

*You know I didn't grow up with much, little girl. You've seen the houses I lived in. Money didn't grow on the palm trees, so Renato, Domingo and I, my "Bag Ban Gang," collected scrap metal and sold it to anyone who would buy.*

*Renato was a bit shorter than me, and his hair was curly. Rare for a Filipino. His fair complexion made him a hit with the ladies. In our group, he was the one most willing to make his own rules— his father was a police officer. The law was just short of trivial for him.*

*Domingo was his opposite, a traditional straight-haired pinoy with skin darker than mine. He was tall, maybe 5'5", and this was useful on our excursions. But he was always cautious, unwilling to do anything actually bad or even questionable. Our strong moral compass in times of confusion.*

*"And what were you like, back then? Were you the leader?"*

*No, no, little girl. We were egalitarian, with no leader. I was our gang's intermediate: on one hand, we had not much money, and I really wanted to change that. The taste of hunger after a long day eats away at you. On the other hand, I had a dream, and it was of America. I couldn't reach the land of Milk and Honey if I was stuck in a jail cell.*

*Together, we functioned as a unit: all sowing the metals and reaping the benefits equally. We snuck out of our houses a few nights a week — sneaking, because our families surely wouldn't approve. We even had a hideout, just to sort the metals and pass them through to a buyer. It was our secret. Our bond.*

*"So what went wrong?"*

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The beautiful skyscraper district sparkled in the moonlight, just as it always did, but Angel still stared in awe. Makati was the crown jewel of Manila, a futuristic jungle gym that juxtaposed the rest of the colorful city. Not a single Filipino hadn't dreamed, at least once, of living in the Philippines' penthouse someday.

That was what Angel was doing on this scorching night, clinging to a distant dream. He shifted his gaze from the dazzling skyline to the crumbling sidewalk he was sitting on: this was his reality, the thin shells of houses standing on litter-caked roads under the mist of a hazy October night sky.

He held in his hand his trusty spiral notebook, his key to passing his periodical exam the next day. It was once a clean collection of identical, untouched pages, but as time passed, his

constant scribbling had given the notebook more texture than the street in front of him. Angel sighed, realizing it was getting too dark to study anyway, so he shuffled on his flip flops and headed for Renato's house.

In truth, Angel was actually going to a secret hideout of sorts. An abandoned, half-finished house, it was perfect to shelter three well-intentioned metal thieves. Even better, Renato lived just next door, so breaking in was easy: there was a hole in his fence which no one cared to fix, and it was large enough to fit a high school aged boy. No one had found their hideout yet, so they considered their operation to be successful.

It rained the night before. Not surprising, but the humidity encased Angel like a wax mold as he approached their hideout. When he arrived, mud was caked just outside the door from the habitual foot-wiping — even in this dilapidated building, it's still rude to track in dirt.

Angel followed a narrow hallway to the main living space, tarps clinging to the walls since construction was abandoned halfway through the job. Renato and Domingo greeted their friend warmly, and offered him a piece of raw guava.

"That old freight truck outside still has a good many kilos of copper in it," Renato said as he pulled apart his guava piece with his teeth.

Angel nodded, interested, as he chewed the rough piece of fruit.

"We want to hit it again tonight," Domingo said, eyes gleaming. He blurted it out like an impossible secret. "You know there's still tons of aluminum in there too. Let's do another sweep!"

Angel was taken aback by his cautious friend's rare enthusiasm. He glanced to Renato, and a similar mischievous grin spread across his face. "This is our fourth night on this job. Are you sure no one is coming to claim the truck?"

Renato shook his head, excitement bubbling out of him. and Angel laughed. Turning to Domingo, he said, "It's not like I can't use the extra pesos. I guess if Domingo is in, then we *have* to go." He waved his hand, gesturing towards the door and jumping to his feet. "Quick, before he changes his mind!"

