

## Dao

1

The bare essentials: a bar of soap, a toothbrush, a seven-peso tube of toothpaste, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a banig (borrowed), two pillows (borrowed), two carpets (borrowed), two bedsheets (borrowed), back pain, some shirts, a pair of jeans, sachets of shampoo, a routine, the obliteration of routine, an essaying of routine, four rolls of tissue, two bottles of water, two cans of beer, pairs of underwear, some socks, a view, a lightbulb (soft), the sun, the moon, the shadows (my own), an account.

2

I had once thought that the number of floors in one's home spoke of stature, that the fact that my family had lived in a single-story house meant that we were of a lesser sort. My father took a week off from work when I was around seven and went searching for a new house. He found three options. How many floors? I asked. Each had at least two levels. This was exciting. The house along Dao Street in what was once United Parañaque 1 seemed the obvious choice; it had a basement den -- three floors. When my father signed the deed of sale, he affirmed that we were made.

Hindsight would disprove the upgrade: a tie at four bedrooms each between the old and the new; my room on a second floor, yes, yet considerably smaller than the one in the house we had rented; no backyard; smaller garage. Years later, when suspicions of bad *chi* served as logic's only recourse in explaining the bad luck that fell upon my family, the illusion revealed itself to me: the second floor was not much of one, for it was not over where I was sitting in the first floor kitchen, rather slightly elevated to one side; the basement was not under me, rather a mere six steps down off towards the back of the house, the floor of the upstairs hanging low

above where we put the big television. It was a single-story house in which there was an elevated platform for three bedrooms and two baths; below it, half a floor down from the first, a low-ceilinged bodega.

We had purchased an illusion. I said this once out loud. This did not go over well with my father. The obvious should often be left unsaid, at least under certain roofs.

3

The thing about other houses for me growing up, beyond the true second floor, was the big garage with a basketball hoop. In our old rented house, in Indonesia where we lived and my father worked in order to buy the house along Dao, we had a low-ceilinged garage, so I could never ask for a hoop to be installed. Instead, I would play in my parents' room, the spaces between the bed, dresser, television, and altar my court, the top cabinets my low hoopless backboard. I became a splendid ball-handler, dribbling with either hand, between my legs and behind my back. No jump shot whatsoever.

The Dao garage was much smaller, and though for the first time I had a neighborhood park with a full court, my not being able to say sali without embarrassment kept me still at home, where I reveled in a living room free of furniture, a novelty that lasted but a week or two, up until the moving trucks arrived. Up in my room, where I was determined to sleep alone for consecutive nights, I raged at the reality of wooden floors on which my ball struggled to bounce without earthquake ramifications. A year into living there, the nature of my frustrations ceased to matter, for disease would rid me of the full strength of a left leg. No more basketball. No more complaining about floors.

4

He held my hand like a girl. I would not have yet known, but I recall thinking this, the way he reached out to where I had placed my fist on his desk, his thumb rubbing the bruised vein where my thumb connected to my wrist. He looked exasperated, and I recall my awareness of this, his offer of prescriptions a sort of defeat. I declined. While waiting for my father to pick me up in front of the clinic, I remember seeing the psychologist walking out a side door to his car, his wife's arm around him, almost like she was holding him up.

Thereafter, instead of clinics, I took to patios -- nightly my father and I on monobloc chairs, a table between us as well as bottles of beer. This helped in as far as context allowed the cursing. They would eventually be propelled with spit at each other. Lolo Vic, my father's uncle, who had taken to staying with us months at a time along with my grandmother, would smile at the interaction. He had begun to lose his hearing. I imagine that he had thought we were bonding, my father and I, our manic voices of no significance outside that of compelling discussion.

5

A memory: ages ago. A friend and I discover the video camera. We film our own movie, his sister the cameraman. He put together a story. Indiana Jones inspired. I put on a denim jacket tossed in dirt. My friend puts on a vest and a top hat. The last scene is a homecoming. The shot is to follow us into the house through the side entrance. The exterior of the house is white, save for a spot where there are long brown streaks where the cement was not smoothed out and where the white paint has cracked.

