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A Tale That Repeats

by Eryk Katimbang

Part 1: Night Invitation

Tailwinds, a grim light, and a sense of connection are the recipe for nostalgia to an aura hunter, no more, no less. These seasoned hunters who were able to perceive beyond the naked eye are what they are known for, and yet so many of them have dabbled into their unnatural gifts for selfish reasons, earning them a foul reputation spreading out far and wide. This made people think that gaining the ability of these renowned hunters was a sign of a curse, an otherworldly connection to the unknown would be gained in exchange for submitting themselves into a narrow and shallow path of joy called greed. However, only a few had ever viewed these abilities as blessings. To them, it was a view from another world beyond their own, as it was another perspective and another story. One of these few people was Amadeus, an infamous aura hunter known throughout the ranks of the hunters. Through his nickname, he carried and built himself a pleasant reputation unlike the rest, and along with what he carried were a few stories he would often share with those who are willing to listen. Although not many would get along with Amadeus, some were able to pierce his shroud of mystery that he always emanated whenever he was around, which some have thought that he gained from a previous encounter that he was sent out from. But to those who knew the real reason for why he does have a strange presence is a very secret piece of information gained only by trust, and for one to truly know he trusts someone, Amadeus himself would let these people call him by his real name instead: Leander.

Although not versed in giving off the best first impressions, he had proved himself time after time to be one of those rare hunters who never had an egocentric goal. To common folk, he is well known for a famous tale passed through children and wanderers alike. "The Tale That Repeats". It was a story that embodies one of his speculated personal ideals and unselfish goals: "That judgment must come after knowing someone else's story". Even though that wasn't really what Leander had in mind when he first shared this story with others, he figured that people often strayed far from the point of his intentions whenever he told the tale, and there would be no point in sharing a specific reason why

he told them so. But because rumors spread fast, he figured that it was anyone's guess at this point, and he alone was the only one who could straighten out the facts. However, as time went on, he realized that straightening out the tale shouldn't be his concern. After all, he preferred to keep the experience for himself, as it still reigns fresh over Leander's mind whenever he recalled it, and a short smile would always come next when he does remember.

An hour before nightfall, and in the middle of spring is where it all started. Leander found himself passing by a small open land in the middle of the forest, a place where the map he held had not shown. He paused for a brief moment to survey the area. "Strange," Leander said. "I sense something there, and yet... there's nothing visibly there." He steered his sights towards the trees surrounding the land, trying to figure out where did the sensation he felt come from. To his surprise, nothing but a void of any lingering presence was in between the empty lands and the forest, as life ceased to exist inside the wall of greenery. "An anomaly." He thought. As Leander drew closer, the presence felt more alive, and somehow, familiar. It was an uncanny resemblance from a sensation he knew back home, and a part of a person that he knew so well was somehow reaching out into his mind from beyond the empty land. There, only a border of stone and dirt was its barrier, and all that is left is for Leander to cross the thin line of what awaited from beyond.

Leander looked around as he gripped the insignia on his coat, the familiar sensation had reached its peak when he stood before the anomaly, and when he reached out inside, he knew something was in front of him. He breathed as he took a step beyond the border's threshold, and what came after was the beginning of a tale he would never forget. Sunset never came, for the night had come within a blink, and a house suddenly appeared before Leander's eyes. He gaped at its humble design that bore no signs of aging, with its outermost layers of wood polished like brand new. A garden full of different flora had colored the once lifeless ground, conjoined by the silver light cast by the moon reflecting on petals thus displaying a lively brilliance. But even with the welcoming presence in front of Leander, his eyes were only able to take the beauty in by a short glimpse, for Leander's gaze was immediately caught by something else. On the porch, a person stood, with stature and posture resembling of a fine noblewoman. Her poise was composed of a gentle and caring presence, with closed palms clasped against one another, along with a face that lent out

a comforting smile, as if waiting for someone to be greeted. Leander wondered who the woman was, as her face emanated an intense estranged aura that Leander thought was familiar, and yet he couldn't think of any answer to explain this unnatural occurrence, as if an unknown bond had already attached Leander to the mysterious woman despite not knowing each other.

Leander needed answers, as he knew for sure that the connection was involuntary. He mustered all his courage to greet the woman in front of him, but he slowly felt uncomfortable when the woman gazed back. As Leander walked, he noticed an unusual accessory the woman wore: A necklace of a thick brown cord was tightly sealed around her dress' collar, decorated with a colorful mess of decorations surrounding it. Even though Leander was not entirely into fashion, he figured it was too unusual for a design, or rather that he hasn't recognized the grander design and sense of it yet. But when the woman noticed Leander looking at her neck, she immediately hid the necklace with one of her hands as he drew closer, immediately greeting Leander as he approached closer.

"Good evening," The woman said. "and who might you be?"

"A-Amadeus," Leander replied.

The woman noticed Leander's coat. A Freesia flower hung below his hunter's insignia.

"You're... an aura hunter?"

"Indeed. I was supposed to go off somewhere else. But I... got sidetracked. Would you mind if I stay for a night in your humble inn?"

"Oh no, I'm sorry. You're mistaken, this isn't an inn. But..."

The woman paused, eyeing Leander's insignia with a nervous expression. She thought that inviting a guest bearing the aura hunter's insignia would probably do more harm than good. But as the woman looked at Leander again, she felt something wasn't quite right. His presence was somehow familiar to the woman, and its uncanny resemblance to someone she once held so dear was too uncomfortable for her to think about, especially on someone he had only met. This strange sensation was unlike any

she had felt before, especially when she had dealt with other hunters similar to him. It was an indescribable relief and welcome that emanated from his presence, and the woman thought that the very same sensation would inevitably erupt a clash within her mind, with two sides debating on whether to trust a stranger again for one last time to do a special request she always wished granted.

“...but if you’d like to stay, I’ll prepare a room for you.”
The woman said.

“Gratitudes.” Leander bowed. “and my apologies.”

The woman responded with a discomfited smile before turning to open the door for Leander. But before Leander would go past the doorframe, he noticed three gravestones with etched symbols near the entrance.

“Intriguing,” Leander said. “Aren’t those...?”

The woman frowned. “They... are my family.” She replied.

“Apologies. But might I inquire who they might be?”

“My husband, and our two kids. A son and a daughter...”

Leander stared at the gravestones in silence, sensing something amiss the more he looked closely. Before him were three graves, but Leander felt that the rightmost grave was empty. However, there was a presence of something below beside the left-most grave.

“Were the gravestones misplaced?” He thought.

“Oh, right. I forgot to introduce myself,” The woman said.
“Gertrude Holland.”

“Gertrude,” Leander replied. “What a beautiful name.”

“T-Thank you.”

“Wait. Did you say Holland?”

“Huh...? Yes... what about it?”

Leander crossed his arms. “Nothing. I know of a person with the very same name as you, but I have my guess that it’s probably a coincidence. Pay it no mind.”

Gertrude tilted her head. “Well then, let me show you your room.”

When Leander stepped into the house, he was greeted by a well-furnished interior and a warm welcome from a chime ringing above him. Stone figurines and wooden ornaments could be seen all around along with a well-furnished family table in the middle of the room. Ranging from antique pots to small sculptures, they were all displayed meticulously. “Over there,” Gertrude said as she pointed past Leander towards an intersecting hallway with a room at its end. As they walked, there was a barrier of awkward silence between them, along with the unsurety of their presence against one another left their mouths mostly shut, and the only words they exchanged were small greetings and pleasantries. Gertrude left in silence when Leander entered the room, and no further talks between them were spoken for the rest of the evening.

As hours came by and midnight arriving soon, Leander stared at the clock ticking at the wall, unable to sleep. He couldn’t help but think about the connection he felt when he met Gertrude. Something that familiar was too great for it to be a coincidence for Leander, especially when he couldn’t remember the name “Gertrude”, nor the house that he was in. The connection grew stronger as time went on, and it lingered in Leander’s mind more than it should. He thought that it may be the aftereffect when he exchanged a glance with Gertrude, and he would have easily ignored it and called it mere instinct, but he would have it either way for the fact that the familiar presence was also present within the three graves. As Leander ran out of possible conclusions to acknowledge these strange phenomena, he suddenly remembered the last name Gertrude, on which he sparked an interest.

“Holland... no, that’s impossible,” Leander whispered to himself.

Leander tried to recall if he had any memory regarding Gertrude, but a shred of disappointment came over his frustrated expression

when his mind became hazy as he tried to remember anything at all. All of his memories of the name Gertrude Holland were all but vague, and with his mind becoming hazier as he tried further, the more he became worried. However, not all was in vain when he remembered that there was one Holland that came into Leander's mind, despite it not being Gertrude. It was someone he had already known before, except something was blocking him from remembering. The imagery in his mind slowly unveiled the person he was looking for, standing in front of him in his imagination. But before Leander could even fully remember, the clock had struck to signal midnight, and suddenly, a voice of a child began to sing.

“Mother, father where do I belong?

Brother, sister will you hear my song?

Mother, father who am I among?

Brother, sister what did I do wrong?”

The voice grew louder beyond the door of Leander's room, repeating itself until a knock from the door accompanied its tune. When the last word of the rhyme had been spoken after the fourth knock, everything fell into silence, and the clock's tick was the only sound that could be heard. But before Leander could even wonder, he felt an eerie presence resonating beside him. As he turned his head slowly, the familiar presence he felt with Gertrude was there again, but this time it was different and stronger. There, a child sat beside Leander, with a blade embedded in his chest. His eyes were almost colorless, along with a clean slit that ran deep across his eyes. The child smirked as he playfully swung his legs back and forth while humming the same tune of the same song earlier.

“Dear sister! What took you so long to return home?”
The child asked.

“Sister?” Leander asked.

“Huh? That voice... you're not my sister, are you?”

“Apologies. But no.”

“Whoa, you sound like a grown-up! Shall I call you mister?”

“C-Certainly. And you are?” “I’m Nichol! would you like to play with me, mister? I can’t sleep.”

“Apologies. But I’m not good around children, nor do I have time to play.”

“But! But! But you’re already awake!”

“Yes. But that doesn’t mean I can play either way.”

Nichol frowned, hoping he could evoke a sense of shame unto Leander. But as Nichol tried to change Leander’s emotions, he felt something strange when the winds blew on Leander’s coat. It was the presence of an unmistakable object he knew so well, reminding him of something terrible from his memories.

“You’re an aura hunter mister?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“Oh! That means you’re a thief!”

“Thief?”

“Thieves who take away people’s money, sometimes even lives! Right mister?”

“No. I’m not like them.”

“It’s ok to deny them mister, but you can’t hide it from me!”

Leander fell silent, gripping his badge in shame.

“Ah! By the way mister, if you can’t play now, can we play tomorrow instead?” Nichol grinned. “I feel like you want to more about me and this place, right?”

“Unsure. I might leave immediately.”

“But why...!”

Leander sighed. Although not knowing fully who he was, he already had a clue who he might be. With Nichol having a close resemblance to the connection he felt with Gertrude made it very obvious for Leander, but despite being presented with such an undeniable correlation, he preferred to validate it with Gertrude tomorrow instead of making assumptions. However, as he thought more about Nichol's request, he figured that he might be able to learn more about Gertrude too, and perhaps even answers for the unknown lingering connection he had with the place.

“A-Alright. Fine. But I won't—”

“Yay! Thank you, mister! Oh, and please don't bring anyone else, ok?”

Nichol pointed his finger towards the door's direction, of which Leander's eyes followed. There, Leander felt a shift in Nichol's presence, and his eerie presence has shifted towards the walls slowly crawling towards the door. When Nichol had finally reached the exit, his body simply phased through, leaving Leander confused for the rest of the night.

Part 2: Table of Four

When morning came, the night winds blew through Leander's window. The sky was still dark, and the moon's glow was still reflecting on the glass panes. Leander figured that the anomaly was responsible for freezing the cycle of day and night in the area, with the ticking clock whose hands didn't move was the definite proof. Even though this strange encounter itself never bothered him, the words of Nichol did, leaving Leander to question something about himself.

A lot of areas with unnatural phenomena had circled over many places around the world, with most having driven the normal folk insane. But for the aura hunters such as Leander, it was a common thing for the unknown to exist, and it's their job to know why such things occur. Leander knew there are plentiful reasons why there were no codices for training an aura hunter because anomalies are never the same and encounters can differ. Though how many reasons there may be, Leander knew well that those exact reasons are why so many aura hunters had viewed their occupation

as a chance to gain wealth and prestige. Exploiting unknown anomalies and leaving people hanging on their trust and faith was its biggest factor, making Leander despise his job from the moment other hunters urged him to do the same. This fact left a bitter reflection on Leander as a hunter, especially whenever people talk about how they ridicule his job whenever people saw his insignia, but perhaps there was another reason for him to rant: Connecting with strange entities in other anomalies have been more difficult lately due to this foul practice. But knowing he couldn't do anything with it, he sighed as he hid his badge inside a pocket of his coat before getting up from bed in frustration.

When Leander walked over to the living room, a different vibe had welcomed him as he stepped inside. Leander darted his eyes around, taking in a full view of the interior design that felt different than yesterday. All of the decorations were different except for the family table in the middle of the room, with the only difference it had from yesterday was a flower vase placed in its center while a tablecloth draped over the sides.

“Good morning!” Gertrude greeted him. “How was your sleep?”

Leander took a deep breath before replying. “Great. But...”

“But?”

“But... can I ask something?”

“Ask away, even if it's another day for a stay.”

“Nichol. Who was he?”

Gertrude paused as her mouth gaped. Her mind raced when she tried to remember well enough if she told Leander any names yesterday. How is it that somehow, he was able to know a name of a family member she never introduced? Gertrude's upbeat expression turned into a frown, and her bubbly voice turned into a worrisome murmur.

“He's... My dead son.”

“Apologies. I... didn't know.”

“D-Did he say anything? About me? Did he ask something? Anything?”

“None.” Leander sighed. “But he asked me to play with him.”

“I see. I... haven’t seen him for a while.”

“Interesting. Maybe I can help with that?”

“I... I’m fine. I just don’t want to talk about certain things is all.”

“Surely? I ought to think I can.”

“Well... let me think for a moment. Please sit at the table... Oh, and don’t sit on the chair where its backside faces the window. That is Nichol’s favorite chair. He might get angry.”

Leander nodded but never sat down, instead, he went around the room to observe the new furnishings to relieve his mind for a while. Gertrude however sat behind a table counter that hung old bottles of wine and beer barrels. It was her favorite place to spend solitary time, and ever since she was left alone in the house, that place became her comfort zone. With nothing left to do but to think, she poured herself a glass of water, enough to calm her mind for an hour or two.

Much of the stories she knew around the house had her sitting at the stool and observing things at a distance, especially in a family gathering. Joyful, sad, and bittersweet memories were mostly born when she was far away from the family table, and dreadful moments were the only thoughts in her mind when she is near it. She bore witness to most of the family’s history at her stool, and with it, she hid one of the most valued possession she ever had: a glass teapot. Gertrude would wrap the teapot in cloth and place it inside one of the unused barrels, bringing it out whenever she wanted to ‘amplify’ her hidden emotions when alone. This day was no different for Gertrude, as hearing the name of Nichol brought forth a wide variety of emotions. But before she unwrapped the cloth of the teapot, Gertrude looked at her reflection in an exposed portion of the wrap before gently hugging it dear around her chest.

Whenever Gertrude felt down, she would always brew something within the teapot: A mishmash of ingredients she took from the kitchen cupboard. Each ingredient represented an emotion, and Gertrude handpicked them based on their tastes.

Sweet berries create a soothing texture, and so she would put it in whenever she felt happy. Chili peppers are known for their unwanted painful aftertaste, and so Gertrude would put them in whenever she felt lingering anger or a bitter gripe that still festered at that moment. Such ingredients were but a few to the many, and the list would go on if Gertrude would be asked to write them down. However, when Gertrude thought about the situation about Nichol, it was a surprise to her when she found out there was no ingredient that she had picked for an emotion she never had thought of in her life: Fear. Her mind spun as she tried to think of anything she could put in the glass teapot but to no avail. Distraught, Gertrude sighed as she placed her teapot down at the family table before sitting at the left of Nichol's favorite chair. The teapot filled itself up with clear waters when it was placed on the table, and now all that is left is for Gertrude to pour and share its contents with Leander.

“Amadeus, May I ask something?” Gertrude asked.

Leander turned his head after observing a small painting.

“Sure.” He replied.

“Would you mind if... I asked you to stay for a little longer?”

Leander turned his head to meet Gertrude's tired gaze, pausing to consider the offer. Still, there were plenty of questions he had in mind, with the anomaly of the house being one, the familiar aura being around is another, and finally Gertrude herself.

But another question would pop into his head after he looked at the teapot Gertrude held.

“Interesting. That teapot is...?”

“Oh, this? It's my personal teapot.”

“Intriguing. It contains water of memories, does it not?”

Gertrude grinned. She knew she couldn't hide anything anymore behind Leander.

“Yes. With a touch, a person can fill a vessel like this teapot with memories they wish to impart, and those who will drink its waters will relive that memory. Up to this day, I still find it fascinating how it only works within anomalies don’t you think?”
“Indeed. Is that why you needed time for yourself a minute ago?”

“I wasn’t sure if I could really trust you. But something... just tells me I should. But either way, you shouldn’t be drinking this just yet.”

“Why? I don’t recall water of memories being undrinkable?”

“No, it is drinkable, but mine is... well, it’s missing something that’s all. I really can’t let you drink it yet. It’s more of a personal thing.”

“Understood. I won’t inquire anything further if you wish.”

“Thank you.”

Gertrude laid her back against the chair while she breathed for fresh air. It had been so long since she sat on the chair of the family table again. A mix of nostalgia and displeasure ran over her mind, sighing over the faint yet powerful memories as she tried to remember what events had occurred around the table. Gertrude poured herself a cup of water from the teapot, with the intent of reliving the few joyful memories she had on the table. As she took a sip, the faces of her family were slowly formed by the gentle winds that came through the window. The first face that appeared before Gertrude’s was her husband, sitting beside her left. He laughed and smiled as how she remembers it, sharing worthwhile humor whenever he had his weekend rest. Her son and daughter would gather around when he would share a story or two about his former job as a soldier. He would often tell them how he commanded armies to fight in the name of good, but that was merely an exaggeration because Gertrude knew he was only a patrol unit. She knew that he only shared those stories to inspire his children, with nothing less than to always strive in achieving daunting goals. Gertrude smiled as he reached out to her husband’s face, but he faded away before she could touch his cheek.

The next face that appeared before Gertrude was her son Nichol, who sat on the right. Nichol played with his feet, swinging them back and forth while eating ice cream. Gertrude smiled as she watched her son fiddle with his food while sitting on his favorite chair. Nichol had picked that chair ever since he ate his first ice cream so that next time, the ice cream wouldn't melt away from the sunshine piercing the window whenever he ate them in an afternoon. When Nichol took his first scoop, he quickly faded away in front of Gertrude before he could express his delight.

However, as Gertrude anticipated the last face about to appear on the opposite of where she sat, Leander dragged the chair away before sitting on it, facing towards a window. Gertrude thought she could perhaps ask him to leave to continue reliving into her comfort. But before she could even call out Leander, the winds formed the final face that Gertrude was waiting for. Lilly Holland stood beside Leander, staring into the same direction where he looked, with her arms in the back and a wry grin on her face. Gertrude never remembered her daughter with such a memory, and so she was left with a gaping mouth, wondering what it could mean. When Leander gripped his insignia, Lilly's presence followed his gesture, before fading away in a gust of wind.

"Gertrude? Is something wrong?" Leander asked, turning his head to face Gertrude.

"I... don't know." Replied Gertrude.

"Surely?"

"I'm ok. My head's just floating around the clouds that's all."

Gertrude knew everyone in the family was gone except Lilly, but she couldn't shake off the feeling that somehow, what she saw earlier could be a hopeful sign of her daughter being alive. She thought that perhaps fate was toying with her mind, especially being the only member in the family to live longer to tell their tales. However, it was too surreal for Gertrude to ignore, and yet why was it all pointing out to... "Amadeus?" She thought. "How? Who... is he really?" She looked into her teapot again, looking at a distorted reflection of herself, wondering what to do next.

“Gertrude,” Leander said. “Why do you want me to stay?”

“Well, I have two... no, one favor to ask you.”

“One? Why the sudden change?”

“Well, I wanted to ask you if you could bring my daughter Lilly home, but I’m just being delusional that’s all. I just... had the feeling that somehow, she’s alive. I don’t know why. But that’s impossible right?”

Leander crossed his arms, sighing as he pondered her words.

“Intriguing.”

“Well, the other favor is I... want to see Nichol again. A lot of aura hunters have already denied my request. Some even just used me for their own bidding, but—”

“Done.”

“W-What? J-Just like that? But why...?”

“Personal. And perhaps a little... closure.”

“Closure?”

“Nevermind. I’ll see where I can help.”

“T-Thank you.”

Memories rushed forth like a waterfall over Gertrude’s mind, remembering the faces of those who once sat down beside her. Laughter, problems, arguments, and debates that occurred around that same table were still succulent memories for Gertrude. If only there was a way to relive those memories herself, she would’ve done anything in exchange for it, no matter how heavy the price was. “Perhaps...” Gertrude wondered, looking at Leander as her mind raced. She figured that her answer might be the person in front of her, but to gamble one’s trust again would prove difficult for Gertrude, especially on how she remembers the previous hunters who tried to help. However, she knew that this could be her only

chance, and accepting the bitter facts should not hinder her hopes of her requests being granted. Gertrude stood up, holding the teapot as she looked at Leander with a stern face.

“Good luck on finding Nichol,” Gertrude said.

“Gratitudes.” Replied Leander as he stood from his chair as well. “And may luck be on your side as well in finding that missing ingredient of yours.”

The two parted ways for the moment, but Leander couldn't help but think that Gertrude was hiding something from him. It may be a matter of time before Leander figures out the whole truth, but perhaps there is a good reason why she would hide it. Although Leander hoped it would absolve not only Gertrude's inner conflict, but also somehow answer the reason why he thought she was lying about the final ingredient.

Part 3: A Moment's Breath

It was the peak of the night when Leander went outside of the house to look for Nichol. It had been in the same position since yesterday, with the same flora and petals it shone over. The nightly tailwinds blew again when Leander sensed Nichol was near, along with the same familiar connection ever so diligently linking them together to a set location.

“Mister! Are you there?” Nichol's voice said, but he was nowhere to be found.

“Nichol? Where are you?” shouted Leander.

“Up here, mister!”

Leander turned his gaze upwards, and there he saw Nichol gazing in the distance. The boy swung his feet back and forth while humming the same lullaby as he always did.

“Hey mister, do you mind if we go outside of this place before we can talk?” Nichol said.

“No, I don't” replied Leander.

“Great! Wait for me.”

Suddenly, Nichol vanished in the front of Leander’s eyes, and a coiling light had appeared in the treetops outside the anomaly. Branches and barks twisted into grotesque figures, with splinters and binding roots crackled as they looped and connected on one another. The trees had torn themselves asunder, with their front portions ripped from themselves to resemble jaws and sharp teeth. Sap flowed like blood pouring from a wound, it sprayed in unpredictable arcs before drying up immediately as soon as the coiling light had touched them. When all the sounds halted, Leander stood before a haunting figure that resembled a distorted face of a crying child.

“Not bad huh mister?” Nichol said as he walked in front of Leander.

“Certainly. You did that?” Leander replied.

“Yes! But I’m not sure if I did well. It’s supposed to look like me, but...I don’t remember my face anymore.”

“Well, it’s... beautiful.”

“Aw, don’t flatter me that much mister,” Nichol laughed.
“Anyway, let’s get out of here.”

When Nichol led Leander outside the anomaly, the moon immediately disappeared and the sun shone once again. He turned his head, and sure enough, life inside the anomaly was lifeless again and the house was gone. Leander followed Nichol through the dense forest, who was prancing around and phasing his body through the bushes and shrubs while humming the lullaby again. The playful aura that Nichol emanated made the foliage around him bloom, with the sun casting its rays unto them when he commanded the trees to reveal them out of their shades. Leander watched and wondered how nature bent around the whims of the boy, even more so outside of an anomaly.

“Say, mister. I have a question for you.” Nichol said. “Why do I sense the presence of my sister when you are around?”

“Clueless,” Leander replied. “I have nothing to share with you.”

“Are you lying mister? Is there a reason why you’re not telling me? Are you the one who perhaps... killed my sister?”

“No. And I have no reason to hide anything.”

“Aha! A hunter telling me he doesn’t hide anything. You’re all the same.”

“Same? You’ve met other hunters?”

“Of course! They are the reason why I’m like this.”

“Apologies... on their behalf.”

“I wonder, are you different mister? Are you not here to hunt me? Like the rest did?”

“No. Why would I do that?”

“Well, you do you mister, but I still hate them. Say, would you like to hear what I think about hunters like you?”

“Sure. I’d love to.”

“Yay! I believe I already like you, mister.
But we have to play a game first.” “Game?”

“It’s nothing special, just plain hide and seek. The longer you remain uncaught, the more you will learn. How does that sound?”

Leander paused, unsure what he meant by being “uncaught”. Although there was no way to tell if Nichol would hold to his word, Leander felt that there is some value from his request, but not entirely to his understanding. Held with a few options to figure everything out, Leander nodded, and Nichol’s smile turned into a malicious grin.

“Well then, I’ll give you time to hide alright mister?” Nichol said.

“Certainly,” Leander replied.

“Who knows? Maybe I am after something. Teehee...”

Without giving any second thought, Leander rushed towards the thick and dense trees hoping he could outsmart Nichol instead of outrunning him the moment it starts. But when Leander climbed up the nearest tree, a small object fell from one of its branches and hit his head. It was a hunter’s insignia hanging from a corpse above him. And as Leander climbed further, the dead became more visibly present, with all their twisted and grotesque bodies wrapped around glittered rope. The eerie presence of the bodies made Leander get a slight hunch that climbing was a terrible idea, but it was all too late when a voice shouted from below.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Nichol shouted.

Suddenly, a blinking light had appeared below Leander, moving around as fast as he could talk. It danced around the forest while coiling and jumping between trees, with an intense aura reminiscent of a serpent. The light slithered around the ground before it went to jump between treetops. At this point, Leander had a small window of surviving if he let himself be caught hiding. Without the most plentiful of options running in his mind, Leander leaped out of his hiding place, and within an instant, a sharp blade had carved out the branch where he sat a second ago.

“There you are mister!” Nichol cried out. “Let me tag you!”

Leander leaped down the tree without looking back, swinging over branches to avoid the coiling light that trailed behind him.

“Isn’t this fun mister? Aren’t you happy?!”

But Leander didn’t respond, his mind was focused on surviving rather than responding to Nichol’s taunts and small talk. He ran in zigzags to avoid being caught by the coiling light that carved anything in its wake while it hopped between “predictable” locations. As Nichol gradually grew closer to Leander, small whispers bounced back and forth between the trees, shaking them as he began to sing.

“Mother, Father where do I belong?”

Branches started to fall above Leander, rapidly growing into thick logs that crushed anything below.

“Brother, Sister will you hear my song?”

Leaves flew in the direction of Leander, withering as they create piercing winds that gathered behind Leander like a storm, surging towards Leander as it shot out razorblade currents in different directions.

“Mother, Father who am I among?”

The seeds below grew, bursting forth from the ground as their roots weaved with each other. The vines formed into hands, trying to grasp Leander from below. Nature had bent to Nichol's whim, it was his expression for his unnatural way to depict his twisted history, wishing to know what truly happened. He never witnessed his own story, for it was mere fate unraveled by his sudden death. That was the only memory he had, enough of a reason to wear a mask of a grim face, for fate took the life of the boy who only wished to live happily ever after. Nichol always wondered what happened on that precious night where he couldn't see the beautiful moon again, and why it was painful to remember. He could only recall the last voice he had known before his unfortunate death: a cry of grief without explanation. This unbeknownst feeling had manifested unto tears that he does not own, falling unto Nichol's cheeks wondering whose it was before he screamed the final verse he always wished to ask.

“Hunter? Hunter? What did I do wrong?!”

Leander felt the anguish Nichol had spewed within those words that echoed in the winds. His presence was powerful enough for nature around him to follow his weeping anger. The cry that longed for answers was something he was all too familiar with, but his stoicism had blocked all emotion running forth. Leander understood what he wanted, and now armed with this knowledge, he knew he had to go back immediately.

Nature grew more vicious around Leander, with cutting winds and grasping roots growing in size and shape as time went longer. Forward was the only way to escape, and when Leander saw

the barrier in front of him, he knew Nichol's time was almost up. However, Nichol was well aware of this as well, and with one last attempt to stop his prey from crossing the border, he took out the blade from his chest as he howled in pain, throwing it against the winds as it carried forth his deadly message. The dagger flew along with the razor winds, following the sound of the intense heartbeat of Leander. Nichol shifted the roots to entangle Leander's exit, but to his disappointment, Leander had already crossed the border, and his dagger flew right over his head, sticking itself into a wooden wall past the barrier. He lent out a shrill cry before vanishing under the veil of night.

As Leander started to catch his breath, Gertrude rushed out of the house after hearing a loud thud outside. When she saw Leander laying on the ground, she immediately offered a helping hand, but Leander brushed her hands off when after she laid a finger on him.

"What happened?"

"Apologies. I was chased down by Nichol, and I tried to lure him here to you. It seems that he couldn't get in the anomaly." Leander replied as he gasped for air.

"Y-You found him again?"

"Indeed." While Leander explained the rest of what happened, Gertrude noticed the dagger embedded in the wooden wall. There, she stood horrified, eyeing the blade as she slowly reached out.

"W-Where did you get this?" Gertrude asked.

"Nichol..."

Gertrude took the blade with the utmost caution, with memories flooding over her mind as she stared longer. Her hands shook as she held the blade, and her breath was taken away when the wind around it whispered a short cry from a voice Gertrude knew all too well.

"What did I do wrong?"

Her mouth gaped as she dropped the blade, falling to her knees as she began to weep.

“H...how did that get here...?” Gertrude asked.

“Nichol,” Leander replied. “He had the blade on his chest.”

“The very blade that killed him...”

“Intriguing. May I ask what happened?”

But Gertrude didn't answer, shaking her head as she covered her face with her hands. Leander figured that the blade may have some correlation with Gertrude herself. It was no question that the blade itself served as a bad memory for Gertrude, and yet Leander couldn't brush off the feeling that there may be another reason for it.

“Gertrude. May I ask something?” Leander asked.

“W-What off?” Gertrude replied softly.

“Nichol. Was he really your son?”

“What kind of a question is that?! O-Of course!”

“Interesting. But why does the blade emanate your aura along with Nichol?”

“That's! I...”

Gertrude fell silent as she stared at the blade. The memory which she dreaded most had poured out again into her mind, slowly repeating the same scene she doesn't want to remember. She clenched her fists as she tried to escape from her mind, but when Leander held her hands, the memory vanished in a blink. The comfort that Gertrude felt when Leander held her hands was the same touch from a member of the family that she knew so well. “Lilly...” Gertrude whispered to herself. But after reminiscing for a while, she snapped back to reality after realizing that she hasn't given Leander an answer yet.

“Oh right, uh... well, it would be best if you drink the water of memories to see for yourself,”

Gertrude said. “And... thank you for not harming his spirit.”

“Gratitudes, for entrusting me with the water of memories. And no need to thank me, it is what aura hunters are supposed to do. It is such an aggravating sight that only a few hunters truly know the meaning of ‘Understanding’. I’m guessing you may have already experienced it firsthand.”

“Yes. Too many to count.”

Leander and Gertrude sighed as they share the same frustrations in silence. At that moment, the link between them flourished, extending out into their hearts and minds as they finally understood each other. Gertrude offered her hand again to Leander, and this time Leander obliged to comply.

Much of what Leander knew at that point was all still chaotic, with Nichol being angry and Gertrude somehow being not concerned about what just happened. He figured that he might be right, that there was something Gertrude has not told him yet, and uncovering it means he should play by the rules laid down before him even if Gertrude would become an obstacle in doing so. Leander looked up again in the starry sky, hoping beyond all hopes that Gertrude would not put a knife on his back when he finds out what had happened. It was a strange conclusion he had drawn from someone seemingly innocent, and yet he couldn’t shake off the feeling that she harbored a dark secret.

