DISGUISE

SYNOPSIS

A mayor drives a cab around the city in search of a thief preying on taxi drivers.

A woman on the other side of the road summoned me. I gestured to her to wait because I could not make a U-turn; I had to go around the intersection near the bridge. Later when she climbed into the vehicle, carrying plastic grocery bags, I thought immediately: Are those biodegradable? She told me to take her to a middle-income subdivision. We were cruising at sixty kilometers when she finally recognized me.

"Is that you?" she gasped. "*Hala ka*, it's really you! *Hala ka uy!*"

"*Maayong gabii*," I greeted her good evening, glancing at the rear-view mirror.

But the woman was already beside herself, giggling, embarrassed by her luck. Then she was quiet. Maybe she was sending a text message. If not their husbands or wives, their brothers and sisters, or their parents, they tell the children first. The children love me – I'm proud of that. Boys and girls, guess who was driving Mama home?

"It's almost midnight," I said. "The malls closed two hours ago."

"I had coffee with my friends," she said. "We had not seen each other for a long time."

"Are you sure you only had coffee?"

She laughed. A few of them had some beer, she said. I asked how much a "bucket" of beer cost in those bars. In my youth, we bought beer by the case. We drank wherever we could plant our buttocks. The neighborhood storefront, the back of a rusty truck, the beach from night until dawn when we dragged ourselves back to our homes. Those rich sons of whores from nearby towns who gunned each other down in my city cemented my decision to order a 1 a.m. liquor ban. Imagine that. Deaths over a disagreement, a woman, and sometimes, a single glance!

Business owners groaned, but what could they do? They had to adjust; so did their patrons. Ultimately, the safer people felt, the better it was for business.

"I thought it was only a rumor," she said, almost breathless.

"What?"

"That you drive a taxi at night."

"A mayor's salary is not enough," I said. "I drive every night to earn some more."

"But your security."

"What about it?"

"You drive alone," she said.

"I drive to have a better view. It's the criminals who should be afraid."

What better way to observe than to disappear? After my friends at the taxi company gave me this unit, I began driving around the city as often as I could, blending in with traffic. Many times I had seen with my own eyes robbery, assault, even attempted rape. The bastards cowered at the sight of me stepping out of a taxi. But the city was too big to patrol—2,400 square kilometers of settlements along the hills, the river, and the gulf. A driver had been shot in the head after a lowlife led him near the mountainside. After a few days, the police had spotted the bastard loitering outside the driver's residence. A shoot-out with the police ensued. He was dead before sunrise.

"I've seen you before," the woman said.

"I have a show on TV. How could you not have seen me?" A local station created a segment where I could address viewers every Sunday morning. I had been doing the segment for almost twenty years, informing the people of developments in social services and publicly condemning hooligans.

“No!” She chuckled. I noticed for the first time how young she was, younger even than my eldest daughter.

“You came to my high school before to give a talk,” she said. “You told the elementary students that if no one came to fetch them, they could ask a police mobile to take them home.”

“That is true,” I said. “Can you imagine parents who forget to fetch their children from school? What stupidity is that? There are parents who throw their children away. I have seen it myself.”

From my father, I learned politics. He was a gentle, soft-spoken fellow, the total opposite of how I turned out. But he was brilliant and efficient—the last governor of an undivided province. I learned discipline from my mother, a public school teacher and genuine servant of the people. She had shown me how the less fortunate suffer, how the elite prey on the weak. After people in the capital ousted the dictator, the widow successor appointed me as officer-in-charge vice-mayor. My mother was offered the position first, but she declined. I could never have lived up to the kind of leader she would have been if she had accepted.

“I remember that day,” my passenger said. “You cursed in front of the priests. In front of us! My classmates and I couldn’t decide how to feel about it, so we just laughed.”

“You can get away with anything when you are of a certain age.”

When I was a child I wondered why adults knew so much about the world, about life, that they could behave in such a way. I had wanted so badly to obtain that amount of knowledge. But knowledge and experience, I learned, had nothing to do with it. Nerve is all there is. Also, the pleasure of making the righteous squirm. When I found the courage, after everything that I had seen, I never looked back.