Improvisation: Instead of walking down the hall, my friend stops. His sister bumps into me. She recovers and focuses on her brother's hand touching the cracks on the wall. What is it, my friend? I play along. Blood stains, he whispers, eyes widening. He then runs down the hall

into the house. I follow, the camera trailing. The story would end on a to-be-continued. All this meant then was that we would eventually make another movie.

Cut to: Dao. Early morning. I step out of my second floor bedroom. The bathroom door is closed, light coming out from the inside where Lolo Vic may or may not be; he has taken to forgetting the light switch. I try the knob. Unlocked. A slow nudge forward. Something reeks. Lo-vic? A futile gesture; he is deaf. As the door opens slightly wider the smell worsens. No one by the sink. No reflection in the mirror. Wider. No one in the shower. Wider. Long brown streaks on the tiled wall that separates the shower from the toilet. Wider. Violent streaks all over. Dad! I call out. Dad! Wider. A hand, browned, appears and draws shapes on the wall. Wider. My father rushes out of my parents' room. Get out of the way! I stumble back from the door. My father shoves the door open. Lolo is on the floor, naked. Brown everywhere. I step back inside my room and do not come out until evening.

This continues for the next few days. By the afternoons, it is as if the bathroom has been yet again sterilized. Then, a new daily occurrence: I would wake to the sound of banging on a door. Tyu-vic! my father would yell. Bang bang bang. Tyu-vic! Bang bang bang. I would open my door. My father would appear sleepless in front of the locked bathroom. Tyu-vic! Bang bang bang. He would take out a key only after a good half-hour of patient hoping. Upon opening the door, he would see Lolo Vic shirtless by the sink, faucet on. Streaks had given way to flooding. Soapy water all over the counter, the floor. Lolo would look at my father then return to his ritual: splashing water on his own face, his body. Liquid soap everywhere. Since, I have taken to using the bathroom in the basement den.

Mornings at Dao, notions of landscape are framed by an arched doorway looking out to a moss-stained adobe wall lined with leafy plants sprouting from a row of cut-off tree trunks no more than three-feet tall and as thick as a flagpole. Smaller, greener plants swim in pink rocks and silver pebbles. Beyond the wall are trees less sculpted. They stand closely and tall, one with leaves long and spear-like, the one beside it with several leafy flowerings, yellow-green little clusters that protrude just as much out as up. Next to these are standard palms thirsting for rain as they lean against the pig-pink electrical post of that house with the ridged lime-green roof that can fake sky-blue when light is at its brightest.

There are sights more intimate: A sun and rain-stained monobloc table stands just beyond the doorframe, within the adobe wall. Three similarly stained chairs sit at the corners, one under the shade of the wall, the other two under an overhanging roof. The fourth chair is just there beyond the frame, toppled over, the shadow of its legs to the right on the dimpled stone patio floor.

As I sit out on the patio, I see Lola inside, her arms anchoring her on a bench. She takes deep yet difficult breaths. I cannot tell from outside but I am certain that she reeks. Piss that she no longer controls has stained a daster she has not and will not change in days; upstairs, by the trash bin just outside my parents' room where she sleeps, a soiled diaper from two nights prior, when the family dressed her up and bathed her in baby cologne for a reunion where she was left in the living room beside her deaf brother, in front of a television on mute, stuck on a channel showing a movie about the end of the world.

7

The old house I grew up in no longer has windows. When my father returned to Jakarta on business a year after we had left for Manila, he decided to pay the old house a visit. Upon entry,

a gallery assistant had him sign a guestbook. My father wrote his name and was tempted to write Jalan Kemang Raya No. 36 as his address. He did not do this, though -- though I am tickled that he considered it.