“Shall we go inside?” Gertrude asked.

“Certainly.” Leander nodded.

Gertrude picked up the blade again before placing it inside her teapot, stirring it with her fingers before handing it over to Leander.

“Whatever you do, please understand whatever you see,” Gertrude said.

“Certainly.” Replied Leander.

Part 4: Drawing out History.

As they went inside, Leander noticed the furnishings had changed again, only this time, the place looked more rugged and old while still looking homely. Leander had poured himself a cup of water from the teapot as soon as he sat down on the family table, and when Gertrude sat in the opposite of him, he immediately drank the water.

The first memory appeared before Leander. Streaks of tailwinds moved past his shoulders, forming a hazy mirage of what beautiful memories Gertrude had cherished. The room became different, with new furnishings Leander has not seen before, with the family table being the only one unchanged. The morning light had peered through the window, with a different breeze coming through it. The aroma of the flowers was somehow familiar to Leander, yet somehow distant. There, Leander stood between three realities, hoping he could piece out how everything would connect in the end.

It all started when Nichol and Gertrude were bonding at the family table laughing. Piles upon piles of decorations were littered all over the floor. There, Nichol rummaged throughout the mess, hopping over stacks of his undoing as he reached out for a bauble to finish his work.

“Mother, look! I made something for you!” Nichol giggled.

Gertrude smiled as Nichol handed him a brown cord cut from a piece of rope, which he decorated with large quantities of glitter and paint. Gertrude wrapped the cord around her neck, tying each of the ends with a simple knot.

“Do you like it?” Nichol asked.

“Yes, it’s beautiful,” Gertrude replied. “Although you might want to clean up now.”

“Oh, right. I should make one for Lilly too!”

Gertrude laughed. “How about your father? Aren’t you making one for him?”

“Uhm. I don’t know. He might not like it like last time...”

“Well, that’s because you took something from him without permission.”

“But! I wanted to make it better!”

“Yes. But you did so without his permission.”

“Alright. I’ll make one for him too!”

The unrestrained innocence of Nichol kept Gertrude grinning. Hazy winds began to brew, a sign that the effects of the waters were already fading out. The memory had distorted into a vague image of another embracing her child, and the first memory had faded after Gertrude kissed Nichol’s forehead.

Wisps of smoke from the memory had all but vanished, and the room has changed back to its original form. Leander’s mind became disoriented after the experience, with the room swirled in his head while his vision blurred. He tried to recollect everything he saw, but his mind suddenly twisted, unfathomable imagery flashing before him. Fading screams of despair and whispers of betrayal were all that was present, but he didn’t know whose it from.

Leander checked his watch and darted his eyes around, checking if he wasn’t still in the memories. The hazy winds were still there, and everything else was how he remembers it, but he was left unconvinced. Leander looked at the table again, pouring himself another cup of water from the teapot. Leander knew the water should only be drunk after its disorienting effects have worn off, but despite this, his curiosity drove him to take in the next sip immediately. And as a result of his reckless behavior, Leander’s mind became haywire.

The hazy winds became a thick fog carrying words from different voices he had heard before. Some were loud, and the others whispered. Innocent laughter mixed with maniacal hysteria was all that rang in Leander’s mind, and there was no hope

of stopping it. All he could do now is brace himself, along with the darkness that enveloped his eyes as he tried to peer beyond. When Leander began inhaling the fog, thick plumes of smoke were exhaled in return, slowly revealing the next memory he so eagerly wished to witness. Leander steadied his breathing into long gasps of breath, and eventually, the smoke he had made had born a sour memory with a significant difference from what he witnessed before.

“You know you shouldn’t be doing that.” A faint voice said.

“Why? Because I’m a girl?! Are you insane?!” another voice replied.

“Watch your tone! I’m not tolerating disrespect from you—”

“Respect? Since when did you two do that?! I’m always being told what I should do! I’m sick of it! I’m sick of both of you!”

A loud crash had followed after, with a short silence following it. The thick fog slowly disappeared, and the faces of those who argued became clear. It was Gertrude and her husband scolding Lilly Holland for her mischief deeds at the family table, telling her to act accordingly and more lady-like, but Lilly didn’t stay silent. She cussed at her parents in a fit of rage, telling them how they were terrible parents for not defending the actions of their daughter. Leander watched as Lilly stormed outside the house, with Gertrude tailing behind as she tried to reason with her daughter. However, before Leander could fully comprehend what was happening, the memory had shifted abruptly to another timeline. What came after was the aftermath of the incident, with the place shifting towards showing Leander a miserable reunion. It was a scenery many mothers he had known have dreaded: a dinner at a family table with someone so dear to them missing. Gertrude never touched her plate, while her husband and Nichol ate in silence. The blank state “Intriguing. So that’s what happened.” Leander thought to himself as he finally realized the familiar connection he had with Gertrude.

It was there when Leander found out that Lilly was never to be seen by her parents again. Days had cycled quickly inside the memory while Gertrude and her husband became more worried. Weeks became a nightmarish ecstatic joy for Gertrude as she waited

for any reports that brought any news for their missing daughter, and months of hell came after when they slowly accepted that she would never come back. The memory ended with Gertrude looking distraught, peering through the window as she hoped Lilly safe, and that the words of forgiveness may one day be carried by the winds as a whisper.

Suddenly, a loud crack was heard, and Leander felt pain in his cheeks. Immediately, the thick fog within the memories had all vanished within a blink, and Gertrude stood in front of Leander sternly.

“Why did you do that?!” Gertrude asked.

“W-What?” Leander replied.

“Why did you take another sip immediately? You’re an aura hunter, right? You should already know not to drink too much in succession!”

“Apologies. I know.”

“You know, you remind me so much of Lilly. Always so reckless and sometimes acting immaturely on serious things.” She sighed. “But then again, I brought you into this... so it’s somewhat my fault too.”

“No. I shouldn’t have drunk that immediately.”

“Then, why did you?”

“Familiarity. There’s something about this memory that was somehow...nostalgic.”

“Nostalgic? But... those were my memories?”

“Indeed. But it seemed that... I was a part of it for some reason.”

Gertrude was left confused. “Well, I mean... you did witness the memory, but I guess you have something different in mind.

But there's still one memory left in this room, so be more careful."

Leander looked in the teapot again, with its contents almost halfway gone.

"Intriguing. From the looks of it, there are three memories left."
Leander said.

"Yes. The third memory is here, but the others are somewhere else."

"Interesting."

While most of the disorienting effects were gone, Leander poured himself another cup of water from the teapot with Gertrude silently observing him.

The fog had not completely vanished from Leander's eyes, with some lingering on the corners of the room as if waiting for him to take the next sip. Small shrouds of mystery were filled with small whispers of what came after his last drink, containing terrible screams and a faint cry of mercy. Leander might have already guessed what the next memory could be, but it wasn't looking all pretty.

The fog thickened once again, enveloping the room with a dense and unclear atmosphere. The voices he heard from before became louder, and the guess he made came with a twist he did not expect.

"Please! Don't take him!" Gertrude pleaded.

"Miss Holland, his behavior is very clear as you can see. He is possessed by a long-forgotten mental disorder that slumbered quietly over countless generations." Replied a distant voice.

"No! You're lying! There's no such thing!
He has done no wrong! Please!"

"You dare question our work?! With all due respect lady Holland, we are only doing what is best, and we are not going anywhere unless he comes with us!"

"Stop this, I beg you! You can take anything you want, just don't take him please!"

As the fog lifted, the face of Gertrude appeared first in the memory, kneeling as she reached was reaching out. Nichol stood beside her crying, watching whatever was in front of him. But when the fog had finally lifted, Leander stood in terror from his chair as he watched what was before him. Men wearing oversized coats with hoods covering their faces were dragging away Gertrude's husband bloody. The men struck the poor man constantly as he struggled to stand, but the moment he pleaded for mercy made only things worse. "This! This is...!" Leander said as he watched the men pull out a bladed chain from under their belts. Leander closed his eyes shut as soon as one of them began to swing the device against the bloody man. He covered his ears with his palms, but it didn't save him from hearing the screams of Gertrude and Nichol before the memory faded away.

The mirage was all gone, but the cries of those who pleaded still lingered in his mind. Leander slammed one of his hands on the table, while the other tore his insignia out from his coat. He clenched his fists tightly while Gertrude watched in shame.

"I was powerless back then," Gertrude said. "I have nothing to say."

"No. It's not your fault." Leander replied. "Apologies... on their behalf"

"You've done nothing wrong, Amadeus." Gertrude sighed as she held Leander's hand that contained his insignia. "It's ok, I trust you don't worry. Come on, there's still two more memories left, let me show you the room where both are in."

Leander gritted his teeth as Gertrude lead the way to another room, but as soon as he turned around, he noticed a cut rope hanging from the hallway's intersection. The presence of it felt eerie for Leander, it bore a strange and unfitting aura that made him uncomfortable. It emanated a faint but distinct presence Leander was familiar with, making it more ominous than it should. But when Gertrude noticed his gaze was locked unto the rope, she placed her hand around her chest, pulling Leander aside towards the room they were headed, refusing to look at where he did.

When they reached the door, Leander paused to observe the entrance that differed from the rest of the house. The wooden frame was old, and the door creaked when Gertrude opened it. Leander wondered why he felt a sudden rush to go inside immediately, along with a sad and ecstatic feeling coursing through the back of his mind. But before he could enter, Gertrude took him by the hand.

“Wait. There’s something I should tell you first.” Gertrude said.

“Intriguing,” Leander replied. “What would that be?”

“Amadeus, before you go in, can you promise me one thing? Whatever you may uncover inside, please do judge everyone fairly, whoever they may be.”

“Depends. But I’ll see what I can do—”

“No! Please... promise me.” Gertrude held Leander’s arm tightly as she sobbed. “Please...”

Gertrude’s grip tightened as she pulled Leander closer. But her worries were assured to rest when Leander took her chin up and nodded.

“Please tell me you really mean it,” Gertrude said.

“Certainly. You have my word...” Leander replied as she removed her arm, returning the favor as she clipped her hands with a warm embrace of his own. “...as an aura hunter.”

When Leander released Gertrude’s hands, a sigh of relief came out from her mouth, but when she watched him go inside, a mix of fear and regret caught up in her mind, knowing full well what history awaited him inside. All she could do now is wait for her gambled trust to reveal its bloom, it was all or nothing.

When Leander observed the room from the door, he figured that it was no different from what he expected it to look like. Ragged and torn walls were the first to meet his eyes, with a reeking odor following the next. The room was dirty all around, filled with nothing else but dirt and dust. Leander gave a second thought about entering the room, thinking it would be better to watch from the door instead,

pouring himself another cup as he continued to look around. While he stood outside, he kept observing small details that may pique his interest later, but none of them stood out like the blanket over the bed. It was filled with tiny holes, surrounded by tiny seeps of dry blood. “Intriguing.” Leander thought as he tilted the teapot he held, with its final drop reflecting the hazy mirror of himself. He paused as he looked at his distorted face in the cup, letting out a deep breath before drinking.

The once thick fog Leander expected to see had turned into a vague mist. The winds carried muffled voices inside the room while the dust formed into vague figures resembling people. Slowly their faces became distinct as time went by, and the look of terror came in Leander’s face when he saw what was before him. Men who wore the same outfit as the previous memory were in the room holding down Nichol, who growled back at the people who restrained him. Gertrude was in the corner pleading the men to leave them alone, but all her cries were responded by fury by one of them.

“I said not to hit her!” Their leader said.

“But she won’t comply with us!” The man replied.

“As your superior, I’m ordering you to stop!”

However he ignored his words, instead, he pinned down Gertrude further.

“I...” Gertrude muffled.

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“I’ll do it!” Gertrude cried. “I’ll do it...”

All the men in the room paused as they looked at Gertrude. But the leader wasn’t all happy to see the sad state Gertrude and Nichol were in.

“All of you, get out!” The leader shouted before pointing over to the man who pinned Gertrude down. “and I’ll be having a word with you later.”

An order was issued to release all restrains. Nichol rushed to his mother as soon as he was free from the grasp of those who held him down, crying as he hid behind her.

“You have three days to comply, miss Holland. Or else, we might think you might be afflicted by the disorder too. We will return to see if you are doing well, we promise.” A man laughed as the leader clenched his fists in a fit of anger. Gertrude fell silent as she looked away. One by one, the men vanished against the winds, with only the leader of the group remaining inside as he bent down in front of Gertrude. The man took off his hood, and his silver hair draped down his coat.

“I apologize on their behalf. They call me Lark, I’m their leader.” He sighed. “I figured they would ask so rashly when they encountered the disorder for themselves. I’m sorry.”

“No! you’re lying, aren’t you?” Gertrude shook her head. “And I have never heard of such things!”

“It is inevitably true lady Holland. Believe me, I wouldn’t have wanted to ask you this either.”

“No. Please... Why are you all doing this...?”

“Don’t worry, I know it’s hard to take in. How about we’ll give you a week instead of three days?

That would be enough time, yes?”

“That’s not what I asked! And don’t give me that pitiful look! You’ve already taken my husband away!”

“Th-That was another group, not us! I could swear it to you!”

“Liar! All of you are liars! You are all the same!”

Lark shook his head before he stood and left Gertrude alone. With no way to give a proper expression of one’s sorrow, Lark’s face glued to the floor while he slowly walked towards the door. And before the memory could fade away, a gentle whisper

came from his mouth before everything completely vanished.

“I really wish there were another way, lady Holland.” Lark cried.
“I’m sorry I couldn’t stop them.”

Leander gave in a deep sigh before pouring the last cup of water. His sadness was enveloped by a state of nothingness, along with unending grief trailing behind it. The memory was a reminder of the dark nature of his work and a mirror that never shown who he was, but Leander was already used to it. He breathed again as he waited for his mind to be clear, unfazed by the heavy and grim recollection of a dark past he will finally witness. Leander closed his eyes before taking in the last cup.

The hazy winds started to form one last time, with Leander opening his eyes in anticipation of a tragic end, bracing himself for the revelation of Nichol’s fate.

“Mother, could you please sing my favorite song before I sleep?”
Nichol said.

“Of course,” Gertrude said as she cleared her throat while pulling up Nichol’s blanket.

“Mother, father where do I belong?”

Brother, sister will you hear my song?

Mother, father who am I among?

Brother, sister what did I do wrong?”

Gertrude continued to sing until Nichol could sleep, but Leander felt something wasn’t right. The tone of Gertrude’s voice gradually changed the harmless lullaby to a cry of sorrow, and when Nichol was visibly asleep, Leander paused as he witnessed the unthinkable. Suddenly, Gertrude slashed her son’s eyes with a swift strike from a small blade she hid from her waist, all before stabbing him multiple times on random parts of his body. With each stab, Gertrude’s façade of a strong expression quickly dwindled,

and her motherly demeanor was all but gone. Leander watched in terror as Gertrude exhausted her hands, giving in the final stab on Nichol's chest before leaving the blade embedded there. As Gertrude touched the face of Nichol's lifeless body, all the tears she held in for so long all came out in a single howl of sadness. Gertrude hugged her dead son, constantly cursing herself for being too weak. Slowly, the winds washed the sorrowful memory away, in a curtain call of a tragic end Leander never thought possible.

"So, did you finally see it all?" Gertrude asked.

"Yes..." Leander sighed. "Everything."

"Thank you... for listening."

When Leander turned his head, he saw Gertrude sitting on a corner sobbing while a figure loomed beside her. The lifeless body of Gertrude was hanging on the hallway's intersection, wearing Nichol's necklace around the neck.

"So, you hung yourself..."

"Yes..." Gertrude said. "After a few days from what I did, I couldn't stand by and live in my own selfishness anymore, so I decided to end it all."

"Intriguing... but what happened to your bodies?"

"Lark's men buried us, but it was only Lark who stayed behind to pay his respects," Gertrude said. "But... do you think Nichol would ever forgive me? I need your honest answer."

"Unsure. But, from what I've seen, I have no reason to give my own judgment. Either choice would end in the same way, and I think you have been braver for choosing a path almost no mother would take."

"Could there have been another way?"

"No. You could've ended up worse."

"I see... Thank you again for listening. But I think I've made you

stay longer than you may have wanted. I-I'm sorry for wasting your time... and hiding all this from you."

"No. I too have a fair share of things that I must apologize for hiding to you as well."

"W-What?"

"Gertrude. I know I have failed in bringing Nichol back to you, but... I was wondering if you would like to see Lilly again?"

"Y-You can?" Gertrude's head shot upwards. "B-But how?"

"Memories. Can I borrow your teapot?"

Part 5: Embedded Trust

Gertrude's head shot upwards, standing up for herself as quickly as she could. Filled with ecstatic hope, her sad expression had flipped almost instantly. Leander watched as the grim hallways filled with dreadful memories turn into a welcoming pathway that led to an offer of relief to both ends.

"Curious," Leander said. "Is it me or... the house shifts based on your current emotion?"

"Ah, so you've noticed," Gertrude replied. "Only when I will it."

"Intriguing."

When Leander walked back over to the living room, the interior changed again, only this time, it changed back to the same room when he came in yesterday, with all of the décors were as to how he remembers it.

"Gertrude. Please take a sit as I work on three memories."

"Three? And... how will this bring back Lilly?"

But Leander didn't respond. Instead, he silently gave back the blade inside the teapot to Gertrude, behold holding the teapot

within his hands. Water started flowing inside the teapot as Leander concentrated, filling the teacup with pure and clear waters. He then handed over the cup and teapot to Gertrude after he finished.

“I guess I’ll have to see for myself, right?” Gertrude said.
“Well, here goes nothing.”

As Gertrude drank from the cup, a sudden flash of light emerged within his mind, and the first memory immediately appeared in front of her. She found herself walking towards a place where everything was unfamiliar to her, with little to no greenery and towering structures were only things present. All was silent, but the sound of two children suddenly laughing behind her was all that it took for her attention to be piqued. But when Gertrude turned to look, she could only exude a face of shock and disbelief.

“Come on! Don’t be scared!” Lilly said.

“But... I can’t climb up further.” A boy replied.

“And I thought you wanted to be an aura hunter like your father? Hmph!”

“How does climbing trees even make me a hunter?”

“Eh, you’re just scared of heights, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are!” Lilly mocked him. “Do it then.”

“Alright, alright, I’m going up!”

Gertrude watched as Lilly deceive the boy into climbing a thin branch, only for it to break the moment he stepped on it. However, Lilly caught his arm before he could fall into a muddy pit.

“Ah... thank you for saving me.” The boy said.

“Who said I saved you?” Lilly smirked as she let go of the boy’s hand.

Gertrude watched as the poor boy fell into the muddy pit as Lilly howled in laughter, all before the memory flashed back into reality

again. Her mind spun around, trying to comprehend what she saw.

“That’s...!” Gertrude said.

“Yes. I’ve met her,” Leander replied. “And... I’m that boy who fell in the mud.”

“W-Where is she right now? Please... tell me!”

“Gertrude. Please, finish what you’re doing. I’ll explain the rest once you do.”

Gertrude nodded as she poured herself another cup before drinking it almost immediately. Her mind became hazy, and the second memory flashed before her in a luminous brilliance.

Again, Gertrude was unfamiliar with the place where she stood, however this time, she found herself in a room where she saw Lilly hiding in a corner while Leander was being scolded by someone else.

“Pssst. Hey.” Lilly whispered.

“What?” Leander replied.

“Run. I’ll distract them.” Leander looked over to his scolder before smirking. “Gladly.”

Suddenly, Lilly threw a glass vase towards the man who was scolding Leander, exploding clouds upon clouds of dust and dirt everywhere. She grabbed Leander’s arm as they both stormed outside the room.

“H-Hey! you might have gone a little too far on that.” Leander said.

“When have I gone too far?” Lilly replied.

The two ran laughing as they faded away into the distance, with the man left screaming as they cursed their names. Gertrude couldn’t help but laugh over her daughter’s mischievousness, all with a little hint of guilt after the memory had parted ways in her mind.

“I see you two had come along well.” Gertrude smiled.

“Indeed. It was annoying at first, but I’ve gotten used to it,” Leander replied. “Say, have you not told me that drinking those waters in quick succession would make you disoriented?”

“Well... Not this anomaly for me. They are full of surprises Amadeus.”

“Intriguing. And I thought surprises only ran in the family.”

“And I never figured you could make that joke either.”

“Perhaps. But you might find that out on the next memory.”

“W-What do you mean?”

But Leander didn’t reply, instead, he pointed towards the cup she held. Gertrude poured the last of the waters inside her cup but didn’t drink it yet. The silent response of Leander made her nervous, with the anticipation of finally finding what happened to her beloved daughter. But as soon as she drank the cup, a flash of light came in a second, and darkness enveloped her vision on the next. There was only an endless void embracing Gertrude all around, with nothing left to see nor feel, but amidst it, she began to hear faint voices.

“Lord Jethro. There’s nothing we could do.” A fair voice said.

“Is there any other way? I could give you anything!” another replied.

“With all due respect my lord, we have already told you to bring the freshest one possible.”

“There’s one from a day ago. Can’t that be used?”

“No my lord, we need it under the three-hour condition.”

“T-Three?! Then that means...”

“I’m sorry, but we really couldn’t do it without—”

Suddenly, a small and shrill voice shouted in the distance, with an unmistakable cry that echoed through the dark place where Gertrude stood.

“I’ll do it!” the voice said.

Gertrude fell in silence as the memory flashed away.

“Wait... what was that memory?” Gertrude asked.

“This,” Leander said as he unbuttoned his clothes in front of Gertrude, revealing a large scar on his chest to her.

“I was fatally wounded when I was young. The voices you heard were elven doctors and physicians telling my father that my heart needed to be replaced.”

Gertrude gasped. “So, that means...!”

“Lilly. She was the donor.”

Gertrude stood as she slowly reached out on Leander’s chest, but before she could even control herself, she threw herself to Leander, hugging him tightly as she cried. A heartfelt reunion was all Gertrude wanted, although it may not be the way she expected, she nonetheless cherished it. Leander wiped her tears as they began to steer the conversation to Gertrude’s curiosity about Lilly, and much less on anything else. Hours went by, and each answer made Gertrude ecstatic, with more questions only ever-growing from Leander’s never-ending stories about Lilly’s mischief. However, as much as Leander wanted to sate more of Gertrude’s curiosity about Lilly, he realized that he must stay for long.

“Gertrude. Mother. I have to go.” Leander said.

“I understand.” Gertrude smiled. “I’ve heard well enough. Thank you.”

A formal pleasantries was exchanged before the two hugged again, but as Leander opened the door, he stood before the three graves once again. The sensation he felt was now all clear, and the mystery behind his thought of a “misplaced” grave was now but answered. Leander looked around, and upon seeing a big enough stone nearby, he quickly etched Gertrude’s name on it and dragged it beside the leftmost grave. He gathered small stones and cleaned the trail left behind to keep the surroundings of the stone tidy,

but as soon as Leander finished placing his last pebble, a short memory suddenly flashed within Leander's mind.

"What is this?" Leander asked.

"A Freesia flower, it is a household symbol of the Hollands,," Lilly replied.

"Household? You're a noblewoman?"

"Pfft. Noblewoman? Me? Don't make me laugh!"

"W-Why did you give me this?" "Ah, well in my family, it is said that when you give someone that flower, it means you wholeheartedly trust that person, to a point that you are willing to risk your life for them."

"So... does that mean you trust me wholeheartedly?"

"No? Why should I?"

"But... you said—"

"I'm kidding of course! You're still as gullible, aren't you? You never change."

As Lilly laughed in his memory, Leander held the Freesia flower on his coat tightly. The sweet memory had all but connected the final piece of Leander's internal puzzle, at last realizing what Lilly wanted to show him on that same night. The moon gleamed on its petals the way he remembers when Lilly personally gave it to him, with the aroma bringing forth the same nostalgia he always sought out whenever he misses or remembers her. As Leander held the flower in his hand, Gertrude walked over to see what he was holding. But before Gertrude could get a good glimpse of it, Leander plucked the flower from its pin and placed it beside Gertrude's makeshift gravestone.

"Gertrude. I would like to pay respects to you as Lilly by offering this flower." Leander said.

Gertrude's mouth gaped as she gazed over the flower. "That's—!"

“Yes. Your family symbol... and I’m guessing it is also your favorite flower.”

“I... I can’t thank you enough.”

“Apologies. But I should be the one giving gestures of gratitude.”

“Why? I’ve never helped with anything at all.”

“Well, not exactly help but, more of a realization.”

“I see. Say, Amadeus. You’ve never told me your real name yet, have you?”

“Leander. Leander Cadleck.”

“C-Cadleck?! Well, I guess that explains why Lord Jethro was in your memories.”

“Yes. You know him.”

“I do. I once worked under him, but the noble houses under him were thrown into chaos when he disappeared. Though, if I may ask...what was your affiliation with him?”

“Son. I’m his son.”

“Eh?! T-Then... I am honored to meet anyone of the royal blood.” Gertrude bowed. “But how did Lilly even meet you?”

“Fate. I believe the events of the past are all entwined, and its entangled effect is what causes us to experience all things that are present, all in a single thread for reasons I could never comprehend. Though if I may... I would love to visit this place again, and perhaps... answer any questions you may have when I return. I hope you don’t mind.” Gertrude smiled.

“Definitely. I’d love to know more, and you are more than welcome to return.”

“Gertrude. Mother. Please take care.”

“Thank you again, Leander. You take care too, both for me and Lilly.”

It was all too sudden for Leander and Gertrude to say goodbye, but both knew they were bound to part either way.

Leander stood against the border of the anomaly with a breath of hesitation as he didn't want to leave. But when he finally mustered all his strength to let go of his supposed second home, he took a step forward, and as Leander turned, he saw the once lively place where he built memories in a day became a lifeless patch of ragged earth once more. However, as he was about to take another step, Leander sensed a presence waiting for him nearby, along with a sudden voice giggling under the cold shade of the trees before him.

“Aha! So we meet again mister! Or should I say... sister?”
Nichol said.

“Curious,” Leander asked. “So, you've heard?”

Nichol nodded. “Everything. I snuck up behind you two when you were sharing memories. Although, I'm sorry for trying to...you know. I really thought you would be like them.”

“Certainly. Apology accepted.”

“R-Really?! Well, does that mean you wouldn't mind playing again when you come back?”

Leander grinned. “Absolutely.”

“Yay! You really are the best, mister!”

“Nichol. Please take care of your mother, even though...”

“I understand mister. You don't need to tell me.”

“Gratitudes. I could only hope you will still see your mother the same way.”

Nichol sighed. “In time mister... in time. But... let me ask you something mister. Why do you think they made her do such a thing?”

“Apologies. But I cannot discreetly tell you.”

“You mean it’s not certain? Well... I guess we all do have our reasons, right mister?”

“Indeed. But I must say, even though you still bear a child’s spirit, I could tell you already have the mind of a mature man.”

Nichol shook his head over Leander’s flattery. When morning came, the silver shine of the moon slowly faded, replaced by a blinding beacon of pure radiance.

Nichol smiled as he felt the morning winds flow past him, with the coldness buried in his heart starting to warm up again. This meant that the grim light who watched vigilantly over the forest must now take his rest. Now with the morning breeze carrying over Nichol’s spirit through the deep forest, a whisper among the tailwinds stayed behind for Leander to hear.

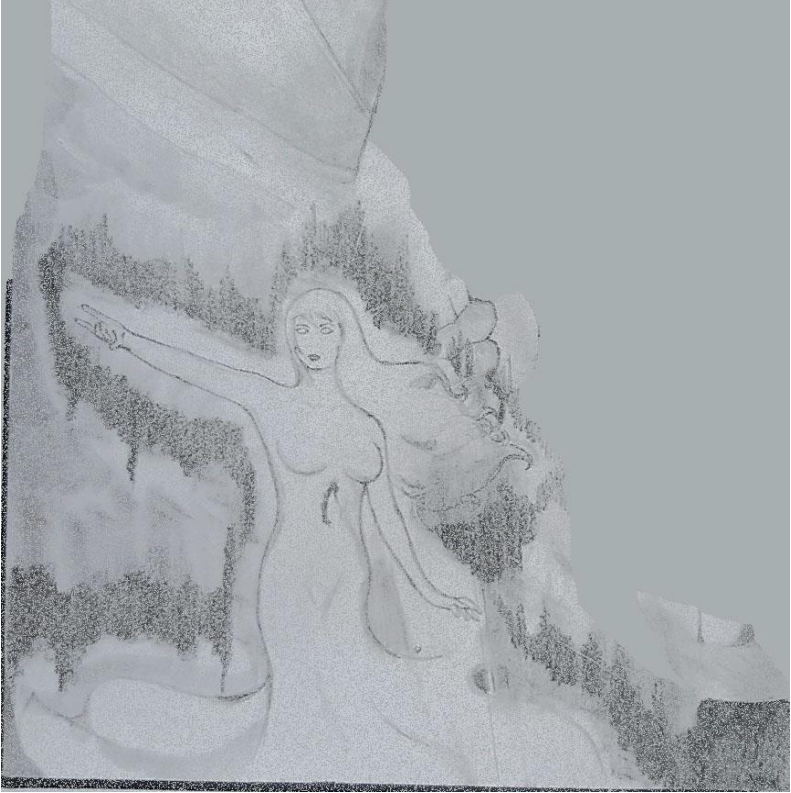
“Thank you, sister.”

Suddenly, an object carried by the winds landed over to Leander’s hands: A rope filled with a “generous” sprinkle of glitters, with a name etched on its tag embroidered in the middle. ‘Lilly’. Leander smiled, as he stared into the horizon.

“Gratitudes. Brother.” Leander whispered.

Leander wrapped Nichol’s necklace around his wrist before hiding them inside his sleeve. Although everything was settled, Leander felt something was missing. “Right... I almost forgot” he said as he reached out in his pocket to get his hunter’s insignia, pinning it on his coat proudly once again.

Abandoned **by Clifford Sychingiok**



Main Scene: Abandoned Construction Site

Page 1 (5 Panels)

Panel 1: An abandoned construction site of a mid-rise building, the structure is of I-beam construction (not known if it was discontinued due to the pandemic, lack of funding or something else) where all the metal columns and beams are exposed, at the sides are dilapidated construction vehicles. Rust from the structure starting to show some signs. The site is isolated where the streets are abandoned as if everyone moved away.

Narration: There are so many of them these days, abandoned sites. But this site in particular seemed bereft of its surrounding populace. Left to its stasis...Abandoned.

Panel 2: A group of people (construction workers) over a dozen is at the entrance of the main lobby. They brought along live native chickens. And at the center of the group is a geeky looking young foreman, well dressed. Holding an old book. The young man said "Shall we begin?" with all the men agreeing.

Narration: Amidst the growing rumors surrounding this place, a few still believe in the power of paper and coins. They try their opportunity, their faith in the abundant physical attainment drives their will.

Dialogue

Foreman: Shall we begin?

Panel 3 : The image of the construction workers placing the chicken in a "Katay" butchering position, as its neck is exposed ready to be chopped off.

Panel 4: The butcher knife and hand raised. The action of butchering. But no actual image of the chickens being severed.

SFX: The sound of steel chopping through flesh.

Dialogue

Worker: Gather the blood, try not to spill anything.

Panel 5: The men gathered the severed chicken and poured the blood on to the structure's columns and floor.

Note: For Panels 3 to 5 use small panels

Page 2 (6 Panels)

Panel 6: The foreman at the middle of the lobby, two candles from side to side. At the center there was an offering of food and a few silver nuggets. At the middle of the candle were burned incense as the smoke emanates to its distant surroundings.

Panel 7: Foreman opened the book, a very old looking book with old Chinese characters. As he meditated.

Dialogue:

Foreman: It's ready

Panel 8: The workers carried their sledge hammers and strikes the building columns where the streaks of blood from the severed animal. Creating a loud booming sound that echoed throughout the structure.

SFX: Sound of metal hammering to metal

Panel 9: The lights from the candles blew off.

Panel 10: Peoples faces with their eyes wide in a seeming fright.

