

# Adumbrant

THE GUY'S NAME WAS OBET, he'd told me himself, short for Robert, which he said sounded as if he were sporting a recent model Porsche instead of a rattletrap ten-year-old taxi with a busted air-con. He said he'd named his taxi after his son Tony, who had Tourette's syndrome and always ran off at the mouth with remarks like "I have a lonely penis!" or "Your breasts look happy!" Obet clearly loved to talk, and I let him. He told me the most mournful sound he'd ever heard was the shriek of his wife when she climaxed, which was only once, so that one time stood out starkly in his memory.

For a moment, I looked out the window to my right, at the baking metal hood of a jeepney and a hawker squeezing past it, holding out dripping water bottles and plantain chips in the glare of the hot afternoon, as Obet told me how he'd woken up one morning with a cockroach in his mouth.

"I tried to pull it out with one hand," Obet said, "but it just crawled further down my throat! I could feel it wriggling, and when I jammed my hand down my throat I only got a hold of its wings, which tore off when I yanked it out. That sound, like a small piece of glass breaking—it was in my head for weeks! I ran to the bathroom and tried to retch, but the freaking thing just wouldn't pop out! I felt its bristly legs brush against the walls of my throat, scratching at it—almost like it was torn between wanting to stay down there and hopping out of my trap right then! It was insane!"

The traffic had let up a little, and we inched down the road. I said, "How did you get it out?"

He turned halfway around to face me, as if to consider my question, and then he barked a laugh and threw his head back. "Oh, no, I didn't! I swallowed it with a swig of San Mig Light and a paracetamol—God knows that cockroach gave me one hell of a headache!"

Suddenly I thought about the taciturn cabbies in L.A., with their calculating glances in the rearview mirror and their PhDs or unfinished dissertations on subjects like Ottoman birthing rituals or the metabolic process of Etruscan bears. Four years overseas had made me almost forget how extremely voluble taxi drivers were here. And, apparently, how murderous and time-dilating Metro Manila traffic was, too. I glanced down at my phone and saw it was already half past two.

After a long beat, I said to Obet, "You know, in some religions, they believe roaches embody the souls of their dear departed. When they see one, they don't stomp down on it like we do here."

A young boy approached the taxi, armed with circular rags and a toothy smile. Obet waved him off and pounded on the horn with the heel of his palm. We were crawling along again, and I was getting

**Richard Cornelio** is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Materials Engineering at the University of the Philippines Diliman. His fiction and nonfiction pieces have appeared in *Kritika Kultura*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction X*,

and *Trash: An Anthology of Southeast Asian Urban Writing*. He has received prizes from the Amelia Lapena Bonifacio Literary Awards and the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature.

exasperated. Obet buzzed his horn one more time before saying, “If that were true, I can only think of one person who hated my guts enough to crawl into my fucking mouth—my mother!”

He banged his head on the headrest, laughing. “You know what she told me when she saw my wife for the first time?” He turned down the radio. You can bet by now I was all ears.

“She pulled me aside and whispered, really seriously, ‘I have to give you something.’ We walked up the stairs to her room, and inside she crouched down to pull something out from under the bed—a big, rusty shovel! She handed it to me. ‘It’s yours now,’ she said. ‘What am I gonna need this for, Ma?’ She looked at me, then over my shoulder, as if expecting someone to materialize behind me any second. Then she said, ‘With that girl of yours, this will come in handy pretty soon.’”

He barked another laugh. “I mean, come on, my wife’s not that half bad! She can be pretty naggy most of the time, but with a loser for a husband, who wouldn’t?” I hadn’t until now met a self-aware loser. Obet edged the taxi towards the center of the intersection and said, sighing, “But boy, did my mother hate Tonya. She was an active church member, my mother. She joined the choir and would spend her weekends stringing little beads into rosaries, you know? I didn’t know exactly what she hated about my wife, but she sure as hell prayed day and night that I’d come to my senses.”

The car in front of us, one of those cars, I could see, that forever dripped oil, seemed not to have moved an inch. I was running late. Obet made a gurgling noise in his throat and went on, “Things got worse when five years later we moved into her house, after we’d been behind rent and got evicted. Tony was already six then. He’d accompany my mother to church every Sunday, much to the woman’s embarrassment. I’m telling you, those folks my Ma was hanging with were a bunch of cuckoos. They told her Tony’s Tourette’s was God bringing His wrath down upon us. Once, Tony got really excited meeting these new people and said to one of her pals, ‘I want to eat your nose!’”