Kemang Raya is a main road along a primarily residential suburb, but for most the time we lived there, there seemed no significant places along it. Kemang was a stretch you simply passed through to get somewhere, No. 36 somewhere in the middle. Across the street from the house was a sprawling government compound that remained quiet even on weekdays, its large parking space where I would be brought to bike on weekends. A couple of blocks to the left was the street that led to Hero Supermarket, where my father and I would drink straight out of small milk cartons while my mother shopped; a couple to the right, Champions Sports Grille and what used to be Gang Gang Sulay, our favorite place to dine after Sunday Mass.

For much of ten years there seemed more changes inside our house than out -- a garage would be converted to a bedroom, a fishpond would be built and subsequently ignored, the family grew close. Because of political turmoil and rioting, we left Indonesia entirely one afternoon in 1998, to finally move to Dao. From when it was decided to when we left was a span of a month. I myself have not been back to Kemang since.

The area is now an art district, they tell us. No. 36 has been converted into a gallery. Windows have been replaced by white walls with paintings. A year after we had left it bare, No. 36 was again furnished but only sparsely, to make easier the roaming from room to room; they had also gotten rid of the old brown doors.

I like to think that my father spent most his time during his last visit thirteen years ago in what used to be his old study, where he had spent hours alone with a clunky laptop, a cloud of smoke, and the rumbling of a brown air-conditioning unit, earning all that he would for the next

thirteen years lose. A huge painting would have hung where once there was a view of the front yard from where I would peek in. A prayerful man, he may have uttered one that afternoon back in his study, thankful for a return home, one now so distant it seems.

8

When possible, avoid stairs altogether. In public places proceed to the escalator or elevator, your best options when on crutches. When stairs are unavoidable, consider the following:

- a. In the sitting position, use your arms to push yourself to the next step. Repeat until you reach the top, pulling your crutches up with you every third step or so.
- b. Keep your crutches on the level where you are standing. Make sure they are steady on the ground as you lift yourself up to the next level. Bring your crutches up to the next level.

Repeat.

- c. Give one crutch to a companion. Use the other crutch and the rail of the stairs as anchors.

Similarly follow the steps to the second method above.

Potassium deficiencies lead to cramping. Your extremities are locked in odd angles and the pain can be excruciating. It becomes difficult to move, all the more when on crutches. It is recommended that, when you need to move to another room amid a potassium crash, you seek the help of others. One method entails a monobloc chair and two strong bodies. Sit on the chair, and the two strong men -- your father, perhaps, or your granduncle still strong and fit, maybe along with the houseboy -- will simply transport you by lifting the chair.

Regardless, it is unadvisable to reside in houses with multiple floors. Otherwise, it would be wise to stay on one floor at all times.

9

My mother caters out of our kitchen. A few years ago she bought a stainless steel stove. Rats crawl next to the burners and the dogs sleep under the oven. There are three refrigerators. Some mornings we wake to a bustling kitchen, food all over the place, none of which we are allowed to touch. Lolo Vic did not seem to know this, though; my mother had taken to slapping his hands away.

My father spends his days in a lot he does not own, an abandoned area across the street from our house. Every morning he gets up, shakes off a hangover over coffee, puts on a pair of shoes, and proceeds to what he has converted into a vegetable garden. He will stay there until evening, at which point he will station himself at the patio or the garage. He will massage the muscles of his legs, alcohol off the dirt on his hands, sipping rum to warm the stomach. He will go to bed when all the other lights in the house are off.

Lola sleeps on my father's side of the bed. Beside her waits a pot for when the bathroom is too far. This is positioned on the floor, inches away from where my father's head lays on a folding bed at night. Between Lola and my mother is a scattering of pillows and chocolate wrappers.

Tita Chichi sleeps in her own room in the basement den, often next to the dogs. When I enter her room to borrow something, I notice many stains on her bed. Lolo used to sleep on a folding bed just outside, in a part of the den partitioned off from the rest by a stained glass divider from Indonesia. He would eventually move to the third bedroom upstairs, across from mine, what was meant to be my father's study. There he slept next to pocket books and an old organ.

One of the dogs died in my mother's arms on October 23, 2010, the day I turned twenty-five. At ninety-four, Lola can still climb up and down the stairs on her own. When she walks, she

has a tendency to drag her feet. Her eyes do not allow her at times to notice the little brown stool left by the dogs that run around.