Note: Panel 9 and 10 use small panels

Panel 11: In between the candle lights the lady ghost appeared to them, the ghost features an icy blonde hair, the garments covered in white, glowing in white. But just below her chest, there was a like a small rip where that area is completely black.

Dialogue:

Foreman: Who are you? Are you the spirit that dwells here?

Page 3 (4 Panels)

Panel 12: The Ghost with her hand pointing to a location in a huge debris, the image as part of the building structure collapsed.

Narration:

There was no answer, only an action pointing towards the huge debris.

Dialogue:

Foreman: (Thinking) Could her body be trapped inside the rubble?



Foreman: Everyone let's get these out.

Panel 13: The men clearing the rubble.

Panel 14: There was a huge blackhole like energy that was nearly quarter of the size of the entire building façade. And a pair of glowing red eyes.

Narration:

As they finally removed every underpinning, they failed to find anything that resembles a human trace. Except a huge dark hole. And before they could try to deduce what was the impossible,



a pair of RED GLOWING EYES emanates from the darkness.

Panel 15: A huge dragon appeared from the blackhole.

Dialogue:

Workers: Expletive words!

Page 4 (6 Panels)

Panel 17: The ghost at her backside as she addresses the workers, the reaction and faces of the people listening as they are bewildered, afraid, mesmerized.

Dialogue:

Ghost: Do not be afraid

Ghost: I came from a place very foreign from here, from a time passed I have yet to determine, though my ambition was briefly halted, it did not wane.

Panel 18: Ghost with the Dragon behind her. A glowing red on the Dragon's throat ready to breath fire.

Ghost: I implore you to join my cause...refuse and you will meet the fate of many others who have chosen that path.

Ghost: So...speak your mind.

Narration: Sometimes when the impossible crosses the imagination, the possible can happen!

Panel 19: One of the columns starts to crumble

Panel 20: The column falling down to the pavement

Panel 21: The column breaking apart, revealing square blocks with four circles on top.

Note Panel 19 to 21 Small panels only

Panel 22: A boy and a girl playing with "Lego" blocks, square and rectangle blocks which serves as the columns of the structure, there are pieces scatter which serves as the debris. At the center is a stuff toy dragon. The girl is holding the dragon while the "Lego" people are standing in front of it.

Dialogue:

Girl: So...speak your mind.

Narration:

Sometimes when the impossible crosses the imagination.

Baga

by Alliyah Vanessa Provide

Pumunta ako sandali sa palikuran upang paalalahanan ang aking sarili na wala akong kasalanan sa nangyari, kahit na may sapat na oras pa sanang hilahin ko siya palabas – ngunit hindi ko na ito nagawa dahil sa labis na takot.

Pagpasok ko pa lamang sa palikuran ay sinalubong ako ng kakaibang hanging hindi ko maipaliwanag, hanggang sa unti-unti akong nakaramdam ng paghigpit sa aking leeg. Pilit ko itong nilabanan, ngunit tila pati ang aking dibdib ay tinutulak na rin. Bigla ring nawala ang ingay sa loob ng evacuation center na dinig noong una hanggang sa palikuran. Tila may isinaksak na bulak sa aking tainga, at hindi ako makapagsalita dahil sa higpit ng pagkakasakal sa aking leeg. Napaupo ako.

Si Annie na siguro ang pinakamasuwerteng nilalang na nalikha. Lahat nalang ng kanyang makasalamuha ay nagugustuhan siya. Maging ang Nanay at Tatay, siya ang paborito. Kung sa bagay, sa isang tipikal na pamilya, talagang ang bunso naman ang laging pinapaboran. Dagdag pa rito, may sakit siya sa baga – kaya halos ang lahat ng atensyon ay nasa kanya. Sanay naman na ako, ngunit hindi ko maiwasang mainggit kung minsan. Ako pa nga ang napapagalitan at napapalo kapag napapagod si Annie, kesyo hindi ko raw binabantayan.

Dumating din ang panahong napagod na ako sa paulit-ulit na pagbulyaw sa akin sa tuwing aayain ko si Annie na maglaro ng basketbol, kaya’t nagpasya na lamang akong tulungan kahit papaano si Nanay sa pagtitinda ng barbecue habang pumapasada si Tatay. Ito ang paraan ni Nanay para makatulong sa mga gastusin sa bahay. Maghapon siyang nagpapaypay at nag-iihaw – hindi inaalintana ang usok at init.

Bago ako iniwanan ni Nanay sa lutuan ay pasigaw niya akong binilinan: “Huwag na huwag mong isasali ang kapatid mo dito. Kapag iyon hinika, ikaw ang malilintikan sa akin!” Hindi pa man nagpipilit si Annie ay napagalitan na agad ako. Nakakadagdag pa sa pagkairita ko ngayong araw na ito ang mga dati kong kalaro –

dito pa talaga sa harapan ko napiling maglaro ng basketbol, gayong dati ay nandoon kami sa kabilang court. Tila ba sinasadyang mang-inggit at ipakita sa akin na hindi nila kailangang magtiis sa init at magtinda para lamang mabuhay. Alam ko naman na ang iba ay may galit talaga sa akin noon pa. Sabi nila, kesyo baga raw kasi ako sa bola.

“Ate Kristine! Kailangan mo ba ng tulong?”

“O, bakit ka bumaba? Baka ako nanaman ang sisihin kapag hinika ka. Umakyat ka na.”

“Sige na Ate, hayaan mo na akong tumu—”

“Umakyat ka na nga! Hindi ko kailangan ang tulong mo at lalong ayokong mapagalitan ngayon! Akyat na!,” sigaw ko na halos kinagimbal ng mga nakarinig at nakakita sa amin. Isipin na nila kung ano ang nais nila. Mahal ko ang kapatid ko, ngunit labis ko rin siyang kinaiinggitan at kinasusuklaman. Kung minsan, halata namang pinapagod niya ang sarili niya para sa kanya mapunta ang atensyon at ako ang mapagalitan.

Matapos ang isang mahabang araw ng pagtitinda namin ni Nanay at ng pagtitimpi ng galit ko kay Annie, humiga na ako at bahagyang umiyak habang pinapatulog ang aking sarili.

Ang takdang oras ng paggising namin ni Nanay ay bandang alas-sais pa ng umaga, ngunit nagambala ang aming tulog ng bigla kaming may naamoy na tila nasusunog mula sa katabing bahay. Hindi nagtagal ay may itim na usok nang lumalabas mula sa kanilang bintana. Nang makita namin ito, agad kaming nagbuhos ng tubig sa aming katawan at dali-daling bumaba upang ligtas kaming makalabas. Mabilis na lumaki ang apoy – malapit na nitong madilaan ang gilid ng aming bahay na madaling masusunog sapagkat gawa lamang sa kahoy. Nagsisitakbuhan na ang mga kapitbahay, at tumakbo na kami palabas ng pintuan.

“Si Annie! Kristine ang kapatid mo, nasa itaas pa!,” sigaw ni Nanay na napahinto nang malapit na kaming lumabas sa pinto. Biglang pumasok sa aking isipan na ang bintana kung saan nagmula ang usok ay halos katapat lamang ng kuwarto ni Annie. Kahit pa unti-unti nang nilalamon ng apoy ang aming bahay ay sinubukan ko pa ring umakyat upang iligtas si Annie – ngunit unti-unti na ring gumagapang

ang apoy sa lapag hanggang sa mayroon nang tumumbang isang mahabang piraso ng kahoy.

Kitang-kita ko ang balingkinitang pigura ni Annie sa likod ng apoy. Nakatayo lamang siya, hindi alam kung paanong ililigtas ang sarili. Sigurado akong hirap na siyang huminga hindi lamang dahil sa kanyang hika, kundi dahil balot na balot na rin ng usok ang buong bahay. Kaunting hakbang na lamang ay lalamunin na rin ako ng patuloy na gumagapang na apoy. Natigalgal na lamang ako.

Biglang bumagsak ang nasusunog na malaking bahagi ng kisame sa gitna namin ni Annie. *Kailangan ko na lamang lumabas mula rito.* Bumulong ako ng patawad, at agad na bumaba.

Binubuo ko na sa aking isipan ang mga paliwanag na aking sasabihin habang papunta kami sa evacuation center. Iniisip ko na baka ninanais nilang tawirin ko ang nagbabagang apoy para lamang mailigtas ang kanilang paboritong anak. Ngunit sa aking pagkagulat, hindi na nila ako tinanong tungkol dito – ni hindi pinag-usapan kahit minsan ang nangyari kaninang madaling araw. Pinipilit naming lahat na magbawi ng tulog kaya kahit mainit at masikip sa evacuation center dahil sa sobrang dami ng tao, hindi na lamang namin ito inalintana.

Nagawa kong matulog ng ilang minuto, ngunit tila binabangungot ako. Sa tuwing ididilat ko ang aking mga mata ay nakikita ko si Annie. Kitang-kita ko siya sa bawat sulok, sa bawat mukha ng mga taong naglalakad, at maging sa dingding ng palikuran kung saan sana ako maghihilamos upang matauhan. Ramdam ko pa rin ang nagbabagang galit niya sa akin, sapagkat natanto niyang hindi ko kayang magbuwis ng buhay para sa kanya.

“Tama na! Tulong!,” mahina at pabulong na sambit ko habang naramdaman ko ang isang mahigpit na sakal. Napaupo ako sa sobrang higpit – tila may mga kukong bumabaon sa aking leeg at idinidiin ako sa inidoro. Sa gilid ng inidoro ay may nakita akong isang maliit na bagay. Pilit ko itong inabot sa pag-asang makatutulong ito sa akin.

Isang *lighter*. Naalala ko pa ang galit ni Nanay at Tatay nang malamang sinadya pala ang sunog kaninang madaling araw. Ang sabi ng mga kapitbahay, maililit na raw ang bahay ni Mang Junio sa susunod na linggo, kaya’t sinunog na lamang niya ito gamit

ang *lighter* at gaas. Nagmumura at nagbabaga sa galit si Tatay. Hindi raw sana siya mawawalan ng anak kung nag-iisip lamang ng diretso si Mang Junio.

Hindi ko maisip kung ano ang gagawin ko sa *lighter* na hawak ko, ngunit nararamdaman kong pahigpit na nang pahigpit ang sakal sa akin. Tila bibigay na rin ang aking tadyang sa sobrang diin ng pagkakadagan dito. Kahit anong sikap kong sumigaw ay walang lumalabas na tinig mula sa akin. Hindi ko na alam kung ako ba'y nagdedeliryo na lamang, ngunit mistulang nakikita ko ang mukha ni Annie sa dingding na nasa aking harapan. Nanlilisik ang kanyang mga mata.

“Annie, parang awa mo na, patawarin mo ako, hindi ko na kaya,” bulong ko habang binubuksan ang *lighter*. Marahil ay nais niyang maramdaman ko ang sakit at hirap na naranasan niya sa sunog, kaya’t pinasya kong idarang ang nakabukas na *lighter* sa isang daliri ko. Hindi man ako makasigaw kahit labis na ang hapdi at sakit, unti-unti namang lumuluwag ang sakal.

Nang muli na akong nakakahinga nang maayos, unti-unti ko na ring inalis sa pagkakadarang ang aking daliri sa apoy. Ngunit mistulang ikinagalit ito ni Annie. Bumalik ang higpit ng sakal at ngayon, namanhid na ang aking buong katawan. Hindi ko na nararamdaman ang aking mga binti maging ang tsinelas na suot ko. Nagpasya akong buksang muli ang *lighter*, ngunit bigla itong hinampas mula sa aking kamay patungo sa mga oxygen tank na nakasalansan sa gilid ng palikuran.

“Diyos ko, may sunog nanaman!”

Beyond the Gate

by Celina Peñaflorida

PAGE ONE

EXT. DEAD-END STREET - DAY

A man in his 20s, ADAM, is driving through a street with a row of houses on the right, and a long creek on the left. At the end of this street stands a tall, concrete dead-end wall.

As he drives further, he can see a small pedestrian gate in the middle of this dead-end wall - just wide enough for one person to pass through.

Adam stops the car just in front of the wall, looks to his right, to a large 2-storey ancestral house - his grandparents' old house.

INT. ANCESTRAL HOUSE – AFTERNOON

The house is bare except for a couple of furniture and boxes of Adam's stuff.

While Adam arranges his things, he's on a call with his mother.

MOTHER: Are you sure you don't need any more stuff? You don't even have a refrigerator.

ADAM: I have a mini ref. And yes, I'm sure. It'll only be for a month until I earn enough to get my own place. This is actually a nice house, Ma. Why did lolo and lola move back then?

MOTHER: I don't remember. I know we used to live there but then we moved. I was too young then and I completely forgot about it. I didn't even know they kept the house all this time, until, well you know. Since your lolo—

ADAM: Yeah.

Adam stops when he gets a whiff of smoke inside the house. He keeps sniffing, trying to locate where the smell is coming from.

MOTHER: What's wrong?

ADAM: Nothing. I just smell smoke.

MOTHER: Did you leave the stove on?

ADAM: I don't have—

MOTHER: See! You don't even have a stove.

ADAM: ...yet. I'll be fine! Oh it's gone. Maybe someone was just burning leaves outside or something. It's fine. I'll be fine.

EXT. BALCONY – SUNSET

Adam goes out to the balcony, getting fresh air, looking at the view.

From this part of the house, he can see what's beyond the dead-end wall.

Adam is surprised to find out that their street's road actually continues on to the other side where it leads to a large, derelict commercial center just a short distance away from the house. It looked like the project was abandoned while still under construction. A shame since it would've been a beautiful place.

Adam sees someone pacing in front of the building - a man whose face he can't see. The man would stop, look up at the building, then would grip his hair in frustration. Then he would pace again. The man did this over and over, creeping Adam out.

PAGE TWO

INT. BEDROOM, ANCESTRAL HOUSE – NIGHT

Adam is asleep when he's woken up by loud voices from outside. He couldn't clearly hear what was being said but it sounded like people fighting. He tried to ignore it at first but the voices kept getting louder and louder and louder until BANG! BANG! BANG! Like fists pounding on something metal.

Adam jumps out of his bed, rushes towards the balcony to see what the commotion is about when he sees thick smoke coming from outside.

Adam hears the shouting voices again, now clearer.

VOICES: FIRE! FIRE!

Adam runs to the balcony to see a HUGE FIRE where the abandoned commercial center should have been but in its stead is a large SHANTY TOWN ON FIRE. The fire rapidly consuming the houses in its path, making its way to the direction of Adam's house.

Adam is about to dial on his phone when he hears another BANG! BANG! BANG! Followed by frantic shouts.

VOICES: OPEN THE GATE! OPEN THE GATE! THE GATE!

EXT. ANCESTRAL HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Adam sprints out of the house towards the dead-end wall. He stops when he notices that the rusty pedestrian gate is chained shut.

He hears the shouts louder, their voices crying out, desperate.

ADAM: Please wait! I'll try to open the gate!

Adam gets a hammer and hits the padlock over and over and over almost crying out of frustration as the smoke gets thicker, the air gets hotter, the wailing grows louder.

Finally, the padlock is broken, the chains untangled. Adam opens the gate and HUNDREDS OF FACES made up of black, thick smoke rush through, pushing Adam to the ground, almost suffocating him.

Adam cautiously opens his eyes and looks at the open gate to find no one there.

PAGE THREE

EXT. BEYOND THE WALL – NIGHT

Confused, Adam passes through the gate. He is greeted by darkness and silence.

The banging and the screaming had stopped. There was no crowd. No shanty town. No fire. But the smell of something burning still permeated the air.

Adam continues down the road and finds the same abandoned commercial center he saw from the balcony that morning. And the same MAN he saw pacing in front of it.

As Adam approaches the man, he notices that the man was old. Maybe in his 80s. This old man was muttering to himself, pacing back and forth, crying.

OLD MAN: I told them to leave. They didn't listen. I told them.

The old man kept repeating to himself.

ADAM: Excuse me po. I don't know what's happening but did you see a fire here? I woke up to people shouting 'fire' but—

OLD MAN: I told them! They should have left! They didn't listen!

ADAM: What are you talking about?

But the old man was rushing away from him and the building.

EXT. GATE – NIGHT

Adam goes back to the other side of the wall and sees an OLD LADY by his house, watching him.

OLD LADY: Hello hijo. What are you doing there?

ADAM: I thought I saw—Well, I thought I heard shouting.

OLD LADY: You must already be Nenang's apo right? It's your first time staying here? I'm Lydia, I live next door. I used to be close to your lola before they moved away. Though we kept in touch but it wasn't the same. Still, I couldn't blame them for leaving this place.

ADAM: Did something happen?

LYDIA: There was a huge fire here many years ago. You weren't even born yet. It was very devastating. A lot of families died there.

ADAM: Why? What happened?

MONTAGE

As Lydia and Adam's conversation continue, we see images of Adam trying to find out what happened many years ago.

***LYDIA:** They said it was a candle. Some said it was from someone cooking. I don't know. We never did get a straight answer. But what I do know was that after the fire, the few survivors weren't allowed to come back in that area. And after just a few months, that commercial center was already being built but for some reason, it was never finished.*

- Except for one very short article without too much detail, it was like there was a media blackout about the tragedy.
- But Adam found a lot of promotional posters and articles about the commercial center.
- Adam looks at his mother's childhood photos when their family was still living in the house. There was no dead-end wall back then. The shanty town and the houses were all on the same street.

EXT. ANCESTRAL HOUSE – NIGHT

ADAM: I saw an old man there. This morning. And again, a while ago.

LYDIA: Oh? Better not go there again. I don't know what's in that place but it's better not to disturb or mind it.

Lydia looks behind Adam and sees the broken padlock and chain on the ground.

LYDIA: You should get a new padlock. Good night hijo.

Lydia goes back inside, leaving Adam with more questions.

PAGE FOUR

EXT. BALCONY, ANCESTRAL HOUSE - DAY

Adam is looking out at the commercial center. The same old man pacing in front of it.

Adam is on a call with his mother.

MOTHER: Do you want to come back here?

ADAM: No, it's fine. I think I'll stick it out for a bit. Ma, don't you find it weird that lolo kept this place?

MONTAGE

- Adam chains and locks the gate again.
- Adam still gets a whiff of something burning at random times.
- Adam is still sometimes startled awake by the same loud screams and banging he heard the first night. He covers his ears with a pillow and tries to sleep.
- Adam opens the chained pedestrian gate, making sure it stays open, as Lydia watches disapprovingly.
- That night, Adam sleeps peacefully as smoke slowly filters in the room

BFFs

by Phoebe De Leon

PAGE 1

Panel 1: Establishing shot (slightly upwards angle from the floor) of a winding hallway inside the main character's home. The hallway is dimly illuminated by an almost burnt-out fluorescent ceiling light and from this angle, you can see large portraits hanging on both walls. In these portraits are people with indistinguishable—faded—faces and landscapes. There is a door at the end of the hallway that is slightly ajar.

Panel 2: Close on a pair of Chuck Taylors tapping on the wooden floorboards. (SFX, floating letters: tap, tap, tap, tap). The floorboards creak under the light pressure. From this angle, the inscriptions on the portraits are slightly readable. "**Verus amor ad matrem suam**"* "**Solus amor maternus...**"* There is a small handprint imprinted on the bottom corner of the portrait nearest to the character. It looks like a child's.

*Note: only the emboldened words can be clearly read. The rest must look more obscure but not too obscure.

Disembodied voice: Enjo, *come on!*

Panel 3: Medium shot (eye-level) from behind the character's head. Only his ear and a small, small portion of his head are seen from this angle. In front of him is still the dark hallway. (SFX, floating letters: Kreeeeee....).

Panel 4: Long shot (slightly upwards angle from the floor) of the hallway from the other end of the corridor. There is more light at the other end of the hallway than in this end. The character wearing the Chuck Taylors is a child and from behind, you can see him wearing khaki shorts that don't go below his knee but are obviously too large for him and a plain shirt with a towel hanging out of it to absorb his sweat. The child is jogging away, farther, and he stands a little to the left of the hallway as if making space for someone on his right. The door that was slightly ajar is now closed shut.

Panel 5: Extreme close-up shot of the child covering his eyes with his hands. His hands have scratches and small calluses on them from rough playing outdoors and his hands are obviously children's hands. There are beads of sweat forming on his hairline. The child is counting.

Child 1: Five... Six... Seven...

Child 2: Ready or not, here I come!

PAGE 2

Panel 1: Extreme close-up shot of the child's chest region. (SFX, floating letters: *huff, huff*). His arm is outstretched as if reaching out for someone to tap their shoulder. His physique looks like a 7-year-old's.

Child: Tag! You're it!

Panel 2: Medium close-up shot of the child's legs and feet. He is crouching over a line of ants and a heap of pebbles with a stick in his hand for poking the ground. (SFX, floating letters: *smush, squish*). The heap of pebbles beside him is arranged neatly into an almost pyramid. He seems to be crouching beside someone given how he is positioned slightly facing his left and how he's made enough space for a person to occupy. His body looks like a 10-year-old's.

Child: Do you think ants have best friends?

Panel 3: Medium close-up shot of the child lying down on grass at night. There is, once again, space large enough for another person his size but no one is there. (SFX, floating letters: crickets and night wind). His arms are behind his head, acting as a cushion, and his head is slightly turned to his left. There is a smile on his face and a sparkle in his eyes, as well as random splotches of dirt. There are also fireflies hovering above him, illuminating small patches of grass.

Child 1: I've never had a proper friend, you know, and sometimes I'm scared that I'd never have one until I die.

Child 2: But you're here.

Panel 4: Medium close-up shot of the child lying down with space for his imaginary friend but angled from the ground. Only his back and silhouette can be seen. It is cloudy but the moon is peeking through, slightly illuminating the sky. The fireflies look like stars and the treetops are swaying with the wind. (SFX, floating letters: *swoosh*).

Child 1: I just hope you don't leave like my mother did when I was a newborn. Father said she had to go somewhere.

Child 2: Elsewhere.

Panel 5: The child is dozing off and the sky above him starts to diminish as his eyes close. The last thing he sees is the moon.

Child: I'd want to meet her, though. Just once is enough. And, I hope I could meet you, too...

PAGE 3

Panel 1: Medium close-up shot of the child holding cards in his hands. He is once again positioned to the right of the panel and to his left is a pile of cards laid neatly on the table, face down. (SFX, floating letters: *shuffle*). There is a deck in between. Scattered on the table are cookie crumbs, especially around the cookie bowl next to the child. His hands look larger, rougher.

Floating text: *What else can we do?*

Panel 2: Wide shot of the child, now obviously bigger and older, grabbing books from a shelf. He is now standing center frame as if he no longer is making space for another person beside him. The child is also wearing different clothes now—sneakers, joggers, a flannel shirt with a hoodie inside. From this perspective, a table can be seen and on it are several open books. There are comics and novels.

Floating text: *You're growing up too fast.*

Panel 3: Very wide shot (from behind) of the boy entering school premises. The location is full of life and noise, something that he isn't used to given how he was raised in borderline isolation. He is surrounded by people, some of whom seem to be waving at him. The boy has his arm raised, poised to return the wave.

Floating text: *I thought you wanted to meet me.*

Panel 4: Medium close-up shot (from behind) of the boy center frame but this time, there are actual people with him. There is a girl to his left and a boy on the right. The boy's arm is slung around the girl's shoulders and the boy on his right is slightly turned such that his face is seen from behind. He is making funny faces. They seem to be laughing together.

Floating text: *Where is my place in your life now?*

Panel 5: All black, only text.

Why can't I keep you?

Disembodied voice: You'll be old enough to venture into the bigger world, son. I went to boarding school during my teenage years and so did my father and his. When you come of age, we'll send you off for a few years.

PAGE 4

Panel 1: Medium shot of the child, now a boy, behind a birthday cake with a lit "15" candle. There are streamers and photos plastered on the wall behind him. In these photos are two figures, a father and his son. There is a pile of gifts next to the child and the gift tag attached to the present at the bottom of the pile seems to be labelled *From Mom* but the writing is very obscure. Around the child, hands can be seen clapping to the tune of *Happy Birthday*.

Panel 2: Extreme close-up shot of the child blowing the candle out from the cake. (SFX, floating letters: *fwooo*).

Panel 3 All black, text only.

Stop growing older!

Panel 4: Medium shot of the boy and his father in earnest conversation. They are in what seems to be a study. Only the back of the boy's head is seen whereas the father is seen in front view from his chin to his torso. His hands are folded on the table in front of him and he is sitting on a cushioned chair before a large window.

Father: The arrangements have been made with the headmaster of the boarding school you are to stay in.

Son: When do I leave?

Father: In a week's time.

Panel 5: The boy stands up from his seat, his shadow cast over his seated father. He looks bigger, older, more mature.

Panel 6: Close-up shot of the boy peering back at his father. There is sadness in his eyes.

Floating text: *What will it take to make you stay?*

PAGE 5

Panel 1: All black, text only.

There's something cold on my stomach... Another one on my neck...

Panel 2: All black, text only.

SFX, floating letters: *slash! squelch!*

Panel 3: Close-up shot of the boy waking up suddenly from his sleep. There is fear in his eyes and on his forehead are beads of sweat. (SFX, floating letters: heavy breathing).

Floating text: *What...*

Panel 4: Medium shot of the boy hunched over in bed. His face is buried in his hands. The boy's hair is ruffled and his shirt seems to be drenched in sweat. His room's door is wide open and from it, a portrait of a woman can be seen slightly.

Floating text: *...did I dream of?*

Panel 5: Wide shot of the boy's home with the window seen at the top left of the frame. In the foreground, he is seen to be wearing a baseball glove and is poised to throw a ball at an unseen partner. He looks energetic and happy with what he is currently doing. Peering closely at the window, there is an obscure figure standing behind and looking through it. It looks like a woman.

Panel 6: Medium shot (from behind) of the boy in the same hallway seen when the story began. He is walking toward the other end of the hallway, toward the light. In the foreground is the back of a woman who seems to be observing—following—him.

Panel 7: Medium shot of the boy asleep in his bed from the same angle as Panel 4. The room's door is open but the portrait of the woman is no longer seen. Instead, there is a figure sitting by the bed. The figure's hand is on the boy's chest.

Floating text 1: *You're leaving tomorrow...*

Floating text 2: *I'm not losing you again.*

PAGE 6

Panel 1: Close-up shot of the boy stirring from his sleep. There are beads of sweat on his forehead and splotches of blood near his eyes. He is struggling to keep his eyes open but you can see fear in them. (SFX, floating letters: labored breathing). The panel has a heavy vignette around the edges.

Floating text: *Where am I?*

Panel 2: Medium shot of a male figure holding a bloody child swaddled in a blanket from the boy's perspective. The boy is lying down in bed. The figure and the child it is holding are blurry but the man resembles the boy's father—only younger. (SFX, floating letters: baby's crying). There is a heavy vignette around the panel.

Floating text: *What am I doing?*

Panel 3: Close-up shot of the male figure approaching the boy in bed. Only the figure's torso is seen. His hands are gloved and bloody—his right hand is gripping the bed's railing and his left is holding a large scalpel. His hands are shaking slightly. There is a heavy vignette around the panel but the figure's silhouette is clearer now compared to the previous panel.

Male figure 1: I have no use for you now.

Male figure 2: He will never know who you are. *What you are.*

Panel 4: All black, text only.

SFX, floating letters: *slash! squelch!*

Panel 5: Close-up shot of the boy waking up suddenly from his sleep. There are beads of sweat on his forehead. His eyes are bloodshot. (SFX, floating letters: heavy breathing).

Floating text: *NO!*

PAGE 7

Panel 1: Medium shot of the boy hunched over in bed. The room is dimly lit, the only source of light being the bedside lamp. The boy's hair is ruffled and his shirt seems to be drenched. His sheets are drenched in blood, especially around his stomach and crotch region, and there is a deep slash on his jugular. It is oozing blood. His room's door is wide open and from it, a woman can be seen leaving. She is wearing what seems to be a hospital gown drenched in blood.

Panel 2: Close-up shot of the boy's shaking hands. The bloodstained sheets can be seen behind his hands. His hands are stained with blood, too much of it that the blood is dripping from his fingertips.

Floating text: *Who was I in that dream?*

Panel 3: Medium shot of the room's door. The father is entering the room, looking obviously disheveled and sleepy. There is a look of alarm on his face as he sees his child drenched in blood in his bed.

The woman's head can be seen behind his entering figure.

Father: Who *did* this to you?

Panel 4: Medium shot of the boy in bed, this time with the blood stains slightly faded. There is fear in his widened eyes as he points towards the door behind his father weakly. (SFX, floating text: shaky breathing). He is *shaking* violently.

Panel 5: Extreme close-up shot of the father's face. He has now turned his head to peer behind him and he is frightened by what he saw. His eyes are wide—scared and almost teary. Beads of sweat are forming on his head.

Floating text: *All these years...*

Panel 6: All black, text only.

...you never left.

PAGE 8

Panel 1: Close-up shot of hands fumbling with luggage. It is still dark outside but there are only a few minutes left before dawn.

Panel 2: Medium shot of the father in the middle of a phone call. He is turned away from the viewer and is visibly shaking. The boy can be seen in the background, sitting by the stairs with his face buried in his hands.

Father 1: Yes, a taxi. I need a taxi.

Father 2: No, I don't care who it is—just send one over here *now*.

Panel 3: Medium shot of the boy now raising his head. His eyes show that he is extremely rattled by what had happened. He, too, is shaking.

Boy 1: What did you do?

Boy 2: In my dream, you—

Panel 4: Extreme close-up shot of the father's face. He is glaring and sweaty.

Father: You wouldn't understand.

Panel 5: Medium shot of the boy now standing, eyebrows furrowed and eyes spilling with confusion and frustration.

Boy: After I was born, what did you *do*?

Panel 6: The boy and his father are now face to face. The father is staring his son down as he tries to stop his hands from shaking by his side. The boy is glaring back at his father defiantly.

Father: *Stop prying.*

PAGE 9

Panel 1: Very wide shot of the home from the other side of the street. There is a taxi pulling up in front of the house gates. The sun is now out and there are birds flying around.

Floating text: *You're taking him again.*

Panel 2: The father is dragging the boy by the wrist towards the waiting cab. The boy's face cannot be seen from this angle but the father's shows anxiety. The boy is trying to wrest himself free from his father's grip.

Panel 3: The cab door is opened. The driver looks back from his seat looking slightly concerned but generally nonchalant. He looks somewhere around sixty and is wearing a newsboy hat. A rosary dangles from the rearview mirror and there is a small figure of Mother Mary on the dashboard.

Driver: Top of the morning to you, sirs. Where to?

Father: Take him to the port, please.

Panel 4: The driver turns and faces ahead, his back to the father and boy. His left hand is gripping the steering wheel while his right hand touches the rosary dangling from the rearview mirror.

Driver: Come on, then.

Panel 5: The boy finally manages to wrest free from his father's grip, sending his luggage flying. The suitcase opens and his clothes lie in a heap on the grass. The father is shocked.

Panel 6: The boy shakily stands and positions himself to walk away from the cab and from his father. He is breathing heavily and there is a crazed look in his eyes as his lips curl into a snarl.

Panel 7: The boy doubles over and collapses on the ground, arms wrapped around his torso as if in pain. There seems to be blood around his torso similar to when he woke up from his dream.

Panel 8: Medium shot from the boy's perspective. The father is standing over him and the driver exited his cab to look at what happened. The boy is blacking out and his ears are ringing. There is a heavy vignette around the panel and the figures the boy is seeing are very, very blurred.

Floating text: *Stay here.*

PAGE 10

Panel 1: Wide shot of the home's parlor from the perspective of the second floor foyer. The father and his son are sitting in a circle around a table with what seems to be a priest and old lady. The boy is slightly restrained. There are candles lit on the table alongside open books with inscriptions. There are talismans, too. The parlor is well lit by the open windows and the chandelier but there is a darkness lingering in the room.

Old lady: I sense a feminine energy—a malevolent one, at that.

Panel 2: Blurred. Medium shot of a pregnant woman lying dead on a gurney with her clothes drenched in so, so much blood. Her throat has been slit and her eyes are frozen in fear. Her hands are lying limp—one dangling over the edge of the bed and the other placed on her stomach. There is a man holding a child by her side but the man is turned away from her. He, too, is drenched in blood.