We stopped at a red light, and this time he turned full round in his seat to regard me. To my surprise, he looked only about my age. “You know how many people on this planet have Tourette’s?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“A freaking lot. Well, shit, seven to eight percent of the world’s population, at least.”

The guy was talking out of his ass. I decided I liked him and would be sure to tip him big.

He turned back around to face the wheel. Outside, in the swirl of cars and motorcycles, the world was still one big choking reality. After what seemed a minute I asked, “Then what happened?”

“To my mother?” he said. “Croaked from diabetes two years ago. The nurse told me all she could talk about till her last breath was how she’d never forgive me—over her dead body.”

“No, I mean, to the shovel,” I said. “You still have it?”

“Been under my bed for nine years now,” he said, “waiting for when I come to my senses.”

The backseat was worn in places but marvelously comfortable. I leaned back and glanced down again at my phone. Somehow, only twelve minutes had passed since the last I’d checked.

“Waiting for a text from your girlfriend, Sir?” Obet asked, then cocked his head to look at me.

“My ex-wife, actually,” I said. “She agreed to fly with me to Tarlac for my father’s funeral.”

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said. Then he added, almost to himself, “Our parents suck, don’t they?”

The silence that followed lulled me to sleep. I was only vaguely aware, after quite a while, of Obet turning up the FM radio and mangling the lyrics of one Beatles song after another. When my eyes fluttered open, it was already quarter to four and a film of sweat had matted a stubborn lock of hair to my

forehead. Through my haze, I heard Obet say we'd almost arrived. I gazed out the window at the acacia trees lining the avenue and told him to drop me off at the waiting shed nearby. The meter tab came to three hundred. I pulled a five-hundred from my wallet and said he could keep the change, for which he thanked me profusely. He even got out, popped the trunk, and lifted out my suitcase.

"I think," he said, handing the luggage to me, "it was the only way my mother could exact her revenge, you know? By creeping into my mouth and reminding me she still had me by the throat."

"Your mother and my father both," I said. "They're the cockroaches we can't kill but only gulp down." Obet stared at me and shook his head. Frankly, I can't imagine why I said that either.

"YOU SAID WHAT?" FRAN SAID, almost spewing out half her cheeseburger and choking on the other half.

We had met up in our usual spot at the Sunken Garden, under a sprawling acacia tree from across the College of Education. I'd told Fran what I'd told Obet the driver thirty minutes before, that I flew home for my father's funeral, which was an utter lie. My father was suffering from ALS, a brutal illness of the neurological system, and was sinking deeper into the hospital linen by the day. That much I'd been told by my half-brother, Israfel, who had from the start stayed by our father's side and tried infinite times to guilt me into coming back to the Philippines to hold the crumbling fort.

The other lie I'd told Obet the driver was that I had an ex-wife. The truth was, Fran could've been my wife six months ago. What happened instead was that she'd dumped her asshole of a boyfriend for another bad choice, this time a hipster plucked from the consolidated bank of broken hearts, because, like the dick I was, I'd colossally and obtusely screwed up my last chance with her.

The crazy thing was, I never believed for once that she'd have been better off with me.

The even crazier thing was, I didn't think she believed that for even a moment either.

I wiped cheese off Fran's chin with my hanky, then said, "Aren't you famished today?"

"Don't do that," she said.

"What?"

"Attend to me as if I were a toddler. I can wipe cheese off my face, thank you very much."

"That's crazy! I only did that because I'd expect the same gesture from you if it was me who'd had cheese on his face. And no person in his right mind would ever try to treat you like a toddler!"

"Well, you just did," she said. "But, then again, if you were in your right mind you wouldn't go around telling strangers your father's dead when, for all intents and purposes, he is not."

The weather in Manila can be as batshit nuts as my mother fussing over her hair. I looked up, and it didn't seem as if it had been baking hot just a minute ago. Already the wind was picking up, the bare branches of some trees forking up twenty or thirty feet. Dust billowed around us. I took the last bite of my burger and gestured for Fran to do the same. She pulled a murderous face on me.

"First, I only told the cabbie, so technically I didn't go around telling strangers," I said. "Second, thinking of my father dead sort of prepares me for the whole impending process of grief."