We stopped by her house, a bungalow surrounded with manicured shrubs. I refused the fare she offered.

"The meter was not running," I told her.

"I thought you wanted to earn more," she said.

"Next time we see each other," I said, "treat me to lunch."

She went out and opened the door to the front seat.

"Can I take a photo of you, Mayor?"

"I look uglier in pictures," I teased. Still I smiled without showing my teeth.

A TOURIST WOULD not have suspected that we were passing through what used to be the most dangerous district in the city. The roads were empty, the neighborhoods quietly asleep. Years ago when I started, this place was a killing zone. Every day there was a shoot-out, an assassination. The armed forces were reeling from vertigo, the revolutionaries eating their own, democracy still in ruins even after the revolt. Later, the district became known for its spacious public market and the commercial warehouses selling anything from lumber to animal feed to coffins. It took some time, and we lost a few intrepid men, but we cleaned up the place.

They said that this was the birthplace of the group the media called the Death Squad. Contrary to what many believed, I had no hand in such a group, if it even existed. I welcomed the accusation—in fact, I relished it—and challenged my enemies to prove my guilt in court. Not one of them could. There were killings, yes, possibly vigilante. Who was I to get in the way of persons who waged war against criminality? I respected the constitution of the Republic, but when scalawags put up a fight, they were surely going to be killed. The deaths of a few rotten souls are nothing compared to the welfare and safety of law-abiding citizens. These vigilantes

were not always on the mark—some of their targets were innocent. But in time, even vigilantes get what they deserve.

I parked near a row of taxis outside an eatery in the last block of Chinatown facing the sea. The place served the best *batchoy* noodles you could find in the city. A tiny hole with three wooden tables set under two cobwebbed fluorescent bulbs. A wall fan had been installed in the middle of the room, and although the thing still worked, it couldn't rotate side to side any more, and was stuck blasting air in one direction: a table where two taxi drivers, a *balut* vendor and the attendant were having a conversation. When I came up behind them, they were chatting loudly about Pacquiao's knockout defeat by Marquez. The way they were talking about Pacquiao, they still could not believe how the Mexican had put their champion to sleep on the canvas.

"I really thought he was dead," said the attendant, a short woman in her sixties. "I really thought Pacquiao was dead!"

It was the *balut* vendor who saw me first, twitching when I rested my hand on the shoulder of one of the drivers.

"He'll be fine," I said, nodding at the attendant, who, in a burst of quick gestures, commanded her staff—two young men gawking through the kitchen window—to fix me a bowl of *batchoy* topped with slices of hardboiled egg.

"That son of a bitch is richer than all of us here combined." I winked at the second driver who had been cleaning his bowl off with toasted bread when I walked in.

For about a minute, they did not speak. Then they greeted me good morning. It was almost 2 a.m.

"So? One more round?" I glanced at the empty bowls on the table. Without hesitation, they nodded.

"What about you, *parekoy*?" I asked the *balut* vendor. He was wearing rubber slippers, denim shorts, and a tattered cotton shirt with the sides ripped away, exposing his protruding ribs.

"*Aw*, *siempre*, Mayor!" said the vendor.

"You really dressed for the occasion."

He scratched his head, smiling nervously. I noticed the drivers ogling the .45 on my waist.

"*Batchoy* for them too." I pointed to the attendant, who again gestured quickly at the men behind the kitchen window.

"What brings us here, Mayor?" asked one of the taxi drivers who was slightly darker than his companion but looked younger.

"*Batchoy*," I said, taking the stool next to him. "What else?"

They laughed. Soon one of the men from the kitchen brought us steaming bowls of noodles.

"You," I turned to the *balut* vendor who had been leaning on the cement wall, his left arm carrying a basket filled with duck eggs. "How much is that?"

"Thirty pesos, Mayor," he said. "For you, it's free."

"No. I mean the whole basket."

