

Don't Blink

They couldn't find the body.

The world pulls into focus and shuts up for a second. A heartbeat. Then glass shatters, and the world resumes. Sparrows flee tree branches and scatter, women scream, the LRT station's guards bark orders. Outside, it has begun to rain: the drops are bullets smashing against leaves, stomping on tin roofs, tap-dancing on the pavement.

By now the train has screeched to a metallic, sparkly stop. Much later, CCTV cameras will show the grainy, black-and-white image of a man flinging himself right in front of the oncoming train. The police, news reports, the Internet will play and replay that image ad nauseam: train, shadow, a blur. They will talk about it, wonder, speculate. Because that's all they have: where the body goes, what happens to it after impact, nobody knows. They couldn't find it. Not even Manila's finest forensic experts could figure it out. The body has simply disappeared.

Only Fidel knows the truth. Or he thinks he knows.

He disengages from the crowd, the lone sperm who swims to the opposite direction. A death like this—no, “death” is highly debatable—will enthrall an audience for hours until the police hauls off the body. This frenzy shall continue for all eternity, then, given that there's no body to haul off and hammer the nail on fact's coffin.

Witnesses will talk about this for the rest of their lives. The man who jumped and disappeared. *I was there, I saw it all*, they'd say. As the years grind by, as they all trundle toward the tomb, the memory of this incident shall mutate and find itself in new forms

and versions. They'd say it wasn't a man, but an old lady. A pregnant teenaged girl abandoned by her boyfriend. An old "laos" showbiz personality dying of cancer. Or the busker who, in the middle of singing "Pusong Bato," saw the train, solemnly placed down the guitar, bowed to the crowd, and silently met his end.

Only Fidel knows the truth. But even now as he descends the wide, cold stone stairs of the Lawton LRT station, he begins to doubt his own memory. His thoughts unspool in well-sprung gasps. Did he really see that? Was that really Felipe? Wasn't he dreaming? A hallucination? Am I really here, right now, and not snoring through the morning in my one-room rat-infested apartment?

He stands there, uncertain about crossing the street. His knees have magically turned into melted rubber, unable to support him. He grabs a nearby pole and retches out the morning's breakfast on the sidewalk—pan de sal, coffee, pancit canton—which he had shared with Felipe just that morning. Oh, Felipe—*where the fuck is he now?*

"Did you see it? Did you? Was there blood everywhere?"

The woman tending the food stall has a bee in her pants, and apparently, her idea of an LRT accident/suicide is a Tarantino movie. She polishes the counter with a dirty rag, arranges and rearranges bottles on the shelf, fixes her hair, she steps out, retreats, and says, "Did you see it? How many died?" She's an endless loop of frayed nerves and a current fixation.

Fidel orders coffee. The woman watches vacant space as she serves it: her mind is up there, on the train tracks, in the now-sacred place demarcated by the ticker tape. Her body merely performs the motions; obviously, she's dying to be somewhere else. Fidel's hands tremble. A quasar of cream unfurls in the coffee cup, and he stirs it, vigorously,

unnecessarily, hoping the flimsy exercise makes the trembling subside. The hot coffee slithers down his throat and nestles where warmth is needed most. Somehow, it helps him regain focus. Think, Fidel, *think*. What did Felipe say? What were his last words again?

“Don’t blink.”

Felipe had said that as soon as the LRT train emerged round the bend, right before he jumped. Until that very moment, Fidel did not realize how serious his friend was. Sure, they had read Michael Borja’s foolscap manuscript: “November 23, any year, at the south-bound section of the Lawton LRT station. Count the fifth tile from the last turnstile, then parallel that, walk toward the edge of the train platform. You should be standing on the tile with a hairline crack that resembles a “Y.” At exactly 10:45 AM, jump into the tracks. A most impossible thing happens.” They were intrigued. It had been the meat of their raging debates these past many weeks. And all along, he had thought it was merely intellectual masturbation. But the nearer they got to November 23, the graver Felipe’s countenance had become. The edge in his words grew sharper. And as soon as the month of November hit, Fidel would often find his friend poring over the manuscript, mumbling.

“Wait for the exact stated time. Then jump into the track,” so stated Michael Borja’s manuscript.

“Jump? Are you crazy?” Fidel, as usual, was the voice of reason.

“It says here.” Felipe’s face was that of ancient man who had just discovered fire.

“Do you realize the implications?”

“Yes, I realize the implication. And the implication is instant death.”

“But that is—” Felipe waved a finger—“only if there’s an oncoming train.”