"That's a crazy rationalization," she said. "And you know it."

The sky was grim, clouds in strange shapes thickening and scudding overhead. There was no sound but faint wind whining over our heads and the shuffling footsteps of a couple of students walking past us. "The trick worked for my friend. She divorced her husband of twenty years. Fat abusive douchebag, if you ask me. But you know the story. She couldn't do it at first. She loved him, couldn't imagine her life

without him... blah-blah-blah, babble-babble-babble. Well, she said to me, ‘Honey, if you want to make it easy for you, you better get the thing over with as soon as possible.’”

“She called you ‘honey?’” Fran said, munching on a patty. “Is this a lady friend of yours?”

“Been her escort a couple of times, that’s all,” I said. “You want to hear this story or not?”

“Why doesn’t this surprise me?”

“Weeks before signing the papers, she started to see him for what he really was. She’d look at their pictures together and see this big, gray lump with its slimy, fat hand around her shoulder. She didn’t know why, but the pictures looked real. They gave her the creeps, all right. Another photo showed them kissing by the pool. Or, at least, that’s what it was supposed to look like. Instead, she saw the same gray, slimy thing on top of her, eating her face. She was trembling all over when she told me this—that the picture was moving. She saw a side of her face swell like some nasty boil filled with pus oozing all over. She couldn’t see her mouth, but greenish goo flowed from where the slime was sinking its teeth into the skin around her mouth. ‘Teeth of a bum’ were her exact words—crooked yellow teeth, brown with clotted blood. But she was smiling. She could see it in her eyes.”

The blood had drained from Fran’s face. “He was murdering her,” she whispered.

“But she was smiling, see,” I said. The wind died away altogether. “She burned all their pictures together. A few weeks later, she got the nerve at last to sign the divorce papers. She got that over with, which was what she’d thought was all there was to it—a few strokes of a pen to toss all those painful years out the window. But it took her years to finally look at him without having to shake that image in her head of him devouring her. The explanation she gave herself all those years, partly to avoid confronting the question of her own complicity, was that she’d stayed in a monstrously abusive marriage for love.”

107

“I wonder if she’s already forgiven him,” Fran said. “Or herself, for that matter.”

There followed a few long seconds of silence. A burst of laughter floated from down below, a group of P.E. students come to toss a frisbee around, their heads bobbing up and down in the air.

Fran was the first to break the spell. “When are you going to visit him?”

“I was hoping that you could come with me tonight.”

“Are you willing to wait until five-thirty for me?”

I straightened up, brushed the dust off the seat of my pants. “Been waiting for you forever.”

“You’re rewriting history, Mr. Santos,” she said, then extended her hands. “Help me.”

I complied. She was heavier than I expected. “Have you thought of a name yet?”

The last time I saw her, two months ago in Atlanta, the adjective that first came to mind was “chunky.” Now she looked officially wonderfully expecting, in a dress ballooning around her bump.

She said, slipping her hand into the crook of my arm, “Maybe you could help me with that.”

“IT WILL BE MUCH BETTER,” THE DOCTOR SAID, “if a more comprehensive support system is here to help him get through this ordeal. A loving, understanding environment where his needs, both emotional and physical, are met. I’m only talking about a constant compassionate presence by his side.”

“I’d really appreciate it if you quit the whole a-family-that-stays-together-shits-together talk and tell me what’s going on with him.”

“You must understand,” he said, “that healing is a process as much spiritual as it is corporeal. Did you see his face when he saw you? We haven’t seen him smile like that!”

“You and I both know that’s bullshit,” I said. “He’s genetically programmed not to smile, except to gloat. And didn’t you just say, a little while ago, that healing’s already out of the question?”

“Be that as it may, I suggest that you act as said support system while you’re here.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“We can’t have a serious discussion if you keep on refusing like a ten-year-old on a playground. On top of ALS, he’s had a stroke, which left him speech-impaired. He’s getting terrible, Joaquin. The least you can do—and you’ll thank me for this—is make his last days worthwhile.”

“What is the worst thing that might happen if I don’t do as you say?”

“That you’ll look back on this day and regret not having made the right decision.”

“Believe me when I say it’s more statistically probable that I’d step out that door right this second and get a vasectomy than regret anything remotely related to that man in the near future.”

“I’m asking this of you as his doctor.”