The vendor looked at the taxi drivers, and then at the attendant who raised her eyebrows at him. Eventually, I got him to give me a figure.

"Thank you, thank you so much!"

I gave him cash. "Keep the change. Buy something new to wear. There's a sale at Victoria Plaza tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mayor," he gushed.

"Your *batchoy* is getting cold," I said.

"No Coke, Mayor?" the younger driver said. Unlike his older colleague, he wore a company shirt, light blue with a red and black logo on the breast pocket.

"That's pure sugar!" I said. "If the mugger going around doesn't get to you first, you will die from diabetes. Your dick and your balls falling off."

What I loved most about *batchoy* was the soup: tasty, not too salty, the broth rich with liver and crushed pork rind, fried garlic and shrimp paste. If you get that wrong, you might as well eat porridge. I wanted the *miki* noodles cooked just right, the meat boiled to perfection.

They let me eat my noodles in peace for a while, until one of them thought of something to ask.

"Mayor, is this your last term?" said the older driver.

"Yes," I said. "I'm tired of you all."

They laughed again, but I could hear the worry under the laughter.

"They say you'll run for president," the *balut* vendor said. For the first time since I joined them, he grabbed a stool and sat down, placing the basket filled with eggs on the floor.
It was not the first time someone suggested this ridiculous idea. Some of my friends had asked if I had what it took to raise the ante. Every time I would think, "Be careful. I might just do it." I had seen great discord in this country. Perhaps only an organized form of chaos could prevent an irreversible catastrophe. The nation would need no less than an exorcism.

"Where did you get that nonsense?" I said.

"A person on TV said you might run in the next election," said the older driver. "I don't know who he was, but he sounded smart."

"He's not so smart after all," I said.

"Why not, Mayor?" the vendor asked.

"And what? You impeach me too?"

"You will do great!" blurted the attendant.

"If I am president, you will either impeach me or have me assassinated in the first year of my term. That's what you do to your presidents when you are not happy with them. Why would I want that?"

"We assassinated a president?" the younger driver asked the older one.

"*Wala uy!* You idiot," said the older driver.

The younger driver gaped at me, as if looking for an ally in an argument he was about to start. I reached for the bottle of toothpicks from the table behind us, tapped one out, and went about picking my teeth.

"You should run, Mayor," said the attendant. "You have many supporters, not just here."

She was so certain when she spoke that my heart skipped. I grabbed the tin pitcher of water on the table and poured a glass. Before I drank, I raised the glass to the attendant, who by then was beaming.

"You will finance my campaign, right?" I said.

"Of course, Mayor!" she said. "For you, I'll do anything."

"We'll support you all the way!" said the older driver.

I never pretended to anyone that I came from an unfortunate background, but my parents did value the simple way of life. I had broken bread, sweated, laughed and bled with ordinary people. I had seen life through their eyes. The problem with some presidents of the past was that they ultimately protected only the interests of those close to them, whose histories they shared, in whose ranks they belonged. The rest of us further down, who were far from the proverbial ladle,

continued to suffer, either from neglect or the indolence of those up there to imagine us beyond the mess in which we had long been buried.

"If you become president," said the younger driver, "can you get rid of the extra two years they added to high school?"

"And can you get insurance for us vendors too!"

"Me too, Mayor," said the older driver. "I want health insurance."

"*Pesteng yawa!* I thought I was just going to eat noodles here. President, president. If I become president, I will make you all cry."

In the end, I paid for our snack. I warned them about the thief preying on taxi drivers. On my way out, the *balut* vendor shouted, "Mayor, you left this!" He offered me the basket. Inside, the warm eggs were arranged on a padding of old newspapers.

"What will I do with that?"

"Mayor, you bought them."

"You want me to have a heart attack? Put that away."

I told him to give the balut to other drivers who would be arriving in the area soon. I asked for three *balut*. Later, for my little girl, I told him.