Fidel sighed. It was diabolical, that manuscript. Felipe was on it like white on rice—every letter, every pen stroke, every dot on the i’s and cross on the t’s, he overanalyzed and over-investigated. If he could marry that thing, he would.

Felipe taught Philippine history in a university in Manila, while Fidel’s expertise was political science, a vocation Felipe would occasionally dismiss as “mere masturbation without orgasm.”

“This country is hopeless as far as politics is concerned,” he’d say, removing his glasses and polishing them. He’d squint in the sun. “So hopeless.”

Fidel would not let it go just like that. “Isn’t Philippine history its equally hapless twin?”

“Sure. But imagine this: what if, for some reason, we can change the course of history? What if the lamp filled with nitroglycerin actually exploded in Kapitan Tiago’s house, wiping out the leaders of civil society and the Church’s hierarchy?”

“You’re kidding, right? You know very well that that’s fiction.”

“Partly, yes. But Rizal only took inspiration from Guy Fawkes of the famous Gunpowder Plot, among many other influences, most of which were based on fact. So going back, imagine: a clean slate. *Tabula rasa*. Who would lead us, and how would power shift?”

“I’ll humor you for a moment, Felipe: there’s too much uncertainty. These things could go both ways. Remember the Butterfly Effect? A butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world could eventually create a tornado in Texas. If, for a moment, we consider Borja’s letter to be real, and we do exactly what he says, what then? What if you

commit something and cause historical shifts so massive they could spell the end of the world as we know it? The end of our country?”

Felipe sighed. “Always the worst-case scenario, my friend. Lighten up.”

“Remember Franc Reichelt?” Fidel was on fire. “Remember how he’d been so sure about his special ‘innovative’ overcoat, how it could show the world it would let him glide down safely? In 1912, refusing to do a safety test with a dummy, he himself jumped off the top of the Eiffel Tower to prove a point. As you very well know, the overcoat-parachute design did not work, the whole thing a dismal failure. Reichelt’s recklessness killed him.”

“Oh, damn it,” Felipe smacked his forehead in frustration. “Nobody’s jumping off the Eiffel Tower, Fidel. We’re just—”

“Jumping in front of a train. Same difference.”

“We—I mean, *I*—I won’t jump if there’s a train. Simple as that.”

“Really? If Borja’s accurate, if he’s telling the truth, this could only work every November 23, within a very small window of time.” Fidel glanced at the calendar on the wall. “It’s the middle of August now. If November 23 comes and there’s a train, would it be ‘thank you, come again next year’? Would you have that kind of patience?”

“Yes,” Felipe said. “Isn’t that exciting?”

Felipe, of course, did not have that kind of patience. “There are many things we have to learn about this letter,” Felipe once said, looking out the window. “The first is find out if it’s not completely bullshit.”

Does it work only on November 23? How about on other dates? In the first week, they tried jumping into the prescribed spot on random days and time: around midnight on a Tuesday, for instance, or whenever no guard was around in the wee hours of the morning. Nothing happened. On a lazy weekend, risking jail time and possibly losing their university teaching jobs due to the ensuing scandal, they even did it at the exact time—10:45AM—and still nothing happened. They came to a point where they had already tried the stunt on all the days of the week, at different times, to no avail. It didn't seem to be working. What was even more amazing was they were never caught by the LRT station's guards—their stunts were too audacious that they had already run away even before anybody could scream and point a finger.

Were they in the right spot, at all? They've split hairs over the wording—"count the fifth tile from the last turnstile, then parallel that, walk toward the edge of the train platform. You should be standing on the tile with a hairline crack that resembled a 'Y'"—and carefully checked if there was any other tile with the "Y"-shaped crack. There was another tile, at the opposite end of the platform, which seemingly looked like a "Y," but could also be an "X" if you were not very stringent with what constituted a hairline crack and what seemed to be a permanent gum stain. Felipe, weary of having things not working, decided it was not the right tile.

"I guess we'll have to try it on November 23." It was halfway through October when Felipe blurted that out during one of those drinking sessions at their favorite videoke joint along Kalaw. They had just spent a couple of hours casing the LRT station for the umpteenth time, debating what kind of contingencies they should prepare for. As

though the whole project were real and had real-world consequences. As if the fate of the world depended on them getting their sums right.

“Hypothetical question,” Fidel said, “What if it’s November 23 today, waiting for the stated hour, and an oncoming train gets in the way between you and that magic spot on the tracks?”