“And I’m telling you he’s gonna cash in his chips sooner or later. Whether or not I am there, reading to him or feeding him or washing his bottom or whatever else perfect sons do to their ailing parents—when the inevitable happens, me being there by him won’t matter at all. He’s riding a fucking freight train bound for only one destination, and we know neither you nor I can stop it.”

“You feel frustrated, I know. You still resent him, after all these years.”

“Is there any other way to feel? And, hell, you’re not a shrink, so back off!”

He said, red-faced but smiling, “Do you want to hear a funny story?”

I said, “Do you want to tell a funny story?”

He leaned across the table. “My friend had this patient five, six years ago. Alcoholic old man, around eighty-five years old, I think. Anyway, on his deathbed, he asked his daughter to give him his dentures. They were in a glass of water, on the bedside table. You’d think she’d oblige, but she must have been too squeamish. ‘My dentures,’ the old man breathlessly said. But the girl was adamant! ‘Please, my dentures,’ he begged. ‘My dentures, Lyn.’ Still, she didn’t give in. Ten minutes passed and, alas, he flatlined. The old man died without his dentures on. The girl ran down crying to the hallway to find the doctor. When my friend and the daughter returned to the room, she screamed.”

“The dentures weren’t in the glass of water,” I said. “The old man had them on.”

“Wow! How did you know that?”

“The daughter saw to it that they buried the old man with his dentures on,” I said. “The night of the burial, the daughter went to bed with eyes red-rimmed from crying. She was a fitful sleeper. But there was something else, too, that night. She flicked on her bedside lamp, sighed, sobbed, glanced at the watch clock. It said three forty-six. The old man had died the exact same time. She sobbed some more. She was about to turn the lamp off when she saw it on her beside table. And that’s when she screamed. No one believed her when she told them she’d seen her father’s dentures, the same dentures he had on, now six feet below the ground. For the next five, six years, she’d see the dentures everywhere. On the bookshelves. On top of her laptop. In the sink in the bathroom. In the sink in her boyfriend’s bathroom. In her shoes. In her panty drawer.”

“You’re a damn good storyteller.” He put his hands behind his neck and tilted his chair.

“Lyn, I think you should go see a friend of mine,’ a friend told her. The therapist was kindly, smiled a lot, snaggletooth and all. The daughter told the woman everything. The therapist had to produce another box of Kleenex. ‘I hated him,’ the daughter said. Then, ‘He says to me, “Come here, Lyn, sit on Papa’s

lap.” I say, “But I’ve got homework.” The daughter blew her nose loudly. ‘And he says, “You wanna learn something tonight, baby?” I don’t. He’s been drinking a lot lately. I’m afraid of him. He says, after finishing another bottle, “Are you disobeying, Papa?” And I say again, “No, I’m just really busy, is all.” Then he stands up and walks over to me. “Get up!”’ The daughter cried another loud, good cry. ‘It’s all right now, Lyn,’ the therapist said, and when the daughter looked up, she screamed. The snaggletooth was gone. The therapist was smiling, flashing perfect teeth.”

“The dentures,” the doctor whispered, his voice quivering.

“The daughter went to the apartment of her boyfriend, who was a carpenter. She called him several times, but he just wouldn’t pick up. She was afraid to go to her own house, afraid of what was awaiting her there. She sank down on his velour couch, feeling more alone than she’d ever felt. She was tired of crying, just stared at his toolbox on the lacquered table. The daughter tried calling the boyfriend again. She needed someone to believe her. She stared at the toolbox. She tried his cell. She stared at the toolbox. She tried his cell. Then she saw the dentures. This time, she didn’t scream. She unclasped the toolbox, took the pliers out, and one by one she pulled her teeth out, not making a sound. She was spurting blood, but she felt numb, free. It was only the morning after that the boyfriend, who’d spent the night at another girlfriend’s house, found the daughter sprawled on his couch, all her teeth neatly laid out on the lacquered table, in her mouth her father’s dentures.”

After several seconds of silence, the doctor said, “I don’t know where you get these ideas.”

“She wasn’t squeamish, Israfel,” I said. “She hated him, and she had a reason for hating him.”

MY CONVERSATION WITH ISRAFEL had left me wanting to murder everything, so I cut our visit short and pulled Fran out of my father’s room, despite her protestations. She’d read to him poems from Adrienne Rich’s *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, and she said he’d seemed to be enjoying himself.