10

My cousin Pope lived in Dao for a time. A seminarian destined for priesthood the second he was named, he moved in for what was supposed to be his year of regency. He ended up living with us for well over a decade. Now a corporate hot shot, he still insists he is on regency, that he will return to the seminary some day.

When he first arrived my father had given him the second floor study. Pope, however, took to spending hours at a time at the den, where the television was. You knew he was awake by his reaction to the sitcoms he had taken to. Watching television until late into the night, he would begin to fall asleep on the basement couch, and after some time, he transferred his blanket to the basement as well. Consequently, my father's study became but Pope's storage space and where he would change after bathing.

When Lolo moved in with us, they shared the den, though Lolo was adamant about giving Pope priority over the television. Pope would sleep out in the open, on the couch; Lolo behind the antique divider at the far end opposite the television. Pope would eventually seek privacy, and he began sleeping more regularly in my father's study. There, he would position the electric fan right next to the bed, for it got warm and sticky at night. He would wake to the electric fan switched off. Lola could not rid herself of the habit of finding measures for saving money, and whereas she felt she had no say when it came to the private spaces of her son, his wife, and their son, all short-tempered and stubborn, she felt empowered when it came to Pope,

her favorite grandson who had increasingly become distant to her and consequently to her dreams of having a priest in the family.

There came a point, when Pope was gainfully employed and when I was starting out alright after university studies, when we considered moving into a condominium together. Motivating us, beyond the desire of men to set out on their own, was the pervading sense of dreariness and decay that had overwhelmed Dao. It's like quicksand here, Pope would say. My father took our desire to move out personally and drunkenly, and my mother begged me to stay, fearful of tending to the drunkenness alone. Sudden instability from working for an American company during the US recession forced Pope to back out of the idea. He stayed in Dao for another six months. The first time I moved out was by myself, to a tiny room on top of a sari-sari store across the street from a noisy bar and a popular kebab place, a ten-minute walk away from where I worked as a university instructor. I lived there for six months before moving back to Dao for financial reasons. Pope would move out from Dao when I returned. Lolo then moved into my father's study.

11

A wall of brown cabinets. Inside: photo albums, empty golf ball boxes, three levels of shelves with brittle blouses of various faded prints, paisley polos on hangers. An air conditioning vent covered by a copper serving tray embossed with a horse. The window screen torn open. Magazines on top of a stained striped mattress. Underneath the bed, books. The black frame to a folding bed. The box to an organ. A wall of golf trophies. Virgin Marys. An antique lamp atop documents. Folders on the floor. A Motorola box. Plastic bags with boxes in them. A pair of binoculars. Super Nintendo, Sony Walkman. Leather suitcase. A computer. A monobloc stool.

12

Save for a maroon rose and two pastel green leaves, the same green that lines its base and lip, the mug sitting on the table in front of me is saffron colored. It is a handsome mug amid feminine decoration. The ceramic is thick, and its fat body gradually widens closer up to the lip. A large ear of a handle mimics the shape of half a heart, starting from below the green trim of the tip, down to just above the thicker green trim of the base. Its surface shines and is smooth, save for the in-lay of the stem of the rose lying on its side.

It is interesting how archetype gives rise to such simple design. How every morning, in many homes, a man wakes and walks to a kitchen to grab a mug just like this one. How he will fill it with something and watch steam rising from its lip. How he will ignore the half heart of a handle and opt instead for the warmth against his palm which a firm grip affords him, without so much as a stain, save for a slight redding.

Lolo used to wake early to heat water for our coffee. The whistle rendered useless, he listened for steam in the dark. He also watched television with shades on.

13

A pig was once killed in our garage. It was Holy Week, and while watching *Seventh Heaven* in my room I heard the squealing from outside. The pig had been sequestered in a corner closed off by some planks of wood. His feet were tied, and he seemed to know what was going to happen. A hired hand unceremoniously took out his bolo knife as the sun was coming down. My father had taken the car out onto the street to make way. The pig was dragged to the middle of the garage. Wait, said one maid. She emptied a bucket of laundry and rinsed it quickly. She squatted by the pig's gut and positioned the bucket real close. The bolo moved swiftly, the pig stopped squealing. The blood gushed into the bucket.