“You mean, like, if fate plays a cruel joke and tries to cramp my style?” Felipe laughed. “We’ve tried it countless of times, and we’ve never encountered a train at that hour.”

“Yeah,” Fidel nodded in assent. “But what if there’s one? What then?”

Felipe chuckled. “It’s not...” His words trailed off. He gazed at the large TV on the wall. Someone in the other table was singing “One in a Million You” by Larry Graham. The man’s voice reminded him of his father, long dead from cancer and a broken heart. It suddenly made him deeply sad.

“It’s not real, remember? This is all something we do in our spare time,” Fidel was saying. “There’s no death here. It’s just a thought experiment. If there’s a train, then all bets are off.”

“Sure,” Felipe said, his voice tapering to a whisper.

If Fidel were honest, really honest, he’d tell Felipe to cut the bullshit. He knew Felipe did not really care about the country, about all those people flailing their arms neck-deep in execrable poverty and hopelessness. In the dark moments of candor of those past many weeks, Fidel thought “jumping into the tracks” was really about ending it all. That Felipe was not really okay whenever he said he was okay. Deep inside, he craved

for the ultimate self-destruction. He knew very well Felipe's personal history, the long-time girlfriend who had betrayed him, the ensuing years of bitterness and rejection. Nearing forty, his faculties and prospects diminishing, Felipe had begun descending that all-too-familiar path down malevolent eccentricity. The point of no return, as far as bitterness is concerned. Which was why he couldn't be trusted when he first mentioned the foolscap manuscript.

How the manuscript ended up in Felipe's possession had been a tale told many times (and quite passionately at that, with some embellishments) in the past several months. An avid collector of Spanish-era antiques (the ones he could afford to buy, anyway), Felipe found a two-foot Santo Niño in a shop along Mabini. The Santo Niño was made of dark wood, its facial features exquisitely detailed, and was on sale for only a thousand pesos. According to the shop owner, it was salvaged from the remains of a burned-down ancestral house in Pampanga. Thinking he had a tremendous bargain in his hands, Felipe paid for it faster than a chronic smoker could cough twice. And indeed, it was a good purchase—a friend from the National Historical Institute paid him a visit one day, took one look at it and theatrically fainted (this was probably an embellishment). The statuette looked every inch like something that would come from the 17th century. Its provenance could be verified with the proper investigation. But more importantly, Felipe's friend—an unusually observant fellow—discovered that deep within the Santo Niño, accessible through the hollow wooden base, was a piece of paper neatly folded into the hollow to make it look like part of the wood. Part of it jugged out, though, like fish bone in a throat. Felipe couldn't believe what the manuscript represented after he had fished it out and unfolded it on a table. He thought it was a prank—history could attest to

the many fabricated historical “artifacts” that fooled generations, such as the Code of Kalantiaw and that *La Loba Negra* novel attributed to Fr. José Burgos. Making modern paper appear like it had come from the last century was easy enough to make—at least, it can trick the naked eye. Then there’s the manuscript’s language: English, the kind that is contemporary in the 2000s, referencing things not yet existent at the turn of the 19th century. Who would do such a stupid, asinine thing, desecrating the holiness of the Santo Niño with a childish prank?

But Felipe would be conspicuously absent from their watering hole days after that supposed purchase. And when Fidel, thinking his friend was sick and bedridden, turned up at Felipe’s place, he found the man speaking in staccato on the phone, mouthing words like, “It’s genuine?... Surely, an error... I’m sorry, yes, I’m sure you did everything you could do...State of the art... Yes, yes...”

His face totally bloodless, Felipe solemnly replaced the receiver on its Bakelite cradle, staring at that piece of paper on the table, as if it was about to pounce on him and bury its fangs in his neck.

“Fids, they just called to say it’s true.”

Fidel was beginning to resent the suspense. “What is true?”

“The ink, the paper, the manuscript!” Lightning cracked, thunder boomed.

“I don’t follow...”

“Let me show you.” Felipe, like some deadly curiosity guiding Pandora to open the box, took out the manuscript from its Ziploc prison, and let Fidel read every word.

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Dear Future Person,

I am Michael Borja, a former researcher at a pharmaceutical company. I was born on June 23, 1978. I have eidetic memory, I remember the smallest details, and at some point, the burden of so many unspeakable memories pushed me toward self-destruction. I'll spare you the execrable details of my life. I'm sure, like any other human being, you understand in your gut how anyone could come to a point where he would choose to end it all, so we don't have to go into specifics. Let me just say I tried to commit suicide on November 23, 2010 by jumping into the path of an oncoming train. But due to some fantastic, utterly unexpected turn of events, I ended up in a different time period, my body hurtling through some sort of a space-time tunnel, which spat me into the same spot, only more than a hundred years earlier than where I had originated.

