eye your uncle gave her, and the red blots on her cheeks were glaring.”

Did you ask her about it? I mean, have you reached out? Directly, about her situation?
“Some of us did. But who were we to interfere? I wished so many times, *nakkong*. How I wished we could turn back time and had stopped him,” my aunt replied.

It had lingered in my memory, and made me ponder further, while the night bore more stars and shadows. I couldn’t sleep with what she said. Not with it, I thought. But it seems it is. I felt the heat, despite that it was already December and the breeze and the solstice should have made the coldness felt. But it was otherwise. I pulled my shirt half to my chest and my stomach bore a growing roundness. I placed my palm on the back of my head with my eyes on the ceiling. To blink was rare. And with hours, maybe minutes left before I would take the shower and hit the road for work, the conversation with my aunt stayed long in my mind.

I did not like my aunt that much except for her stories of their yesteryears. She was the youngest of all four children, and despite being the only lady in the family, her cousins, mostly female, had given her company. Her two front teeth, distant from each other, distract the listener while her wrinkles grew more as she smiled. And it was a sight. There would be small spits bursting like fireworks from her mouth. She couldn’t stop telling the tales of her life—their lives. Tales of having no cellphones, no internet, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Youtube and of course, our town, named after a saint, which had no lights in the street at night. She had so many comparisons: of what was then and what is now; and I had always taken note of how holy was the name of our town, and whether it has some chapters of malevolent past—unholy and ironic if one would honestly describe it, the place was, and still is, named after a male saint. *Welcome to San Juan!*

On my aunt and her cousins, my other aunts and my uncles—each one of them, or their generation of this beloved family, I learned that sensibility was a rare word for these old souls. Or perhaps sensibility as a rarer feeling; or perhaps sensibility as a rarer responsibility. They grew up too disciplined, conscious of how meticulously scrubbed the floor was—always ending the day with no spot missed, and the marble floor was shining like a mirror cleaned by their callous hands; and conscious when to close the windows if night reached the plain houses, the darkness moving in every households and *kaykayo*—and conscious how to write well, speak loud, whether in English and Spanish; or in Filipino: Ilocano, Itneg, and Tagalog—name it all. All the traits that this generation is lacking were present and marked on the hearts and minds of my aunt’s generation. They were almost militaristic, too strictly taught by their grandmothers and grandfathers which made them the tough kind of our own bloodline. These had been my observations on my aunt. Even how *probinsiyana* she was: simple and admirable, content of what was being served before her, whether *dinengdeng a marunggi wennu adobo a tokak*, I still

felt there was this cold atmosphere of a doña in her presence, like a dark tower: a highly built Spanish colonial architecture—a church. If I was to ask her intriguing questions about the family, there I would stand before her, and the shadows of the tower would eclipse my innocent size, and then she would quickly close the huge, baroque door with its carvings of angels and demons, together with the depicted saints in straight lined-lips and long robes. Like having to recite a prayer, there was no answer. And if I would ask a lighter question, there would be—but as a sermon. And it had been a miss, a recurring hit on the gut, and in the heart, not asking further the questions that would bring light about their darkest times.

Their generation: my aunts, uncles, and my father, as young as they were in high school, would be sent by my lolo and lola to their lolos and lolas—my great grandparents. There, they would live and be taught how to fold dresses, sweep the house and the backyard, pray and hold the rosary, and study with the candles on. “The boys, together with your uncles, your father, were taught to do carpenter works, masonry.” She was narrating, trying her best not to be excited. But she was, and she skipped some parts of their long, lost tales; and instead, she told her own experiences. “There was this one time, back when I was in college and after class, I went to see then my former admirer at the *bilyaran*,” she said smiling. “The moment I stepped out from the kalesa when I got home, I saw her, arms folded in the veranda. When I got passed the bamboo gate and was standing before her, ready to reach out my hand to bless,” she paused, her mouth was full—but I could see from her cheeks she was ready to laugh, “she slapped me so hard.”

I was seated on a white monobloc chair, at a maroon monobloc table. The latter was my aunt’s scarred property, used many times without a table cloth and at the very moment she was speaking, and eating at the same time, all the china plates were laid without anything to shield from the heat of the newly-cooked *adobong pusit*; the hot, white rice with its coils of steam curling above; and all the mess one had to spare. She asked me to join, but I excused myself not to eat, because I was still full. She looked at me, from head to chest, and from that stare all along I knew that she intended to scrutinize me from head to foot. But I was seated face to face with her with the table between us, and she stopped to what her vision could only reach. She asked me then, “*Mangmanganka met laeng dinengdeng?*” Our eyes met, and there again, the presence of the dark tower shadowed over me—cold and colonial. She asked me if I still eat Ilocano vegetable dishes cooked in bagoong when I’m in Manila. I said I still do, and she smiled.

