

## Circle

1992

Blood on our toes greeted us when we woke up. The rats had been busy nibbling our toes all night. What drove them to do so all of a sudden, I didn't know. We never bothered them. My mother, cigarette in mouth, said, "Something we did last night must have annoyed them." She was playing solitaire on the floor as Imelda Papin wailed full-blast on the stereo from the other room. My stepfather nodded in agreement.

The biting didn't wake us up. But judging from how my right foot looked, the rats were a little fonder of me.

"That's because you were born in the Year of the Rat," my mother said. "It's only a bite. You'll survive."

"I'm not worried," I said. "And I won't mind being a rat myself. Rats always find a way."

"Don't believe everything you read, young man. Your father and I don't send you to school to study horoscopes."

I stared at my rat-bitten toe, wondering why I didn't faint despite my hemophobia.

We were hole-dwellers, renting a tiny room on the second floor of a shanty in an alley off Maria Orosa. The room had striped pink wallpaper and tired green linoleum on the floor. The sliding plywood door had no knob. We used a hook to keep it fastened, but sometimes we didn't even bother.

That night, before the rat nipping, we had argued about whether to lock the door before sleeping. There was nothing else to talk about I suppose. No TV too.

"What is there to steal?" I asked.

“The things we have here?” said my stepfather.

“Like that stinking *orinola*?” I pointed at the bedpan in the corner. I saw two black rats scurry behind it.

“It’s your piss too!” said my mother.

The room had no furniture. There was no space even for a small table. We stacked dishes, utensils, cookware, clothes, sheets, pillows in flimsy cubicles on the walls, where the cockroaches liked to lay their eggs.

The cockroaches and the rats I didn’t mind very much. If there was one thing in the house I dreaded, it was the toilet. And not because the frog-like Undin in *Shake, Rattle and Roll* had come out of toilets to kill people for taking her eggs. It was because this one brimmed over with shit. I didn’t want to go anywhere near it.

Still not done with her solitaire an hour later, my mother, seeing the distress on my face, asked me, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“You stupid boy. Go take a crap.”

And so, hesitantly, I obeyed. The one bathroom, if you may call it that, that more than a dozen of us hole-dwellers shared was also a “dirty” kitchen, where we washed dishes and clothes. For a squatter kid, I was rather spoiled. My mother never let me do household chores. She would tell me, “Your hands are meant for writing, son, not for dirty work.” She was probably right in one thing only: I was never any good at cleaning.

That afternoon, while my parents were away to make a living, I got out of our hole. I hated taking a nap, so I watched *Mara Clara* instead with the landlady next room. An Iglesia ni Cristo devotee, she was old and mestiza looking, and had a big scar on her right ankle. Before she went

to their church on Sundays, I would sit on the floor and watch as she put on her stockings. I had asked my mother once, “Why does she always wear stockings to church?” She, Ate Imelda (my mother’s best friend), and other ladies wore stockings at night.

“She wears them to cover her ugly scar.”

“Because it’s disgusting and smelly?”

“Because she has to be presentable in the eyes of God.”

“Papa said God loves us no matter what we look like.”

“Yes, but her God is not the same as ours.”

The old woman was fanning her face and chest with a piece of cardboard, her legs splayed, smelling of old books and cockroach eggs. The folding bed where she lay also reeked. I watched the telenovela with her in silence, hoping that the elusive diary would finally be found and Mara would be saved and Clara would be punished. The old woman never talked to me while watching TV, much to my relief. After *Mara Clara*, I left her snoring on the bed, her scar gleaming in the dark.

Downstairs, in the alley, I played with the landlady’s grandchildren out of boredom. I didn’t particularly like them. One time I had pigged out on a stick of *betamax* in front of one of them because their religion forbade them to eat blood. But the person I didn’t like the most in the house was the landlady’s eldest son, whose room was right below ours. He was selling drugs to the hole-dwellers of Orosa, my mother included.

Before the sun disappeared completely, I went up to our room and waited for my parents to bring food for the night. I was drawing the Japanese super robot Voltes V and thinking of how the Armstrong brothers had searched for their missing father and the Boazanian Empire had invaded the planet, when policemen suddenly stormed the house. I heard babies wailing, and

other tenants and the old woman screaming. I peeped through a hole beside the door and saw men and women running up and down the stairs. I dashed out of the room and back down to the alley, where our neighbors had gathered to watch the spectacle unfold.

The landlady's eldest son was now in jail, but not for long, most people said.

"For some reason," my stepfather said later that night, "he is always back home a day or two after he is caught."

"What do you expect?" my mother said. "The guy has connections."