“You read him a ten-part poem,” I said, “riddled with allusions from Dickinson to Diderot, allusions I don’t think he even recognized as such, and you’re saying he was enjoying himself?”

Fran said, shifting in her seat yet again, “Aren’t you embarrassed at your Philistinism?”

The three angels perched on top of the Quezon City monument were still tethered to their posts, their wings jutting into the night sky like shark fins. The last time I’d seen them, they’d looked pale-faced and dead, but now swirls of varicolored light swept over them every few seconds or so. I watched the light on their faces turn from red to blue just as I swept the car around the perimeter of Quezon Memorial Circle. I said, “Israfel thinks I should be a ‘comprehensive support system’ for Dad, ‘a constant compassionate presence by his side.’ The way he said it would make you think he was reading from a script for Kerygma TV. If not for the stethoscope, you’d believe he was a priest.”

“Your brother seemed like a wonderful man,” she said.

I veered to the left, running a red light. “You’re right. He’s a big self-righteous bore.”

“You’re being too hard on him. Is that because he has a cooler name than you?”

“Got a clout on my nose over that name when I was kid, actually. I was eight when Dad came home with him, this kid who looked exactly like Dad. I instantly hated him for that. He was around twelve then—just a kid, too, none the wiser. On the porch later that day, I came up to him and said I’d heard what his name was and knew how he’d gotten it. I said, ‘You were conceived in Israel.’”

“Conceived? You got an excellent vocabulary for an eight-year-old.”

“And a pretty good memory to have memorized the capitals of all the countries in the world, too. So, yeah, I was this son of a bitch showing off to the bastard. He said, ‘How’d you know that?’ And I said what I’d been practicing to say to his face all afternoon. ‘Well, I’m a bright kid, Israfael. I know for a fact that the ‘F’ in your name stands for what your Ma and Dad did every day in Israel.”

“Let me guess. ‘Fray’ in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, maybe?”

“That’s possible. Those two must have been pretty ‘fious’ to choose to honeymoon in Israel.”

“So he punched you in the face,” she said. “And that’s why you’ve harbored this resentment towards the man all these years.”

I rolled down my window and let the cool breeze graze my cheek. Shadows on the street blurred past on either side as we zipped down the road. I said, “That’s one way of summarizing it.”

A minute of silence passed between us. I kept my eyes to the road, the eerie silence falling from the halogens turning everything the color of gunmetal. I liked the silence, as I always had when with Fran. It was the best kind, for it was effortless and comfortable, sometimes even more preferable to the talk, and it could go on boundlessly without either of us feeling the urge to fill it with pointless words. In this silence, even the bustling city seemed to almost completely stop.

“You should’ve stayed,” she said finally, putting her hand over mine on the wheel. “Did you see his face when you stepped into the room? He kept asking about you. I didn’t know what to say.”

I said, “I’ve been thinking about telling him I died in a plane crash, on my flight to Manila.”

“And how exactly are you going to tell him that?”

“I’ll say, ‘Dad, are you happy now?’”

“And he’ll say, straining from the effort, ‘Wha-a-a?’”

“And I’ll say, ‘I’m dead, Dad. Literally.’ Then I’ll turn around to show him the hunk of metal lodged in the back of my head, which has been nearly completely sliced open by a rotating turbine.”

“And he’ll say, sounding out the words excruciatingly slowly, ‘I’m puh-proud of you, s-son.’”

“And I’ll say at the door, before slamming it shut behind me, ‘I wish I could say the same.’”

HE SEEMED TO BE MELTING RIGHT INTO THE BED, vulnerable and small like a child. Half the time his speech was so atrociously garbled you’d think he was drunk, or Swedish, or a drunken Swede, or speaking in a wholly different tongue, maybe Inuktitut or one of those that use umlauts. And the smell in the room, there was no accounting for it. No matter how many air fresheners Mom placed on his bedside stand, there was still that inert rank smell that hung like another, lurking presence.

There was no way of wrapping it daintily or fooling myself otherwise. My father was a goner.

Meanwhile my mother was the crazy queen of contradictions. She’d feng-shuied the room, and now the television was mounted askew in a corner and a small round table sat at an odd angle smack-dab in the center of the room. She’d also gone way over-the-top in her visits to the church, lighting enough candles to burn the whole thing down and muttering Hail Marys even at the spa. She was surprised to see me this morning, but gladly let me take over and handed me the book she’d been reading to him. It was *The Celestine Prophecy*, bookmarked with a Jehovah’s Witness flier.