I approached her at lunch time, after visiting the *munisipyo*, where I checked all the real property titles my father had registered. It was best to meet her anytime possible, rather than at night. It was a vintage practice, that any talks regarding inheritance, documents and money should be left out. Night is the time for television, dinner and solitude—to disturb even once, disturbs the serenity of a family. But this kind of life had somehow faded, no longer being practiced. As many of the folks were coming home late, they bring their problems back from the traffic, their job hassles, and even their relationship woes to their families, instead of bringing food home, or any good news from their day-to-day experiences. The midday sun was still high, and night time was yet to come. I

listened to her stories, focused even more hearing that one of her cousins, my uncle, was an aggressive *padre de familia*. “Oh, yes! He beat her so hard. This character of your uncle came from the fact that he was an alleged marksman of the mayor back in the day,” she said.

I curiously looked at her, my eyebrows curving with my skin on the forehead wrinkling in folds.

Is that so? It seemed not right, I said.

“Well, here we are. I expected this is how’d you react.”

Was it because of his affiliation with the mayor? Come on, I replied defiantly.

“It’s not that easy confronting someone with that political power, and someone who was armed, *balong*.”

I wanted to explain to her, engage her in a strict intellectual discussion, that yes, he was a private guard, but he had no right to drop, even the weakest slap to a woman. He was a sexist, showing his macho side, demeaning and controlling women—but I stopped. I had to calm down because I wanted to hear more from her first.

“Our times back then were harsher than yours now. Yes, this drugs—war on drugs is a demonic thing. But look at us before.”

Okay then. Tell me more, I replied.

She again went to generalizations without the crisp descriptions of what they had before. Then I stepped over the line, and I did not expect to voice out my own opinion to her just like that. The tower was no longer eclipsing me in my human height. I was already the giant—in my own accord, brave enough to go against her.

People are so scared of these times. Especially since a fascist went up to be the president, and his sexist ways, unnecessary rhetoric that has disrespected women, I exclaimed, for her to realize that this was not a contrast of times.

“You’re right. But we have streetlights almost everywhere now. In our day, only the first point of the barangay and its boundary had a streetlight. Then, it was purely dark. Windows closed by *alas-siyete*, and if 10 in the night, you hear your pig squealing, don’t go out.”

This had been the moment to go against the current. I could feel my heart beating, fast and furiously immeasurable with every beat. I asked her why not.

“Someone broke into your compound, and at that moment, you could see a towering figure in the dark. God knows what if he saw you.”

A thief?

“Yes! A thief, without the lights on. And by morning, all you can do is report to your barangay and your case will stay unresolved. That’s the way it was for us.”

How about Lola Neneng? And Lolo Robert?

“Right. Well, your lolo met an untimely death. He was stabbed to death, his body found in the next town. A farmer saw a large sack of rice, but he quickly noticed that inside was not garbage or rice due to the sack’s shape when seen afar.”

Next town? San Idefonso?

“There!” She concluded, “As a mayor’s guard, you know he had enemies.” Our chat was long, and she went to explain that their son, Roman, or Uncle Mando as we young ones called him, had the same strong-willed character—like my Lolo Robert. He also beat her wife.

We moved forward to the passing of Lola Neneng. “She had a cruel life. We could never really tell what is meant for us, and why we suffer despite working hard not to.”

She stood up, a grain of rice hanging on her lower lip. I pointed it out and she quickly took her rough, white towel by her shoulder and wiped it off. She had the best time eating, because she talked well again about their times. She opened the faucet, four steps far from the table. Then she closed the fading grey metal. The rush of water stopped, until it bled the last droplets, until every three seconds after, the smallest drop fell. Time slowed at that moment.

I should be going, I said. I put my folders together with all the credentials that certified my family’s ownership back in my bag. I stood up and thanked her for the time. She went to feed the chickens that were grouping up outside her kitchen.

A week brought me back to Manila. But my mind barely let go of the stories my aunt told when I was in the *probinsiya*. She was implying that the lights missing back in the day was a crucial strike to the town’s morals—the toll of their times. My guts seemed to break at such a thought. They had a choice—why not one of them had asked how Lola Neneng was, and advised her to leave lolo? I could not blame Lola Neneng. Family was important no matter what, but for someone to step in and tell something was wrong, that’s what I anticipated. Or if not there, why not here: why did they allow this unwarranted violence to be passed on to the next generation? To their generation? Why didn’t they stop Uncle Mando then? I wondered, passionately too, why my aunt’s hands were tied on this matter. And even the fact that the pigs were squealing back in the town, in certain households or in a compound, but the owners were scared to go out and check who was there and hold the thief captive if possible—sounded like a crime itself. The crime is the punishment, but wasn’t it the same with silence?

All these thoughts after a sleepless night, I never realized that my shift was near. One hour to get to the office, and here I was, naked: with towel on the head, forcing to dry my hair and finding the comfortable sleeves to wear. The wooden floor creaked, and I became more conscious, and would be ashamed if people in the next room, or the room below might hear the racket and wake up. I found the best suit I could wear for the night. A simple, black and blue long-sleeve for this shift. I put it on, until the last button fitted perfectly.