Floating text 1: *Is there anyone in your family, a female, that met a gruesome death? A mother, a daughter? Anyone who may have any reason to latch onto your child?*

Floating text 2: *No.*

Panel 3: Medium shot of the boy now strangling his father. The boy's eyes are crazed and his lips are formed into a snarl. He is screaming in an airy, wheezing voice—this is not his voice. The priest is behind him and is trying to pry him off of his now choking father. The old lady is extremely alarmed, her hand clenched tightly around a wooden cross.

Boy: *You... killed... me! Killed me! Took my son!*

Panel 4: Very wide shot of the son throwing his father onto the floor a few feet away. The father hit his head hard on the marble floors and he is struggling to stay awake. The priest is reaching out for the boy with a bible on hand and the old lady is now standing from her seat. There is fury in her face.

Old lady: *Get out of that boy!*

Panel 5: Extreme close-up of the boy's bloodshot and glaring eyes. There are tears forming. The hair framing his face, however, looks like a woman's. He is still speaking in the same airy, wheezing voice.

Boy: *You are not taking my son from me!*

Panel 6: The father has now regained his strength and consciousness. He throws himself at the distracted boy and keeps him at a chokehold. The father looks guilty—extremely guilty—and he is sobbing. The boy is struggling against the father's chokehold and he is clawing at his father's arms.

Father: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*

Panel 7: The boy's eyes are rolled back into his head and he is salivating in his father's grip. He's breathing heavily, too. He is, however, still fighting to break free from the chokehold. The priest and the old lady are surrounding the pair.

The priest has placed his rosary around the boy's neck and the old lady has her hand on the boy's head.

Priest: We command you, begone and fly far from the souls made by God in His Image and redeemed by the Precious Blood of the Divine Lamb!

Old lady: Leave the boy—*now!*

Panel 8: The old lady still has her hand on the boy's head as his face is contorted into a scream. He is convulsing.

Panel 9: Medium shot of a newborn being held by his father. The father's arms are bloody and so is the child. He is swaddled in a blanket similar to the one the boy uses in his room. The child is crying. Behind the father, a dead woman can be seen lying on a gurney.

Floating text: *Mother!*

PAGE 11

Panel 1: Long shot (slightly upwards angle from the floor) of the hallway from the other end of the corridor. There is more light at the other end of the hallway than in this end. The character wearing the Chuck Taylors is a child and from behind, you can see him wearing khaki shorts that don't go below his knee but are obviously too large for him and a plain shirt with a towel hanging out of it to absorb his sweat. There is a woman walking beside him. There is a heavy vignette around this panel.

Floating text: *Mother...*

Panel 2: Extreme close-up shot of the child's chest region. His arm is outstretched as if reaching out for someone to tap their shoulder. He is chasing a woman. There is a heavier vignette around this panel compared to P1.

Panel 3: Medium close-up shot of the child's legs and feet. He is crouching over a line of ants and a heap of pebbles with a stick in his hand for poking the ground. The heap of pebbles beside him is arranged neatly into an almost pyramid.

He is sitting beside a woman. There is a heavier vignette around this panel compared to P2. The illustration is blurred.

Panel 4: Medium close-up shot of the child lying down beside a woman but angled from the ground. Only the backs and silhouettes can be seen. It is cloudy but the moon is peeking through, slightly illuminating the sky. The fireflies look like stars and the treetops are swaying with the wind. There is a heavier vignette around this panel compared to P3 and the illustration is extremely blurred.

Floating text: *...when will you come home again?*

Panel 5: Medium shot from the boy's perspective. He is opening his eyes. The father has his face buried in his son's hair. The priest and old lady stand over the pair, hands holding sacred items and talismans. There is a light vignette around the panel. The people the boy is seeing are hazy but he can make out their silhouettes and some of their facial features.

Deadline

by Mara Fabella

I.

The sun was starting to set as Daniel made his way toward his new home, carrying a huge box in his arms and his phone sandwiched in between his cheek and shoulder. He was always one for multitasking.

LINDA: Long story short, they loved it. We sold out within the first 24 hours. Fastest sell-out they've reported in months.

DANIEL: (*awkwardly pushes the door open with his foot*) All right! So when should we start talking the next project?

LINDA: Huh... maybe after that weekend getaway to some posh hotel by the beach?

DANIEL: ... I didn't –

LINDA: You really are Mr. All Work and No Play. Dan, you're the fastest writer I've ever worked with – and don't get me wrong, it's great... but it's also kinda worrying. Do you sleep? Breathe? I mean, aren't you in the middle of moving houses?

DANIEL: Officially moved in right...

He fumbled with the front door lock until it finally clicked shut.

DANIEL: ... now.

He walked past the foyer into the living room, oblivious to the light overhead that flickered right as he passed under it.

LINDA: *Mazel tov!* When's the housewarming?

DANIEL: (*chuckles*) Seriously, Linda. I need... something. You know me, I need to work on tight schedules.

LINDA: Only you'd be crazy enough to choose sleepless cramming nights over that beachside hotel.

DANIEL: Others get inspired by a vacation; I get inspired by... the chase.

LINDA: The *chase*?

DANIEL: Of the deadline.

LINDA: Okay, you know what? You wanna get a head start on your next manuscript, be my guest. But I'm not giving you any deadline just yet. I want you to enjoy yourself for once. You deserve it. Take it easy.

DANIEL: I—

LINDA: (*slowly*) *Easy.*

DANIEL: ... All right.

She hung up. He fumbled his keys awkwardly as he looked around at his new home. Full of polished floors, partly furnished walls, the promise of a new life, and...boxes. For the first time in what felt like years, life was slowing down.

And Daniel wasn't sure he liked it. He pondered with an unsatisfied grimace. Behind him, the light continued to flicker ever so quietly.

II.

Daniel must have sat for hours, staring blankly at his equal blank laptop. He was basking in the dim light of his new home office, the screen illuminating his sleep-deprived face. Even with the freedom his agent had now given him, all he could bring himself to do was watch that cursor blink into oblivion.

He had finished unpacking within a few days, and his house already looked like it had been lived in for a few months. Daniel never thought of himself as a workaholic. He just liked being busy. He liked churning out pages and pages on a deadline-induced adrenaline rush. In fact, he didn't really know who he was without it.

He closed his laptop and chugged down another beer, certain it wouldn't be his last of the night.

DANIEL: *Fucking beach.*

Daniel made his way to the kitchen. Whether to make himself coffee for another overnight screen-staring binge or to get another beer, he didn't know.

He passed by the light in the foyer, which once again flickered. The light had been flickering on and off each night since he moved in. Slightly awoken now at the thought of something to do, he grabbed a stool and got to work. He was suddenly aware of how quiet it became.

As he moved closer to the bulb, it flickered even more. Until finally, it died out. It took Daniel a few moments to notice her, watching from the doorway. All he could make out was her gaunt silhouette and ghostly pale skin. Her hair was matted and tangled, her eyes bloodshot and intense as they seethed in silent anger. Even in the dark, he could tell something was wrong with her, as if she were flickering in and out herself, faint and wraith-like one moment, clear as death the next.

Daniel barely managed to catch himself as he fell off the stool. He slowly raised his hands, unsure of what to do. He tried to say something, or even just scream. All he could hear was his own heavy breathing.

A bony hand pointed to something behind him. Daniel warily turned around. It was the clock. 1:00 AM. In an instant, the house went dark. Lit only by moonlight, the only thing he could see was the ghostly figure start to walk toward him.

Daniel began to run.

III.

She pursued him steadily, surely, each step forward bringing her closer to him no matter how quickly he ran. Her eyes, burning with murderous intent, followed his every movement.

Daniel stumbled his way through the kitchen. He barely had time to turn around before she was right behind him, her claw-like hands reaching forward, ready to ensnare him.

Spurned by adrenaline, Daniel reached into a drawer and grabbed a knife. He attempted to lunge forward at her. A skeletal hand effortlessly grabbed the knife in mid-air and wrenched it free, tossing it to the side. His own hands shaking uncontrollably, Daniel tried tossing chairs in her way as he continued to run. She was barely fazed.

Desperate, he sprinted up the stairs, clumsily falling over himself. He froze, paralyzed in the dark. He could hear his heart pounding. He had barely a second to decide which way to turn before he heard her guttural growl as she started to move even faster up the stairs, her skin – if it even was skin – blinking in the dark.

Without thinking, Daniel ran straight to the only source of light that remained in the house: his office. He immediately turned to locked the door just in time to see her gaping mouth release a scream of pure fury. She continued wailing and banging at the door as he grabbed everything he could – desk, shelf, couch, a heavy set of books – and used them to bar the door shut. Still, his makeshift barricade thumped and thumped as the ghostly figure continued banging. He knew it wouldn't hold for long. He knew *he* didn't have long.

Daniel slumped down on the floor. He didn't know how long he sat there, dumbfounded at the turn his night had taken. Until his eyes found the only source of light in the room – his laptop, open on the same blank page and blinking cursor. His heart began to race even faster than it already had been.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

Suddenly, in that moment, that surreal and inexplicable moment, came a single drop of clarity. Not knowing how or why, he grabbed the laptop and began typing.

IV.

LINDA: You. Fucking. Genius.

Daniel couldn't resist a satisfied grin. When he first told her,

he knew she'd be doubtful, but now he could hear the almost annoyed disbelief over the phone.

DANIEL: Well, I guess taking a short break worked. Really got me... inspired, you know?

LINDA: (*chuckles*) I don't know how the hell you do what you do so fast and so damn well! The truth is there was always gonna be a quick deadline for this, but I didn't wanna rush you into making shit. But clearly... you don't know how to make shit, do you?

DANIEL: (*shrugs*) Your words.

Daniel felt clearer than he had in days. He was making breakfast – he hardly ever made breakfast – in his clean, orderly kitchen. Not a sign that anything out of the ordinary had transpired not too long ago.

LINDA: Well, everyone's beyond excited. Publisher's expecting an even higher turnout than your last book, and that was already huge! When this is done and ready to go, ooh, they won't know what's coming.

DANIEL: (*chuckles cheekily*) When have I ever let you down, am I right?

LINDA: And that ending – ah! That's just screaming sequel...So?

DANIEL: So what?

Daniel could hear her excitedly tapping her pen on her desk.

LINDA: Sequel? When?

He paused for a moment and leaned on the kitchen countertop, thinking deeply. For the first time in a while, he felt fulfilled. Sure of himself. Maybe even happy.

LINDA: Dan!... Well? When can you give me something?

DANIEL: Sooner than you think.

Daniel paced back and forth, trying to stop himself from shaking. He had thought things through over and over. Still, his heart was pounding in his chest.

Finally, the light overhead flickered.

He turned around slowly. She stood once again at the doorway, her eyes peering out from their sunken sockets. Her form flickered as her grim hands clenched readily at her sides. Daniel glanced at the clock. *12:00 AM*. Six hours before sunrise. That was enough.

He looked back over to her, his breath growing heavier by the second. Her lips began to curl up into a wicked smile.

Estante **by Mitzi Bajet**

A family went to Batangas for their summer vacation. The family was big which included the extended relatives in both clans. It was like a huge reunion. The kids played by the front lawn of the grandparents' house.

Torry, Kyle, and Lisa are cousins who love to explore things and places. The elder warned them to not stray too far off the woods or else they might get lost because their grandfather's farm still hasn't put up fences yet.

The three kids still went their way and played chase along the way. Lisa was "it" and had to chase Torry and Kyle, the two boys ran fast that they intended to leave Lisa behind and pull a prank on her. But when they looked back, it was only a wall of tall and thick shrubs and trees. No Lisa on sight. Lisa panted and looked around dazed and scared because she was left alone in the forest. She kept on walking and started to call for Kyle and Torry. No answer, only the crickets chirping, and the frogs croaking is only heard from a distance. It was getting dark, and Lisa has to find her way back home, with or without Torry and Kyle.

Torry and Kyle pressed on until they stumbled upon an old ancestral house. They sneaked in thinking that no one seems to be inside. The floors made of kawayan creaked and the wind silently blew as they entered the door. They sneaked past the sala and into the dining area where they found a large *estante* that are filled with glass jars. And in those glass jars were dark pieces of matter that they could not make out of.

"You think this house is haunted?" Torry asked Kyle.

"I bet," Kyle replied.

"What makes you say that this is haunted?" an old woman from behind them said.

The boys were startled, the old lady asked, "What are you boys doing, trespassing in someone's house?"

“We’re sorry, we got lost along the way and found your home and got curious. But we need to get back and find our cousin now.”

“It’s okay boys. Rest for a while, I welcome you now that you’re here. Come, sit. I’ll prepare something quick in the kitchen. Just stay here.”

The old lady disappeared and the two boys were left alone in the dining area when all of a sudden, Kyle felt something tugging at his leg.

“H-hey, Torry! Stop pulling my leg!” Kyle whispered.

“What do you mean? My hands are here”

Torry showed his free hands to Kyle Kyle shocked looked under the table and there was a small boy with no eyes, his sockets were black and empty and it’s as if he was trying to tell him something.

“AAAAH!!” Kyle shouted.

“W-what happened?!” Torry exclaimed

“There’s a ghost kid under the table!!”

Torry looked underneath and the creature was gone.

“What are you talking about? Nothing is underneath!”

“It’s a ghost I tell you!”

The old lady came out from the kitchen, “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The boys said in unison.

She went back again and left the boys.

“I want to leave this place now. This house is haunted. And I bet the lady doesn’t know that.” Kyle said.

“Yeah, me too. And it’s getting dark we should--” Torry’s mouth dropped and his eyes gaped wide open because he saw the little boy with no eyes behind Kyle.

Kyle turned slowly and the child’s face was just nose to nose with him. Kyle pulled back and so did Torry. Before the boys screamed, the child said, “Hide!”

“What’s the matter the two of you? You’ve been jumpy ever since you came here.” The old lady appeared behind them carrying a tray of food. In a blink, the child was gone.

“We saw a ghost! It was a kid ghost!” Kyle exclaimed.

“Oh?” The old lady seemed unsurprised and settled the food platter one by one. Among them was a plate full of *suman*.

“You must be tired boys, maybe you’re imagining things. Here, have this delicious hot choco and *suman* to calm you down.”

Behind the old woman was a rectangular landscape mirror and then suddenly, dark dried up blood slowly oozed out from the surface and it seemed to appear in words. “RUN”, “GET OUT OF HERE”, “YOU WILL DIE.” Then all at once, the little boy’s face popped in the mirror, voicing out the words but no sound came out of it. The boy’s face multiplied, but they did not look the same. They were many kids with no eyes.

Kyle and Torry screamed. “We have to go now, old lady. We can’t stay here anymore.”

The old lady, taking notice of the ghost children behind her, blocked the entrance door to prevent the boys from escaping. Her face morphed into a more hideous, deformed look.

Her voiced gargled and almost incomprehensible,

“BOYS, I INSIST YOU STAY. FOREVER.”

The boys scrambled and ran around the house until they reached the *estante*. They both pushed it and let the glass jars fall down and break.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH” The old hag screeched so painfully loud that it caused the boys’ eyes to bleed. They saw that the contents of those jars were decomposed eyeballs, they reek a foul smell that imprinted in the minds of the boys. As the old hag was screaming they took the chance to escape and spotted a tree branch near an open window in the dining area and rushed to climb out of there. Kyle went out first, followed by Torry. They went down with a loud thud and ran from where they came from as fast as they could. They bumped into Lisa and dragged her with them away from the place.

“I’m so glad we found you, Lisa.” Torry said.

“Don’t you ever leave me behind like that! I’ll tell my mom.”

“We’re sorry, we promise we won’t do that again.” the boys said.

In a distance, a loud wailing was heard until it faded into the night.

--END--

Haunted

by Mick Quito

The living room was quiet as it was for the past several weeks. A dark shadowy figure sits quietly on the couch. His form was hazy and transparent. Sometimes, when the sun rays would penetrate the windows, it would make him disappear. The sunlight does not bother him since his presence was still there. His name used to be Oliver, but he does not remember anything else. He likes to spend most of the day in the living room where he can hear the chirping of the birds outside or sometimes kids who would play in Lily's backyard. Occasionally, he would also smell someone cooking his favorite meal, Adobo chicken or Caldereta. He does not get hungry, but he still loves remembering how delicious it tastes. He does not crave food, but the thought of eating tingles him with delight. Once in a while, he would hear Lily's cat, Nini, meow and playfully jump from roof to roof. Nini could see him or at least sense his presence, so she would sometimes drop by a visit and take a nap on the sofa to keep him company.

His love for food is also why the kitchen is where he would spend the night. He can hear the cooking from Rosemary's kitchen which was directly adjacent to his house. She usually cooks at 6 pm, chopping onions and garlic. She would then start singing and humming her favorite song, "Can You Feel the Love Tonight". Her voice was sweet and captivating, giving him a tingling feeling of happiness. Then he would try to remember a moment when he was happy, but nothing comes to his thoughts. After cooking dinner, Rosemary would serve dinner usually at 8 pm. Her husband would always slurp and chew out loud on every meal. Despite not hearing the exact conversations, their cheerful conversations and loud laughter made him at ease since he knew they were happy.

When it was late evening, he would stay on the balcony and listen to the grasshoppers' chirp in the backyard. The wind would blow from the south of their village, rustling the mango tree branches before touching the two chairs underneath it. Both chairs are now rusted and covered with leaves. One of them has a broken leg and must have fallen to the side a long time ago. The moon shines the tall grass with a glimmer across the yard.

There was a time long ago he would probably go stargazing with someone on special nights. He could not remember her name, but the thought of being with her made him feel warm and serene. He wondered where she was now. When the neighbors started chopping the mango trees down, he tried scaring them by dropping mangoes on them, but it didn't work. In fact, they liked it and waited for him to drop more mangoes so they would eat them. When trees were gone, he scared the birds so they could poop on the neighbor's pool.

Occasionally, someone who looked like him with a younger face would visit the house. He is one of his grandsons, but he had so many he doesn't remember any of them. There was a time he brought a stranger to the house to show him around. This stranger's energy felt invasive as if it's trying to settle in the place which made him upset. He would make sure that the stranger was alone, and he would start knocking down books and chairs. His favorite moment was when he slammed the door in the kitchen and locked it. The stranger became hysterical and ran outside as soon as he escaped. The stranger never came back again. The grandson came one last time and started taking the furniture, tables, and shelves. He hated it since it made it more difficult to navigate the place. Finally, the grandson tried taking his favorite brown sofa, but he made sure to keep it by making it unbearably heavy. And if he would manage to lift it up, he would knock it down. One of the supporting legs broke, but he was glad they left it alone.

One evening at the kitchen, he waited for Rosemary to start cooking, but she never started. He knew she was there because her silhouette was seen through the windows. She stayed at the kitchen table barely moving except when she would wipe her face. As he patiently waited, he heard a faint cry that was soft but consistent throughout. He tried moving to the second floor of the house to get a better view, but there wasn't much he could see. He was upset that his evening routine was suddenly ruined, but the thought of Rosemary hurting made him feel angry. How he wished he could give her a hug and ease the sorrow. There was no cooking or dinner that night or the succeeding nights to follow. And so, he decided to stop going to the kitchen.

He stayed in the living room this time, hoping that Lily would make her presence felt, but she only cooked when her grandkids visit. She would usually eat fresh fruits and vegetables.

Nini suddenly dropped by for a visit the next day. Her fur was a bit disheveled, and she hasn't been fed for days. She has been wandering the yard to eat grasshoppers and other small insects. She snuck into the house through the broken window. When he saw her eyes, he knew Lily was gone. Nini hopped into the sofa where she nestled into a curl. The summer heat was unbearable, but it didn't matter. She just wanted to rest.

When night fell, the house became deafening quiet. The paint on the walls began peeling faster and the dust on the floor gathered more quickly in thickness. Only the distant sound of rain pouring can be heard throughout the house. The wind blew for a short while from the backyard. The chairs were broken into pieces, but there were no leaves to cover them. The wind found nothing interesting worth touching and went another direction.

Haunting

by Kael Molo

Pg.1

Panel 1. EST.

INT. A room barely lit by the light from a computer screen. Empty biscuit wrappers and ramen containers scattered around; it was a disgusting mess.

Panel 2. The floor had marks of dried blood leading towards the direction of the bathroom.

Disembodied Female Voice

I don't remember much but I knew I've always wanted to die.
I didn't want to die this way though.

Panel 3. A mid shot of an empty bathtub from above, clearly once drenched in blood, now dried up, almost brownish. A rusty wrench sits inside.

Disembodied Female Voice

I didn't have the time to cry for help as a big hard metal
hit the back of my head--

Panel 4. A shot of a guy from behind. He's watching tv while eating cup ramen. Trash lay around him like flowers adorning a shrine.

Disembodied Female Voice

Nobody came looking for me. He made sure of it.

Panel 5. An eerie shot of the cabinet in his room.

Disembodied Female Voice

My legs he sawed in half by the knee, wrapped in garbage bags
and stuffed inside a cabinet behind his clothes,
as if to prevent me from running away.

Panel 6. An eerie shot of the ceiling with a small hatch slightly open. You can't see what's inside.

Disembodied Female Voice

My arms he hid inside the latch on
his ceiling, as if to prevent me from strangling him while he slept.

Panel 7. An eerie shot of a box under his bed.

Disembodied Female Voice

My torso he dressed with a lacy top as if to cover my nudity.
He put it inside a box and slid it under his bed.

Panel 8. Close up shot of the fridge, with the mist slightly seeping out through the metal door.

Disembodied Female Voice

My severed head he put in the fridge, as if to preserve it,
kept smooth and beautiful, yet cold and dead.

Panel 9. Close up hand opening the fridge to get beer. Her head is placed at the side, slightly peeking behind a tray of eggs and beer, with a crown of flowers on her head.

Disembodied Female Voice

He adorned it with a flower crown as if to worship me.

Pg.2

Panel 1. Overhead shot of the man sleeping, the cabinet included in the shot at the side.

Disembodied Female Voice

On the seventh night after my murder, I knocked from
the inside of his cabinet.

Panel 2. Close up of the cabinet, rattling, something knocking from inside.

Disembodied Female Voice

I kicked on the door repeatedly and so violently.
I wanted him to notice me.

Panel 3. The man stands up from his bed, sweating.

Panel 4. The man puts a chair against the cabinet door, as if to keep the thing inside from coming out.

Panel 5. The banging doesn't stop all night. He forcefully covers his head with a pillow to drown the noise.

Panel 6. Shot of the man slumped on the couch, camera facing him. The TV's lights are reflected on him. He's drinking beer and chips.

Pg.4

Panel 1. A loud bang comes from the ceiling. The girl looks up, curious.

Panel 2. A loud bang comes from the bedroom from the cabinet. The girl turns her head towards the noise.

Panel 3. She sees him, arms raised, holding a wrench, prepared to strike. She screamed.

Panel 4. A loud, blood-curdling scream explodes from the fridge. The two both stood stunned by the loud screech coming from the fridge.

Panel 5. The fridge opens on its own.

Panel 6. Her disembodied head rolls down to the floor, screaming. Her dead glass eyes stared at him.

Panel 7. Distracted, the girl stabs the man with a kitchen knife.

Panel 8. The girl runs outside, calling the police on her phone.

Panel 8. The man falls down, facing the severed head on the floor.

Panel 9. The severed head screamed at his face in pain.

Severed Head

“We can die together now!!”

“Anak, hindi dahil nasira mo ang kanyang tirahan, ay napatay mo na siya. Kahit sirain mo ang kanyang tirahan, lilipat lamang siya sa ibang tirahan. Espiritu ng kalikasan ang engkanto. Hindi mapapatay ang espiritu.”
– Shake, Rattle & Roll 9: Engkanto

Incineration **by Mac Andre Arboleda**

PAGE ONE

Panel 1-2 (merged).

Isang mainit na hapon sa isang kabundukan sa may Norte. May onting usok sa loob ng tahanan ng mag-ina: ang matandang lolang 80-anyos na si Rose, at ang kaniyang 52-anyos na anak na si Rowena. Si Rose ay may tuwalyang nakapalibot sa leeg habang nagpupunas ng mukha. Makikitang may radyo sa sala.

Panel 3.

Rose: Ang sakit na naman ng ulo ko! Buwiset!

Panel 4.

Rowena (umuubo): Nagsusunog na naman ba yung mga tarantadong pulis ng damo?! Jusko, linggu-linggo na lang may sinusunog na namaan!

Panel 5-6 (merged):

Wide-angle shot ng bundok kung san may nakikitang maliliit na taong na nakapalibot sa isang bonfire. Sila’y may hawak na mga kahoy at nagsusunog ng marijuana.

Speech bubble ng radyo: Isang pulis, dinakip umano ng NPA! Jusko, wala nang magandang balitang dumadating partner.

Speech bubble ng radyo: Oo nga partner, at napakainit pa ng panahon, ano? Siguro sa Baguio malamig?

PAGE TWO

May dalawang pulis na nag-iinom sa isang dormitoryong may tatlong kama. Si Jim, isang 25-anyos na baguhan, ay nakasuot ng puting t-shirt. Si Angelo naman, 32-anyos, ay nakahubad at nagpupuno ng shot glass ng Emperador.

Panel 1-2 (merged).

Angelo: Ano, G-Bong? Musta first day?

Jim: Ayos, sir! Parang na-high nga 'ko kanina eh!

Panel 3.

Shot ng kamay ni Angelo na nag-aalok ng shotglass.

Angelo: Hahaha, wag mo na 'ko i-sir! O, shot ka muna pogi.

Panel 4.

Jim: Sige sir, isa lang, ah! Maaga pa tayo bukas eh!

Panel 5-6 (merged).

Tamang sikip lang 'yung dormitoryo nina Angelo at Jim. May malaking bintana kung saan matatanaw ang mga puno sa likod ng gusali. Sa isang pader, may litrato ng isang lalaki na nakadikit. Hindi ito si Angelo o Jim. Si Angelo ay makikitang lumalalak pa ng isang shot.

Jim: Uy, sir, last mo na 'yan, ah!

PAGE THREE

Naglalakad sa kagubatan si Jim at Angelo tila parang nawawala.

Panel 1-2 (merged).

Angelo (galit): Putang ina! Kanina pa tayo nandito ah! Akala ko ba alam mo 'yung daan!

Jim: D- di po ako sigurado, sir. Dalawang oras na tayo naglalakad.

Panel 3.

Sinuntok ni Angelo si Jim sa mukha.

Angelo: Sumasagot ka pa, ha?!

Panel 4.

Jim (umiiyak): Sir, sorry po.

Panel 5.

Napaupo si Angelo sa isang tuod ng puno't naghubad ng damit.

Angelo: Pucha, nahihilo ako.

Panel 6.

Sa gitna ng kagubatan, si Angelo ay nakahiga na para bang nawalan ng malay. Makikita ang anino ni Jim na nakatayo malapit kay Angelo.

PAGE FOUR

Panel 1-2 (merged).

Dalawang araw na nakalipas...

Sa labas ng tahanan ng mag-ina, nagkakagulo ang mga kapitbahay. Ang isang babaeng 28-anyos ay umiiyak at napapalibutan ng mga kumare at isang pulis na nakaunipormeng military.

Panel 3.

Rowena: Mare, anong nangyari diyan kay Jemma?

Kapitbahay na 43-anyos: 'Yung asawa raw, natagpuang patay. Sunog-sunog yung balat!

Panel 4.

Close-up shot ni Jemma na umiiyak.

Kapitbahay na 30-anyos: Galing daw sila dun sa taas, may kasamang batang pulis, 'yung Jimboy daw. Eh mukhang kinidnap din, hindi na siya mahanap.

Panel 5.

Jemma (umiiyak, talsik laway, tumutulo ang uhog): Sinong Jimboy?! Walang kinekwentong Jimboy 'yung asawa ko!

Panel 6.

Long shot ng engkantong itim na may hawak na mahabang kahoy na pangsunog, naglalakad paakyat ng bundok. Nag-iwan siya ng unimpormeng pang-militar sa damuhan.

END.

Nanay na si Jenna Mae

by Alina Co-Calleja

I. Introduction

Labas ng Apartment ni Jenna Mae, Kalsada. Exterior. 3:00 AM.

Maga-alas tres ng umaga, tahimik sa buong subdivision ng Sacred Heart Village, Cebu, maliban na lang sa mangingilang aso na kumakahol. Sa himpapawid, may makikitang malaki at maitim na ibon na tila patungo sa isang partikular na bahay sa Chico St. Mabilis itong pumapagapas.

Sa Loob ng Apartment ni Jenna Mae, second floor sa bedroom niya. 3:00 AM.

Magiging si Jenna Mae sa kalabog sa balcony. Bubuksan niya ang lampara at pinto sa balkonahe.

Sa labas maririnig. **IKIKIKIKIK!!!!**

Lalabas si Jenna Mae, suot ang puti niyang night gown. Sa harap niya ay isang malaking tiktik, na may matatalim na pangil at mahabang dila. **IKIKIKIKIK!!!!**

JENNA MAE (buntong-hininga, pero kalmado): Punyeta!
Ang tigas ng mukha mong gisingin ako. Sino ka ba? Pakita mo ang peke mong anyo, Tiktik! O duwag ka ba?

TIKTIK: Hindi ako dito nagtungo para makipagtsismisan sa'yo. Iba ang pakay ko.

Winagaswas ng Tiktik ang dila niya patungo kay Jenna Mae.

JENNA MAE: Puwede ba, diretsahan na. Gusto kong matulog ulit, may pasok pa'ko bukas.

Mula sa *ledge* ng balkonahe, tatalon ang tiktik sa sahig, at iwawagaswas ang dila niya paikot kay Jenna Mae. Hahalakhak ang tiktik.

TIKTIK: Hindi mo pala talaga alam! Hindi naman patas ang laban kung ganun.

JENNA MAE: Tangina mong Tiktik ka, huwag ka nang pa-cryptic!

TIKTIK: Saka na lang ako babalik kapag...mas maliligayahan ang aking sikmura. IKIKIKIKIK!

Dinilaan ng tiktik ang tuka nito, at lumipad palayo sa madilim na langit. Naiwan si Jenna Mae sa balkonahe.

JENNA MAE (sisigaw): BAD TRIP KA!!!!!!

II.

Sa Loob ng Apartment ni Jenna Mae, second floor sa bedroom niya. 7:00 AM.

Kinaumagahan, nagising si Jennang nasusuka at nahihilo. Kinuha niya ang trashcan at doon nagpakawala ng hapunan niya kagabi.

Kinuha niya ang kaniyang cellphone, at tinawagan si Candy, kaibigan at katrabaho niya.

JENNA MAE: Hello, Candz?

CANDY: (antok na antok pa) Yez, atey! Ang aga mo naman gumising!

JENNA MAE: Hindi ako makakapasok. I don't feel well.

CANDY: Okay. Magsabi ka kay Boss.

JENNA MAE: Nasusuka ako at nahihilo.

CANDY: Juntis?

JENNA MAE: No way, mamey!

CANDY: Mag-PT ka na, just to be sure.

CUT TO

Banyo ni Jenna Mae. 10:00 AM.

Nakaupo si Jenna Mae sa sahig ng banyo, humahagulgol. Hawag niya ang isang pregnancy test, may dalawang malinaw na linya. Positive siya. Sa sahig, makikita ang nagkalat na iba pang pregnancy tests. Lahat ito ay positive.

JENNA MAE: Imposible! Hindi ako puwedeng mabuntis!

JENNA MAE: Pa'no nangyari to? Hindi ako naniniwala sa Diyos, pero Diyos Ko Po, anong hokus pokus ang ginawa mo sa'kin? HUHUUUUUU!!!

Bigla, naalala ni Jenna Mae si Paolo.

Flashback.

Si Paolo ang cutie na bagong barista sa hotel, kung saan si Jenna ay nagtatrabaho bilang receptionist. Isang gabi, naglasing sila pareho at nag-one-night-stand.

Balik sa Banyo.

JENNA MAE: (patuloy na humahagulgol si Jenna) Ultimate Karma, GANERN????

III.