I settled into a gray chair beside his bed and put the *Celestine Prophecy* on his bedside stand. He was peering at me through glazed eyes, uncomprehending. I said, “I’ve got some stories for you.”

He made a kind of grunt and snort, but more of the former, which I took to be appreciative.

“This is about my friend’s kid who got swallowed by the thing behind the wall,” I said, and my father held up the corners of his mouth, his miserable attempt at a smile. “His name’s Jack. As with all good boys, Jack finished his schoolwork before dinner, maintained straight A’s, hung with smart, bubbling boys like himself, made the basketball team, obeyed his mommy and daddy at all times, and had his eyes on the pretty little cookie with the long pigtails on the playground. In short, he was the kid every mother would love to have and every father would be proud of bringing to his office like a loving cup. One night, in his room, Jack heard something. Something behind the walls. Distant at first, then close, and then impossibly terrifyingly close, like only a quarter of an inch from his right ear. He didn’t know what it was. It sounded like nothing he could associate it with. But one thing he was sure of: It sounded real bad and sickening and it made him wet his pants.”

He coughed, which tapered off into a series of barking, gargly noises, the kind you make when simultaneously clearing your throat and choking on a chicken bone.

I went on. “Jack told his parents the morning after. Told them how the noise sounded, although all the words he used to describe it couldn’t approximate how real bad and wet-in-your-pants sickening it had sounded in his ears. Told them how he’d spent the night with two pillows pulled over his head, and how he’d still heard it loud and frighteningly clear. Jack’s mom spread the pineapple jam on the wheat bread, making tsk-tsk noises, chiding herself for picking the wrong brand of jam. Jack’s dad looked up from his morning paper and said, nonchalantly, ‘You’ve got a writer’s imagination, son. That’s good for now. But when you’re thirty and have a family of your own, you’ve got to find a job to pay the bills.’”

He made another curt and reproving noise, this one I interpreted as *The hour groweth late*, something he used to say to hurry me up when, as a kid, I’d tell him stories of how my day had gone. I continued. “‘The thing behind the wall,’ Jack said solemnly, too solemnly, ‘it’s gonna swallow me.’ The perfect kid soon became a complete basket case, jumping even at the slightest of sounds. Jack had since gotten D’s, kept to himself, dropped out of the basketball team, and been avoided by the pretty little cookie with the long pigtails on the playground, thinking he was buggy. Cooped up in his room, he took to books and found in them worlds within which fictions were an escape and truths were obliquely disguised but ironically made more refined, like a metal pulled out of a furnace. He then made up his own stories in which the thing behind the wall was but a monster in a faraway galaxy.”

He lifted his head ever so slightly as if to show his growing impatience, but all I could see now was a man worn thin by age and cowering behind a tangle of pathetic plastic tubes. Only a ghost of his former self flickered every now and then, in the way his eyebrows knitted together in the middle or when he’d produce clucking sounds dimly resembling Tagalog curses spoken backwards.

“He’s acting out,’ Jack’s dad assured his worried wife one night. ‘It’s just a phase,’” I said, then waited for the words to sink in. “But that same night, putting his book down, Jack knew the thing he was afraid of was finally coming for him. He heard it. The thing behind the wall that sounded real bad and sickening. It was so close, it seemed whatever was making the sounds was breathing right down his neck. This time, he pooped his pants. He heard it and, defenseless, he let it swallow him.”

When I stopped, he said, working his dry tongue, “W-wah-what hu-happened?”

“Jack wasn’t up by seven the next morning,” I said, “which his mother found annoying and just a little disturbing. She let herself into his room and saw that he was gone. The bed was made, not one thing out of place. Through her tears, Jack’s mother told her husband what she’d seen, or, more accurately, what



she hadn't seen. Jack's father looked up from his morning paper, then sipped his coffee, and sighed. 'I guess I was wrong about him after all. I never thought he would run away.'

He canted his head to one side, away from me, and mumbled, "S-s-stop."