THE FEAR I HAD not seen for a long time in the eyes of residents in this city haunted me as I drove by what used to be our old airport. Before the wharf and the airport were bombed ten years ago, a war was pulverizing provinces not far from us, pulling more recruits to the secessionist cause, and spreading its poison to our city. I had already restored public order. Everyone was finally supposed to be safe. But the bombings reminded us of where we were after all. I had been

a city prosecutor for almost a decade and I had seen the evil inside men. To survive this part of the country, you had to be fearless. You had to be ready to kill.

A new airport had been constructed, the wharf secured. We had recovered since, but the wounds had not healed. Not long after the bombings, a foreign man accidentally detonated explosives in his hotel room. He was ferried away by secret agents before we could interrogate the son of a bitch. The day of reckoning had not yet come, but so help me God, we would get there.

The bastards would be lucky if I'm not around to see them eat their own balls.

At a turn going to the diversion road, I picked up only my second passenger of the day. Inside the car, he was silent, so I asked him where we were headed.

"The relocation area," he said.

He was probably between fifty and fifty-five years old, of medium build, with a deep but low voice that I had to strain to hear. He sat on the left side of the car, his face obscured by the backrest of my seat. We made our way along the diversion road, avoiding the crowded downtown area, speed kept below eighty since I didn't want to embarrass traffic police and myself again.

At some point, I could hear the passenger breathing heavily, a soft wheezing noise as if there was something blocking his passages. I thought for a moment he was having an asthma attack. But then I knew that it was not so. The man inside my car was weeping.

"Are you okay?" The man did not answer and for a while he was quiet. Then he started to cry again.

Clearly, he had not noticed who the driver was. I did not prod any more, and focused on my driving. At this hour, past three in the morning, what could a grieving person be doing in the

streets? We rode past villages, gasoline stations, a couple of chapels, 24-hour grocery chains, until we slowed down at the public cemetery where my parents were buried. The sobs unnerved me; I could not wait to take the passenger home.

At last we were near the villages by the river. I asked the man where his house was, but he didn't respond. Growing impatient, I wanted to stop the car and confront him, but he spoke up before I could step on the brakes.

"Here," he said with a voice that sounded much younger. "Leave me here."

We were still a good five hundred meters away from the village where he claimed to be from, but following his instructions, I dropped him off just outside a row of stalls that displayed gravestones, the livelihood of families in that area close to the cemeteries.

The man opened the door near his seat and pulled his body out of the taxi. I watched him leave, but I could not make out his features in the dim light. I had to turn around to look again because it appeared as though he was much younger—a scrawny young man in his twenties. When I looked out the backseat window, he had already slipped into one of the alleys that snaked around the settler villages. The hairs on the back of my neck stood as I went down the sloping road going to the public market. The passenger had not offered to pay.

EVERY CITY is haunted. That was on my mind as I crossed the bridge over the river where, a hundred or so years ago, a local chief fought a Basque pirate, the pirate's armada of Spanish conquerors and natives they had convinced to fight for them. I imagined their ghosts floating over the waters, the settlements, and the condominium units that loomed over a view of the gulf.

A road was named after the Basque marauder – an injustice of historic proportions if you asked me, but the white man had his defenders even among our people. The name had stuck, like

how the first Datu who took up arms against the Spaniards now shared his name with a fish. I wouldn't know if the man who had just disembarked from my taxi was a ghost. Perhaps he was only a good actor who couldn't pay for his cab fare. Perhaps I was getting tired. Perhaps that was my signal to go home.

At the highway crossing, rain began to pour, gaining force when I passed the area where an IT park was being constructed. According to old tales, the city used to be submerged in water. The earliest inhabitants lived on hills, mountain ranges and at the foot of the country's highest peak – a volcano sleeping just a few kilometers from where I was driving. The past paid us visits during the rainy season in the form of floods, a number of which had been deadly.