It was one in the morning, and the noises and traffic of Manila had lessened. The street I used to walk everyday had become a ghost boulevard. There was nothing except vehicles parked on both sides, and when a large car passes by, you as a pedestrian need to move yourself near to the houses and walls of vacant lots. The problem with the pedestrian lanes is that the large feces of dogs are all over. The streetlights were haunting, light orange in their monochromatic gloom, and were not enough to unravel the location of the dogs' mess. Once, I experienced stepping on a long, round shit hidden in the dark at the side of the vehicle. It was flattened by these shoes I was wearing. My footwear then, brought an unforgettable tang when I stepped in to the office, and I was unaware why all heads were turning and my colleagues were complaining of what struck their noses.

After that funny and futile reminiscence, my eyes were set on the road. By all means, I was staying intuitive. Scattered by the stray cats, dogs, and the homeless garbage scavengers looking for food, the garbage aired a strong odor on the street—intensifying the finest details of the city. Walking alone in this street, with thoughts of being safe and sound, I had to move to the middle because the vehicles blocked and shadowed each side of the road. Aside from seeing parked vehicles left and right, I also noticed the tall gates of steel, households staying secure because the thieves in Manila are ruthless. With thieves in mind, I remembered the 10 in the night, and the squeals of the pigs my aunt told me. This is Manila, I said. I walked with confidence, but still, my reflex felt like an amplified paranoia which made the silence sound a requiem, with the light and darkness fusing as one and human apparitions seemed to conjure in between, and move—as if the shadows dance to the soundless sound. With these striking visions, I remembered something: I left my headphones back in the room. Without it plugged into my smartphone, without music, I could hear each step I take as I move to the avenue where jeepneys come charging in like buffaloes.

After being anxious of what lies ahead, I started studying where I was walking. All the vehicles, be it a Honda or a Toyota, whatever make and model, all the typical ones were parked at both sides of the road. Except on a space where a tricycle was parked, and there, a couple was sparring for quite a time. The thin, frail lady was trying to take the phone from her husband, it seemed. Four hands were in the air; one pair was evading the other. The man was resisting; even meters away, the aroma of beer lingered towards my nose. I was getting closer to the couple.

It seemed that the woman found something doubtful on the man's phone. A quarrel over a phone beyond midnight is beyond the shallow reasons. There was something more, and as I wondered, my knees trembled—the woman found herself ruined: all her hair were dispersed over her face, after a strong punch swung hard. She was bending over, after the man showed his strength—the control of a man over a woman. She cried, she wailed, and the sobs began to break into pieces. The large mason hands were gripping her arm tightly, while a sob at the peak of Manila's melancholic hour echoed.

I stopped. I had to decide. I pretended that I did not find them, that I knew nothing of what transpired, the punch, the grip, the cry, the man's demeaning voice—I knew

nothing. I turned away then I found a large white Hyundai van and ran towards the darkness: the slanting shadow of the vehicle as it was lighted by one the streetlights. I was at the back of the vehicle, embracing my bag, staying intuitive. I could hear their conversation—the dialogue of the abuse, each of crisp word thrown like a family picture being crushed. I was in the midst of confusion. I asked myself what I could do here, but time was being drained like sands in the hourglass. This nausea could even shatter the hourglass, and time would bleed without end. If I stayed long and waited until they would fade from the site, I would be late for work. And checking the man's height, his tattoos and his bulked body, I knew that one word, one word could lead me to the hospital. But it's wrong, I whispered, and perhaps, that whisper was too loud to be a whisper. The fear was one with my heart's beating. Should I call the authorities? The police? The barangay tanod? Whom should I reach out and how? Why and what for? What right do I have to dwell on the woes of their relationship? What if this was a vacuum where I would be sucked into without escape? There were so many questions in one moment. Still behind the vehicle, I tried to gaze through its window with the help of the refracted light to see if my vision could get through, but I could not concentrate. I could see the house where I found the couple but my eyes could not reckon what was happening.

The tint of the vehicle's windows was dark enough. I asked myself calmly but the strike of fear elevated so high in me, I could faint without notice. Feeling the sweats rolling down, I tried to straighten myself up. Each sweat was cold, sticky, much like an asthmatic child who played outdoors. Like a child. Like my aunts and uncles back in the day. When they were young and they saw Lola Neneng. This time, the tides turned—I *am* here where they were.

I began to move and felt the roughness of the road. With my eyes moistened, and the road dark, trapped with vehicles and violence, my vision was near to be lightless. But I could still see the road and its fading white lines, like arrows pointing for an exit. The road could wound as the path is like laid shards of hammered rocks, and despite this challenge to get away, I walked fast enough. I pretended that I never saw them, that I knew nothing of what transpired, the punch, the grip, the woman's cry, the man's demeaning voice—I *am* nothing.

WHAT PROWLs IN ALABANG
Jules Abraham de Leon

Freelipiniana

I woke up three hours earlier than I should have. Now my eyes felt like closing as I walked through the dark streets for my 5th day shift. I could hear crickets chirping by the grass under the bright yellow moon. I felt the collar of my tight shirt almost choking me. I took a stick of cigarette from my side pocket and lit it. I felt the rush of nicotine in my body, like it removed the heaviness of my brain. I blew the thin smoke across the night sky. It was like a cloud but blue. I stood under the orange lamppost and the feeling of heat on a cold windy day was magnificent. I waited for an empty trike and kept on taking drags off my cigarette. I could see a single headlight came approaching my way, a passenger sat behind the driver's motorcycle, but the carriage was empty, so I quickly got in and it sped away fast. I could feel the wind blow on my face. The dirt on the ground was getting through the lenses of my black rimmed glasses. I took another drag off the cigarette and the smoke covered my face.