The three swiftly sprung into action, tossing the guava aside and heading towards the front of the house. They usually didn't use the front door; it was much easier for their cover to be blown, as it faced one of the busiest streets in an already busy section of Quezon City. Typically,

this wasn't such a concern, but Marcos declared martial law a few weeks ago. Because of this, they had to revise their tactics.

Between the front door and the side of the street their target truck sat on was a wall of cinderblocks, over three meters tall, towering well above their heads. *Pinoys aren't very tall, little girl. You know that.* In the interest of time, there was no squabble over who should mount the wall first; Domingo just started climbing, with the others following closely behind him. It wasn't a particularly difficult feat — Angel spent a lot of his childhood climbing palm trees in his backyard jungle, and subsequently had hands full of calluses. Consequently, this hike over the stone wall was, literally, just another Tuesday.

Bago Bantay was one of the darkest sections of Manila. The full moon above them was their only real guide, but it only illuminated what they already knew was there: roads, houses, trees. It didn't help the boys identify what lay in the shadows. If only Bago Bantay had another streetlamp, then Domingo, who had already made it to the other side of the wall, would have seen the unfamiliar group of men waiting menacingly between the wall and the truck.

"There they are! There they are!"

It was like a rally call: instantaneously, at least ten men, moving faster than they had any right to, began scaling the far side of the wall in hopes of catching one of the pesky fifteen year olds. The boys couldn't process the scene: *where did they come from? And why are they carrying clubs?*

Angel panicked, and his grip on the wall slipped. Without thinking, he leaped from the second meter of the wall, all the way to the unforgiving ground beneath him. His knees took the brunt of the fall, but he scrambled to his feet in a flash, as if his body were completely unaffected.

Through the holes in the cinder blocks, Angel watched as Domingo jumped down from the remaining height of the wall. Not missing a beat, Domingo fled down the sidewalk, multiple men at his heels. Unfortunately for Renato, he had no choice but to run into the swarm of cars that had accumulated at a red light a few hundred feet away. In seconds, Angel lost sight of both his friends.

In the interest of self preservation, Angel made a beeline to the back of the house. *If they didn't see me, then I was safe. I felt bad leaving them to fend for themselves, but what could I do?*

Silently hyperventilating, he dragged himself inside. It certainly didn't occur to him to wipe his feet.

*I found in the following days that those men were sent to protect the truck, specifically to ward us off. Remember when we thought it was abandoned, and therefore fair game for us to steal from? Apparently, the truck still had an owner, and the owner was angry.*

Angel huddled in the corner of the main room of their hideout, still as a statue. Beads of sweat had formed around his hairline and had begun dripping down the sides of his face, half from the sweltering heat, half from the anxiety of not knowing where his friends were. It wasn't a wild idea to assume they were dead, or would be by the time the night was up. *There's a reason why I never took you to Bago Bantay, little girl. It's not safe.*

Seconds felt like hours. How was it possible that not ten minutes ago, they were cheerfully sharing a guava in this room? The leftover fruit was still on the floor across the room, and the scent, usually pleasant, was sickening. What if that was his last memory of them?

Angel didn't make a sound, fearing that the men would trace him back to their hideout. What was the best place to hide? Below the window that had a tarp instead of glass? In the corner with the guava remains? Should he just keep his head down until the sun comes up?

Pulling the tarp from the window frame, Angel cloaked himself in the material and pressed his forehead to the darkest corner of the room. His mind had reverted to the childish notion, *if I can't see them, they can't see me*. Forcing his palpitations back down his throat, he closed his eyes and didn't dare move an inch.

Although he sat still as a statue, his mind moved at a mile a minute. It was selfish, but in the back of his mind, Angel imagined his American dream crumbling to the ground. What if tonight had trapped him in Bago Bantay forever? *What if all my hard work, those long hours studying, what if they were for nothing?*

He was only aware of the passage of time from the change in noise on the street outside. Around seven or eight, the rush-hour of Bago Bantay, the jeepneys and motor-tricycles flew in such volume that Angel could physically hear the air move. But now, all he heard was a single car here or there, creeping along the road with caution. It had to be past midnight.