Labing-limang taon ang nakakaraan...

Sa isang squatter's area sa Jaro, Iloilo....

Nabuhay mag-isa si Jenna Mae. Walang pamilya, walang kaibigan, walang tirahan. Sa umaga, naghahanap ng pagtataguan o pagsisilungan. Sa gabi, tinatatahak ang himpapawid para maghanap ng makakain. Isang kahig, isang tuka. Nabubuhay para lang hindi magutom.

Hindi na mabilang sa mga daliri ng kamay ang dami ng kaniyang kinain na mga bilig, at napatay na mga Ina. At para sa'n? Para lang mainitan ang tiyan.

Ngunit alam ni Jenna Mae na hindi lang ito ang tanging paraan para mabuhay. Nakita niya ito sa mga masasayang tao na may mga bahay, pamilya, at may mga inaabot na pangarap. Bakit hindi sa kanya binigay ang ganung buhay? O, marahil, baka dapat siya mismo ang gumawa ng paraan para maayos ang buhay niya?

Kaya nagnakaw si Jenna ng identity ng isang dalaga, si **Jenna Mae Sison**. Nagnakaw rin siya ng pera, maleta, mga damit, at tumungo sa siyudad ng Cebu para magkaroon ng panibagong buhay.

Sa Cebu, nagpanggap siyang isang edukadong babaeng nagaaral ng HRM. Natanggap siya bilang receptionist sa isang four-star na hotel. At unti-unti, nawala ang pagnanasa niya sa mga sanggol. By sheer will, naturuan niya ang sarili niyang mandiri sa kahit anong karne, mapa-manok, baboy o baka. Kahit balot ay kinasusuklaman niya. Sampung taon na rin siyang clean living. Lahat ng kaniyang pangarap ay nasisikatuparan na, kabilang na ang pagiging YouTuber na nagtuturo magluto ng vegetarian dishes.

Ngunit, sadyang malupit ang mundo. Ang karma, hahabulin ka talaga, kahit anong bagong-buhay ang gawin mo. Kahit anong paghingi ng tawad, kahit anong pagsisisi.

JENNA MAE: (umiiyak sa banyo): Lahat ng kasamaaan, lahat ng pinatay ko, at mga nanay na sinira kong buhay, babalik sa akin a hundredfold! Ito na ang parusa ng mundo sa akin. *I know I deserve it*, pero...ginawa ko naman ang lahat para talikuran ang nakaraan. Diba *past is past*?!!

IV.

Balkonahe, 8:00 PM.

Noong gabing iyon, sinabuyan ni Jenna Mae ng asin at bawang ang balkonahe, hoping na hindi siya gambalain ng mga tiktik na umaaligid, naamoy ang binhi sa loob ng sikhura niyo. Pero as it turns out, hindi pala tiktik ang mangliligalig sa kaniya sa gabing iyon, kundi mga multo mula sa kanyang nakaraan.

Bedroom ni Jenna Mae. 12 MN.

Bubukas ang mga mata ni Jenna sa madilim na madilim na kuwarto. Tataas ang kaniyang balahibo. May humihikbi sa sa sulok ng kaniyang kuwarto.

Makikita ang isang 28-anyos na babae, nakasuot ng duster. Mahaba ang buhok, at may mga malalaking luha sa mga mata. Bubulong ang babae. Umaalingawngaw ang boses nito.

Nanay: Jenna Mae...Jenna Mae...

Jenna Mae: Sino ka teh?

Nanay: Kainin mo na yan, Jenna Mae. Sipsipin mo. Mainit, masabaw, mapait, maalat, matamis. Diba yan naman ang gusto mo? Lahat ng lasa na gusto mo sa bilig, nariyan sa tiyan mo, ang lasa ng sanggol na KINUHA MO SA AKIN!!!

Lilipad bigla ang Nanay at lalapag sa kama ni Jenna Mae. Ilalapit niya ang mukha kay Jenna Mae.

Nanay: Sige na, pagbigyan mo na ang tawag ng laman. Huwag mo nang ikaila sa sarili mo ang tunay mong pagka-aswang. Hindi ka kailanman magiging tao, at HIGIT SA LAHAT, hindi ka kailanman magiging ISANG MABUTING INA!

Nanginginig si Jenna Mae, hindi mapipigilang mapahagulgol.

Jenna Mae: S-sorry. H-hindi ko ginusto yun, girl. *I had to survive.* Pero nagbago na'ko!

Nanay: Hindi ka karapat-dapat maging isang INA. Isa kang putanginang tiktik, isang halimaw! Dapat sa'yo, kainin ng mga kapwa tiktik at dumiretso sa impyerno!
Sa kaliwang pader, may sanggol na iiyak. Isang embryo na naglalakad pabaligtad sa pader. Maliit ang boses, at malambing.

Sanggol One: Ate Jenna Mae, hindi mo ba kami namimiss? Matamis, malapot, nanunuot sa tiyan ang sarap. Kami ang comfort food ng isang foodie na katulad mo...Sige na, Ate Jenna Mae...

Sisigaw si Jenna Mae sa takot sa multong fetus. Tatagaktak ang kaniyang pawis. Sasampalin ni Jenna ang kaniyang sarili.

Jenna Mae: *This....is not...happening. I'm dreaming, gising ka na teh! Gising!*

Sanggol Two: Alam mo Ate Jenna, gusto ko sana maging duktor o kaya isang microbiologist. Siguro kung hindi mo'ko ninakaw sa tiyan ng Mommy ko, nadiskubre ko na ngayon ang cure sa cancer. Pero ito ako ngayon, isang fetus sa kalawakan ng mga nagmumultong kaluluwa.

Nanay: Kainin mo na yan Jenna Mae, sipsipin mo...

Sanggol One: Alam namin na gusting-gusto mo talaga... nagke-crave ka, matagal na. Ito na ang chance mo, Ate Jenna...

Nagtratransform na si Jenna Mae, pero pinipigilan niya. Humahaba na ang dila na dumidikit sa kaniyang tiyan. Pero bigla siyang nasusuka.

Matatapos ang eksena: napapaligiran si Jenna ng mga fetus sa buong kuwarto niya. Humahagulgol si Jenna Mae, naka-fetal position, humuhuni ng lullabye para pakalmahin ang sarili niya.

****END****

Rear-view Mirror

by Roi Yves Villadiegoby

Humikab ako't bumalik sa pagmamaneho.

Tumingin ako sa orasan at 10:54 PM na. Kaso kailangan ko pa ring ipasada 'tong taxi. Kung may kausap lang sana akong pasahero, eh baka 'di ko na kailangang magkape pa. 'Yon nga lang, bibihira na rin ang bumabiyaha ngayong oras dahil sa curfew. At ang mas malala, nagiging hele ang ugong ng aking sasakyan.

Teka, tama ba 'tong nakikita ko? Akala ko namamalikmata lang ako sa antok, pero oo nga, may nag-aabang na babae. Salamat sa panginoon at madadagdagan ang kita ko.

Tinaas niya ang kamay niya't tinigil ko ang sasakyan sa harap niya.

“Hi ma'am, sa'n po tayo?”

“Sige lang po manong, diretso lang, sabihan po kita kung nakarating na tayo.”

Tumingin ako sa rear-view na salamin at naaninag ng buwan ang malungkot niyang mga mata sa mukha niyang pagkabata. Hula ko, kasing edad nito ang anak kong nasa kolehiyo. Naawa ako dahil baka kinailangan niyang magtrabaho sa murang edad. Nang tumingin siya sa 'kin, umabante na ako't tumutok sa tulay na tatahakin namin.

Tahimik siya, mas aantukin yata ako nito. Mahirap nang makadisgrasya, teka.

Katukin ko muna 'tong kahoy na headboard ko.

“... Bakit po, manong?”

“Ahh, nakasanayan lang, ineng, sa tuwing may naiisip akong 'di maganda.”

Hindi siya sumagot. Mukhang pagod din katulad ko.

“... Ineng, eh ayos lang ba na buksan ko ‘tong radyo? Bibigay na ang mga mata ko sa biyahe eh.”

“Sige po, manong, wala pong problema.”

Pinihit ko na ang ikutan ng radyo at bumulaga sa ‘min ang malakas na boses ng DJ. Ayos ah, ganda ng boses, malamig sa tenga kaya nakakagising. Bulyaw pa niya:

Itinuturing daw na ito ang Golden Age ng Infrastructure! Buildings, roads, and bridges, you name it! Everything is successful under the Build, Build, Build program! Kaya amang Rodrigo Roa, maraming salamat at kami’y patuloy na mananampalataya!

“Uhm... Manong patayin n’yo na lang po pala ‘yan...”

Pinihit ko ang radyo upang humina ito. Ngumiti ako’t tumingin muli sa rear-view na salamin.

“Ineng... Huwag mo sanang mamasamain ha, may tanong ako...”

Hindi siya kumibo, ngunit nakita ko muli ang mga malungkot niyang mata sa rear-view na salamin. Tinignan niya ‘ko pabalik at tumango nang dalawang beses.

“... Eh ineng, k-komunista ka ba?”, sabay kamot ko sa ulo.

“Gabing-gabi na kasi tapos... “

“... Hindi ako pabor sa presidente? Komunista na agad? At teka, presidente nga ba siya?”

“... ‘Neng, kung ako ang tatanungin mo... eh oo naman, kakarinig mo pa lang ng radyo ‘di ba? Lahat ng ‘yon ginawa niya sa ikabubuti natin.”

“Manong, kung gayon nga po, bakit... Bakit hindi ko na mahanap ang pamilya ko?”

“Anong ibig mong sabihin, hija?”

“Gusto kong lang naman mabuo kami. Umahon sa kahirapan.

Makapagpundar sa kinabukasan. Pero nang dahil sa kanya. Sa kanya mismo. At itong mahabang tulay na tinatahak natin papuntang bayan. Nawala ang lahat.”, at dito na siya humikbi.

Nawala ang antok ko. “Teka, teka, dahan-dahan lang ineng, eh anong sinasabi mo?”

“Tinayo po itong tulay na ‘to no’n noong nagsimula ang curfew. Ragasa pa ang pagtaas ng kaso ng COVID sa ‘min kaya nasa bahay lang ang pamilya ko. Ilang segundo sa pagkatulog, nilalamon na pala ng apoy ang munting bahay. Bahay na sabay-sabay naming tinayo gamit ang pira-pirasong kahoy na nakita namin sa bayan.”, at humagulbol pa siya. “Lahat ng ‘yon, para lang mapatayo ang tulay na ‘to dahil sagabal daw kami. Para lang magkaroon ng pangalan sa kaniyang administrasyon. ”

Pinatay ko na ang radyo.

“... Ineng ... Pasensya na at hindi ko ‘to alam. Kaya pala biglang nabalita na nagkaroon ng sunog noong isang beses? Naalala ko. Pero Diyos ko, hindi ko alam na maraming buhay ang naibuwis para sa tulay na ‘to.”, naluluha kong sambit.

“Hindi lang buhay. Pati po mga pangarap, manong.”, muling hikbi niya.

“Pasensya na talaga... ineng. Ang sakit-sakit ng kwento mo. Kung alam ko lang na magagawa niya ito eh hindi ko na sana siya binoto.”, at patuloy akong naluha.

Tumigil na siya sa pag-iyak. “Hindi mo ‘to kasalanan manong, pati tatay ko po napaniwala ng mga salita niya. Ang importante po ngayon ay alam mo na kung ano ang tama at mali. Ayon lang po ang gusto kong gawin mo. Para kahit papa’no ay makamit namin ang tunay na hustisya. Sama-sama po tayong.”

“Oo ineng, gugustuhin ko rin na makamit ‘yan ng mga nasunugan. Naiintindihan ko ang pakiramdam mo dahil minsan na rin itong mangyari sa ‘min, ang asawa ko kasi eh. Sa awa ng Diyos, nakaahon kami kahit papa’no. Kaya ikaw ineng, makakaahon ka rin.”, maluha-luha kong banggit habang papalapit na kami sa dulo ng tulay.

Ngunit hindi na siya sumagot. Pinunasan ko ang mga luha ko't tumingin sa rear-view na salamin.

Wala nang nakaupo sa likod.

Tinigil ko ang sasakyan at lumingon ako. Sa upuan niya, nakita ko ang mga pira-pirasong abo.

Recuerdos

by Sig Yu

PAGE ONE

Panel 1. ROMAN is currently in bed, looking all sick. He hasn't eaten and slept for days after his lover ROSAURA was buried. He is currently having delusions and is currently shouting out ROSAURA's name while crying.

CAP: IT'S BEEN ALMOST TWO WEEKS SINCE ROSAURA, ROMAN'S LOVER DIED AND WAS BURIED. HE TOOK THIS VERY HEAVILY AND REFUSED TO EAT AND HASN'T BEEN SLEEPING PROPERLY AS WELL...

ROMAN (Crying): ROSAURA! ROSAURA! I'M SO VERY SORRY! COME BACK TO ME PLEASE!!!

Panel 2. ADELAIDA, ROMAN's mother, has her ear is pressed on his bedroom door from the other side. She is very worried and at the same time hurt on what her son is going through.

CAP: HIS MOTHER, ADELAIDA IS ALSO HURT SEEING HER SON THAT WAY, BUT SHE KNOWS THAT, NOT EVEN HER SYMPATHY AND CONDOLENCES CAN BRING HIM COMFORT AT THE MOMENT...

Panel 3. She then steps back from the door and turns around looks to the altar on the hallway and starts to weep silently.

CAP: ALL SHE CAN DO IS HOPE AND PRAY THAT HER SON WOULD COME BACK TO HIS SENSES, RECOVER AND START ANEW...

Panel 4. ROMAN suddenly shifts from crying to jumping for joy at the sight of ROSAURA, who happens to appear to him and looks a bit different and gets closer and closer to ROMAN who is very ecstatic at the sight of her.

CAP: BUT APPARENTLY, IT SEEMS THAT ADELAIDA ISN'T PRAYING THAT HARD...

ROMAN (Ecstatic): ROSUARA! AT LAST! COME TO ME NOW

PAGE TWO

Panel 1. ADELAIDA enters ROMAN's room with a doctor to check on her son. ROMAN is agitated and pushes them all out forcefully.

CAP: WORRIED ON HER SON, SHE THEN BRINGS A DOCTOR THE NEXT DAY...

ROMAN (Ballistic): WHAT THE HELL?! WHY ARE YOU BOTH HERE? OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT NOW!!!

ADELAIDA: WE'RE VERY SORRY DEAR TO-

Panel 2. On the hallway, the doctor states that ROMAN is depressed and would badly need intervention. ADELAIDA reluctantly agrees.

CAP: FAILING TO BRING INTERVENTION TO HER SON, ALL THE DOCTOR CAN DO FOR NOW IS GIVE AN ASSUMPTION TO HER...

DOCTOR: APPARENTLY, YOUR SON MAY HAVE HAD A BREAKDOWN AND EVENTUALLY BECAME DEPRESSED, IF THIS IS TOLERATED, HE MAY BE EVENTUALLY... HOPELESS

ADELAIDA: I UNDERSTAND DOCTOR.

Panel 3. ADELAIDA talks to CARMEN, their help, at the kitchen. CARMEN shares to ADELAIDA that ROMAN can be possibly be bewitched by ROSAURA's spirit due to the fact that he still holds on a remnant of anything that belongs or survives the likeness of ROSAURA.

CAP: WITH NO ONE ELSE TO SHARE TO ABOUT HER CURRENT PREDICAMENT, SHE THEN CONFIDES WITH THEIR HOUSE HELP...

CARMEN: MADAME, I BELIEVE YOUR SON'S PREDICAMENT MAY HAVE SOMETHING TO DO ABOUT HOLDING ON TO A KEEPSAKE OF THE DECEASED, THESE ACTUALLY GIVES ACCESS TO THE DEAD TO EITHER RETURN HERE AND GET BACK AT ANYONE...

CAP: FOR A MOMENT, THESE WORDS RUNG TO HER...

Panel 4. ROMAN on the other hand, now looking more sick and near death cuddles with ROSAURA in his bed. There is something different with ROSAURA on that moment as well but ROMAN doesn't seem to mind.

CAP: IF THE HOUSE HELP'S WORDS ARE TRUE, WHAT COULD BE THAT KEEPSAKE THAT ROMAN HAS OF HIS LOVER ROSAURA?

PAGE THREE

Panel 1. ADELAIDA enters ROMAN's bedroom with a candle and sees ROMAN asleep. She is looking for anything that could belong to ROSAURA or anything that survives her likeness.

CAP: DESPERATELY WANTING TO KNOW THE ROOT OF ALL HER SON'S SUFFERING, SHE CONSIDER THE HOUSE HELP'S WORDS AND INDEED...

Panel 2. A portrait of ROSAURA is seen. ADELAIDA grabs it as quickly as she can.

CAP: ... SHE FINDS A PORTRAIT OF HER SON'S LOVER, THE WOMAN HE ADORES AND THE WOMAN SHE ABHORS, THE ROOT OF ALL HER SON'S SUFFERINGS!

Panel 3. She is suddenly stopped by a very sick and grotesque-looking ROMAN and behind him is a devilish-looking ROSAURA. ROMAN tries to grab the portrait from ADELAIDA but fails.

CAP: SUDDENLY, AS SHE CLUTCHES THE PORTRAIT IN HER ARM, A HAND GRABS HER ARM AND TO HER SURPRISE, IT'S HER SON, UNRECOGNIZEABLE AND BEHIND HIM...

ADELAIDA: THIS CAN'T BE...

CAP: IS HIS LOVER... ROSAURA!

Panel 4. ADELAIDA runs out from ROMAN's bedroom.

CAP: OUT OF FEAR, SHE RAN OUT OF HER SON'S ROOM,
ONLY TO BE FOLLOWED BY BOTH HER SON AND HIS LOVER...

PAGE FOUR

Panel 1. On the hallway, ROSAURA with ROMAN confronts ADELAIDA.

ROSAURA: AND WHAT DO YOU INTEND TO DO WITH THAT,
MOTHER DEAR?

ADELAIDA: SAVE MY SON FROM YOU OF COURSE!

Panel 2. ADELAIDA despite her fear, faces ROSAURA regardless how she looks and her possible possession of her son. She tries her best to hide her fear. ROSAURA taunts ADELAIDA.

ROSAURA: SAVE YOUR SON FROM ME? I AM HIS SALVATION,
HIS TRUTH, AND LIFE! I AM HIS REFUGE, YOU ALWAYS BRING
HIM SADNESS, I CAN TELL!

Panel 3. ROSAURA tries to intimidate ADELAIDA. Unknown to ROSAURA, ADELAIDA is calculating her next move against her.

CAP: THOSE WORDS SEEM TO HAVE TRIGGERED SOMETHING
ELSE IN ADELAIDA...

ADELAIDA: NON-SENSE!

ROSAURA: YOUR SON LOVES ME!

Panel 4. And the confrontation ensues.

ADELAIDA: INDEED, HE LOVES YOU BUT YOU NEVER REALLY
LOVED HIM! I SHOULD KNOW!

ROSAURA: MOTHER KNOWS BEST, HUH? YOU WERE NEVER FAIR!

ADELAIDA: AND YOU WERE NEVER TRUE! YOU TOOK MY SON FOR GRANTED, RELIED EVERYTHING ON HIM! AND NEVER EVEN GAVE HIM DIGNITY AND RESPECT, YOU LITERALLY SUCKED OUT EVERYTHING OFF HIM, EVEN IN YOUR DEATH!

PAGE FIVE

Panel 1. ROSAURA continuously taunts ADELAIDA and is about to attack her using ROMAN. ADELAIDA seems unfazed.

ROSAURA: TOO BAD, YOUR SON'S MINE NOW! AND HE SHALL DO AS I SAY!

ADELAIDA: NOT A CHANCE, THAT ENDS NOW YOU SHE-DEVIL, GOLD-DIGGING BITCH!

Panel 2. ADELAIDA then sets ROSAURA's portrait on fire with the candle on her other hand.

CAP: WITHOUT THINKING ANY FURTHER, SHE SETS THE SHE-DEVIL, GOLD-DIGGING BITCH'S PORTRAIT ON FIRE, REGARDLESS ON WHERE THEY ARE AT THAT MOMENT...

ROSAURA: HA! THAT, WON'T WORK MOTHER DEAR...

Panel 3. ROSAURA burns behind ROMAN as the latter falls down on the floor. Smokes from the fire heads to ADELAIDA.

CAP:...AND AS THE PORTRAIT BURNED SO DID ROSAURA BEHIND HER SON, ROMAN ON THE OTHER HAND, FAINTS AND FALLS ON THE FLOOR...

ROSAURA (Maniacally): AHAAAAHAHAHAHA!!!
IF IT WON'T BE YOUR SON, THEN IT SHALL BE YOU INSTEAD!
AHAAAAHAHAHAHA!!!

Panel 4. ROMAN regains consciousness looking healthy and his old active self. Behind him is mother frozen in shock, speechless, mouth wide open as well.

CAP: ... QUICKLY THE FIRE DEVOURED ROSAURA AND THE FIRE VANQUISHED TRACES OF HER AS WELL, INCLUDING THE ASHES OF THE PORTRAIT BURNED. ROMAN WAKES UP, LOOKING HEALTHY AND NORMAL AS IF NOTHING HAPPENED...

ROMAN: WHAT... WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

CAP: AND INDEED, IT WAS THE KEEPSAKE OF ROSAURA, THE PORTRAIT'S DOING... ROMAN NOW IS WELL, BUT WHAT ABOUT HIS MOTHER ADELAIDA?

END.

Shift

by Jorel Magistrado

Page

1. Established haunted 7-Eleven
2. Introduce Charlie and Ethan
3. Charlie finds the Timezone card Ethan left
4. Ethan now haunts Timezone in ATC

Charlie sighed, the sight of food and magazines strewn haphazardly on the floor greeting him good morning. On his way to the counter, a dazed Julian greeted him, emerging from the stock room. His hair was tousled, name pin almost falling off the shirt he wore. Stumbling to the front of the cashier, he mumbled, "Is my shift over? Is it really morning already?"

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Why would you volunteer for the night shift if you'd fall asleep for most of it anyway? And how does it always get so messy here? Do you deliberately toss everything off the racks before I arrive?"

Slowly blinking, Julian pointed a hand towards himself. His gaze roamed around the shop, eyes widening as shock overtook his body. "Jesus Christ. *Again?!!*"

Charlie raised an eyebrow. The younger employee muttered an incoherent string of words, eventually ending in a sentence that Charlie caught only two words of: "trade" and "shifts." Torn between wanting sleep and doing his friend a favour - as Julian had placed it - Charlie reluctantly agreed. Before leaving, he casted one last glance at the messy 7-Eleven interior. Something in his gut told him this wasn't Julian's doing, nor an angry customer's. From the corner of his eye, a shadow slid from the stockroom Julian came out of, and silently crept behind an empty food shelf.

"I swear to God, this place gets unbearable at night," Julian called out after him. "Avoid the pantry later and I think you'll be okay. It's like getting sucked into a time warp, dude."

Charlie didn't exactly understand what he meant by that. But seeing that his friend was already frazzled enough, Charlie just nodded. "I'll see you later, Julian."

That night, Charlie was greeted by an enthusiastic Julian, who was eager to go home. He couldn't count how many times he's been hugged. Julian could always talk anyone's ear off, which only made it weirder how unhinged he acted the hours prior.

"Stay out of the pantry!" Julian shouted, hurriedly exiting the store.

After that, time trickled by, slow like arnibal. Throughout the night, Charlie picked up chip bags and candy bars falling off the shelves. Goosebumps raised from his skin although the air conditioner had been busted a long time ago. As he was wiping down the precipitate off the drink coolers, the flickering "Open" sign caught his eye. Being one of the rarer, mint-condition furniture of the shop, you'd expect it to shine brightly without fault. However - on this particular night - only the "E" was singularly blinking. Just as Charlie was about to swivel his head to get a closer look, the glass door of the cooler burst.

Charlie crashed onto the floor, tiny dots of red slowly forming on his cheek and arm. Shattered glass lay next to him, alongside toppled beverages. Some of them spilled, the sticky liquid crawling closer to his forehead. His head felt like it was being hammered again and again. An annoying, high pitch rang in his ears, getting louder as he sluggishly tried to pull himself up. "I can see you."

Although his vision was blurry, he could make out the form of a man standing at the end of the aisle. All Charlie could comprehend was his jeans and his shoes - stark white, save for droplets of crimson staining the fabric. Charlie craned his neck to get a better look at the figure's face, but it - *he?* - turned on its heel and started walking away. Still trying to get ahold of his footing, Charlie half-crawled, half-limped in pursuit of the stranger.

He could hear chip bags popping, newspaper pages fluttering, and that goddamn awful ringing. And under all those layers of noise, he could hear one name repeated, almost like a chant. "*Ethan.*"

“Ethan,” he mumbled. The man in front of him briefly stopped in his tracks. He brought an ashy-brown finger up, pointing towards Charlie’s chest. Charlie gingerly looked at his own chest, finding his name tag hanging on to dear life, almost slipping from his shirt. The sharp pin raised upward, ready to dig into his flesh. When he tore his gaze away, the man had vanished. Instead, he - *Ethan?* - stood motionless in the pantry. Charlie’s gaze flitted upward, finally catching a glimpse of the back of his head.

A small, almost imperceptible hole burrowed into his skull, sitting amidst the dark, brown locks of his hair. Dark, red blood oozed from it, sticking onto his curls and dripping down the base of his neck. Suddenly, a flash of light pierced Charlie’s eyes.

He brought his hands to his head, palms pressing against his eyelids. He let his body crash on the ground once more, a flurry of visions flooding his mind. There was a boy at the counter, donning the same uniform he had. He clutched a wad of cash in one hand, a sack in the other. His mouth opened and closed, as if he was shouting at someone, but Charlie couldn’t hear the words. It was as if he was submerged in water.

A group of men surrounded the boy, one of them armed with a gun. The leader - Charlie has coined him - momentarily turned to face one of the masked men. Seizing the moment, the employee dropped the money and the sack, sprinting towards the pantry. All at once, the voices came crashing unto Charlie. The yelling. The sirens. The gunshot. The echoed thud when the body hit the floor.

Then, a hoarse voice called out to him, *“I’m trying to find something.”*

“Ding!” The shrill sound of the cash register pulled him out of the scene. He snapped his head up, sunlight giving him whiplash. Light streamed through the windows of the 7-Eleven, washing over the floor and the various commodities thrown on it. Charlie lugged his body up, subconsciously rubbing the small cuts all over his arms and face. He squinted, trying to adjust to the sudden brightness.

Once more, a messy store greeted him, except this time, one of the cooler doors was also broken. The windchimes tinkled, signalling the arrival of someone who is hopefully not a customer nor his manager.

“Oh God, it happened to you too? See! I told you I wasn’t doing it on purpose. Did you see him too? Jesus, if it wasn’t for my mom nagging me to get a job, I would’ve quit the first night I saw him. Oh fuck, you’re *bleeding*! Charlie, we need to go. There’s a first aid kit at my house and I can - Charlie? Charlie?!” Charlie ignored Julian’s cries. He slowly made his way to the pantry, which was unceremoniously empty, save for some file cabinets and a water dispenser. Wordlessly, he yanked open each drawer, trying to find something - *anything* - that even vaguely alludes to any traces of an employee named “Ethan.”

Finally, he found what he was looking for in the bottom-most drawer labelled, “MISC.” At the very back, his fingers brushed over the cold, metal plate of a name tag. Charlie pulled it out, taking his time to read each engraved letter. “*Hi! My name is Ethan Macasinag*” Reaching in again, he procured a thin Timezone card. “Ethan,” was hastily scribbled on the back of it with a marker.

Making sure all the items he needed were packed safely, he walked past Julian, who was busy sweeping up the shards of glass. “I need to go somewhere important.”

Without another word, he left the shop, along with a confused and genuinely worried Julian. It was weeks later when Julian got to talk to him again.

“Is your mom still mad?”

“No, not anymore. She got over it when I got another job at Starbucks. Is the place still...?” Charlie raised an eyebrow. They were sitting on the sidewalk, enjoying a hearty meal of fishballs and sago’t gulaman. Julian shook his head, too preoccupied with making sure his food was covered in sauce all over.

“I don’t think so. Not that I’d know. I don’t take the night shift anymore. Too freaky.”

For a while, the pair ate in silence, enjoying their day-offs. Julian (being Julian) perked up again. “I heard that the arcade place in ATC had some freaky stuff going on too. Thank God I didn’t sign up to be a security guard.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “Timzone? I heard it was fun there.”

“No, thank you. I’d never go anywhere else with ghosts in them,” Julian snorted, loudly chewing on a fishball. Beside him, a faint smile ghosted over Charlie’s lips.

“I hope he’s enjoying himself.”

Shift (comic book script)

by Jorel Magistrado

Page 1

Panel 1: Low angle shot of a 7-Eleven store. This particular store is just a small, compact one. It is early morning, and there's an unlit "Open" neon sign on one of the glass doors. It is important that this particular sign looks new. Charlie's back is seen on the foreground (Half body, cut off at the waist). He is in his early twenties, a boy with long, fluffy, curly hair. He is wearing a white t-shirt and jeans. Slung around one arm is a tattered backpack.

Panel 2: Close up of Charlie's worn rubber shoes. The laces are messily tied. He is inside the 7-Eleven, standing in front of the doors. On the floor are scattered potato chips, chocolates, etc., and magazines.

Charlie: "..."

Panel 3: A younger looking employee can be seen stumbling from the pantry. Said pantry is behind the counter. This is Julian. Julian's hair is messy, there are stains on his uniform, and his name plate is about to fall off. He looks like he just woke up. Establish that Julian is a bit dumb, but very kind and charming.

Julian: "Is my shift over? Is it really morning already?"

Panel 4: A shot of Charlie rolling his eyes. A part of Julian's head can be seen at the foreground with a tear-drop shape over his head. (It looks like the same effect in anime whenever a character is embarrassed.)

Charlie: "Why would you volunteer for the night shift if you'd fall asleep for most of it anyway?"

And how does it always get so messy here? Do you deliberately toss everything off the racks before I arrive?"

Panel 5: Mid-shot of Julian pointing a finger at himself. He glances from side to side in apparent shock.

Julian: “Jesus Christ. Again?!”

Page 2

Panel 1: The two boys are shown, Charlie is closer to the foreground, his back towards Julian. He looks annoyed, with a slight hint of disbelief. He was starting to unpack his uniform from his bag, Julian is behind him, looking smaller. There can be multiple drawings of him to show that he is moving all over the place, gesturing wildly. There is a long string of blurred, messy text at the top of the panel, which thins out midway. The only words visible are “TRADE” and “SHIFTS.”

Panel 2: Charlie looks at Julian. He looks grumpy and hesitant. (Effects: “Turn” is written across in a curve accompanied by action lines to show Charlie craning his neck to look at Julian.)

Charlie: “Fine.”

Panel 3: A midshot of Charlie about to leave. His eyes are looking at the floor. He looks perplexed. He feels like something is off. In the background are the security censor bars and a messy looking magazine rack. The rack has only one magazine in it, which is also about to fall off.

Panel 4: A wide shot of the 7-Eleven interior. It is very messy, as if someone ransacked it. Julian is shown to be carrying a broom and dustpan, about to clean the store.

Panel 5: Extreme close-up on Charlie’s eyes. He is still looking off towards the side. He looks calm at the surface, but he is actually very surprised. Something caught him off-guard.

Page 3

Panel 1: Close-up shot on the pantry behind the counter (This shot is in Charlie’s perspective). There is a shadow halfway through the entrance of the pantry, as if it’s about to go in.

Panel 2: Same shot as **Page 2 - Panel 5**, except the entire panel is black, while the lineart is white. On top of Charlie’s forehead is a scribbly third eye.

Panel 3: Shot of Julian picking up junkfood. The broom and dustpan are leaning on the shelves. He still hasn't tidied up his appearance. He looks panicked and disturbed. (Effects: "Shiver" is loosely written around him. This denotes that he has goosebumps.)

Julian: "I swear to God, this place gets unbearable at night. Avoid the pantry later and I think you'll be okay. It's like getting sucked into a time warp, dude."