Back when my children were very young, we woke up one evening to a thunderstorm. Water had rushed into our living room, destroying our appliances, trashing our furniture. Within minutes, we were climbing onto the roof of our house, neighbors watching us from their rooftops. We were cold, wet, in shock, but safe. As mayor at the time, I decided to order the upgrade of the city's drainage, enforce a strict waste segregation program and set disaster preparedness measures—but at the end of the day, we were but a speck in the enormity of nature. We could only pray that the volcano remain asleep.

A figure under a lamp post hailed my taxi before I could take the corner going home. The rain was not subsiding, so I decided to take this last passenger, water from his clothes dripping onto the vinyl seats when he got in.

"To the boulevard," he said and, like any resident of the city, I knew immediately which one it was.

The neighborhood would take me back downtown, but I thought it would give me a chance to look out for flooding, especially in slum areas along the river, and alert rescue teams

there if needed. We took the other bridge, the one named after the American general who was assassinated by a defiant village chief.

I could hardly see beyond the windshield or hear over the storm, so it took me a second to process the feel of sharp metal pressing on my neck. I did not move. My hands held the steering wheel steady, my foot still on the accelerator, the gun cool in its holster. Finally, I thought, one of my enemies had outsmarted me. They had caught me while distracted, and supposedly in disguise. Which one could it be? Suddenly, I was morbidly curious. A rival? An old enemy who had been holding a grudge? An emissary from the drug syndicates sending their regards?

"Keep driving," he said.

"Where do you want to go?" I asked. Time stretched between the two of us.

"Quiet," he said. "Just keep driving."

I looked at the rear-view mirror where a pair of holes stared back.

"Give me everything," he said, poking my neck. "Everything you have today."

Here I was, thinking of a damn assassin. This idiot did not know who he was dealing with.

"Do it or I will end you now!"

"Here." I handed him my wallet over my shoulder.

When we reached the public market, I waited for him to take the weapon away. Slowly, I stepped on the brakes.

"Let me out over there," he said, the hairs on his forehead shiny with rainwater.

He was still taking money from the wallet when I stopped the car. At first, he tried to open the door closer to him, but it was locked. He tried the other one, but it was also locked. I

turned to him, aiming the gun at his face, and said, "Give me back my driver's license, *putang ina ka*."

He must have been stunned because he turned pale when he raised his eyes and saw the muzzle of my gun. As if by reflex, he dropped the wallet and his weapon – a screwdriver with a jagged tip.

"Mayor?" said the man, who could have been around the same age as my eldest son.

"Come here," I said.

He was not moving.

"Come here," I said firmly. "Sit here. Beside me."

He slid through the space between the front seats. He was wearing a red fake leather jacket over a black shirt and denim pants. He had thick, messy hair, a narrow face and bad skin. He was shaking.

"Open the compartment. That one in front of you."

He did not move, staring at me like a dumb child.

"Open the compartment!"

He sniffed when he unlatched the slot.

"Reach inside."

He reached inside the compartment and retrieved a pair of handcuffs.

"Put it on," I said. "The other one, on the bar above your head."

He cuffed himself, both hands, to the handlebar by the car window. I put the gun back on the left side of my waist and started the engine. It was still raining.

"Sir, forgive me," he said. "Please, sir. I did not know it was you, sir."

"How many taxi drivers have you killed?"

“Sir, I never killed anyone! No, sir! I never killed anyone! Please, believe me, please!”

“How many!”

“I only take money, sir!”

“Are you from around here?” I said.

“Living here for three years now.” He sniffed.

“Three years? Then you must know by now not to do this kind of offense.”

I made a turn to the right and passed by the driveway of an old hotel.

“Mayor,” he said, “where are we going? Sir, where are you taking me?”

“I’m going to kill you,” I said.

I could see his shoulders jerking.

“Sir,” he said.

I glanced at him.

“My mother will look for me, sir.”

“The drivers are doing their job. Some of them don’t sleep for a day just to earn.”

“Please, have pity on her,” he said. “Mayor, please have pity.”

“Then trash like you snatch away what they worked hard for. Tell me, and be honest, you son of a bitch. Did you think of your mother when you flagged down this taxi? Did you? Answer me!”

“I needed the money, sir,” he said quietly.