The trike stopped near a Mang Inasal just outside our village. I got down, and paid the fare, thanked the driver like I usually do every day. I finished my cigarette and dropped it on the ground. I crossed the street cautiously; drivers at this time were like maniacs in a drag race. I waited for a Jeep to Alabang, I looked at my watch, and it was 8:30pm. Oh how I hoped traffic is less this time.

After a few minutes, a horde of vehicles came in blinking their headlights. I quickly raised an arm and hailed a jeep. I took two steps in and sat at the right side of the passenger seat. There were four people inside, two men sat opposite each other, one was sleeping by the entrance rail and the other was looking at passengers getting in and out. The other passenger was a student, probably in her fourth year of college somewhere in Las Piñas. She was busy laughing at her phone, probably it was due to a meme. When I ride a jeep I usually encounter these people. Everyday I could see them, the same type of people that were with me at this moment.

I shook the thought away and took my wallet and brought out a twenty peso bill, "Isang Northgate!" I shouted.

"Ilan ito?" Asked the driver.

I took a second before answering, "Isa po! Northgate lang."

He handed the change of three pesos and I thanked each and every hand.

We had a lot of stopovers and I was anxious to get to work, I have never been late to work or ever been absent.

We met the traffic in Pilar, a border of Las Piñas and Alabang, the jeep was not moving. I could feel a soft vibration as I looked at my watch, it was 8:55pm. My shift was ten, but I still want to get there an hour earlier.

We entered Alabang Northgate at exactly 9:04pm. And from afar, by the barred window, tall buildings with their lights on could be seen. A row of different companies like Concentrix, HSBC, as well as a couple of hotels surrounded the area. We stopped near a bridge and I hurriedly got down.

I almost tripped as I was walking too fast. I crossed the street with a group of men and women, some wore polo shirts, some wore t-shirts with a jacket over, others wore a suit and a tie like there would be an interview at this time of night.

The stoplight was red, counting down from twenty-five. There were no cars coming by, so like a soldier I crossed the road, I looked back and some people followed my move and laughed, they ran like cats fleeing from an oncoming van.

I entered my office's lobby and I could smell the aroma of something filthy, like a rotten mussel from the marketplace. I rubbed my nose; I punched in my badge and quickly went inside. Now the smell was different, a mixture of sweat and a woman's perfume. I could see numerous employees sitting seriously staring at the computer screen.

"Thank you for calling Systems Inc., my name is Karlo how can I help?"

"Sir, we cannot afford to waive another charge for you. This is the third time..."

"Sir, I'm sorry I... (mute) Fucking I hope you listen, bobo!"

"Tang ina, Patel nanaman!"

This is our job, our own circle of life. I went to our locker room and took out our company headset, and a laminated list of transfers. Then took out my tumbler and closed my locker with my bag and phone inside.

I walked to the far end of the production floor near the windows and under the air conditioner. I dropped my things and plugged my headset. I logged in my credentials and opened my tools. Most customers would ask about why their phone is down, or why we shut down their line. Our answers were mostly logical, either they haven't paid or they were just too lazy to think. I sat down and read my recent mails, new updates on the system and a letter from our HR...

"Dear J,

I have attached here a notice for you to explain why you have dropped a customer on the line last time. As you know there are records of what you've done and that it is punishable under the termination rule. But as exemption to your good scores recently we have given you a verbal warning. Please do explain your reason the management will wait.

Thanks,
Gemma Velasco, HR Specialist"

I didn't know what to explain, I accidentally dropped the line, but if I said that, that would mean I'm terminable. Accidents don't happen or should not happen in a place like this.

I looked at the time and saw it was one minute to ten. I logged in my soft phone and clicked on active. I waited for a couple of seconds and the phone rang once, twice.

"Thank you for calling Systems Inc., this is J, how can I help you?"

And it seems that everyone was talking, repeating the same line over and over again.

The queue stopped, the phone was silent. I looked at my watch, 1:30 in the morning, it was time for my first fifteen-minute break. A pop up showed up on my screen, I closed the window and waited for another call. As I silently waited, a friend of mine entered, with his side-brushed hair, his skipping steps and his tight shirt that quickly gave away his stomach.

He entered the locker room and the phone rang, I winced from the loud tone and a gushing wind from the other line.

"Thank you for calling Systems Inc., my name is J how can I help."

There was silence.

"Hello?"

"Ah... ye-yes, thi-i-is Stu-u-art so-o-ory... i am having having a hard hard hard time-ime speaking ngng... my i-i line is cu-u-ut off..."

What a lucky day, a customer with speech deficiency, I cannot understand him; I tried my best but the whole conversation was like a Rubik's Cube, it's hard to figure out. I kept pushing the headset in my ear, yet I could not understand a single word he was saying.