Panel 4: Close-up on Charlie's face. He looks like he's pondering on something. He doesn't completely understand what Julian said, but he appreciates his friend's worry for him.

Panel 5: Same shot as the previous panel, but this time Charlie has a small smile. He nods at Julian.

Charlie: "I'll see you later, Julian."

Page 4

Panel 1: Black background with white text.

Narration: "Later that night..."

Panel 2: A wide shot of the now tidy 7-Eleven interior. Julian is behind the counter, packed and ready to go home. He is no longer wearing his uniform. Instead, he has plain clothes on. He also looks neater now. He is very eager to get out of the store, and relieved to see Charlie. Charlie's torso could be seen on the foreground, although it is out of focus.

Panel 3: Julian is hugging an uninterested Charlie. Charlie looks like he doesn't want to be hugged, but he endures it anyway since he sees Julian as his giddy little brother. Julian is oblivious that Charlie is not into physical affection much.

Panel 4: Mid-shot of Julian about to exit the store. His back is facing Charlie, though his head is turned so he can look at Charlie. Julian looks more serious now.

Julian: "Stay out of the pantry!"

Page 5

Panel 1: Show a wall clock displaying the time: “12:00 a.m.”*

Panel 2: Charlie is picking up a chip bag that fell off the shelves. Another bag is about to fall off.

Panel 3: Close-up of the same wall clock, this time it’s “1:30 a.m.”

Panel 4: Shot of Charlie surprised and bothered by a whole shelf of chocolate bars that keeps falling off. Charlie senses that something is off.

Panel 5: While he is picking up the bars, he feels goosebumps (Same effect as **Page 3 - Panel 3**, “Shiver” is loosely written around him again).

Panel 6: Again, the same wall clock is shown. The time is “3:00 am.”

*Note: Panels 1-6 are shown as smaller panels, sort of like a montage.

Panel 7: Charlie is wiping down the glass of the drink coolers. This scene is shot from the perspective of the inside of the cooler. There are blurred softdrink tops in the foreground. Charlie’s face and his hand holding a rug is shown on the other side of the glass. Over his shoulder is the flashing neon “Open” sign.

Panel 8: Close-up shot of Charlie’s face, from the same perspective as **Panel 7**. Everything is in black again, save for the white lineart. The scribbly third eye on his forehead, along with his two normal eyes are wide. He sensed something. Behind him, the only letter lit up in the neon sign is “E.” This is the only letter done in color, preferably red.

Page 6

Panel 1: Close-up on the neon sign (The lettering should be mirrored since Charlie is looking at it from the inside). The letter “E” is blinking on-*

Panel 2: - and off-

Panel 3: - and on again. **

*Note: Effects; “Flicker” is surrounding the sign. This is repeated in different positions until Panel 3.

**Note: Panels 1-3 is done montage style again.

Panel 4: Charlie is in the middle of turning his head. He was going to get a better look at the sign. Behind him, show that the glass panel of the cooler is cracked, suggesting that it is about to explode. (Effect: “Rattle” is written shakily around the cooler. Add lines to show that the drinks inside are shaking).

Panel 5: The cooler explodes. There is shattered glass mid-air. Charlie is thrown back. Some of the glass made tiny cuts on his skin, specifically his cheek and arm that was facing the panel. Everything is a mess, there are drinks spilling and broken, the liquid inside splashing mid-air.

This scene is very intense and has dramatic lighting.

Page 7

Panel 1: Low angle shot of Charlie on the floor. He is bleeding from the cuts and his eyes are shut tight. The floor around him is a mess - there are spilled drinks and a few chips have burst out of their bag. There is shattered glass on the floor surrounding him.

Panel 2: Close-up of Charlie covering his ears. This could be shot from a bottom-up angle. He looks like he is in pain. He is hearing a shrill ringing. It makes his head ache and it only gets louder. His eyes are shut, but the third, scribbly white eye is open. (Effects: In the background, “Riiiiiiiiiiiiing” is crudely written. This takes up most of the background space.)

Charlie: “I can see you.”

Panel 3: A figure is at the end of the aisle. This is in Charlie’s perspective. His vision is blurry, but he can make out the hem of some jeans and white shoes. There are some faded, red stains on the white fabric. The lights are flickering, and the shop is overall chaotic.

Panel 4: Framed the same way as the previous panel. The figure turns around and starts to walk away. We could see Charlie reaching out a hand to him. He couldn't see the figure's face.

Panel 5: Charlie half-crawls, half-limps, following the figure. Charlie looks like he's in pain from his injuries and from all the noise, but he is determined to follow the stranger. Chip bags are bursting around him. Newspaper pages are fluttering wildly in the air. The ringing is still there. (Effects: "Riiiiiiiiiiiiing" is crudely written in the background again.)

Voice: "Ethan."

Panel 6: Close-up on Charlie's mouth. He is mumbling something.

Charlie: "Ethan...?"

Page 8

Panel 1: The figure stops walking when he hears his name called. They are near the cashier counter now.

Panel 2: Close-up on the Ethan's hand. It is an ashy brown, ghostly in every way. He is pointing at Charlie's chest.

Panel 3: Close-up of Charlie glancing down at where the man was pointing at. Show his messy uniform, and his name plate.

Panel 4: Extreme close-up on Charlie's name plate. Its pin is bent, almost piercing his skin. It's about to fall off, but is still hanging from Charlie's shirt. Written on it is: "HI! I'M Charlie Medina" (Effect: The name tag looks like a generic employee name plate. It is metal, with the latter engraved into it).

Panel 5: Ethan is no longer by the counter. Instead, he is in the pantry. His back is facing Charlie. The focus is more on the strange figure now, but Charlie can still be slightly seen. Charlie looks alarmed, peering into the room. Inside the pantry are rattling file drawers. There is a water dispenser at one of the corners, the water inside it bubbling. Charlie's backpack can be seen somewhere in the background.

Panel 6: Close-up on the back of Ethan's head. There is a small, almost imperceptible hole burrowed into his skull. It is sitting amidst short, curly, dark brown hair. Dark, red blood oozed from it, sticking on some of the curls and dripping down the base of his neck.

Panels 7-9: Transitioning panels which fade from **Panel 6**, until there is only white filling the frame in **Panel 9**. Show **Panel 6** fading as if it was being consumed by bright light.

Page 9

Panel 1: Charlie is pressing his palms toward his eyelids. This panel is in black and white again. The pupil of his scribbly, third eye is blown out. Charlie is shaking and yelling. He is kneeling on the ground, hunched over.

Charlie: "AAAGHHH!"

Panel 2: Charlie collapses on the ground. His eyes are open, the third eye crying. This is in a horizontal view, showing Charlie's upper half on the floor. Above him are an overlay of visions and chaotic ringing.

Panel 3: This sequence of events looks like a dream. Everything is foggy, but clear enough to understand what is happening. There is a young employee at the counter. He looks panicked and scared, his hair and stature resembling that of Ethan's. The uniform he is wearing is the same as Charlie's, but this employee doesn't have his name tag on. He is looking at someone else over the counter while he shakily stuffs a wad of cash into an old burlap sack. The cash register is open. The employee is shouting something, but Charlie couldn't hear the muffled words.

Panel 4: A wide-shot of a gang of men, all of them wearing either bandanas or face masks covering their mouths. Some of them have caps on, covering their face. They look like thugs, each one of them armed with ordinary melee weapons (baseball bats, knives, hammers, etc.) except for the one closest to the employee. This one is the leader, and he looks the most aggressive out of everyone. He is pointing a gun at Ethan, who is still trying to empty the cash register's contents into the bag.

Panel 5: The leader looks away from Ethan momentarily to say something to the other gang members. This catches their attention. Ethan freezes.

Panel 6: Close-up on Ethan running into the pantry. The sack drops mid-air, money spilling out of it.

Panel 7: The gang notices Ethan running away. This shot is focused on the leader, whose face is contorted into an ugly snarl.

Panel 8: Close-up on the hand holding the gun. The leader has pulled the trigger and there's smoke on the nozzle (Effect: "BANG" is written jaggedly behind the gun).

Panel 9: Ethan's body falls to the floor. His white shoes are the ones closest to the panel. He is slumped over, hints of blood starting to trickle on the floor (Effect: The sound effect "Thud!" is written next to Ethan's body).

Page 10

Panel 1: The panel is white, save for black writing taking up most of it.

Narration: "Ding!"

Panel 2: Extreme close-up on Charlie's eyes, which are fluttering open. There is light overlaying part of Charlie's face, making his pupils shine.

Panel 3: Wide shot of the 7-Eleven chaotic interior. This mess was worse than before - the broken panel of one of the coolers could be visible in the background. There are spilled drinks and scattered food everywhere. Newspaper pages lay separated from each other on the floor. Charlie is lying next to the counter. The cash register is open. Parts of the floor closest to the windows are lit up by sunlight, some of the light being reflected on the shiny wrappers of junkfood. It is early morning.

Panel 4: Charlie is about to stand up. His hair is tangled, the small cuts on his cheek and arms still bleeding, but only lightly. He is squinting his eyes, trying to adjust to the brightness.

Panel 5: Close-up on the windchime next to the store doors tinkling. Someone is opening the door. (Effects: “Tinkle” is written thinly next to the windchime).

Page 11

Panel 1: Extreme close-up on Julian’s eyes reflecting some bits of the 7-Eleven. He looks startled.

Panel 2: Julian is running towards Charlie to help him. He looked especially concerned when he saw Charlie bleeding. Charlie can be seen standing, leaning most of his weight on the counter. His lips are pressed into a thin line.

Julian: “Oh God, it happened to you too? See! I told you I wasn’t doing it on purpose. Did you see him too? Jesus, if it wasn’t for my mom nagging me to get a job, I would’ve quit the first night I saw him. Oh fuck, you’re *bleeding!* Charlie, we need to go. There’s a first aid kit at my house and I can - Charlie? Charlie?!”

Panel 3: Charlie is entering the pantry. Julian can be slightly seen behind him, still calling after him. Charlie looks tired, his eyes having heavy bags under them. He isn’t minding the cuts all over the body.

Panel 4: The pantry is empty, save for the file cabinets and water dispenser. Charlie’s bag is in the same spot as earlier. The room looks untouched.

Panel 5: Charlie is standing in front of an open file drawer, sifting through the folders. He is trying to find something.

Narration: “Ethan...”

Panel 6: Charlie has moved on to another cabinet. The previous one has files sticking out of it. Julian can be seen in the foreground. He is sweeping up the scattered food and papers.

Narration: “Where are you?”

Panel 7: Close-up on Charlie opening a drawer labelled “MISC.”

Panel 8: Shot from inside the file drawer. Charlie's fingers are brushed over a small, rectangular, metal plate. His hand stills.

Page 12

Panel 1: Close-up of the name plate sitting on Charlie's palm.

Panel 2: Extreme close-up showing the engraving clearer. Written on the name plate is: *"Hi! My name is Ethan Macasinag"*

Panel 3: With the name plate still in his hand, Charlie reaches back into the drawer.

Panel 4: Close-up of Charlie's hand again. This time, aside from the name plate, he is holding an old Timezone card. The card dips on its edges, and part of the plastic film is peeling off. There is an incoherent scribble at the back.

Panel 5: Extreme close-up of the card, specifically on the writing. Scribbled in marker, on the back of the card is *"Ethan."*

Panel 6: Julian is in the middle of tidying some shelves. He notices Charlie's presence, and looks at him. Charlie's silhouette is seen in the foreground. He is carrying his backpack, about to leave (Effect: Add a question mark next to Julian's face).

Charlie: "I need to go somewhere important."

Panel 7: Wide shot of Charlie leaving the 7-Eleven. He is halfway out the doors. There is a hint of a smile on his face. Behind him, Julian looks on, confused as ever. The store is still a bit messy, but considerably tidier now.

Page 13

Panel 1: Julian and Charlie are sitting on the pavement. They have plastic cups with sago't-gulaman clutched in one hand. Next to them are cups of fishballs drenched in sauce. Charlie's hair is tied back. They are wearing basketball shorts and loose shirts.

Caption: "A few weeks later..."

Panel 2: This panel is focused on Julian. He is looking at Charlie. Julian's mouth is open. He is speaking, but at the same time, about to eat a fishball.

Julian: "Is your mom still mad?"

Panel 3: Charlie is looking ahead. He is sipping on a straw positioned at the side of his lip. His expression looks neutral, but he is slightly happier now.

Charlie: "No, not anymore. She got over it when I got another job at Starbucks. Is the place still...?"

Panel 4: Julian is shaking his head. He is sinking the fishballs further into the sauce. Julian looks more refreshed now too.

Julian: "I don't think so. Not that I'd know. I don't take the night shift anymore. Too freaky."

Panel 5: Wide shot of the pair eating and chilling on the sidewalk. It's the afternoon, almost sunset. They look very relaxed.

Page 14

Panel 1: Julian turns toward Charlie again. There's a bit of fishball sauce dribbling from the corner of his lip.

Julian: "I heard that the arcade place in ATC had some freaky stuff going on too. Thank God I didn't sign up to be a security guard."

Panel 2: Charlie is caught off-guard, but he is pleasantly surprised. An eyebrow of his is raised.

Charlie: "Timezone? I heard it was fun there."

Panel 3: Julian's head is thrown back. He is laughing. Unfortunately, there is still some food in his mouth. (Effects: "Hahaha" is written behind Julian)

Julian: "No, thank you. I'd never go anywhere else with ghosts in them,"

Panel 4: Close-up on Charlie's face. He is looking off into the distance with a faint smile.

Panel 5: Extreme close-up on Charlie's eyes. The third eye is there this time. His mouth isn't shown, but you could tell through his eyes that he is still smiling.

Charlie: "I hope he's enjoying himself."

Someone

by Mark Aragona

The Candelaria Inn stands on a lonely hill, surrounded by a windblown plain of dead grass, a long way off from the road that leads to Cabanatuan City. White walls of peeling paint reach up to a brown tiled roof on which roosts a creaking, rusted weathervane. The glass windows are gray with dust, like a cataract on an eye. A sign hangs askew above the white door on the ground floor. Wooden stairs on the side of the inn lead to the second floor where the guest rooms lie unused for nearly a year.

The Inn had been operating for two years when the troubles began. One morning, the corpse of traveling salesman Bruce Lerico was found in Room 3, his face all white and frozen in utter terror. Since then, seven more people who had slept in Room 3 were found in a similar state—according to the coroner, each one had suffered a massive heart attack. But their wide-open eyes and contorted mouths told the story clear as day: they had all died of fright.

The police found no foul play involved in the deaths. And so, Room 3 gained the reputation of being haunted. It had been blessed by three different priests and visited by no less than twelve self-proclaimed mediums. Nothing worked.

One of them, Fr. Rene Montero, was considered the bravest ghost hunter in his field. He had supposedly exorcised the Devil himself no less than three times throughout his career. Regardless, he was found just as dead as the rest of them, his face pressed down on the carpet next to the door and his bloodied hands stretched over his head. The press made a big deal about how they found bits of his fingernails on the door, like he'd been trying to scratch his way out.

After that, the owner closed down the Candelaria Inn. No one has stepped inside Room 3 since.

This is the room I'll be staying in tonight.

I'm no priest or ghost hunter. I'm not a dedicated researcher of the occult. I don't have the least interest in those matters. But I am different from all the other visitors of that room.

When I was only eight, I was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder known as Urbach-Wiethe disease. Over the years, it eventually destroyed a portion of my amygdala. I'm incapable of fear.

I've jumped off a cliff with only a bungee cord around my ankle. I've made and lost fortunes on the stock market. I've held spiders and snakes in my hands. I've been threatened at gunpoint by a would-be robber. I've tried a plethora of drugs in combinations I likely shouldn't have, out of simple curiosity.

Through all that, the most I've felt was surprise or irritation. I don't understand fear; I can't even recognize it in another person's face. Friends had to describe to me the sensation of aracing pulse, of your guts being wrenched and your balls tightening against your crotch.

Fear is for other people; not me.

I made up my mind to stay in Candelaria Inn after Zoe told me were done.

We last met at a diner on High Street. I was telling her about the haunted room I'd heard about in the news, but when she didn't say anything, I asked if something was wrong. She wasted no time in telling me.

I sat there stunned, words like "what" and "why" falling from my slack mouth. Zoe sighed and folded her hands in front of her. "I don't want to live like this, Will."

"Like what?" I seethed. "Is there someone else?"

"No, there isn't. And it's not about my friends or my parents. It's about us."

"What about us?!"

By then we'd caught some stares from the other patrons, but she never looked away from me. That's Zoe, alright. I could tell by that look that she'd already made up her mind.

It was the same look she gave me that night two years ago, when she whispered in my ear that she loved me as I am, as we were slow dancing under a summer moon.

“Will, you and I want different things,” she said. “I wanted it to work out. I tried.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. What makes you think I don’t want what we got?”

She drew in a deep breath. “What you want, Will, is to do what you like without ever having to consider what I think.”

“Is this about the time I went BASE jumping with those Norwegians? Zoe, that was just the one time!”

“It wasn’t ‘just the one time.’ There was that drag race. There was the time with the robber. He had a gun on you, for fuck’s sake. It’s always like that, Will. You could’ve gotten yourself killed a dozen times over.”

“Well, I HAVEN’T, have I?”

She spread her hands. “Am I supposed to sit around and wait for it to happen? I begged you not to put yourself in danger many, many times. But you don’t listen to me, Will. Ever. How do you think it makes me feel when I don’t seem to matter enough to make an impact on how you live?”

“I was always deathly afraid I was going to lose you,” she whispered.

“But were you ever afraid of losing me?”

Everything else I was going to say disappeared from my head. We stared at each other in silence for an unbearably long moment.

It was then I realized something was different about her hair—the red highlights on her bangs had faded away. Or perhaps she’d bleached it. She’d always worn red, my favorite color. That was gone too.

I got up from my chair. “If you’ve made up my mind, then we don’t really have anything left to talk about, do we?”

She looked down and didn't answer. I guess that was all the answers I was getting, so I left her there in the cafe. We haven't spoken since.

I spent most of the week afterward inside a whiskey bottle. It helped. I'm immune to fear, not pain.

All my life, I've been a subject of study for psychiatrists and an object of ridicule from other people. I've endured enough pranks to test if I really don't feel fear: spiders down my shirt, firecrackers behind my back, you name it.

People call me *manhid*. Unfeeling. It's like because I don't feel fear, I'm not part of the human race.

Now the only person who thought otherwise is gone. She knew I had this disease; I can't help how I am. By leaving, she affirmed what the rest of the world thinks: that I'm some kind of unfeeling freak.

She got one thing right at least. I wasn't afraid of losing her.

Then I remembered the story of that room in Candelaria Inn. And I thought, wouldn't it be funny if I were the only man on Earth who could walk out of it alive the next morning? Wouldn't it be ironic if I could disprove that the room is actually haunted?

I wouldn't be a freak, then, would I? I'd be someone. I'd be superhuman.

I began to laugh. Then I went online and found the contact details of the Inn's owner. I had a proposal in mind.

Which brings me to today.

"It's not a ghost," the owner, Mrs. Benitez, tells me. She's a plump, middle-aged woman with dark shadows under her eyes and wearing the faint smell of gin beneath her perfume.

We meet at her house in the city so I can collect the key to the room;

she refuses to go near her own Inn. It took me a few days of convincing and no small amount of cash to get her to agree. She's quite sure I was going to be the room's ninth victim.

"It's not a ghost," she reiterates. "The room is cursed."

I don't want to prolong this discussion, but maybe I can convince her if I let her keep talking. "What makes you say that?"

She looks at me with eyes that have lost a lot of sleep on this matter. "I dream of it sometimes," she murmurs. "It beckons to me."

"What, the ghost?"

"The room. It doesn't want to keep people out. It wants people to come in. I'm telling you now: it's cursed. You'll know that if you stay there. Please, don't stay there."

"We've gone over this," I remind her. "When I come back tomorrow, I can prove your Inn's not haunted. Then you can finally sell it for a good price. It won't be your problem anymore. Do you understand?"

She gazes back at me with rheumy eyes. I can almost hear the gear turning in her head. I smile and pat her shoulder. "Besides, it's my choice to stay."

"It's your choice," she repeats, as if it's a protective charm. "Yes, your choice. I'm not responsible."

"No, you aren't." I take the key from her limp hand and slide it into my pocket. "Everything's going to work for us. I promise."

I realize I may be the first person to ever disprove a haunting by walking out alive the next morning. I don't believe in ghosts—I've slept in enough cemeteries and purportedly haunted places to know they don't exist. You ask me, I think people haunt themselves. And once they learn to stop being afraid of that room at the Inn, the deaths will stop as well.

Or maybe I'll find something unique and undiscovered in Room 3. To be frank, I don't much care.

It's already late in the afternoon when I fit the key into the doorknob of Room 3. "*Colonel Fazackerly Butterworth Toast*," I mutter, as the door swings open with a sigh.

No ghosts and ghouls come to greet my entrance, just a few dust bunnies that flee as fresh air rushes in. The room's atmosphere is so stale I can almost taste it.

Most everything inside is white, from its four walls to the window frame at the other end of the room. Beside it is a flatscreen TV on a low cabinet. A dresser stands open on the left wall while the single bed hugs the right one. A night table with a lamp sits beside it. A fine layer of dust covers every available surface—proof of the Inn's reputation.

It looks nothing more than a sad and neglected old room.

*"Colonel Fazackerly Butterworth Toast
Bought an old castle complete with a ghost."*

I set my bag down beside the night table and try as best I can to make the place livable for the night. I pull the comforter off the bed and shake the dust off. The pillows stink of mildew so I leave them on the floor; I brought a travel pillow with me anyway. I wipe the table's surface clean and check the drawer. No Bible. Maybe someone took it for safekeeping.

*"But someone or other forgot to declare
To Colonel Fazack that the spectre was there."*

I move to open the window, then stop.

On the window sill sits a pile of dead flies, their tiny black legs held up as if in surrender. Perhaps the last occupant sprayed the place, but it was weird to see them all gathered together like this. Like they had rammed themselves into the glass trying to get out.

Frowning, I open the window and blow on their tiny desiccated bodies till they are all pushed outside. I turn to head back to the bed, but something catches my eye.

There's a long shadow on the wall to my left, near the corner of the room. I really hadn't paid it any attention when I came in; I assumed it was cast by the curtains. But now I see that the angle is all wrong and that it doesn't move with the breeze.

Now that I look at it, it's actually some kind of stain, blotches of deep gray and brown that had eaten through the wallpaper and had flowed down to the floor. Likely filled with mold. It doesn't look like water had leaked from the ceiling—maybe a pipe burst behind the wall?

Either way, it ruins the look of the all-white room and makes the place dingier than it already is. The building's next owner will be saddled with waterproofing this place.

I walk back to the bed, switch on the lamp and the TV. On the nightstand, I set down my phone, because I plan to record anything that happens in the room, and the stun baton I bought, because I'm not stupid and there may actually be someone here scaring people. Hell, maybe I can even catch them in the act.

I eat the ham sandwich I packed. There's no cable, and the local shows are nothing short of putrid, so I shut off the TV and pick up the F.H. Batacan novel I've been putting off reading for months.

By chance, I catch sight of the stain on the wall again, and sit up. Has it grown bigger since last I looked?

I come closer and examine it again. It's definitely expanded, looking more black than gray—like an ink stain. There's no water visibly dripping from anywhere; it must be seeping from a crack behind the wall. And there are more dark flecks than before. Mold doesn't grow that fast, does it?

I'm pissed off now. What was I thinking, coming here? The only horrifying thing here is the upkeep. I'm more likely to catch a disease than a ghost. But if I leave now, I'd have gone this far for nothing.

"It's just for one night," I mutter as I head back to bed. I'll leave at the crack of dawn. Hopefully, I won't wake up to a flooded room tomorrow morning.

Now that I look at it again, though, that stain looks oddly shaped, narrow near the top and wider towards the center. It's easy to imagine that it's in the shape of a person—the sides seem like long arms, the top like a veil or a head with long hair. It reminds me of those human shadows in Hiroshima, imprints left by people who had been vaporized by the atomic bomb.

Alright, enough. This is what boredom does to people. I pick up the novel and start reading.

After about an hour, I give up. There's a crick in my neck and my eyes feel like they've been immersed in saltwater. I've gotten used to the stench of dust and age. There's no sound now but for the rumble of a passing car outside.

Now that I'm alone and it's quiet, it's hard not to think of Zoe.

I wonder if she'd be mad to know what I'm doing right now. Probably not. She hasn't even called or texted once to find out how I am. She really let me go for good. I guess I can admire that kind of resolve.

I could always find someone else. But if they really knew me, would the cycle just repeat? Would I end up here again, all that running just to stand still?

I close my eyes and let myself drift back in time, to when Zoe and I could still dance beneath the moon.

I don't know when exactly I nodded off.

It's night when I open my eyes. Something woke me, I'm sure of it; I heard no sound, but I know there's something else in the room with me.

I sit up and swing my legs off the bed; the book on my chest drops to the floor with a thump. It's cold, like I'm standing in front of an open freezer. Even the carpet on my bare feet feels like ice. I had left the lamp on, giving me some light to see—

The stain on the wall has swollen into a black blob. No, not just a blob—a protrusion, a dark shape attached to the wall like a cocoon. I blink and rub my eyes. It's still there. It's the silhouette of a person.

I grab my phone from the nightstand and snap a picture of it. Then I stare at the snapshot for a long moment. There's nothing on the wall—not one single black spot.

I look up as the silhouette starts moving. A hand emerges from the blackness, every finger long, spidery, and dry to the bone. Another shriveled hand appears, then long, sinewy arms. Then a head full of long, stringy hair, followed by its deformed, melted torso.

Slowly, with enormous effort, the thing frees itself from the wall.

It's...hideous, only vaguely human. The flesh seems to have sloughed off its face, revealing black sinew and bone. Loose clumps of skin hang from where its mouth should be. It has no legs; its pallid thighs end in ragged stumps that drip black ichor as it floats there in the corner. Pale cobwebby hair clings to its scalp. Its eyes are black pits like the stain from which it emerged. It's staring right at me with those empty sockets.

This—this must be what scared those guests to death.

I can barely contain myself as I raise my phone again to try and video it. But again, nothing shows up onscreen.

What if it isn't real? What if I'm dreaming? What if something in this room is causing hallucinations, like the mold interacting with some chemicals in the paint? There must be some way to test this.

I stand up and face the—the apparition—fully. "What are you?"

It doesn't answer.

"Do you have a name?"

Again, no response. But the temperature of the room drops further; there's mist coming out of my mouth now.

"Why are you here?" I press on. "Are you scaring people on purpose? Are you bound here? Can you leave?"

There is a whisper of movement; it raises its forearms, its bony hands lifting towards me, fingers dripping black fluid. It approaches me.

I think it wants to touch me.

Am I in danger? I really don't know. For an instant, my eyes move to the door. If I wanted to, I could leave right now.

But then I'll never know if this is real or simply an illusion. People will call me a fraud: a man who claims to have no fear but refuses to spend the night in a haunted room.

No. I need to know. I'm the only one who can.

I reach out my arms to the apparition. Its fingers latch around my forearms, gripping me with monstrous strength. I curl my fingers around its bony arms; the flesh sinks against my hand, the loose skin spongy with rot and age. "You're real!" I exclaim.

Something twitches in its face and I realize I was wrong—the thing does have a mouth after all. The flesh splits sideways, revealing a black maw empty of tongue and teeth. It's grinning at me.

It pulls me closer so that we are face to face with its arms around me. I gag; it smells like an open grave. The room begins to spin. I try to pull away, but it holds me fast. I can do nothing but stare into the void of its eye sockets and the hole that is its grin.

I think for once Zoe would be right. I shouldn't be here.

The apparition breathes in, sucking out the breath from my lungs. I look down. The skin is sloughing off my body, running down my arms and molding itself around the creature's own flesh. The pain is beyond horrific. I can't scream.

The last thing I see before the darkness swallows me are the creature's eyes, forming in its once empty sockets.

I come to as daylight seeps in through the windows. The terrible pain is gone. I feel strange: light as air.

I'm standing in the center of the room. On the bed sits a hideous old woman, watching me with pale eyes and sporting a wide, gap-toothed grin. The skin hangs loosely from her bones and the pale matted hair is plastered to the sides of her face. It's her—the apparition from last night.

She gazes at me, smiling with undisguised glee, and I realize she's wearing my clothes. Without a word, she stands up and hobbles toward the door.

I try to call out to her but no sound leaves my mouth. The hand I put up to stop her is just a mess of rotten skin and bone. When I move, I leave behind a trail of black ichor.

The crone walks out into bright sunshine, shutting the door behind her without a backward glance. I am alone in the cold, silent room.

I try the door, then the window. Strange, neither one will budge. I push against the walls but they're solid to the touch. Every attempt to speak or call out is met with silence.

There's time to think. I force myself to think. There must be some explanation, some way out of this. But all I can think of is the gratitude in the crone's smile. Like she'd been waiting for someone like me. Waiting an eternity.

Someone will come, eventually. Someone must. They'll find out I'm missing and they'll look for me here. I just need to wait for them.

I look down at the window sill. There's a single dead fly there, its legs held up as if in surrender.

I put my hand against my chest to feel for a heartbeat, but there's nothing.

No fear. No pain.

I feel nothing.

I feel no one.



Whatever Sybil has heard or seen, it's up to her whether she believes it or not.

For a decade in the University, she was an ear for anyone who would want to come and speak to. It's either because of her fealty of silence or she is a cleric that students, even teachers, would entrust their sins and fears to.

Hushed tones were shared in the girls' bathroom stalls of affairs to which Sybil found that perhaps a confused romantic is blindly playing a dangerous game of relationships. Some friends from the upper batch had shown her papers with encircled red ink marks, ranting about students not cooperating to group works. She passes by students who are frightened by silent corridors to which a mysterious soft beat of metal or ceramic from an unknown source bounces its way through the tiled floor. The faint smell of tobacco in the early hours of the night had someone who had returned recently from a field trip gossip about a janitor might have had taken a double shift to clean up the corridors, unbothered to light a cigarette in between his lips.

She had heard a lot of noise in varying frequencies. She doesn't gain much from being the most trusted one but valuable information. It's not her doing to ruin anyone with it, but it's her fondness of piecing together stories to fill her curiosity. Reveals and investigations are only done whenever it is necessary.

Tink! Tink! Tink!

The sound of a golden disc meeting the metallic silver ring on Damien's finger made Sybil's skin crawl. "Would you stop doing that?" She snaps at him. He catches the coin in his hand then pauses. "What? Is it your time of the month?" An eye twitches in his direction. "My god, Dame." Then Sybil continues to walk through the tiled corridor with a finger in between her teeth.

"I mean, I know we have a lot on our plate right now, but you don't need to bite your finger off." Damien replies as he pockets the coin.

"Just stop whatever you're doing with that coin."

"I'm just flipping it. It bothers you that much?"

"Yes." Sybil gestures her head in his direction. "Very much."

"That's..." Damien pauses for a second before retracting. "Okay." He takes another moment. "Why though? It's just a coin."

He only receives a heavy sigh from his classmate.

They make their way through the empty corridor where the orange hues of sunset begin to fade from the walls. The classroom doors are now shut, and darkness can be seen through the small glass windows, taking the space within. It is a custom to hear the bustling noise, infrequent shouting, and tapping heels of the high school corridor during the day. But when the bell rings at the latest hour and thousands of hurried footsteps would make their way for the stairs, the walls of the University become quiet in a matter of minutes. The stillness and ever so slight of low noise of rolling and crackling tires and the rustling of leaves coming through the barred windows can unsettle any student who hasn't left at this hour.

"Are you sure Tana's not just ignoring our messages in the group chat?" Damien asks. "It seems like a typical Tana maneuver. She's

there for the classes but doesn't give a damn about group projects." Sybil took a moment before her voice wavers in reply. "That's why we have to find Sir Alvarez. I need to ask him something."

"Any news from her and why she doesn't show up to our group meetings?"

Another moment passes. "I don't keep tabs on her. Too pissed to care. Too busy to do so."

"Alright, then why do you care now?"