As this letter attests, I did not die. I'm not dead yet, but very recent events got me convinced that I'd be gone before the world sloughs off 1901 like dead snake skin. Yes, 1901. You're thinking, "What the hell?" This guy from a hundred years ago writes like some guy in the 21st century? Exactly. And you know what, I've been here for some time now. The quantum nature of reality, fate, and the occurrence of an exceedingly rare phenomenon had brought me back to November 23, 1892—which, from where I currently am, was about a decade ago. Am I saying I ping-ponged across time? Essentially, if you remove all my personal bullshit, yes. Have this manuscript checked by experts, carbon date it or whatever, but the single, simple truth will be the same: I am writing this on November 23, 1901, in this cool and drafty ground floor room in Hotel de Oriente, where the wooden floors (freshly dabbed with kerosene to deter ants) emit

invisible fumes that are supposed to remind me about people's idea of "posh" in these dark, unenlightened times.

You can say I'm trapped here. But then again, I should have been dead. My only recourse is to go back to that spot and jump into the same invisible space-time tunnel—right now it's in the middle of a dirt road lined with bamboo trees, which would become the LRT's Central Station in Lawton by 2010—and it would spit me back to November 23, 1892. Always that date. There's no way to go back to the future, to my beloved 2010. Or even to any other date. I know that because back in 1893, despondent and bored out of my skull, I jumped into that spot just for the heck of it, and it returned me to 1892, a year of my life gone, finding myself standing in the dusty sidelines among poor natives watching Governor General Despujol's caravan as it trundled back to Intramuros.

I'm here in a time when the first antibiotic pill was still three decades in the future. I have survived the past nine or so years, avoiding to become collateral damage in little skirmishes and gun battles, and it is my intention to continue living until I gain enough courage to do what I've been planning to accomplish.

I am writing this so you, Future Person, can join me here and help me. Follow these specific instructions: November 23, any year, at the south-bound section of the Lawton LRT station. Count the fifth tile from the last turnstile, then parallel that, walk toward the edge of the train platform. You should be standing on the tile with a hairline crack that resembles a "Y." At exactly 10:45 AM, jump into the tracks. A most impossible thing happens.

I won't forget that cracked tile. I had been standing on it for a long time, trying to decide if this was the day. I was very aware that I had been committing to memory the

very last bits of useless information I would have as a living person. As I jumped, I saw the clock. I never knew remembering these things would actually matter.

I suggest you read all the current material on wormholes. And by “current,” I mean 2010 (or beyond), because I think wormholes kind of explain what happened to me. I am writing this so you can avoid doing my mistakes and actually live through the year and maybe a while longer. And perhaps, help me in effecting positive changes in this country. As they say, in hindsight we are all geniuses—if you come here with all your knowledge of a hundred years, maybe we can avert some heartbreaking disasters or find actionable answers to burning questions such as: is it best to remove the Americans out of the equation before they could make a move? Should we try to save some of the most obvious heroes in our list, like Rizal or Antonio Luna or even Bonifacio long before their lives are in danger? And would it matter if I introduce the concept of antibiotics in a time and place such as this? So many questions, and although I have all the time—I only need to jump into the invisible spot and I’m back in 1892—there is possible death at every turn.

So if you’re reading this, Future Person, help your country. Help me slay monsters while they’re still embryos of their future selves. Help me nip these evils in the bud. All you have to do is take the leap. If you live in a time and place that compel you to kill yourself, what, then, have you got to lose?

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That same afternoon finds Fidel back at Felipe’s apartment in Malate. He retrieves the door key under a potted plant, right beside a sleepy cat who wouldn’t budge. The place is filled with memories as fresh as today’s headlines. Just this morning, Felipe

cooked instant pancit canton for the two of them. The previous night had been ugly, having soured into a stalemate: to be or not to be. Should he jump or not? Should this be the day?