In the end all he wanted was to pay the bills. I collected the payment and ended up with a fifty-five minute call.

I was shocked to see my friend already sitting next to me.

"Oy, andito ka pala." I said.

"Yup."

"Ano oras shift mo?"

"3am, ikaw ba?"

"10, aga mo ah!"

He smirked, "Syempre! Oy, gago nahuli ka daw nag-drop ng call?"

I laughed, and in a soft voice I replied, "Yeah, nag rerebel na ako dito. 3 years na ako puta walang nangyayari."

"Well, what do you expect? Ikakatanggal mo pa 'yang ginagawa mo."

I burst out laughing, "E di tanggalin nila."

He shook his head and another call arrived. "Systems Inc., this is J how can I help?"

A few minutes later my supervisor came in a hurry, his bearded face looked wet with sweat, and his red shirt was tight, his glasses were almost falling from his face as he ran to his locker room. His time was three as well; it was only 2:00. I took my short break

and went outside for a smoke. The smoking area was far from our building, it was four companies away. I felt my body give up from walking too fast, and I heaved a deep sigh as I lit my cigarette and took a long drag, there was no one else around, it was only me. I finished the cigarette and went back inside the office, the natural coldness of the wind was nothing compared to the blow of the air conditioner at the production floor.

I sat down feeling tired and heavy, I unlocked my computer and realized I was two minutes late. I punched in active and waited for another call.

As the call came in I initially dropped it, and another one came in, I dropped another customer on the line.

I was not in the mood to answer calls at the time. My supervisor realized how I was jumping back to the end of the queue. He approached me and asked me to go on meeting after my next call.

I nodded, and he thanked me.

The next call was a patel, I just realized this will be a long conversation...

"Sir, like I said, we cannot waive any payment..."

"Listen my friend, you and your fookin center employees better fuckin get me my waivur ur am tookin to yoor soopervisor"

I couldn't handle his accent, I pressed the red button and the line dropped.

I stood up and punched in meeting, I sat next to my supervisor who was busy with his reports.

"Hi, so this meeting is regarding your monthly performance."

I nodded.

"Before we start is there anything else you want to discuss first?"

I shook my head.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay so, here," he opened up a spreadsheet in his computer. "We are doing well with attendance and scores no problem with that, your promoters are above average. Good job."

I smiled.

"Your resolution time is still met. My problem with you is your adherence; you don't seem to follow your scheduled lunches and breaks."

I stared at him.

"Is there any problem? Is it too early too late?"

"No, po. It's just that minsan ang hirap mag adhere pag na-enjoy mo kausap yung customer."

He gave a curious look, like he doesn't believe me.

"I just received the letter from our HR of your recent action, and..."

"Yes I know I have to give an explanation? Or am I terminated?"

"Do you want to be terminated?"

I shook my head. For some reason I don't want to be terminated.

"You've been with the company for three years. And I expect much better from you since your tenure here."

I nodded.

"So we'll talk about this some other time, but here."

He showed me a file for an open application for Team Leader.

"You should apply for this; with your years here it won't be that hard to enter. Don't worry about this Notice yet, I can defend this for you."

I nodded.

"Okay, so anything else you want to talk about J?"

"Nothing more."

"Remember, your adherence says a lot about your character. Follow it."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You can go now."

I stood up and went back to my seat, another pop up appeared, it was time for lunch, and I closed the window again and went back to active.

"Ano nangyari?" Said my friend.

I shook my head and kept quiet, waiting for a customer to ease my tense head.

"Shit, man. Open ang Team Lead position. You gonna go for this shit?"

I looked at him and it seems his supervisor sent him the file already. "I don't want to."

"Bakit naman?" He asked wondering.

"Ayoko maging part ng mundo dito, ayoko ng nacocontrol ako ng management."

He laughed out loud, "Walang macocontrol kung walang magpapa-control."

"Kaya nga ayoko. Gusto ko na nga umalis dito."

There was silence then I saw he had a customer on the other line. I shook my head; he looked at me and raised his palm to signal for me to hold on for a while.

"Okay, sir. Just give me a few seconds to double check all information here okay?" He opened up his soft phone. "Thank you, sir let me just place you on a quick hold."

He pressed on hold.

"May lilipatan ka na ba kung sakali gusto mo lumipat?"

"Oo naman may inapplyan na ako. Para saan pa na grumadweyt ako ng Journalism di ba?"

"Yun naman pala eh, anong ginagawa mo dito?"

I fell silent; everything seems to make sense at that very moment.

He just nodded and went back to his customer. An hour had passed and it was already 4am. I punched in my lunch and went out to the pantry.

I ordered one mechado with one and a half rice. Ate my lunch with savor, looking around me, everyone was smiling and laughing with the group they are with. Someone once told me that to survive a place like this you must never be alone.

I finished my meal and drank a cup of water from a dispenser standing at a corner near the door.

I went out for a smoke, I saw my friend in his first break.

"Tol!" I called him up.

"Ano inulam mo?"

"Mechado?" I replied, while lighting my own cigarette.