We would roast that pig that night, a small fire set up near the washing machine, branches tied together on either side to anchor the makeshift rotisserie which Lolo would help turn. My mother would make sauce from the innards. Lola would be the first to the skin. Dinuguan for breakfast the next couple of days.

Years later, my father took to buying whole pigs, slaughtered already. He figured it would be a good way to make money, selling parts to neighbors by the kilo. I would step out onto the patio and mosquitos would hover above the blood left on my mother's prized wooden kitchen table. Lolo would often do the cleaning before returning the table to the kitchen.

14

Lola was thought to be close to dying one day a number of years ago. Family flew in from everywhere. Dao was packed. A second opinion by another doctor said it was nothing more than a false alarm. Perhaps she just needed the company, my family reasoned, logic that angered me since for a month my parents moved into my bedroom so that the others could cramp up in their room. Sensitive as I am to space and privacy I was rendered helpless and would lash out every now and then over something as simple as a table nudged an inch off from where I had aligned it, an ashtray on the floor I had religiously swept.

15

My father's father, Lolo Sid, was an army man. He lived long, but he was paralyzed for a good decade before passing. Lola and my father would take care of him. Feed him, bathe him. The day before his stroke, Lolo Sid took my father out to the opera.

There are no photographs of Lolo Sid in Dao, but my mother's catering company is called Chef Sid's. Lolo Sid did not cook. Now with scleroderma, my mother can no longer grip a knife, all the more pots and pans.

My mother has taken to Facebook. I have yet to see her profile pic, much less her page. I do not even think that we are Facebook friends.

I imagine she goes about Liking a lot of things. Pictures of other people's dogs and husbands. She will say god-bless to someone's son.

In terms of hobbies, if at all she knew how to enter information into fields, I reckon cooking and reading. A standard answer for years, the latter now barely a half-truth.

She is, I imagine, married, though to whom? (My father has no Facebook.)

When I was still living in Dao, as I would walk out the door to my awaiting cab every morning, I would hear the slippared footsteps of my mother racing to the top of the stairs to my room.

When I climbed the stairs in the evening, my steps were intentionally heavy, as I saw light peeking from below the door.

My mother would push the keyboard under the computer desk as I entered. She fumbled to click Sign Out.

I would leave the door open until she left.

Tita Chichi was the first in the family pushing forty to open an account. She is unmarried and works six days a week, and her off days are dedicated to the dogs and taking my mother out.

She was in love once. To some computer programmer in Bali whom she started seeing a couple of weeks before we were to leave Jakarta for Manila. He married their then best friend, the one who used to take them to bars.

My aunt friended me, and among those she had recently added was the name of the man from Bali. When her internet got disconnected in her basement bedroom, she would wait for me

to leave in the morning, or she would sneak in my room at night when exhaustion left my door unlocked.

She used to be mistaken for my sister; when we go out now, my mother. Her brown hair has turned grey. She needs the internet as I am writing this section. She wants to book a flight to Bali.

17

Lolo Vic passed away one morning last year at 6:09 a.m. A week into his stay in the ICU, we had heard of things getting worse. My mother woke me so that she could e-mail my aunts in the US using my computer. At different points throughout the night I was awakened by the incessant telephone downstairs. At five in the morning, my mother again knocked on my door, to send another e-mail. It was heart failure at that point. We received word of Lolo Vic's passing not long after.

We do not know what caused all this. Old age can be reason enough. Two weeks prior, Lolo Vic stopped coming down for meals. His bedroom door, across from mine, was always left slightly open. I noticed that he had started sleeping naked on the floor, and it seemed like he would never rise from that position throughout the day. A caretaker would force him to take in liquid meals, until finally my father brought him to the ER.