"Because I didn't before." Sybil pauses before continuing. "If anything, Tana can be the death of our project and I'm not about to get a failing grade because of her."

"Well, this is Sir Alvarez we're talking to. He loves group works which suck, by the way, but I think he takes individual grades."

"We'll just have to make sure. We're not letting Tana's absence drag us down."

Damien raises a brow at Sybil who seems to be crossed yet conflicted by a groupmate's disappearance. The occasional biting on her finger speaks differently to him. He takes his coin out once again from his pocket and starts flicking it in between his fingers. The wooden walls amplify the soft Tink from the metals on his hand. Sybil immediately stops to reach out for the coin. Her hand swiftly catches it midair before it lands on the flesh of her classmate's palm. "Can you please don't do that?" Her voice stressed each word. She pockets the coin, then turns her heel to the right corridor. "I don't like that sound." Either it was a flash of annoyance or fear he heard; Damien kept his distance from her.

"You're easily ticked off right now. Are you sure it's not the time of the month?"

Sybil maintains her composure and silence.

"I mean, you are really off right now, and I can't tell exactly why."

Another moment of silence comes.

“You know what? Annoying you is better than the coin. If you hate the sound of flipping coins, I also hate that it’s creepy and quiet right now.”

“You’re not the only one who wants to leave, alright?” Sybil exasperates. “I just need to ask some things to Sir and then we’re out of here.”

They reach the Faculty Office at the end of the corridor. Sybil taps a curled finger on the wooden door three times before turning the tarnished knob. The hinges creak open and the cold air from the AC greets Sybil’s skin. “Good...” She quickly checks the ticking watch on her wrist. “Afternoon, teachers, The Lord has granted us a new day. I am Sybil Panganiban. May I speak with Sir Alvarez, please?”

“And may He grant us another.” A male voice responded to the greeting. “Just a moment.” A chair skids off the floor and a series of footsteps come behind a metal locker blocking the view of the whole faculty room. A young man with a pair of glasses resting on his nose, wearing a pair of teacher’s uniform emerges from the side of the locker to meet Sybil outside of the office. “Miss Panganiban.” The teacher greets with a small smile. He then looks at the company besides her. “Mr. Velasco.” Damien waves his hand at him. “Hi, Sir!”

“What can I do for you?” Mr. Alvarez asks, clasping his hands together. “Sir,” Sybil began, hesitating first before continuing. “I would like to ask something about Tana Alonto. I know that she’s been present in our classes, but she still tends to disappear whenever we need her for group works. Is there any news of her and why she doesn’t attend our meetings?”

“Well, as you said, you’ve seen her present in our combined classes as well as in my advisory class. I always check on her in the morning and she seems fine. At least she says so.” He turns his head looking around the corridors for a moment before continuing. “I will say, she wasn’t able to do any of the requirements given to her. I don’t even know how to compute her grades without her outputs as a basis.”

“Any news from her parents? Is she capable of doing requirements? Anything?” Sybil asks.

“It is strange, to be honest.” The teacher crosses his arms and lets out a hum. “I tried calling her parents a few times before to discuss that particular concern. Every time I ask Mrs. Alonto, she would just comment that Tana is a good student. Not the brightest, but she works hard to finish her studies.” He takes a pause. “And here’s the strangest part. Every time I ask where Tana is at the moment, she tells me that she’s waiting for her to come home from school.” He takes another pause. “Just so you both know, the last was on a weekend.” Both students’ eyes widened as Sybil raises her finger to her mouth once again. “I don’t know what you think, but I am quite concerned about Tana.”

“That’s... *sus*’.” Damien comments.

“I’m sorry. I can’t fully answer your question, but that’s all I know. I’m still trying to figure this out myself.” Mr. Alvarez sighs then gestures his hand towards them. “If you hear anything, let me know, alright?”

Seeing Sybil in deep thought, Damien speaks up again. “Yeah. Uhm. Sir, about the group work you gave us, she’s our groupmate. Is she going to...”

“Oh no, don’t worry!” The teacher interjects, raising a hand with assurance. “I’ll be recording your grades individually based on your contribution.”

“Oh cool, cool. Thanks, Sir!”

“Alright, I am going back in to finish up.” Mr. Alvarez takes the knob and starts heading inside. “It’s already late. You two better get home before it gets fully dark here. I’ll see you in class and stay safe on the road.” He gives them a nod, enters the room, and closes the door.

Damien looks at Sybil who seems to be dazed as she bites on her finger. “Well, I guess that’s that.” He says, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Why don’t we ask Tana tomorrow ourselves?”

“Yeah. Sure. Probably.” Sybil answers, flatly. “Oooohkay.” Damien pats her shoulder and begins to turn back to where they came. “I’m a head out. See you tomorrow ‘Bil.” Sybil turns her head to watch Damien walk back to the corridor, then turns to the nearest staircase.

She starts retracing her steps. Her mind starts to piece together information as her feet carry her to a certain place. The faint orange of the sunset dissipates, letting a hint of darkness in. Turning to her desired destination, a waft of tobacco comes to her senses and the lights of the corridor flickered to life, snapping Sybil from her thoughts. Ahead of her was a middle-aged man in maintenance uniform sniffing and coughing into his arm. He carries a broom and a mop in each hand. His eyes look at the student intently, eyeing her until she's out of his line of sight.

Sybil lets him pass for she had already given her attention to who she's looking for. A pale girl, wearing the identical University blue uniform stands in front of her. Her hair is a tangled mess in a ponytail over her shoulder. Her delicate skin is riddled with reddish and crimson marks. Both of her hands clutch her neck, the ruined blouse of her uniform with its missing buttons, and her shaking self. In one hand, she clutches the remains of a broken piece of jewelry. A bead falls to the tiled floor, bouncing towards Sybil's shoes echoing an all-familiar ominous sound.

Tink! Tink! Tink!

The girl's eyes are a river of fear, distraught, and pain. Both shifts to see in front, what seems to her, a comforting and familiar sight. She then speaks.

"Do you believe me now? I begged that I wanted to go home. I didn't want to let the group down."

Sybil freezes in place, letting the gathered pieces click in her head. She curls her hands into fists and turns to the man silently moving the mop left and right on the tiled floor as he keeps his gaze at the only student present in front of him.

Whatever Sybil has heard or seen, it's up to her whether she believes it or not.

Tanya

by Dola Garcia

1. INT. TANYA'S CONDO - NIGHT

Umuwi si Tanya sa condo galing sa trabaho. Nilapag ang award plaque niya bilang “Best Employee of the Year”. Kinuha ang cellphone at tinawagan ang mom niya.

TANYA

Hi Mom.

MOM

O bakit napatawag ka?

TANYA

Gusto ko lang sana sabihin na -

MOM

Tanya, sandali lang ha...

May ibang kausap ang mom ni Tanya.

MOM

Naku, sinusundo na ko ng mga kumare ko. Next time nalang ha. Hinihintay na nila ko.

TANYA

Ok mom.

MOM

Bye.

TANYA

Bye. I love -

Na cut na ang call. Ilalapag ni Tanya ang cellphone at titignan ang plaque niya.

Napa tingin siya sa picture nila ng bestfriend niya na si Joan. Sweet photos na maaring mapagkamalang mag girlfriend sila. Pero hindi. Naalala ni Tanya ung araw na sinabi ng best friend niya na may boyfriend na siya. Bihira na din niya makausap si Joan mula noon. Samantalang dati, kulang nalang sa condo na niya tumira si Joan. Tatawagan niya si Joan ngunit hindi sumasagot si Joan.

TANYA
Busy ata.

Idro-drop na ni Tanya ang call at ilalapag ang cellphone sa table.

2. INT. TANYA'S CONDO - DAY

Nakita ni Tanya na tinatawagan siya ng kaibigan niyang si Cheska.

TANYA
Hello?

CHESKA
Hello? Tanya?

TANYA
Cheska, kumusta?

CHESKA
Okay lang... hmmm... hindi ko alam kung paano ko sasabihin ito pero may bad news ako.

TANYA
Hala, kinakabahan naman ako.

CHESKA
May bagong biktima.

TANYA
Sino?

CHESKA
Si Jennie.

3. EXT. JENNIE'S WAKE - NIGHT

Hile hilerang upuan. Maraming tao ang palakad lakad. Wala nang maupuan sa dami nang nakikiramay sa isang burol. Nakatayo sa may likuran si Tanya kasama si Cheska. Tinitignan nila ang mga taong dumarating, naghahanap nang kakilala.

TANYA

May lead na daw ba sa suspect?

CHESKA

Hindi ko alam, pero may hinala sila, pangatlo na si Jennie sa batch natin na pinatay sa parehong paraan. Hindi kaba natatakot?

TANYA

Na batch natin ung target? Na serial killing 'to?

CHESKA

Oo, kasi masasabi mo bang nagkataon lang lahat ng ito? Every month may pinapatay na kakilala natin. Sabay na mapapabuntong hininga ang dalawa. Dumating ang isang grupo para makiramay.

CHESKA

Ang daming kaibigan ni Jennie. Halos wala ng maupuan dito. Tayo nga naka tayo nalang dito. Ang daming nakikiramay sa pag kawala niya.

TANYA

Ang swerte pa din niya kahit papaano. Tignan mo naman, ang daming nag mamahal sa kanya.

CHESKA

Swerte? Pinatay siya, anong swerte doon? Ang bata pa niya.

TANYA

E kasi may asawa at anak siya. Ang ganda ng trabaho niya kaya naka pag tayo ng maliit na negosyo. Pa travel travel nalang. E ibang tao, lagpas 40 na, ni isa diyan hindi pa nila nakukuha. Namatay siya, oo, pero kita mo naman ung mga taong andito, ang laki ng naging impact niya.

CHESKA

Pag ako kaya namatay ganto din karami ang tao? Ano kaya sasabihin nila tungkol saakin?

TANYA

Naiisip ko din yan. Sino kaya mga pupunta? Meron kaya? Matatahimik sina Cheska at Tanya.

CHESKA

Takot kaba mamatay?

TANYA

Hindi naman.

CHESKA

E anong pinaka kinakatakutan mo? Hindi makakasagot si Tanya.

CHESKA

Kasi ako, takot ako na mambabae ang asawa ko. Ikaw?

TANYA

Wala naman akong asawa.

CHESKA

Takot kabang hindi makapag asawa?

TANYA

Hindi naman.

CHESKA

Takot ka mainlove? No offense ah, pareho na tayong nasa 40's pero single ka pa din.

TANYA

Gusto ko naman makipag relasyon, pero parang malabo na yun. Wala naman kasing dumadating na chance sa akin.

CHESKA

May mga naging karelasyon ka naman diba.

TANYA

Oo, pero lahat iniwan ako.

CHESKA

Ahhhh, alam ko na, natakot ka masaktan ulit kaya hindi kana nag mahal.

TANYA

Hindi sa ganun. Gusto kong mag mahal. Pero wala talaga, siguro may mga tao talagang hindi nakaka tagpo ng pag-ibig sa buhay nila.

CHESKA

Grabe naman, hindi naman siguro.

TANYA

Kaya swerte ka. May kasama sa buhay. Pag umuwi ka ng bahay, may naghihintay sayo. At pag tanda mo, may mag aalaga sa iyo. Tumunog ang cellphone ni Cheska.

CHESKA

Nag chat anak ko, daan daw ako sa Jollibee. Bilihan ko daw siya.

TANYA

Aalis kana ba?

Titignan ang oras.

CHESKA

Oo, hinihintay na ako nun, mag papaalam muna ako.

TANYA

Sige. Ingat ka. Alis na din ako mamayang kaunti. Wala namang nag hihintay sakín kasi mag isa lang ako sa condo.

Lumigid ang mata ni Tanya sa mga taong nakikiramay. Nag kukwentuhan kung gaano kabuting tao si Jennie. Kung paanong isang malaking kawalan ang pagkamatay niya. Tinignan ni Tanya ang phone, walang text, chat or call. Malungkot na ngiti lamang ang nagawa niya. Umuwi na siya.

4. INT. TANYA'S CONDO - NIGHT

Friday night, umuwi siyang masaya galing sa trabaho. Mag oovernight si Joan sa condo niya. Habang nag hahanda siya, nakatanggap siya ng text galing kay Joan at nag sorry dahil hindi siya makakapunta. Mag rereply palang si Tanya ng may kumatok sa pintuan niya.

TANYA

Talaga to si Joan, lakas ng trip.
Kunwari hindi pupunta tapos andito
na.

Binuksan ni Tanya ang pintuan. Hindi niya makilala kung sino. Naka takip ang mukha, naka hood. Lalaki. Pumasok ang lalaki at tinutukan ng patalim si Tanya. Sinara nito ang pinto at dinala si Tanya sa kama. Itinali ang mga kamay at nilagyan ng busal ang bibig. Agad na pinag sasaksak si Tanya. Walang nagawa si Tanya. Wala siyang laban. Umalis ang lalaki matapos saksakin nang 13 beses si Tanya. Habang nag aagaw buhay si Tanya, naaninag niya ang litrato ni Joan.

TANYA

Buti nalang hindi ka nag punta.

Namatay si Tanya mag isa sa condo. Walang kasama at walang nakaka alam. Sinusubukan siyang tawagan ni Joan. Akala niya galit lang sa kanya si Tanya. Dumaan ang ilang araw pero wala pa ding paramdam si Tanya. Pumunta na si Joan sa condo at nakita niya ang kaibigan na ilang araw na palang patay.

5. EXT. TANYA'S WAKE - NIGHT

Huling araw ng burol ni Tanya, maraming pumunta. Andoon ang mom ni Tanya na nag sisisi dahil hindi niya naiparamdam ang pagmamahal niya sa anak. Si Cheska na guilty dahil alam niyang mula ng nag kapamilya siya, hindi na din niya masyadong nabigyan ng panahon ang pag kakaibigan nila ni Tanya. At syempre andoon si Joan.

JOAN

(pabulong sa sarili)

Sana hindi ako natakot. Sana nasabi
ko na mahal kita higit sa pagiging
kaibigan.

The House of Three

by G. “Maki” Martinez

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.
The yellow paint bright, newly built;
There lived three people. A father. A mother. A child.
The father worked. The mother cooked. The child played.
The father shouted. The mother cried. The child slept.
The father hit. The mother stabbed. The child heard.
The father smoked. The mother cleaned. The child watched.
The house was left empty, and hidden among the tall trees.

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.
The yellow paint faded from years it stood;
There lived three people. Siblings three.
The brother worked. The sister cooked. The youngest played.
The brother shouted. The sister cried. The youngest slept.
The brother hit. The sister stabbed. The youngest heard.
The father smoked. The mother cleaned. The child watched.
The house was left empty, and hidden among the tall trees.

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.
The yellow paint repainted after years it stood;
There lived three people. Three friends on a budget.
One worked. Another cooked. The other played.
One shouted. Another cried. The other slept.
One hit. Another stabbed. The other heard.
The father smoked. The mother cleaned. The child watched.
The house was left empty, and hidden among the tall trees.

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.
The walls hidden after years it stood;
There lived one.
Alone. Worked, cooked, played.
Alone. Shouted, cried, slept.
Alone. Heard none.
Alone. The child watched.

Page 1

Panel 1. EST.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small house on a hill. It looks small from the distance, quaint somewhat a modest luxury, and overall, ordinary. It is beside tall trees, where the sun gives it a warm welcoming look. A car drives pass the line of house, heading to the small one.

[CAPTION]

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.

Panel 2.

INT. A busy hallway of a family living their everyday life, against a pale bright yellow wall. The father's off to work, the mother doting on both her husband and child, and the child looking at his parents.

[CAPTION]

The yellow paint bright, newly built;
There lived three people. A father. A mother. A child.

Panel 3.

Snippets of their everyday life slowly getting more and more abusive and bloody, scattered. The father is angry, the mother is miserable, and the child though emotionless looks on with curious contempt. The snapshots scatter initially looking like a homely scrapbook gradually into crime scene photos. The series of photos must end with the child looking on, emotionless.

[CAPTION]

The father worked. The mother cooked. The child played.
The father shouted. The mother cried. The child slept.
The father hit. The mother stabbed. The child heard.
The father smoked. The mother cleaned. The child watched.

Panel 4.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small isolated house on a hill. It looks small from the distance. It is alone, solemn and ominous. It is covered by tall trees. A car going passes the line of house, heading away from the small one, as though escaping.

[CAPTION]

The house was left empty, and hidden among the tall trees.

Page 2

Panel 1. EST.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small isolated house on a hill. The trees have grown much taller, covering and hiding a small portion of the house.

[CAPTION]

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.

Panel 2.

INT. A busy hallway of a set of siblings moving, against a faded yellow wall, with questionable stains. The brother leading his two sisters into the home, confident, carrying boxes. The sister bickering with him as she carried boxes. The youngest carrying her knapsack, and a box looking around. One of the pictures hanging on the walls look at her intently.

[CAPTION]

The yellow paint faded from years it stood;
There lived three people. Siblings three.

Panel 3 -12.

Snippets of their everyday life slowly getting more and more abusive and bloody, scattered. The sister is angry, the brother is miserable, and the child though emotionless looks on with curious contempt. The snapshots scatter initially looking like a scrapbook into crime scene photos. The series of photos must end with the child/youngest looking on, emotionless.

[CAPTION]

The brother worked. The sister cooked. The youngest played.
The brother shouted. The sister cried. The youngest slept.
The brother hit. The sister stabbed. The youngest heard.
The father smoked. The mother cleaned. The child watched.

Panel 13.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small isolated house on a hill. It looks small from the distance. It is alone, solemn and ominous. It is covered by tall trees. A car going passes the line of house, heading away from the small one, as though escaping.

[CAPTION]

The house was left empty, and hidden among the tall trees.

Page 3

Panel 1. EST.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small isolated house on a hill. The trees have grown much bigger and taller, covering and hiding most of the house. Three people are in the front yard taking a picture of them removing the “For Sale” sign off the grass.

[CAPTION]

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.

Panel 2.

INT. A busy hallway with a white board stuck on a board with to do lists. One is smoking, another is on their phone while the other is talking in front of them. They’re discussing bills and chores.

[CAPTION]

The yellow paint repainted after years it stood;
There lived three people. Three friends on a budget.

Panel 3 -12.

The pattern repeats again, if not like the first one, then the previous one. It is inevitable. The series of photos must end with the child, whoever is the last one standing, looking on, emotionless.

[CAPTION]

One worked. Another cooked. The other played.
One shouted. Another cried. The other slept.
One hit. Another stabbed. The other heard.
The father smoked. The mother cleaned. The child watched.

Panel 4.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small isolated house on a hill. It looks small from the distance. It is alone, solemn and ominous. It is covered by tall trees. A car going passes the line of house, heading away from the small one, as though escaping.

[CAPTION]

The house was left empty, and hidden among the tall trees.

Page 4

Panel 1. EST.

EXT. Lanes of suburban houses lead to a small isolated house on a hill. The trees have grown big and tall, but trimmed to frame the house picturesque. The vines that cover the house outer walls have been stripped and washed, though some remains, persistent. A young woman enters the home, moving in on her own.

[CAPTION]

The house at the end of the lane is a small house.
Hidden among the tall trees that stood beside it for years.

Panel 2.

INT. The walls inside are stripped of paint, and covered with a wallpaper pattern. The young woman walks past the hallway, clueless. A small figure looms.

[CAPTION]

The walls hidden after years it stood;
There lived one.

Panel 3 -6.

The young woman going about her everyday life, unknown that the shadow slowly honing in on her day by day, panel by panel.

[CAPTION]

Alone. Worked, cooked, played.
Alone. Shouted, cried, slept.
Alone. Heard none.

Panel 4.

The young woman on the phone talking to someone, as though she's inviting someone over. Something, somewhere someone else is watching, waiting for her to stumble and fall.

[CAPTION]

Alone. The child watched.

The Infestation in Sierra Madre

by Ar-Em Bañas

It wasn't the first time John hiked the Sierra Madre mountains by himself. He had joined several of the tree-planting events held there as a part of the reforestation program and would volunteer to take on a whole mountain. Given, it was smaller than the others, but he took great pride in it.

Confident with his experience, he offered to check on the planted seedlings. Truthfully, he had planned for the trip in advance, hoping to hike through all of the tree-planting locations for sport — and volunteer work, of course.

Despite carrying a backpack filled with hiking gear, he nearly ran through the mountain pass and onto the peak, eager to see it lush with new trees in the early morning light. Instead, he found a dying forest.

The seedlings he planted were trampled on, and the older trees he fostered were cut down. The people who did this even dared to leave behind their broken axes and saws, now coated with a thin layer of mud.

And as if that wasn't bad enough, the area was crawling with termites. They were everywhere — in the mounds at the base of the trees and within the hollowed trunks. They crawled and fed on the trees in droves, their bellies bulging and yellow.

John shivered. He couldn't stand the sight of it.

He knew he could have waited, come back the next day, but he already lost most of his work to crooks and was in no mood to lose more. He wanted to get rid of the infestation, to make it suitable for the next seedlings he would plant.

He didn't even notice the grimy handle of the discarded ax in his hands as he hacked at both the termite mounds and infested trees. He paid no attention to the splinters as it scratched his arms and face. He did worry about what other people would think if they saw him there, hacking away.

He did wonder if he was doing the right thing, if this was safe.

He knew this much though — termites don't bite. The few recorded bites were rare occurrences, he heard. If it were an infestation of anthills or wasp hives, he would've left and let someone else do the work. But this? This he could do by himself.

True enough, the termites scattered and crawled away, disappearing into the dirt. With most of them gone, he prepared a small clearing near the rocky peak, perhaps a meter or so away from the dried bushes and wild grass. He didn't want to risk a forest fire after all.

He then dropped his backpack on the ground and dug around its contents to find a lighter. It didn't take long thankfully, and when he stood to approach the pile of infested wood, he faltered, losing his balance. It must have been the wind, but it felt like he was pushed. Then before he knew it, he was tumbling down the mountain.

He heard himself scream. Then he heard a thud, a crunch, and finally, a crack.

John woke up to the sounds of rustling leaves and howling wind. His lips felt dry, his skin burned by the afternoon sun.

He took a deep breath, or at least attempted to. He coughed and sputtered painfully, and for a moment, considered that he must've broken some ribs. Then the pain spread to the rest of his body — his head throbbed, his arms felt heavy and bruised, and his legs prickled — or perhaps it has always been there ever since he—

Fell.

The memory of it came crashing back into him, filling him with alarm. He looked up dazedly at the dusk sky to find his bearings and saw the peak was only a few meters away. He must've landed on the mountain pass, he realized with relief. If he fell straight down to the base... Well, best not to think about it.

Still, he was hurt badly. He had to call someone for help but remembered his phone was still in his backpack so he got up bit by bit, eyes watering with every movement.

Finally sat up, he pulled his legs closer to him for support, only to wince as blinding pain shot right through him. He nearly wept then, clenching his fists as tightly as he could, nails digging into his skin.

It was his right leg, he realized, the source of his pain. What was disturbing was how easy it was to see.

The skin from his knee down to his calf was purple and swollen. His foot was twisted away, a lump of unfamiliar bone sticking out, pressing against his flesh until it turned white.

He stifled a cry.

What should he do now? Would he have to crawl to the peak? And even if he called for help, how soon could he get medical atten—

His leg twitched. Like a muscle had gone loose and wriggled inside his calf.

He stared at his leg carefully and ran his hands against his skin where he felt it twitch.

And it moved. Small bumps formed and disappeared, moving from his calf to his foot. And there, clearly, against the bone that strained his skin, he could see its yellowed belly.

It began to bite.

And it burned like red hot needles. He tried to squash it but more of the termites gathered on his bones to feast, his skin stretching and swelling to accommodate all of them.

He screamed, trying to shake it out, to kick it away but his foot continued to swell and burn, and the termites wriggled and squelched in his foot then up his calf and underneath his kneecap, its bodies now round and red as it dug deeper, and he could feel it, he could hear its tiny mouths chewing up his skin, flesh, bone, and marrow bit by bit and he wanted to kill it, kill it, kill it all—

He flung his leg against the mountainside. It dulled the burning for a merciful few seconds, so he flung it again and again but then it burned once more, spreading like wildfire from his kneecap

to his thigh, and he thought that the pain could kill him, would kill him, so he sought for a fallen branch, a stone, anything he could find.

His hands found and wrapped around a coarse and heavy rock, then he struck his broken ankle. He felt his bones shatter, its shards piercing his skin, but he didn't care. He wanted to stop burning, he wanted it out of him, and the sensation of shattering bones was a strange comfort compared to the bites, so he struck it again, and again, and again until nothing was left.

John sat there, numbly staring at what he had done. The sensation of burning had gone, replaced by a dull pain on where his foot had been. Before it could overwhelm him, he turned away, crawling, painstakingly slowly, towards the peak. He knew he probably would bleed out before he reached the top, let alone before anyone found him. He didn't care though. He didn't want to be there anymore. He didn't—

Footsteps.

He could hear footsteps somewhere above him.

There was someone. Someone must've gone to the mountain some other way and found his things. He shouted and begged for help, reduced to indiscernible cries of desperation as he crawled towards the sound.

His leg twitched again, more violently this time, as if it was being pulled away, torn away from his body. He crawled towards the sound nonetheless, crawling until he could see the footsteps, crawling until he could see the silhouette of a crooked old man, and then—

John had a dream.

In the dream, he was lying on wild grass and ferns, gazing at the silhouette of the Sierra Madre mountains. The moon was full and bright, and he could see the bodies at the base of the mountain clearly — broken and swollen bodies filled with termites that feast on their rotting flesh.

He wanted to go home in that dream so he tried to get up, but he couldn't. His left leg, or what was left of it, was covered with holes, and where his right leg should've been was replaced by a mound, black and muddied.

He clawed on the ground, trying to drag himself away from the termites, but he was the mound and the hive. He was their home, wherever he went. So he screamed.

The radio in the nearby towns spoke of a man named John Hernandez, the twenty-fourth addition to the list of missing persons. They were all suspected of illegal logging in the Sierra Madre.

Rescue teams had been deployed to find their bodies to no avail.

They only found a termite infestation.

The Kauswagan Building on Velez Street

by Eric John Villena

In the city of Oro Kagayan, at the downtown Divisoria along Apolinar Velez street, stood the Kauswagan building that had a few obscured urban legends in its relatively short history. Back in the 50's it used to be a 2-story, five hundred seventy square meter building, owned by a certain Go family, descendants of Fukien migrants to the then Spanish vesita since the 1850s. The ground floor served as a shop front for groceries, while the owners had taken the second floor as residence. In this period the city had been developing as the then Mayor Borja had prioritized three key concerns: infrastructure, education, and livelihood. He had served the city as Mayor for ten years, and then died of a heart attack, aged fifty-two, at work in 1964.

On the night before the news of the Mayor's death was to reach Oro Kagayan, the shoti of the Go family had been loitering in by the mini park in Divisoria, a few blocks away from the Go's building. The young boy sat on the grass underneath an acacia tree, crying because his dihia was teasing him for being lazy. Sniffing, he wiped snot from his nose with his arm and then heard a shuffling of steps. When he looked back, under the eaves of the acacia tree stood a tall man. Shadows filmed his face, but the boy saw the tall man had both his hands buried in the back pockets. The boy heard the tall stranger ask him why he's crying. The shoti wiped the tears from his face, stood up and faced the tall stranger, explaining to himself to the latter. The tall stranger only listened, hands still in his back pockets. At the lull in their conversation, the boy asked the tall man why he kept his hand in his back pockets. And the tall man said that it was to keep the pickpockets from stealing his wallet.

Days later, when Mayor Borja's body was taken back to the city and his funeral was visited by its beloved citizens, the shoti would recount to his guama about that one night when he was out to get some air that he met a tall man who kept his hands in his back pockets. Upon hearing this, the grandmother asked the boy when this happened. When the old woman put two things together, she made the sign of the cross and forbade the shoti from speaking about it ever again.

Time pressed on, and the Go family had been accumulating capital and ventured to buy some land by the recently-opened Cogon public market. By the 80s, they fully transferred the grocery from the building on Velez street to the public market; they put the old building up for lease. Someone from the wealthy Neri-Chavez family paid the lease on the said building and fitted it as a movie theater, called it Wonder Theater. It was set up as competition for the nearby Nation theater. In this period action movies and bomba films were showcased as local people consumed such media in the way people's attention was captured by the newsfeeds of online social media platforms. Eventually, the movie houses reached its bust in the 90s when bomb scares deterred moviegoers from cramped spaces that may have been the death of them if, God forbid, a bomb blows off and entraps them there. In the last few years before the city's movie theaters were closing down one by one, horny couples and dirty old men preying on "working girls" took advantage of the diminishing number of audience, and "played in the dark," so to speak, with the projector serving as illumination. It was the routine of working girls to sit beside a lonesome man and in roundabout way, offer her services; or the girl would sit at one end of the theater seats, and would seductively eye any responsive man, and allow him to sit beside her. It was around this "underground" culture that the urban legend about the ghost of the working girl that frightened the men to death began.

There were variations on this, but the story typically goes: a predatory man goes to the Wonder theater and looks for a working girl. He happens to pick one who sits at the center of the seats, just underneath light of the reel projector. He sits beside her, seeing she looks the part, and asks about her services. The girl only nods, but kept her eyes on the movie screen. No longer waiting for permission, the man proceeds to molest and kiss her. Only after the lights comes back on will people discover that a man at the center of the theater seats was sitting transfixed at the empty screen, face frightened and no longer breathing. A lot was said as to the identity of the working girl's ghost, but only a few were able to retain the story, as people were more afraid of bombs than ghosts – the victims (there were a string of deaths recorded, in similar circumstance as described above) might as well have died of natural causes and nothing else.

As the 90s ushered in the 2000s, the person from the Neri-Chavez family gave up the lease and the third generation of the Go family

got hold of it again. With healthy growth in business, the Go family decided to re-invest their capital on the old building, which was fitted as a theater, and turned it into three-story multi-purpose commercial building. The reconstruction took two years, and when they opened the lease of spaces to the public in 2003, the Go family christened it the Kauswagan building. The ground floor was rented out to a shoe retail store, while the second and third floor was leased out for office spaces. The second floor shared spaces with the offices of the law firm and an insurance firm. The whole third floor was leased out to an accounting firm.

In between 2008-2015, the Kauswagan building gained a reputation for having the most work-related deaths of employees, relative to other office buildings in this period. If statistics were to be drawn from the City Civil Registry, the nine deaths would be blamed to deterioration of health or suicide as causes. Still-living employees that survived injuries would have such as caused by personal negligence (though many anonymous respondents has claimed that they were put in strict confidentiality about the true events in the building if they were to keep their employment).

In this case, any story about the Kauswagan building that hit a bad note were dismissed as urban legends. Take for example the story provided by a recent-hire accountant (name withheld) who shared about that one time he went on overtime at a quarter to eight of evening. He found himself alone in the third floor office when printers would just print out sheets with jumble of symbols printed on it. Another testimony from a different employee shares that in their office at the insurance, there was storage room where she found a desk and chair and looked like someone had used it. It so happened that one time she worked on overtime and it was just the two of them in the office. When she went inside the storage room to get some reams of bond paper and opened the lights, she saw the back of someone sitting at the table, hunched on the desk. She called the person out, but he didn't respond. As she was too tired to call out, she took the ream of legal sized paper and started for the door and closed the light switch. And then her co-worker called out and asked her to also get some staplers, so she turned back on opened the lights again, and sure enough, the person hunched on the desk disappeared. Still, another story shared by a one employee of the shoe store at the ground floor tells of how late at night, as they were closing the shutters at eight p.m., him and one other employee

witnessed a parade of some sort walking from Divisoria straight on the Velez street. They saw several people walking, men, women, and children, all drenched in river water and soiled with mud, reminiscent of the corpses collected in the aftermath of typhoon Sendong. It took about three or five minutes, and the two shoe shop employees turned to a corner and walked away from Velez street and didn't look back. Of the nine deaths, four were successful suicides, while the rest died of a heart attack.