"Meron pa? Baka yun na lang lunch ko o kaya Mcdo."

I nodded.

"Sige tol," he killed the cigarette at the ground, "Balik lang ako."

"Sure, man."

I took another long drag off my cigarette. I was alone now, and the wind was blowing hard, I looked at the time, I still have thirty minutes before my lunch ends.

I went back inside the office and sat by the computers, I opened my email hoping for a reply from the newspaper companies I applied for.

It took some time for the page to load.

Finally when it did, I got the replies, it all looked the same:

Manila Bulletin

"Thank you for showing interest in our application, however..."

The Manila Times

"Thank you for sending in your résumé, but..."

Daily Inquirer

"We have reviewed your application, but we're sorry to inform you..."

Are these the best words they can produce, I looked at the production floor and the chill from the air conditioner inside the office was not helping. The sweat on my forehead was dripping. I logged out of my email and went back to my station.

I took a deep breath and looked beside me, a view of Alabang Northgate, the vehicles passing by, the people, and employees coming in and out of their shifts. I could feel them; I realized now why they were here. I looked back and saw that I was five minutes earlier than I expected. I pressed in active on time and waited for another call.

Three hours have passed and the light from the day was already visible, the shadow of a tall building in front our company was the only shade of the place. I could feel the heat coming from outside, my boss approached me and handed me a paper, it had my name on it and slowly I felt a thud in my chest, "Ano po ito, sir?"

"Okay na ang case mo sign ka nalang diyan sa dulo."

I read every word on the paper, and signed at the bottom page, I felt a gust of relief, and I looked at my boss who in turn took the paper and went to his station. I looked at my computer and realized it was seven in the morning. I unplugged my headset, and logged out of my computer. I took my things and went to the locker room, I bumped into my friend who just came in from lunch.

“Sarap talaga ng mechado nila, tol. Balita sa’yo?”

I shook my head and took my bag and phone; I said my good bye as he grinned.

“Ingat, tol.”

I nodded; I fixed my things and went out of the production floor. I saw some managers talking about the opening position of team lead. I greeted each of them and they smiled back, they continued talking, and as I went out I saw the computer desk lying all alone there. I sat at the far end, and logged in my email. It took a while to load; I opened the drafts folder and took a copy of my résumé. I attached in a motivational letter:

"Dear HR,

I am sending herewith this letter of motivation for the position of Team Lead as I believe I am capable of handling this position based on my performance please see in my updated résumé my skills and objectives."

I kept the pointer of the mouse hovering by the send button, I gave a last look at the supervisors who were laughing and not realizing the reality of their lives.

I clicked on "send" and signed out. I walked out of the door and the heat was blazing, I smiled at the thought that this was my last day of the week, it was Thursday and I am about to rest from all of this, everyone was going home and so am I. We, we are what prowls in Alabang, prisoners of our own job, hamsters in our own wheel. I walked towards the waiting shed facing the sun home.

TRAVEL EXPERIENCE
IN BICOL

Kahlil Valencia Labastilla

Freelipiniana

Yabba-dabba-doo! sigaw ng aming tandang.

But as much as I appreciated having my four-hour shut-eye interrupted, we do not have a rooster. Rather what I strangled was my smartphone, and what I arrived at entering the bathroom was not a wasteland but a clean mirror, fresh towel, and toiletries neatly arranged on top a shelf. Mama must have done some magic the previous night.

Into my room I dug the floor like a dog for my favorite bong. To my frustration, I discovered that I had left it at a friend's house. Poor dog was I, no bone! My alarm rang for the second time, which meant I had calculated exactly the number of minutes it took to clean my ass – impressive? Impossible? I wanted to congratulate myself in German, but German I didn't exactly speak fluently. "Haghbagabaga." I clasped my hands together and shook them in the air like gladiators do, to the anti-cheers of stoic teddy bears on my bed. It took me no time to pick out my outfit. Like superheroes I had the privilege to limit my wardrobe sets, or more likely because some demon had made it herculean – no, narnian – for me to burrow for my other clothes beneath piles upon piles of statement shirts.

I buttoned a blueberry polo, zipped brown pants, and covered my feet with loafers. My suitcase trolley was by the door. I remember pleading Papa the other day to let me borrow this suitcase, his most treasured one, which had set foot on Scotland, land of the golfers and goafers. Pretty hitech stuff: adjustable wheels, gene-sensitive lock, and bullet-proof. Nothing to lose.

The clock was ticking, but I was too comforted with the idea that I had previously made it in time before they closed the gates on me. This record took an hour from my place to NAIA 3.

Now I had less.

I wore my backpack, carried my suitcase with one hand, and booked a ride with the other. I raced out the door and carried the suitcase fireman-style. Once in the waiting spot I triple checked what I had. Two laptops, mine and the company's, twenty brochures, for the twenty representatives of twenty agencies, survey forms, and two certificates of attendance to be signed, for me and my immediate supervisor, the more important person of the trip. Counting some good-conduct and initiative as well, it seemed I had everything. Hands clasped in the air again.