We quickly accepted that he did not have long. Bickering within the family became about what to do when it was time. Cremation was the final decision, and my father signed the DNR.

18

What the patient will find disconcerting when walking again is how to use one's arms and hands. Their function in walking are for balance and momentum, but a patient just off of crutches may have forgotten this. It is not uncommon then to see a patient walk with his arms straight down to

his sides. This is not only awkward-looking but also an inefficient use of energy, often leaving the patient tired and unbalanced. In houses crowded with furniture, especially the heavy kind like those made from teak, the patient may necessarily lean on any chair, table, or cabinet along the path to where he would like to proceed.

19

I now live on the twelfth floor of a building three-hundred pesos away from Dao. Upon my eye lids, the weight of hours lost to distant assurances. The studio hums of constant presence. The wind whispers through barely closed windows. The electric fan's persistence too helps me feel un-alone.

Moving into the studio was my gift to myself when I turned twenty-six. I barely had enough money for the deposit and the advance the week I told the broker that I was going to move in, and my father had borrowed more money from me, with the vague promise that he would pay me back a couple of days after. Thankfully, he did, breaking precedent, and without thinking about how the studio came completely unfurnished I packed a duffel bag with clothes and left Dao. I did not sleep in the unit that first night, though, as my cousin Nikki, who was helping me move, insisted that I have the unit owner clean the unit himself before I took over. For a night, I slept on Nikki's kitchen floor. I was awakened near midnight by Nikki's daughter, my niece Iana, who was craving pizza. The following night, I slept in my own studio for the first time, on a banig on top of two carpets covered by two bedsheets.

To live here is a study in stubbornness: the hard, white-tiled floor that hides nothing; the mind's persistence at night, mornings; those burr-like things that cling more than crawl toward light, on my ceiling at night, flickering, falling onto my bed, body, the floor that I push away thirty times every evening in an attempt towards better health. I do not own a refrigerator nor a

stove. I rely on fast food and nearby eateries when cup noodles become unsatisfying. The mattress I now sleep on was one that both Pope and Lolo Vic had used; I doused it with alcohol and sprayed it with disinfectant. The first pieces of furniture I bought was a discounted large desk and an overpriced wooden stool. My books lie on the floor. My Christmas gift to myself this past December: a mop and a folding chair -- no monoblocs in my studio.

Often restless, I have taken to cleaning incessantly. The bathroom is spotless, and the white floors and the white walls are as white as when I first moved in. Save for the soft light bulb I bought, the studio has the feel of a hospital room, and the irony of my leaving Dao for something high-rise and clinical is not lost on me. At night I jolt at the slightest stirring, and I look to the door that appears unconvincingly closed, locked. The pristineness of these white floors. The softness of these sheets. The little things can only go so far in providing comfort.

I can now walk to and from where I sleep and where I work; the short distance and a stronger leg have allowed this. I enjoy walking home late at night most, and I have taken to memorizing signs -- Mabuhay Lagumbahay, Sangguniang Barangay, Give Way to Pedestrian, Stop Waiting -- and looking at the headlights on the road. Some kid smiled at me while waiting for his lolo in front of the cariton by the footbridge this evening. I gave him the coins from my pocket.

20

Home, I have learned, is a place where families accumulate things like objects, moments, and most especially days. This is the same as saying that home is where a family waits for time to run out. Though now I live away, this haunting realization about Dao is not lost on me. The last time I was there, I caught my father sitting on a stool and resting his head on the kitchen counter. His was my problem too, whether or not we lived under the same roof.

The egg-carton mattress, which my father had bought in Bambang because of Lolo Vic's bed sores, is stored in my bedroom in Dao. The rest of Lolo's belongings remain in his closed off section of the basement -- next to the filing cabinet, the suitcases, the basket full of Javanese masks, the umbrellas, the nine Persian rugs, the old computer screen, the silver flashlight, the vacuum cleaner, in the space previously allotted for the folding bed -- and in his second floor bedroom with the wall of brown cabinets -- my father's study -- across from where I sleep now on the occasional weekend.

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