I said, "Here's another good one before we call it a day. A man woke up one morning with a cockroach in his mouth. He reached for it, but the further he slid his hand down his throat to get at the little foul dodgy monster, the further it crawled away from his grasping fingers. He could feel its bristly legs scrape the walls of his throat raw. He could hear the rustle of its wings, its furtive movements inside him, the human noise around him almost scaling to nothing. He thought about the many times he'd squished these insects dead with the manic footwork of someone voodoo-dancing, ignoring their bitty arthropod pleas; about the other times he'd watched them shuffle their crushed bodies to a dark, safe corner, their icky yellowish-black innards hanging out, half-dead."

His head had fallen slack on the pillow. I put my face close to his and said, "You know what the man did? He swallowed the cockroach. And he wouldn't realize the magnitude of what he'd done until after many years when he finally looked in the mirror and saw the brittle-looking wings sticking out of his back, the antennae, the centipede legs, the spindly body he had over and over again seen in those little foul dodgy monsters he had crushed to death." Yellowish fluid flowed through a tube and into a catheter bag that lay at the foot of his bed. He was hitching in his breath to scream, his face a mask of horror, but the words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop myself. "He realized, when he looked in the mirror, that he was the foul dodgy monster after all."

My father closed his eyes, the way kids close their eyes to shut out the monsters. He made a whimpering sound that also oddly sounded halfway between a grumble and a belch. With shaking hands, he grabbed at the cord that hung beside his bed and fiercely jabbed at the button to beep the nurse. I rose from my seat, gave him a last good look, and walked out the door to come up for air.

112

THE CLOUD-CURTAINED SKY WAS EQUAL PARTS nitrogen, oxygen, and microscopic fast-flying shit. This was how it always was in the movies, with a prelude to a brewing tempest, everything tinged dapple-gray and not a shaft of sunlight breaking through the clouds, with tears forgotten and condolences ladled out like a bottomless spiked punch you'd rather not drink. The condolences were from well-wishers sympathetic enough to leave behind traces of their presence, in the form of styrofoam coffee cups and, surprisingly, even a benutted condom at what would otherwise have been a quiet funeral. The tears, on the other hand, were mostly my mother's. She cried because she'd loved my father the way she loved Coco Chanel and hated me the way she'd always hated my guts for everything that had gone amiss, including my father's death that same and only day I'd visited him in the hospital.

The whole ritual had long been over, and now there was only the rectangular mound of turned-up earth staring me in the face, the same way I thought the proverbial apple in the tree had stared down at Newton moments before an incontrovertible universal fact dawned on him at last. My father was dead, which meant the world was now one person less crappy, which meant I no longer had to be self-destructively crappy. The thought wasn't as comforting as I'd thought it'd be.

Fran stood beside me at the unmarked grave holding her belly, within which pulsed a new life, though lamentably one that its self-destructively crappy father wouldn't own up to. I stared at the points

where the grass gave way to soil, memorizing each blade before I could finally will myself to cobble together the words so inarticulate that they fell through language as sand through a sieve.

By the time I began, first in a swallowed whisper, then in a torrent of words rolling one after the other, the wind had been soughing through the trees with a seemingly timeless constancy. The late afternoon had made everything look so much as if smeared with charcoal on some forlorn canvas left unfinished, that my father's death seemed like the rightest thing in the world, the key element in the picture. Overhead, the birds made a strange sight, turning pinwheels in the sky before flying off perhaps to more clement skies, reminding me that I was here, bound, weighted.

"I knew a friend in L.A. who claimed he'd been dead this whole time," I said. My voice had climbed an octave higher in my ears, made louder by the sheer absence of even a single soul around apart from the two of us. I continued. "He told me he died that day he'd found himself on a blood-splattered bed with a grinning man holding a dagger above his head, many years ago. The man swept the dagger in a wide orbit in the air before stabbing him with it, five, ten, a hundred times.

"At first, all he could think about was how astoundingly great the amount of blood there is in the human body," I said. "He thought this as his blood squirted like a fire-hose onto the ceiling, all over the walls, painting everything crimson. He thought this as he heard the expert swish of metal cutting through bone and sinew, as pain eased up to something somewhat like perverted pleasure." The sky now was the color of bruised flesh and pressed down on us with the dumb ferocity of a humongous dust bunny. Then, "He thought this because there was nothing else to think about to take his mind off what was happening, which his bewildered young mind couldn't yet fathom, until finally he was told to get up, wipe the blood off himself, and get out of the room. He hurried out the door with his heart still pumping away in his throat, his mouth dry, his guts congealed to stone."