The driver arrived. He wasn't Batman with the Batmobile, but he was a polite, concerned man, and I was lucky enough. Now inside the car I was suddenly so tired. The rush and the panic had expended whatever energy I had to review my parts for the presentation or inform my immediate supervisor that I was on my way. I received a text when we had reached Magallanes. "Good morning. Malapit na'ko. Ikaw?" Mechanically I wrote my reply. "Ma'am, ito po, malapit na rin. May mga baka kasing humarang sa daan hehe."

We arrived at the departure zone just in time: before boarding-time but not enough to clear a line.

Di ko alam kung ano ba ang mayroon no'ng araw na 'yon, pero ang daming nakapila. I paid the driver and he left me to my doom. Then a figure at the better end of a line at Bay 4 waved to me.

My supervisor.

“Ma'am, pasensya na po. Salamat, salamat. It's such a long line.”

Ms. Moyet was headstrong woman in her 30's, calm, cool and collected, peerless at banter in the office. “Pikon ka ba?” was one of the questions she threw me on my first day. At first her bullets did not really affect me, for she was also kind and concerned for my learning. Then it came to the point that I simply had to have my own jokes against her. This did not help, and all the more did she tease me. Still, she had my respect and friendship, for she once told me that her jokes were expressions of endearment rather than spite. I felt as endeared as a plant.

She had our boarding passes printed in advance, so the only things needed were our IDs. Ms. Moyet had hers in a purse, which she produced with ease after gracefully parking her trolley. Mine was a more complicated case. My wallet was in a plastic folder inside my backpack. I had to place my backpack upon a surface before I got the plastic folder out.

My ID was returned to me, but so worried was I about boarding the plane on time, especially since in that scenario I was the one to blame, that I neglected to retrieve my plastic folder. The same folder which had the brochures.

It was only when Ms. Moyet and I had already settled in our seats that she asked to have a look at the brochures. I had printed them dutifully the day prior, so you can imagine my pride when I tried to show them to her.

“Oh, nasaan na?”

My immediate reaction was to race back for it, forgetful that I had already strapped myself in.

“Okay. Kalma, kalma,” said Ms. Moyet. Brochures lang ba laman no'n?” I nodded.

She must have noticed this fraction of hesitation, because slightly she raised a brow.

“Sure ka ah?”

After I nodded again, “Okay, hayaan mo na. Di naman super necessary ang mga 'yon.”

Ms. Moyet, she was a real Wonder Woman.

Again I experienced that drive into abandon The temperature was just right, and the passing clouds were somnolent. More importantly, there were no whining demons – I mean, babies – in the plane. Within seconds Ms. Moyet fell to sleep, and I too followed, despite my unease.

The nap was magical. Someone had sprinkled magic dust on me and I surrendered sinking. The experience was, as I imagine it now, like those long sleeps inside space voyagers, one bereft of dreams. I woke and felt renewed.

The plane doors opened and I felt like some conqueror from the West, about to step onto a richer land. The bliss of travel. Alighting the plane, the first thing I laid my eyes on was Mt. Mayon, and for minutes life as I knew it would never be the same.

It stood taller and wider than anything and seemed to be vessel for the world's end. It became clear to me: the volcano is worshipped because people fear the certain death it can unleash when displeased. With its face clear of clouds, it stood like the god of all, beaming down at the insignificant. But the smoke which rose from its mouth signified peace, indicating that we were all safe for the time being.

Everyone voiced their awe, and as I type this, I can't help but share that theory on the origin of that word, awe. "Oooooooo." Parang gag-o, but it was awesome.

Ms. Moyet too was in awe. Likely it was also her first time seeing the god this way. She took a quick photo then immediately turned to me.

"First time mo rito, di ba? Akin na camera mo."
I'm not exactly one for pictures, but this was my first time seeing a god like this. In the picture I would later crop myself. Mayon is all there needs to be."

We came to the gate of the airport where some tricycles were stationed. The drivers waved to us, and we greeted them. Sir, pakidala po kami sa bukas na kainan. He nodded and offered us the various compartments of his ride that accommodated luggage. To good effect, since Ms. Moyet was left with more leg room. But she refused to part with her luggage. "Ikaw na lang," she told me, and so I placed Papa's suitcase at the back of the tricycle as I rode behind the driver.

May kalahating oras din bago kami nadala sa isang karinderya. I offered to pay but Ms. Moyet covered the payment before me. Despite the fact that it could have used more lighting, the place was undoubtedly clean and well-kept, and the food wasn't so bad either. "I brought a water bottle as a celebratory beverage. Seemed like everything was okay, and we were ahead of schedule too." My loss at the airport somewhat irrelevant now.

"Hmm, sinigang siguro sa'kin. Sa'yo?" I was going to say giniling, when I was struck by a sudden lightness to my person, as if a burden had been lifted off me. Then I realized what the absence was, and the realization stabbed me.

My father's suitcase! In all my moments of panic, this has to be the top one. With as much calm as I could muster, I managed to refrain from the unpleasant, and with a straight face said to Ms. Moyet that I had to check something outside. "What?" She saw my free hands, and containing herself, looked away.