*It was officially the day of my periodical exam. This great, big test I prepared for for weeks was happening in a few hours, and instead I was wishing on every star in the sky that I wouldn't have to be the one to tell Domingo or Renato's parents what happened that night.*

“Lord, Lord,” he prayed, whispering almost incoherently, although in his mind he was screaming at the top of his lungs. He looked up to the sky, or rather at the ratty ceiling. “Please Lord, where are the other two? Protect them, please, Lord.”

He clasped his hands together as if it would summon God, or his friends, or both. Angel wished he had a rosary. “Lord, I promise, if we get out of this situation, I’m getting out of this group. Please, Lord, protect the other two. Send them back here, Lord—”

He opened his eyes and saw a mud-clad Renato stumbling through the hallway towards him. Angel tried to stifle a relieved laugh. *That was fast, Lord!*

Renato breathlessly explained that the last few hours consisted of the hide-and-seek game of his life. He had taken off as soon as he heard the men’s voices, fleeing into oncoming traffic and immediately losing his attackers. But he knew he couldn’t run forever, so he hid under a car — *which coincidentally, we had ransacked a few weeks ago*. As another precaution, Renato had slathered himself with runny mud, a feeble but successful attempt at camouflage. He only returned to the hideout when he knew he wouldn’t be followed.

“They were close,” Renato said, taking a seat on the floor to catch his breath. “I saw their bare feet walk past the side of the car.”

Angel shook his head in disbelief, and the two boys sat in silence for a moment or two. When Angel looked up, his friend had a heavy expression on his face. “Domingo isn’t back,” Renato asked, although it wasn’t really a question.

Angel didn’t want to answer him, and forced the question out of his mind. *Couldn’t I just be grateful that two-thirds of our little gang would be able to tell this story to their children? I didn’t want to think about where Domingo could have been all that time. I wasn’t ready to carry that weight.* Angel saw the irony of watching Renato experience the same rollercoaster of emotions he was just on.

Almost an hour later, the boys heard the shuffling of feet outside the door. There was no way in hell that their attackers would bother to wipe their shoes before coming inside, so Renato and Angel scrambled to their feet and raced to the door. It was Domingo.

The boy was soaked from head to toe. Domingo wasn’t the athlete runner that Renato was, and he had tripped while being pursued. He didn’t have time to hide, or make any decisions at all; fortunately, right in his path was a wetland of difficult terrain and tall grass. He was able to submerge himself in the water and use the strands of grass to conceal his face. *The fact that he*

*made it all the way to a tidepool says something, little girl. Bago Bantay is fairly far inland, so Domingo must have run miles and miles that night.*

The boys celebrated their narrow victory, but none voiced their concern for their friends. It felt less real, less scary that way. And although they were elated to see each other, each boy knew what was coming next.

“I hate to say it, but we can’t keep doing this,” Angel said. Someone had to. “This should be our last night as Bag Ban Gang.”

The words sat heavy in their hearts. The sickening scent of the guava paralleled the sick feeling in their stomachs. No one wanted to leave the thrill behind, or the riches or brotherhood. They had a strong bond that the boys knew couldn’t be replicated anywhere else. *But we almost died, so it was the only choice.* Huddled in a circle, the boys promised to keep their gang a secret, and then parted ways for the last time.

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*I guess that’s why I don’t like guavas much anymore.*

*My teachers would have never known that my life was at risk the night before, because I got a perfect score on my periodical exam. I might have been adventurous and even a little reckless, but I always had my priorities straight. Imagine if those men had caught me or if I had failed that test because of the duress. I wouldn’t have met your mother and you wouldn’t have been born!*

I smiled. His stories always circle back to that same idea.

*Now go to sleep. Magandang gabi anak — goodnight, my child! I love my little girl!*