Two of the suicide jumped off the top of the building, while one hanged himself in a bathroom, while another slit his wrist. The suicides were dismissed as a matter of mental illness arising from personal problems, nothing more. But the stories surrounding it tell otherwise. As the lore of the urban legend of the Kauswagan building would have it, the first one who jumped off the building was said to be overworking himself, taking 60-70 hour every week. It was said that since this person hadn't been sleeping enough, and it probably prompted him to hallucinate about this working girl that had been comforting and making love to him at the office, especially when he's left there alone. Because the ghost of the working girl led him up to the roof deck (but he has no possession of the keys to the door to it) and lured him to the edge. The other who jumped off was said to have been seeing things in the building lately, and his co-workers scoffed at him, blaming it to his imagination as the Kauswagan building has gained again another death, as someone died of a heart attack at work. Long story short, the investigators said that he may have jumped out of the window because he may have seen something, a ghost perhaps, which chased him to the edge.

The other one who hanged herself was probably haunted by the ghost another employee who had died earlier; she had a secret affair with this co-worker, so when he died of a heart attack whilst sitting on his desk, made her feel sick with nausea. It was said that months after her lover died, she had been hearing him whisper to her ear, transmitting to her the ugliest secrets of her co-workers, her boss, and the people in the other offices. As she could not take those voice in her head, she decided to resign. But then, the ghost of her former lover appeared before her while she was in the toilet, and then and there she took her belt, tied on the highest metal grill of the window and hanged herself.

Those who died of a heart attack was said to be found at their desks. One was found at his desk the next day, hunched and no longer moving. They said that he had no prior health problems, but co-workers would point out how he was eating double portions of lunch meals, and was having meals delivered to him when he's having an overtime. Yet, urban legend would explain that he may have died because ghost of an old man with hole in his stomach was haunting him. This same ghost was also same one blamed for the deaths of the other, although other ghosts were described to indicate the various effects of overworking manifesting in their bodies: the ghost of a woman with hollow eyes and frog tongue that slithered through your ears and eyes to keep sleep away; another ghost, a wispy, smoky body of an old, old, androgyne that breaths invisible gas to you and make you feel weak and depressed at work.

By 2016, the shoe store slowly lost its business and closed down. The accounting firm restructured itself into a IT-business solution company and moved elsewhere. A year later the law firm transferred to another place. Months after, the insurance firm followed suit. By 2019, the building was demolished, and a chain fence cordoned the area. As of 2021, the site of what once was the Kauswagan building remained empty, save for the ghosts memorialized, in so many versions, in obscure urban legends spoken at periods between economic booms and busts.

The Place That Never Left

by Princess Van Andrelle A. Galsim

It's Friday night, around 11 o'clock in the evening when Ranniel and Liezl decided to grab a drink in a pub in Katipunan. They walked in the midst of the busy crowd, all are either focused on their partners or just staring blankly at the bottom of their bottles. The two headed to the bar and ordered two Irish Bombs. After a few drinks and laughs about embarrassing stories of their past, Liezl noticed a rugged old man on their right.

He sat alone at the far back of the room. He shifted his gaze away when he realized she saw him. She shrugged it off and continued her chat with her man. After a while, the old man moved to the bar and called for the bartender to order a drink but the bartender seemed too busy to tend to him. The old man just sighed and moved to retreat to his seat. The two couldn't help but notice him.

Liezl: Hey, you can sit here and wait.

Ranniel: Yeah. I'm sure the bartender will be able to help you in a bit. The old man smiled at the offer. He sat on the stool quietly and turned to the couple.

Old man: You lovebirds remind me of my old days. Me and my beloved used to go here after having fun in a carnival nearby. I actually used to give her rose every now and then.

Though he said was short, his graying eyes stated more of his longing than any trained tongue could. Upon taking a closer look, Liezl thought that he looked like he's in his late fifties. His black hair with some streaks of gray matched his white button up shirt and tie.

Liezl: Carnival? There's one here?

Old man: Not far from here. Turn left in Balete Drive, a little after the Reservoir.

Ranniel: Is it still open?

Old man: It's always there.

Ranniel gave Liezl an excited smile. She scoffed and tilted her head.

Liezl: What? What do you have in mind?

Ranniel: Didn't you always wanted to go to a carnival?

Liezl: I mean yeah, but this late?

Ranniel: This is the perfect time for a carnival! It's more fun in late night, right Mr...?

The two turned back to the old man but his seat was empty. The bartender seemed less busy so he was able to come right away when they asked. However, he only shrugged and said, "I can't really track all of the people I face each night, sorry."

Confused, they just ask for another drink and soon the mysterious disappearance of the old man slipped their minds. After just a few more shots, the couple decided to ride a taxi and go to the place the man mentioned. The driver seemed curious when they told him their destination but didn't push much. Upon arrival, they were dropped off at the side of the road which had a dirt path going deep into the darkness beneath tall trees.

Liezl: Is this the right place? I can't see anything but trees. Is it even open at 3AM?

Ranniel: Let's just keep on going. I really want you to experience being in a carnival.

Liezl: Okay, but if another ten minutes had past and it is not in here, let's just go home.

After what seemed to be a lifetime of crickets chirping and leaves rusting, they heard a very welcoming sound breaking through. They followed the noise and soon the bright lights relieved them of their tired legs and sleepy eyes.

Loud screams and lively laughs echoed all throughout the place. They could even see and watch the rides from the outside. The two wondered why they only heard and saw all of this just now.

As they approached the entrance, they bumped into a group of women but the ladies didn't look into them after it so they just laughed and entered. Upon entering, they were immediately drawn to the food stands and couldn't wait to try one.

Liezl: This looks good and it smells so good, too. Let's try this.

Pointing out the corndogs out of the isaw and dugo street food stands around it.

Looking forward to her food, she can't help herself looking into the food the vendor preparing. The vendor accidentally dipped his fingers on the boiling oil but he seemed oblivious to it. She looked at Ranniel but he was too distracted by the rides. She shrugged it off and thought that it was nothing.

After trying it, they noticed that the taste was off. It looked fine and fresh but it tasted horrendously; as if it was rotting and molded. They looked into each other.

Ranniel: Well, this is a disappointment.

Liezl: We should've just left when I saw him dip his finger in the oil.

Ranniel: What?! (Almost chokes on the gulaman he was drinking)

Liezl: I'm sorry! I thought I was just seeing things. (Laughs at the sight of him)

Ranniel: Okay, I just lost my appetite now.

They both laugh and threw the corndogs on a nearby bin. At the very least there were a lot of rides and games, Liezl wanted to try it all but the place was so crowded.

Ranniel: If we can't ride it all we might as well try the romantic one.

Liezl: Which one?

Ranniel pointed his hand to the Ferris wheel, "That one." It was the biggest attraction of the carnival. The top seemed so high that she had to crane her neck just to see it completely.

After a slight hesitation, Ranniel squeezed her hand and she agreed. They were enjoying the ride just fine but it suddenly stopped while they reached the top. Instead of worrying, they laughed and enjoy the special moment under the full moon. They thought about enjoying the view but Liezl was bewildered by what she saw.

Liezl: What happened?

Ranniel: What do you mean? Ah, the city looks so good from here.

Liezl: Nevermind the city, look down.

The both of them looked down. The entire carnival was so dark and it looked like a ghost town, it is not like what they saw. The pod they were riding was covered in moss and rust. The two panicked, Liezl was on the verge of tears while Ranniel tried to break the door open. They reached for their phones but both were missing. They immediately thought the ladies they bumped into earlier.

Liezl: We must be dreaming, we're drunk. (she said with uneasy tone)

Ranniel: Calm down, we'll get out of here. Just trust me.

The door was too rusted and was easily broken. Unfortunately, the pod was just as fragile and was about to fall off.

Ranniel: Okay, just move slightly. We'll climb down.

Liezl: This is way too high.

Ranniel: We don't have much choice. Either we sit or do some--

Ranniel cut himself off. He seemed distracted about something from below. When Liezl looked, she saw thick vines with sharp thorns hugging the metal bars and anything they can hold onto to climb down. For some reason though, Ranniel yelled.

Ranniel: HELP! PLEASE CALL SOMEBODY!

Liezl: What are you doing? Nobody's here.

Ranniel: PLEASE! DON'T JUST STAND THERE! HELP US!

Ranniel didn't seem to be listening. He seemed to actually be talking to someone. Liezl struggled to see through the dark but nobody was there. She shook Ranniel to wake him up from his delusion and the pod shrieked in protest. The pod fell for an inch but was held onto by a single screw.

Ranniel: What the heck are you doing?

Liezl: You're talking to nobody!

Ranniel: Nobody? Don't you see them?

Liezl: What them?!

Ranniel: THEM!

Ranniel gestured hard at the empty grounds. Liezl could only see the old dusty stands and rides.

Ranniel: There! The old man from the pub! HEY! YOU MET US EARLIER! REMEMBER?!

Liezl: There's no one there.

Ranniel: Why can't you see them?

Liezl: You're scaring me.

Ranniel: Let's just get down. They don't seem to be planning to help us soon.

Ranniel moved to reach down with his foot. Liezl panicked and reached for him.

Liezl: NO! THERE ARE THOR—

Their sudden movement on the pod pushed it to its limits and came crashing down. Ranniel managed to hold onto one of the bars while Liezl only managed to hold a few meters down after him. She screamed at the sharp and agonizing pain piercing all throughout her right arm. She strained to see the blood trickling down, thorns digging deep into her hand. Some even sticking all the way through.

RANNIEL: Are you okay?! I'm going down!

She tried to warn him about the thorns but with her sobs, she's inaudible to him. She noticed some nebulous people in the ride. Some were peeking through the windows of other pods. Others were just sitting right on the thorns unbothered. They all had dark gray skin and faint look in their faces. They were watching her intently. Deciding to act on her own, she stepped on the metal bars for support, held onto another one with her left hand and tried to pull her right one away from the thorns. She felt her hand shake as her flesh get more torn, she's in pain. She noticed blood pouring down on her.

When she looked up, she realized it wasn't hers. It was Ranniel's. He was still farther away but for some reason, he didn't seem to be feeling the pain. She freed her hands but she lost strength from her legs and start to fall. She tried to hold onto the bar but it was very hard for her to hold on.

She fell onto the ground and felt her life seeping away as she looked at the breaking of dawn thinking it's the last time. As her vision blurred, she noticed some ladies from the wheel surround her.

Lady 1: She's gonna join us!

Lady 2: Finally, a new face!

One seemed and sounded familiar. She lost consciousness but still heard something,

Familiar voice of a man: Don't worry little one. We have fun here every day, every night.

She woke up and saw her right arm hanging onto someone. Her left leg felt limp.

Liezl: Wh-where are we? Are we home yet?

Ranniel: Just a little more. Seems like no one cares and just went home, or maybe I'm just really drunk. Don't worry I'll get you out of here.

Still a little dizzy, Liezl monitored their surroundings. They were near the exit. There were a lot of strange people surrounding them now. Some were even running right into them. Suddenly, Ranniel lost his footing and both of them came down. She looked at him and saw that he was unrecognizable with all the blood and open wounds. His clothes were completely tattered and worn out. How long were they here exactly? He seemed to be struggling to get up. They are reaching for them.

With all her strength, she stood up and tried to smack one of the nebulous people away. But her hand only shifted right through. She didn't feel anything. It was as if the person was just air. The same person reached for her throat. All the pain in her body seemed to fade away and she felt her entire body convulse and become numb. She then felt she get snatched away and suddenly she's flying right near the entrance. She fell to the ground and she gasped for air. Her ears rang. When she turned back, she saw Ranniel on his knees. She couldn't hear what he was yelling at her, but she could see through his mouth that he was telling her to get away. The nebulous people reached for Ranniel and she watched as his skin lost its lively color. His body slumped down motionless. She crawled out of the carnival just as the people turned towards her.

Years passed by; it is the third death anniversary of her lover. She went to the same pub they went. She ordered the same drink, an Irish Bomb that they once drank together. She still felt the sadness and pain of her mourning, she can't drink and so she just looked into her drink.

"Are you just gonna stare at it? It will start to harden."

She froze and felt her hands shaking. She thought that it's a familiar voice.

She looked on her right and there's the old man.

“It’s you, aren’t you?” she can hear her voice like she’s afraid.

The old man only smiled and said, “How are you, young lady? You don’t look so happy today.”

Liezl: It’s been three years since he was gone.

Old man: Who?

Liezl: The man I love, the man I am with the first time we’ve met.

Old man: Are you sure he’s gone?

Liezl: What do you mean? (Her voice cracked as she said that.)

Old man: He never left.

Liezl: How can you say that? He’s gone.

The old man looked in her drink, “your drink will harden. Time is ticking, why don’t you hurry?”

Confused, she started crying, “impossible, I went there again to move on after the year it happened. Everything was gone, like it was all just a goddamn nightmare but—”

The old man put her hand to her shoulder and said, “They never left, dear.”

After hearing the old man’s words. She felt a little hope.

She hurried to her car and went to the carnival. With her car running fast, she didn’t notice that there’s a cat in the middle of the road. It was too late when she noticed, so she turned her car and got bumped into a tree. She then passed out.

When she gained consciousness, she went out of her car and saw some blood but she didn’t feel anything. She heard the familiar welcoming sound of the carnival; she hurriedly went there. She hears the loud screams and laughter again. She searched in every ride until she saw a familiar built.

She saw her lover waiting on the fence around the Ferris wheel. She ran into him and was so happy that she started crying. Ranniel laid his hand to her and the other hand offered a rose for her. She gladly held his hand, accepted the rose and finally joined him.

“I never left.” Ranniel said as he squeezed his hand.

Back in the bar, the old man noticed the drink Liezl left. It already curdled and harden, “They’re with each other now. They will never leave.”

-The End-

The Stone and the Wind

by Clifford Sychingiok

A stranger leaning by the door, placing his head by the wooden entry, for awhile he felt like there was really no one there. He moved a step back to peruse its structure, the window openings were small preventing from anyone to get inside and no lights were emanating.

He moved forward once more placing the side of his body in contact with the entrance. "It was indeed built to be secured." He thought as he gripped the handle just in case it was open, but alas wishful thinking departed and it was starting to get cold...deadly cold.

The outsider waited a few moments more, nearly believing the barrenness inside until he perceived something from the crevice of the door. The motion of air was distinctive, there was breathing inside as it exited door slit creating a light vapor cloud.

He couldn't hide from the delight, as the late night started to unfold.

"Nice architecture, isn't it cozy inside?" He felt the first chill in spite of his thick overalls.

There was no response.

"Come on, you are safely inside while I'm out here. At least in talking we couldn't do any other action."

The winds started to whistle as some of the debris from the surroundings started to move. The stranger waited, hoping to get a response from the owner inside.

Then he replied.

"It's always cold inside when the heat is intense and warm when the nights are cool." The stranger knew from the sound of his voice that they were just but a hand length distance, separating only by the door and its enclosures.

"I've always admired your hard work. I've been observing you for a season."

“Have you? May I ask why?”

“Habit, its good to know your surroundings from both the static and the living.” Placing several of his extremities on the entrance guiding it, reaching upon the textured doorjamb. He tried to exert some force, if any movement can occur but to no avail.

“It’s nice to know that I’m being regarded with importance. Even though I’ve always been anti-social.”

“So, we happen to have something in common. And perhaps during our little chat we may discover something more.”

“I guess we have time to kill.” The homeowner slid down and rests his back on the door. “Ask away anything.”

“You mean that?” He responded

“Yes”

“And what about you? Don’t you want to know anything about me?”

“You’re the observant one, which means you’re the one whose interested.”

“Fair enough.” The stranger started to ask question after question from trivial to the very personal. He listened to every response, discerning and gathering. Nothing caught much interest until this...

“Do you play an instrument?”

“I used to play a mean brand of piano. I was really good at it.”

“Used to?” A bit puzzled

“I don’t play it anymore.” The stranger could tell that there was a faint sadness from his voice. “Now this is interesting.” He thought.

“And why not?”

“It only reminds me of much happier times.”

“It seems that something terrible has happened to you.”

“Indeed, my two brothers are missing.” The stranger paused for a moment, this time being extra cautious of what to say.

“Missing? What happened?”

“They say a strong cyclone swept them away from their housing.

When the word reached me, I tried searching for them. But I failed.”

“Perhaps you weren’t looking at the right place?”

“Or possibly greatly misled.”

The wind blew stronger and colder, at the visitor’s vantage point he could hardly see what’s in front of him.

“Are you still there?” the one from the inside of the house asked.

“Of course, I’m here to ask and listen.”

“Just wait a moment.” As he moved away from the door. The stranger could discern the steps, the homeowner was moving as quickly as he could. Then he could see light protruding from the windows and the crevices. He could smell the aroma of burned chiminea wood. Gazing upward, he could see the smoke moving away from the rooftop. “I did not see that, if I had known then I wouldn’t be in this position.” He thought.

“Okay, I’m back. I need to keep the place warm. Looks like its going to be a cold night.”

“I know, its always nice to feel warm. It removes the fear of being all alone.”

“You’re all alone as well.” He quickly replied. Taken by surprise he answered back “So...you’ve heard about me.

But how much do you truly know?”

“You said you’ve been observing me for a season, I’ve known about you my entire life.”

“Have you, and what do you know about me?” He asked curiously

“That you always come with grotesque intentions. Enjoying the cries as it gets louder and louder till it fades into nothing. You are always accompanied by the strong cold winds. Things like you should always be alone.”

“Is that what you think of me?”

“What I think is that you’ll be the death of us!”

Those words didn’t even shudder the stranger. He knew all along what he was, what he is and what he’s going to do.

“And all the while I came by this side of the door to listen to you.”

“Because after this, you have nothing left to do. And that frightens the hell out of you.” The outsider couldn’t see but knows very well that he was smiling.

“So...in my questioning, it was you who was able to discern my weakness.”

“Since you’ve met my brothers, you have always known mine.” I guess we have nothing left to talk about.” The stranger stood up, move one step back and shouted.

“OPEN THE DOOR AND LET ME IN!!!”

The one inside moved back as well and cried

“NOT BY THE HAIR OF MY CHINNY, CHIN, CHIN!!!”

The Sunnyvale Sleuths

by Lyndon Magbanua

PAGE 1

Panel 1. Nighttime. We're seeing mostly shadows and silhouettes here. In the foreground, we can mostly make out the outline of a 2-level mid-sized home in the suburbs. No lights are on. The street that the house is on is eerily quiet.

Panel 2. Similar shot. Brightness bursts from one of the second floor rooms as a light seems to have been switched on. The shadow of a boy holding a bike is standing in front of the house.

Panel 3. The young boy, no more than 10, dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, drops his bike and slowly makes his way to the house's main entrance.

Panel 4. He pushes the door open and pokes his head in.

Boy: HE—HELLO...?

Panel 5. We see the shadow of a hand reaching for the boy's back.

PAGE 2

Panel 1. The boy is startled. He turns around and falls on his behind, finding himself inside the house. His arms half-raised as if getting ready to defend himself. Standing in front of him is a girl about the same age as him. A flash goes off as she takes a photo of the boy with a POLAROID camera straight out of the 70s-80s. The girl looks like she's dressed from that period too and has some very "Punky Brewster" vibes

SFX: FLASH!

Whrr....

Girl: BOO.

Panel 2. The girl helps the boy up with one hand shakes the polaroid photo with another.

Girl: I GOT YOU GOOD, DIDN'T I?

Boy: DID NOT!

Panel 3. The girl sticks her tongue out as the boy dusts himself off.

Girl: I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE STILL A SCAREDY CAT...

Boy: AM NOT! I'M JUST CAUTIOUS.

Girl: HA! LOTS OF GOOD THAT DID YOU LAST TIME. I STILL REMEMBER WHEN MAX AND I MET YOU!

Panel 4. The boy looks up. He sees the light spilling out of a door in the second floor that's slightly ajar.

Boy: YOU'VE BEEN SEEING THE BRIGHT LIGHTS TOO, RIGHT?

Girl: YES! 4 AM, EVERY DAY! THE SAME LIGHT SWITCHES ON! ANOTHER CASE FOR THE SUNNYVALE SLEUTHS!

Panel 5. The boy gently walks up the stairs, trying his best to stay quiet, while the girl casually walks behind him. They pass by a collection of family pictures hanging on the wall.

Boy: TOO BAD MAX COULDN'T MAKE IT. I HEARD HE'S MOVED ON...

Girl: EH. I MISS HIM TOO. BUT WITH HOW THINGS ARE IN SUNNYVALE, I'M SURE WE'LL HAVE SOMEONE NEW IN OUR DETECTIVE CLUB!

Panel 6. The boy grabs one of the family photos hanging on the wall. We see the family that lives in this home – mom, dad, two young girls.
BOY: SURE WE WILL. BUT RIGHT NOW, LET'S GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS!

Page 3

Panel 1. Huge Panel. The boy and the girl stand in front of the door on the second floor. The boy is still holding the framed family photo. Light bleeds from its edges.

GIRL: READY, TONY?

Panel 2. On the girl as she gets ready to take a photo of what's inside the room.

Panel 3. We see a man, in his late 30s, looking disheveled in the tub. Water has mixed with his blood, from where he's slashed his wrists. He suddenly sits up.

Panel 4. From the man's POV. He looks at the doorway and sees the family photo that was held by the boy floating in mid-air. The two kids are strangely absent...

MAN: OH GOD... OH GOD... YOU FINALLY CAME BACK FOR ME!

Panel 5. The family photo falls to the ground. The impact causes the glass to shatter all over the floor.

Panel 6. The flash goes off as the girl takes a photo.

Page 4-5

The big reveal! The boy and the girl are surrounded by polaroid photos that pour out of the girl's camera. They show snippets of the life of the family in the photo that the boy held. They start out happy but as the photos progress, it shows how the family's life slowly became miserable. In the latter photos, the ones closest to us, we see the dad hitting the mom while kids cower in the corner, we see the dad in the casino, maybe show his chips dwindling as he becomes more and more frustrated, we have a photo of gas leaking from the oven, the last two photos could be of the mom, sporting a bruise, tucking in her girls and then switching off the lights.

PAGE 6

Panel 1. Wide Panel. Nothing but black

Panel 2. The man is now slumped in the tub. Dead. The boy tries to piece back the shattered glass onto the frame. The girl stands behind him, covering her mouth in shock. Neither notices the figure now standing behind them.

TONY: I DIDN'T MEAN TO! HE STARTLED ME!

Panel 3. The figure walks inside the room. He's dressed like a bus driver and is holding a clipboard.

Pinned on his left chest is a name tag that says NICK. He's somewhere in his 40s. Nice bushy moustache and kind of looks like an unkempt Santa Claus. The boy looks up towards him as he walks past and straight to the man in the tub.

NICK: TONY.

LISA.

WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT WALKING INSIDE STRANGE HOUSES?

LISA: BUT WE SAW THE LIGHT! AND WE'RE DETECTIVES...

Panel 4. Nick flips through his clipboard as he stands beside the dead guy in the tub.

NICK: LET'S SEE WHAT WE HAVE HERE...MIKE SMITH...37...
DEPRESSION... FAMILY DIED IN CARBON MONOXIDED
POISONING...

OH BOY... BLAMES HIMSELF FOR NOT BEING THERE
AS HE WAS ALWAYS AWAY GAMBLING AT THE CASINO.

Panel 5. Nick moves closer to the kids. He squats down to talk to them. The dead guy in the tub is still in the background.

NICK: DETECTIVES... Heh.

LOOK, I KNOW YOU THINK THESE BRIGHT LIGHTS WILL LEAD YOU TO ANSWERS...

Panel 6. Similar panel but the dead guy suddenly sits up, splashing crimson-tinted water everywhere.

NICK: BUT YOU MAY END UP WALKING INTO SOMETHING... UNPLEASANT... AND I DON'T WANT YOU KIDS GETTING HURT EVEN MORE.

YOU'VE ALREADY GONE THROUGH SO MUCH...

MIKE: WHAT THE FU—FUH... WHO ARE YOU PEOPLE?!?!

Panel 7. Nick turns around at Mike.

NICK: HI MIKE. I'M NICK.

AND YOU'RE DEAD.

PAGE 7

Panel 1. We see Mike wrapped in a towel as Nick helps him out of the house. The two kids are behind them. The sun is starting to rise in the background.

MIKE: IT WAS THOSE TWO KIDS THAT WERE HOLDING THE PHOTO?

I THOUGHT THEY CAME BACK...

Panel 2. Mike turns to Nick, a look of confusion and despair on his face.

MIKE: WILL I SEE MY FAMILY?

Panel 3. Nick scratches the side of his head.

NICK: CAN'T SAY, BUDDY. YOU'RE FAMILY JUST GOT USED TO YOU NOT BEING AROUND AND WHEN THEY DIED, IT SEEMS THEY SAW NO REASON TO STAY...

Panel 4. Mike starts to sob.

NICK: WE'LL SORT IT OUT AT THE OFFICE, OK BUDDY?

WHY DON'T YOU... Uhhh... GET ON THE BUS AND GET COMFY WHILE I TALK TO THESE TWO KIDS, EH?

Panel 5. They're now at the house's lawn. Tony, now holding his bike, stands beside Lisa as Nick squats down and turns to them. Mike trudges towards the bus in the background.

NICK: YOU SURE YOU STILL WANT TO STAY? LETTING GO IS GONNA FEEL GOOD AND I BETCHA MAX IS HAVING SO MUCH FUN IN...

PAGE 8

Panel 1. I want this panel to be really grim. Focus on Lisa, looking angry. The rays of the rising sun hit her and we see and we see her... differently... Her clothes are disheveled. Half of her face bashed in.

LISA: NO.

NOT UNTIL THEY FIND MY BODY AND THE BAD MAN THAT DID THIS TO ME.

Panel 2. Nick purses his lips, unsure of what to say. We see Tony's hand tapping him on the shoulder.

Panel 3. On Tony. The sunlight has also hit him and shows us what happened to him – his bike is bent and twisted and he's got what look like tire tracks across his torn shirt. He's the victim of a hit-and-run.

TONY: IT'S OK, MR. NICK. I'LL KEEP HER COMPANY UNTIL SHE'S READY. WE'LL GO TOGETHER.

Panel 4. Nick gives the two kids a hug.

NICK: Sigh...

WELL, IF YOU KIDS EVER CHANGE YOUR MIND, YOU KNOW
HOW TO REACH ME.

Panel 5. We see the bus driving away while the two kids, looking normal again, run off to another adventure.

NICK (CAP): STAY OUT OF TROUBLE, YOU SCAMPS.

Tribulation

by Biboy Calleja

After a night of partying, drugs, and sex, a lightheaded Perry drives home. He hears news on the radio of a powerful storm, estimated to be more devastating than Yolanda. Everyone is advised to stock goods lasting a couple of days. He passes by a convenience store and buys whatever he can get hold of.

His younger sister Dana is already at home when he arrives. They live in a new, sparsely populated village along Daang Hari. The nearest neighbor is three blocks away. As their father's abroad, as usual, for a business trip, it's only the two of them at the house. They prepare for the storm – recharging everything they could, checking their garden, covering their car.

The winds are beginning to get stronger. Dana calls her girlfriend Rica to check in on her, as Perry teases his sister. There's a hint of cigs and alcohol on Perry's breath. Dana knows her brother is at it again. Trying to avoid any arguments, he excuses himself and heads upstairs. Lying on the bed, he texts a girl he met yesterday, Tahara. Some flirtatious exchanges. His father calls multiple times, which he consistently rejects. He continues to text Tahara until he falls asleep.

Roaring thunder and flashes of lightning wake Perry in the middle of the night. Power goes off. No signal. He opens his phone flashlight and calls for Dana. She's already downstairs, securing their rechargeable lamps and candles, just in case. They notice a couple of electric posts have fallen on their street. It's going to be a long night.

They feel the ground rambling, and it's getting more and more intense. They hide under the kitchen table as random items fall on the floor. It lasts a good five minutes.

Confused, they open the radio to listen in to any news. Both AM and FM, dead air. The siblings decide to secure the house in case of an aftershock.

Perry's in charge downstairs. He cleans up broken glass, seals the cupboards, and removes anything else that could fall. Thunder and lightning begin to intensify once again. He observes what seems to be human figures tapping on the windows. Are those just shadows of the trees? Is he just seeing things? He swears faintly hearing them talk in foreign tongues.

A relentless banging on the front door. Perry slowly, cautiously moves toward it. "Sino yan?" No answer. He calls Dana. Continuous banging. He opens the door and a woman in white, covered in dirt from head to toe, falls on their doorstep, unconscious.

"Mama?" Dana exclaims in shock. Perry parts the woman's hair to get a better look at her face. Utter disbelief.

How can this happen? Their mother, Rose, has been dead for 10 years.

Dana, who's a nurse, hurriedly checks her vital signs. She's barely breathing, weak pulse. Dana performs CPR. The woman gasps for air and vomits dirt mixed with blood. They carry her to the sofa.

They both try to figure out what has just transpired. Is this some sort of miracle? Maybe she's not their mother but her long-lost twin? A look-alike? It's impossible to make sense of it.

The woman opens her eyes and weakly utters, "Mga anak..." The siblings hesitate to respond. They are skeptical, suspicious of this woman. "Perry... Dana... ang lalaki nyo na."

The woman admits she's as confused as they are but swears having no recollection of how she was exhumed from the grave, nor how she got to the house. She pleads them to believe her.

While Dana's prying for more details, Perry outright dismisses the woman's story as utter nonsense and goes on the defensive, perceiving her as an intruder. He demands her to leave, then later forcibly drags her out of the house against Dana and the woman's wishes. The woman accidentally kicks Perry in the face.

He's knocked out as he dimly hears the two women ask if he's alright.

He gains consciousness moments later, suffering from a concussion. He tries to get up but realizes that one of his hands is tied to his bedpost, Dana and the woman by his side. At this point, Dana's thoroughly convinced that the woman is telling the truth. The woman reveals anecdotes from Perry's childhood, details impossible for anyone outside his circle to know.

The woman talks to Perry heart to heart. She tearfully apologizes for being gone too soon, for not being there when her son needed her the most. Perry remains obstinate and still doesn't change his opinion on her. She wants him to forgive his father, but he retorts that he doesn't have anything to apologize for.

They hear multiple loud knocks. Dana and the woman answer the door. There's a conversation with what sounds like three men. Perry overhears arguments, shouting. "Kuya! Si Kuya! Kuya!" He tries to undo his restraints to rescue his sister, but it's too late. The door's left ajar as strong winds enter the house. He hurriedly grabs his car keys and looks for them.

Frantic, he decides to head to village security and almost hits a neighbor, Nino. He asks for Perry's help – he can't find his son, Zeke, who went out of the house in the middle of the storm. They talk of the peculiarity of their situation, but Perry leaves out details of the woman. Nino feels guilty for being too hard on Zeke, and shares they had an argument that night.

They arrive at a deserted guardhouse. Without warning, a large comet falls on Perry's car, followed by several more. The neighbors head to the clubhouse for safety and are bewildered by what the hell is happening.

A loud trumpet echoes through the air, replacing all the chaos with complete darkness and silence. Perry turns on his phone's flashlight – and as he swings it around, he sees what appears as demonic figures with large fangs, protruding horns, and bat-like wings, avoiding the rays. Nino is swooped off and disappears. Perry runs to a walled area, keeping the light on around him. All alone, he anguishes in despair, trying to wake himself up from what he hopes to be a dream... or a hallucination. He begins to pray but is jeered by unknown voices. "Wala nang silbi yan!"

“Iniwan ka na ng Diyos mo!” He’s overwhelmed and answers the voices back, shouting at them to stop playing with his head. He’s down to his last minutes of light and is preparing to die, when the sun rises and the demons disappear. He grasps for the first time the damage the night’s events have caused. Most homes destroyed, cracked roads, burning cars.

He chances upon a security guard who also survived the night. They listen to an emergency broadcast. The CBCP president, INC executive minister, and KHC’s appointed son of God call for solidarity in prayer. The presidential spokesperson announces that the president is safe, so are most of his cabinet members, and that the government has mobilized the NTF-ELCAC, police, and military to keep this terrorist attack under control. “Putang ina! Pati ba naman ngayon, fake news?”

The trumpet resounds. Perry braces for what’s to come. He envisions a bright figure – a cross – emerging from the sun.

The rapture has ended. The tribulation has only begun.

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