A thunderclap boomed overhead and without looking up I could see forks of lightning flicker on and off in the thick of pillars of clouds. Fran took my left hand and gave it a light squeeze. I said, "He walked on home and thought the world was so dangerous a place that what had happened to him fit right in, like robbery, which happens every day everywhere without fail. He couldn't recall how he'd met the grinning man. He knew only that the grinning man had listened to him like nobody he knew ever had. He knew only that he had since climbed the steps to the grinning man's room and felt the world drop out beneath his feet. In bed with the grinning man, he would leave his slaughtered body. The room, where an overhead Chinese paper lantern glowed dimly and rocked of its own accord, filled with cockroaches, and where the colors on the sprigged wallpaper stayed inside the lines, simply tumbled away. Kaleidoscopic lights and sparkling spectral fuzz took their place. He was dancing. He was flying. He was dancing and flying and high on ecstasy and numb with joy, or some small piece of joy he was content enough to wallow in. He was anything and anyone but the boy feeling the cold blade of the dagger penetrate his skin, the boy feeling his slow death."

A gust of wind made a hooting sound and drummed through the tall trees, which murmured their fear of the storm close at hand. It took much of my resolve to swallow the plumping lump that had formed in my throat before I could go on. "He couldn't remember how he came to the conclusion that what he was involved in was something morbidly disastrous and nauseating and that—this he only realized many years later—that, by allowing it to carry on, he was simply learning to accommodate brutalization rather than ride it out. What he knew for sure was that one day, looking up at the grinning

man from the bed on which he lay, he saw not the dagger gleaming with blood but the grinning man's eyes threaded with bleary veins of red. The grinning man's skin had gone sickly yellow, his teeth a freak show with canines almost as long as tusks jutting out in a leery grin. He tried to slide away from his body like he'd always done, but now to no avail, and felt instead one damp hand grip his bony body like talons and another push the dagger in, in one swift motion."

The wind shrieked by, ruffling my hair and flapping fitfully at my collar. "He decided he had to tell his father about the grinning man," I said. "His father, a very busy and important man, couldn't reconcile the image of the grinning man, who he personally knew to be genial and virtuous, with the one his son had described, a monster that got off on murder. More than anything, his father couldn't dig why his son had let this go on this far without successfully objecting to such violence. Like a flat-earther, he couldn't believe what he'd just been told because it shook all the convenient assumptions he had all these decades known and turned to and fallen back on for safety. And so his father, a very busy and important man, decided that no one else had to know about his son's death."

"Joaquin," Fran said, in a voice crushed under the weight of all that she didn't know or couldn't say. "You don't have to." On the grass smudged with footprints, our shadows had already completely disappeared. Somewhere far off, birds filled the sky with their cries. I looked at Fran just as lightning stabbed down, illuminating my face in her eyes for a split second, followed by a long, rumbling wave of thunder. A drop of rain fell and built a glassy bead on the tip of her nose.

"The grinning man disappeared just as quickly as he'd come into the boy's life," I said, raising my voice above the roar of the convulsing sky. "But the boy, living but dead, plodded through childhood emptied out and self-flagellating, and soon grew into a man who had become intimately familiar with the curve of the blade and the gentle pressure of its sharp tip against his skin just before he plunged it in and watched blood snake down in a hypnotic scarlet rivulet. He'd known all this so expertly, in fact, that he eventually escaped the place of his innocent youth to eke out a life among the dead, where every day men and women painted walls with blood and danced with daggers and slaughtered him for an hour of pleasure, during which he floated out of his body and felt himself move slowly up through five thousand feet of water, up, up, up, then out of it, alive."

The wind howled and whined and the rain hissed and screeched, steadily, lashing at our frozen bodies standing at my father's grave. The sky had turned a fretfully sinister shade of gray. Lightning flashed down from the walloping clouds, dazzling everything for an instant, and I shut my eyes to blink away the purplish afterimages. I shut my eyes and gave a feeble, hopeless croak as gouts of rain in windblown arcs struck the side of my face and beat at my neck like a hundred angry fists and trickled along my spine and made my sodden, leaden clothes cling to my skin like flypaper and then I felt sudden, warm dampness crawl down my cheeks. My father was dead and the world was breaking down and I shut my eyes tight, furiously, didn't open them, until all at once I was flying, unfettered and weightless, light as a feather, as soft fingers pressed gently against my cheeks and a voice drowned out the din of the storm and whispered, "You're alive now."