"Then why arrest him at all?"

"Why do you care?" she said, blowing smoke from the side of her mouth and tapping her toes rapidly. "It's all just a show to entertain us."

Many other times I had witnessed commotions no less dramatic between neighbors over nasty rumors, between owners and tenants about dues, between husbands and wives over who was cheating on whom. My mother once had flung the *orinola* with urine in it at my stepfather, believing he was cheating on her, although I swore he wasn't. It was one of those days when she needed *shabu* badly. After a slow session with the drug, however, she would pull herself together. She would clean the room and fold and unfold clothes over and over and over, each time thinking perhaps that things she had done could just as easily be undone.

1991

Before Orosa, we lived on a parallel street, Jorge Bocobo, near Remedios Circle. We had a bigger room, with a window that had a view of the alley.

One day, while I was musing on the Japanese superhero Shaider and his enemies, the red-eyed legless Fuuma Ley Ar and his transvestite grandson Ida, Tita Virgie, my mother's younger

sister, arrived unexpectedly from Davao with my cousin Tata. Tita Virgie didn't look anything like my mother. She had fair skin and small eyes, and looked more like Ate Imelda. As on other special occasions, my stepfather prepared *pinangat* that day, together with *kinilaw na dilis* that he had sent me to San Andres market to buy. All the talk over lunch was about how Tata needed to stay in Manila to earn money for her tuition and for the house they were building in Toril. While we ate, Tita Virgie also talked openly about virginity—Tata's in particular.

“She won't tell me,” Tita Virgie said. “But I know, I can tell.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Tata said. Turning to my mother, she pleaded with her, “Auntie, talk to Mama. She's crazy.”

“Look at her skin, Remedios,” Tita Virgie said. “Too dry. It's rough and flaky, like that of a snake! And her face, that's not the face of someone who has not known sex, believe me.”

“I told you many times nobody has touched me.”

“Maybe she's telling the truth, Virgie,” my stepfather said.

Tita Virgie asked my mother to find out the truth. Tata was only sixteen, she said. Only sixteen.

So my mother opened another pack of cigarettes and placed a white cloth on the floor. It was time to seek the answer through *solitaire*. We all sat on the floor watching her closely. But after three unsuccessful tries, she dumped the cards and asked my stepfather to get a ball of thread from her makeup box.

My mother measured the length of Tata's arm, from fingertips to shoulder, cut thread of the same length, and asked Tata to bite the ends. Tata obeyed without saying anything. My mother placed the thread on Tata's head. Tata closed her eyes. The thread sank into Tata's head. My mother looked worriedly at Tita Virgie, who examined Tata's face for a second. Then Tita

Virgie slapped Tata with the force of all the years of hard work in the fields.

“Who was he?” she asked. Tata began to cry and confessed it was one of the cousins in Davao. Tita Virgie hit Tata several times.

“I will kill that boy!” Tita Virgie said.

“Enough. You’re killing her,” said my mother.

“Let it be, Virgie,” said my stepfather. “What else can we do?”

Tita Virgie and Tata hugged each other and cried. I left the room. From the dark house I emerged blinking into the light and the babble of women in the alley cleaning the canals and washing clothes while they smoked, amusing themselves with the day’s dose of *chismis*. I heard the clink of beer bottles and raucous laughter from the men. Girls bounced up and down in their *ten-twenty* game, and boys raced through the street playing *sikyo*. I didn’t feel like joining them, so I kept walking.

I saw the landlord in his junk shop weighing rusty iron pipes with his son and daughter helping him. My eyes fell on old electric fans and motors, bottles, newspapers, cans, and steel beams and rods. Those could fetch enough money to buy school supplies, I thought. The shop, the only junk shop in Bocobo, was also crammed with bike parts and other metals, tarnished utensils and broken appliances, and other scraps. For a father of teenage kids, the man looked older. He hardly ever talked. Mama told me that his wife had left them a long time ago and he raised his kids by himself.

Tita Virgie and Tata didn’t stay as long as they had planned. One afternoon, a few days after they had left, the landlord’s daughter and I were alone in the house. Flies bumbled around before coming to rest on the floor. The air was otherwise still and, apart from faint sounds of people walking in the alley, all was quiet. She was watching *Eat Bulaga* with the sound turned

down low and fiercely fanning herself. Without even a glance in my direction she signaled me to join her on the couch. I did, though the invitation, uncommon as it was, confused me. Halfway through the show she got up and took a box from the drawer under the TV. She opened it and showed me her younger brother's robot, which I had been eyeing for the longest time. It looked like Voltes V. She let me play with it while she put a Betamax tape on. I was still playing with the robot's flying fists when a naked man and woman appeared on the screen. I looked at them and then at the landlord's daughter. She took my hand and put it inside her underwear. My heart started beating fast. When I felt the dampness in her I quickly pulled my hand back. But she took it again without a word and put it back where it was. Soon I heard her quiet moaning and the thudding of my heart. I closed my eyes and sat unmoving until the moaning stopped.