“For what? Drugs? Don’t bullshit me.”

I had been kicked out of high school once for a misdemeanor. Then, at the school where I had transferred, I had caused a commotion by flying a helicopter onto school grounds. I could still remember the sensation of landing the aircraft on the soil, seeing students running toward

the middle of the field, teachers shouting at them to return to the classrooms, skirts lifting from the knees of girls. Later, I understood that I had put not only myself in danger, but also many others. I had felt the same when I watched my children climb onto our roof as water rose around us.

I stopped the car in front an old house that had been transformed into a bistro. There were still customers past three o'clock in the morning, sobering up on buffalo soup after a night of drinking. I took the gun and pressed it to the man's temple.

"You were going to stab me," I said to him.

He closed his eyes, snot dripping from his nose. He shook his head.

I was not afraid to go to prison. I could spend the rest of my years reading books, away from all the chaos, looking back on what I had lost. Outside the car, the rain had turned into a light shower. I took a deep breath. I reached out to him and pushed a key onto his left palm.

"Undo the handcuffs."

He opened his eyes, examined the key as though making sure it was real, and then he fiddled with the lock.

Before he could release himself, I got out of the car. The rain had stopped, the air was damp, large and small puddles had formed on the ground. I grabbed him by the collar and took him to the open-air bar outside of the bistro. People were already gaping at us.

I called one of the waiters.

"Don't let him out of your sight," I said.

"Yes, Mayor!" someone yelled. A few patrons from inside the bistro had spilled out into the bar to watch what was going on.

I made a call. When I returned, bowls of buffalo soup and rice were waiting at the bar. I sat next to the criminal. His loose-fitting clothes made him appear smaller than he was.

“What are you waiting for?”

He gaped at me like I had offered him freedom.

“Eat!”

From the way he scarfed down the food, he probably had not had anything since lunch—maybe he had not had a decent meal in days. Before he could finish, the patrol car I had called arrived.

I explained to the two police officers how our paths had crossed that rainy evening. The entire time, the man sat with his head bowed, uttering not single a word. I told them I could go to the station if they needed me, but they said that there was no need.

They picked him up by the armpits and dragged him to the patrol car. The crowd pressed closer.

“Remember my face,” the animal screamed. “Remember my face!”

Some of the onlookers cursed, others turning away, as though refusing to see his face, the face he was insisting that they remember.

“Shut your mouth!” said one of the officers holding him. “Shut it or you won’t be able to stand in your cell.”

“Remember my face! All of you remember my face! Remember what they’re going to do to me!” He was struggling, contorting his body from their grip with such force that any time now, I thought, he would break his shoulders.

“Remember—”

I walked toward him, lifting the gun to his face that defiantly remained still. I heard gasps from the crowd. Others ran back inside the bistro. The rest merely watched.

"You want to die?" I said. "You want me to kill you? I do not care if all of them will see. Do you want to die here now?"

The two policemen paused. One of them who had been surprised when I had swooped briefly closed his eyes. I stared the criminal down for nearly a minute, but the thief, perhaps overcome with desperation, slackened in the hands of his captors. He hung his head low and, as the police pulled him to the patrol car, began to sob.

I turned to the crowd, a few of them applauding.

"It's late," I said. "Go home."

When the police mobile had driven away, I tried to pay for the soup. I took my wallet from the back seat of the car and opened it. My money was gone.

"It's on the house, Mayor," said the manager of the bistro when I told him. He offered to serve me coffee, but I declined, the humiliation of having been robbed washing over my back.

"I owe you," I said. I could have ended him in the car and thrown his body into the river. In my eagerness to catch the thief, I was not able to prevent him from taking what was mine.

The sun was rising when I strolled back to my taxi, light spreading across the city. I had lived longer than I had expected; I thought I would be dead before my youth was extinguished. A man needs to stay alive, even for his enemies. And yet even I would eventually be gone from here—they would have to find someone else. Until such time, I would take the lead, drive around the city undercover, roam the streets I knew so well.