I exited the karinderya like lions were after me. Our driver was not there. “Werebdinaabas? Szprekonicha” Incredibly, I was speaking German again. “B-b-b-b-agh,” and a long line of “Putang inas”.

Without me knowing it my eyes my mouth my shoulders my hands were convoluting, and I felt now, after being a consumer for so long, like a human pot of unhealthy food and vice, now felt as if I was the one being consumed. I was the one who felt the hiss of unhappy officemates, whose humor I could not adopt as my own. This was karma biting me in ze ass, my anxiety fusing with my hunger, I felt myself being rolled like the numerous marijuana joints I’ve rolled. The thoughts came rushing, and it was crazy.

I cried, oh how I cried. Tears of desperation immediately. My watery eyes had made the decision before any other part of my body could. Perhaps my eyes opted for this option, as opposed to bursting in disbelief at the hopeless and empty road before me. Next my hands: like snakes they gripped and gripped the water bottle I was holding until it made a sound. Gradually, I convinced myself that I had to come to terms with reality again, either from the fact that I was beginning to feel the stare of Bicolanos on me, or the stare of Ms. Moyet and everyone else inside the karinederya. All right, all right. I told myself. I needed a ride, because there was nothing much I could do where I stood. Find another ride to look for the one with my luggage.

Then: why not go to the airport, and hope that the good driver, committed to the Airport’s employ, was kind enough. Kind enough that my luggage was returned at the lost and found section by the time I reached the airport. This seemed like the most logical to me.

I waited. Frantically I flayed my hands at the rides that passed me. I then recalled a story I’ll never forget from Dad – street children that throw themselves upon vehicles just so they can extort money or help from petrified drivers. I was honestly starting to consider the option.

Then, like out of some miracle by Bathala, this empty-by-the-capsule tricycle came down my way – scht-ch-ch-ch-ch, scht-ch-ch-ch-ch – like a song signifying a new chapter. This one I would call Manong Savior, and though I have forgotten his name I will never forget his face.

Unless... I encounter someone who looks like him.

It was evident that Manong Savior could not take me seriously. Had I not first mentioned how much I was willing to pay him it’s likely he wouldn’t have considered, because looking back I imagined I looked quite like a dangerous creature – I had made it to the other side of the street in three bounds, and I wouldn’t be surprised if I was actually foaming at the mouth. Manong Savior was probably only concerned for his own safety.

I recall this comic strip – we can actually just call it a Larson strip – about two hunters who retreated from an elephant not because it was an elephant but because it had a knife.

The relevance of this? I myself was no better than an elephant. In fact, inside the capsule I made sounds more hideous than elephant's, much to the curiosity of bystanders, and the horror of Manong Savior.

When we got to the airport tollgate I spoke to the guard in my German tongue and it worked. "Lahabadagata. Mazhahabarakaka." He let us through.

Once inside I saw the group of tricycle drivers. I darted from my current ride and Manong Savior followed suit.

"Bayad, oi, bayad muna!"

The drivers were in a circle, planning the day out and sharing their early morning stories.

Shamelessly I interrupted their little rap circle and stood upon them like some rabid hound.

"Ano 'yon? Anong problema?"

"Bakit, ano'ng matutulong namin sa'yo?"

"Bakit, boy, bakit? Clue naman diyan."

It was hard for me not to talk in German. Thankfully Manong Savior came to my rescue, and did the explaining for me. I would have loved to accompany his narrative, but I felt too useless and guilty already.

Then one of the drivers spoke: "Kung dito galling 'yong tricycle na 'yon, babalik din 'yon." The words struck me solid. They were certain, sincere. Words rare in Manila.

Then I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. It was Ms. Moyet. I answered the call, expecting the worse, when she told me that my luggage had been returned to the karinderya, and that she was waiting for me there.

In my next breaths I felt like I was breathing everything away. The Bicolanos were curious. I did not mind so much to be embarrassed. I told them the news, but to my surprise, they did not judge me, but stayed serious in their expressions.

And this I have to impress: these reactions were also rare, but on a more personal level. I've been in situations where I was mocked or scolded for my blunders, situations from which I felt I would be unable to recover. Yet, in that moment, these Bicolanos – it was as if they felt relieved for me as well, despite the fact that it was not their problem, that they could have laughed, and I would have been helpless. They did not laugh.

Only once before had I seen Filipinos this understanding and kind. That was when two men lifted me up from a wedge before the train doors closed on my leg. After I had regained my composure, I thanked them, and they gave me reassuring nods. I was all right. "Glad to have helped, pare." This is what their nods seemed to say.

Manong Savior agreed to take me back.

"Kami dito, ser, mapagkakatiwalaan po kami. Kung may problema tutulong naman kami hanggang kaya," he said. I believed him, and I would have believed anything from him,

our shared experience spanned barely an hour, and yet I was more grateful than I could ever express.

He returned me to the karinderya, and I tripled his fee. He smiled, my gesture was unnecessary, he asked only for the standard fee.

Ms. Moyet was already done with her meal. I sat opposite her without saying a word. We looked at one another and then she chuckled.

“Sige, mag-almusal ka muna.”

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