1990

Before Bocobo, we lived in the Hobbit House compound, along Mabini Street. Malate Church, dedicated to Virgen de los Remedios, the patroness of childbirth, was close by. Staffed by dwarves, Hobbit House was a popular bar where my mother and Ate Imelda would go. Inside the compound was a mint-green two-story pension house with about a dozen rooms. One of the rooms was ours.

There was no electricity that time. Power outages crippled the city. One day my mother complained of dizziness and stomach pain. The pain soon became so unbearable that she had to stay in bed for days. My stepfather shuffled through the house trying to help my semiconscious mother, who looked like she had not seen the sun for a long time. Out of despair my stepfather ordered me to get a *hilot*.

The *hilot* lived behind Aurora A. Quezon Elementary School, my school. A giant statue

of Mrs. Quezon, carved in black stone, faced the campus. I was afraid of her, for it was said that she had been seen walking the halls since the day she and her daughter Baby were ambushed. The school was a long 10-minute walk away from Hobbit House. A homely old woman with an air of foreboding and a plastic bag of odds and ends came back with me.

“I’m getting a bad feeling in this place,” said the *hilot* as her eyes surveyed the room. “Someone is watching us.”

“Who?” my stepfather asked.

“We’ll know soon enough,” the *hilot* said. “Give me a basin with water, quick.”

I was curious to see what was in the bag but it was too dark. The *hilot* took out a white candle and lit it with a match. The light cast shadows across the room. I watched her grim face and hands as she began her rituals. My mother would occasionally groan in pain. My stepfather poured water into the basin and gave it to the old woman, who then poured candle wax on the water. My stepfather and I waited, sick to our stomachs.

“There!” the *hilot* bellowed, pointing at the basin.

A creature with a head and limbs was taking form, as if by magic.

“A *dwende*,” the *hilot* said, exchanging glances with my stepfather. “And he likes her.” Seeing the worry on my stepfather’s face, the *hilot* pulled out a bottle of *lana*, poured a generous amount on my mother’s belly and began stroking it. The smell of coconut oil at once filled the room. I kept looking at the *hilot* and my stepfather, wanting to understand what was going on. All I knew was that my mother was in agony the whole time the *hilot* was kneading her belly as if it were bread dough. Then I saw blood dripping slowly from my mother’s legs. The *hilot* continued to massage the belly with brutal strokes, as I remained silent and watched the shadows on the walls.

The rest was a flicker of memory. My mother was brought at some point to the Philippine General Hospital along Taft Avenue. She lost plenty of blood during the operation and needed a transfusion. I thought she wouldn't survive, for we couldn't find blood for her at first. But she made it through. She always did. The baby did not. Unknown to us, my mother was pregnant and the baby was in an abnormal position. Ectopic pregnancy, the doctor said. My stepfather told me that her tubes had been damaged and she could no longer bear a child. She became irritable and blamed the "new" blood running through her body. "Dirty blood" she would say. I blamed the *hilot* and our failure to pray to the Virgin Mary.

1992

We left Hobbit House and its dark memories after some time, moved to Bocobo, and finally to the little rented room in Orosa.

There were rumors that we might soon have to move somewhere else. A deep hole was being dug for two towers along the street, right across our alley.

One sunny day, after the rat incident, my friends and I took refuge in a nearby building, collecting *tansan*, *teks*, and rubber bands. During school breaks I played with them most afternoons. I never took a nap, something that drove my mother crazy.

As twilight descended, heavy clouds started rolling in. Soon my mother would send me to our neighbor to wheedle from her two packs of Lucky Me instant noodles, a can of Ligo sardines, and a pack of Marlboro, to be paid next week.

While my friends and I were playing, the skies opened and rain poured down on us. We ran after one another, taking off our shirts and pulling down our shorts. We ran in our oversized underwear in the downpour, washing the dirt and the sun-baked, rusty smell off our bodies. We

ran and ran and ran. The shanty grew quiet for a moment, as street vendors and vagrants deserted Orosa. The canals overflowed, dragging along scrap, litter, and dead rats from the sewer. Night had fallen as gently as it had never been. It was time to go home.