They had tried lubricating the discussion with the usual recourse in these fiery, blood-curdling times—bottles of classic San Mig—but it only got worse. Mainly because, at bottom, when you remove the fun possibilities out of the equation, it would be a one-shot, one-way thing: if it didn't work, if they'd make a little mistake, Felipe would die in spectacular fashion. If it did work, then there's no turning back: Michael Borja's manuscript made it crystal clear that it was a one-way journey. You return to 1892, you stay there and make the best out of it. In many ways, it seduced and frightened them both at the same time. There were pros and cons: pretty mestizas Felipe could easily woo (he presumed he'd easily become a Casanova simply because he knew a lot of "hugot" pick-up lines), a landscape yet to be blighted by industrialization, simpler times, and the chance to start businesses using only their modern know-how were the good things; the bad—incurable diseases, highly suspicious, ill-tempered Spaniards, absolutely none of the modern comforts they've gotten used to—gave them the screaming meemies.

In the past several weeks, they had exhausted the subject. Felipe had been a changed man since that phone call about the manuscript's authenticity. He talked about nothing else, even in the classroom, baffling his students with questions like, "What would you do if you can travel back in time and change things?" In Felipe's Philippine history class, the man had begun talking about wormholes, time travel, the Grandfather Paradox, quantum mechanics. His students would look at one another and suspect they were being subjected to a strange, new test.

After-hours at their favorite watering hole along Kalaw Avenue, Felipe stopped being the jolly good fellow. Fidel reluctantly served as the sounding board just to humor his friend—he had little idea that when Felipe said “I’ve been preparing for the journey, collecting useful data, winning lottery numbers, all those crucial things,” he was not merely pulling his leg. That Felipe had actually been collecting useful data, clandestinely “harvesting” from the national archives the winning lottery numbers throughout the 1890s, and all those “crucial” things.

“I’m not happy here,” Felipe said at one point. “Maybe I really belong there, start a new life.”

“You realize we could all be gravely mistaken?” Fidel was clutching at straws.

“What do I have to lose, anyway? This shit-hole of a life? Here, I’m a major loser. But in a time and place where nobody has access to the knowledge that I possess, I could be the harbinger of the Second Coming, the nucleus of a Philippine Renaissance.”

“Or you could be dead.”

Felipe shrugged. “We’re all dying, anyway. Let’s do it with panache and never apologize.”

Now the house feels empty, drained out. All gray and shadows, the stillness unnerving. Felipe’s knick-knacks—the stuff one accumulates in a lifetime—are still there, perishable testaments to what a man used to regard as good and beautiful. There are the remains of this morning’s breakfast, cheap plastic plates with their loathsome wounds of ketchup. The books, the statues and statuettes, the antiques. The drawer where Felipe kept the manuscript. The framed pictures of smiling faces. The old black-and-white Sony television from the 1970s, with its wooden exoskeleton, still working after all

these years. Fidel plugs it in. The power button feels sticky with the burden of bringing tidings, glad or not, in the past decades. The TV flickers to life, the reporter's voice are tinny knife-stabs on the eardrum. And there, as he expected, is Felipe—no, not him, but a grainy, CCTV version of him, a figure so resolute in meeting his supposed end. The video super slow-mos in the last few seconds: the figure jumps, the train appears to hit him, but before the actual impact is seen the video suddenly implodes into static. The camera's blindness lasts a few seconds. When the video reappears, the train has already stopped, and the crowd are electrified with the energy of fresh horror.

The reporter interviews the LRT's head of security, a short, pudgy bald man with an unlikely falsetto voice, who goes on to explain that all the video footage retrieved from all the CCTVs at the station have that defect: the same flicker and static at the same exact time, 10:45 AM, rendering it useless for investigative purposes.

The reporter is unable to hide his disbelief. "How was that even possible?"

The security officer squints from the glare of the floodlight.

Fidel turns off the TV. He slumps on the sofa, his head droopy from the weight of countless unanswered questions. He remembers the left-over beer in the fridge. It's only enough to calm him down a bit. He massages the cold bottle on his forehead. He hates thinking about settling Felipe's affairs—selling all this stuff, paying the landlord his dues, calling up close friends and remaining relatives about the man's disappearance—as if the man's actually dead. He isn't ready to confront that reality. Not yet. And *this*—he tears away the manuscript jutting out of the drawer, still in its Ziploc bag—*this* diabolical thing, this fucking insanity, is the reason why he's here now. Gritting his teeth, he crumples it. It feels good to finally have this evil thing in his hand, to destroy it, to make

it the recipient of his densest anger. He tosses it at the wall, but it bounces back on the sofa and rolls by his side. Fidel finishes the beer. In the deepening darkness, he stares at the ball of crumpled paper. He stares at it for a long time. Maybe it's the beer, maybe it's the bad day that seems to never end, but something slides in place deep in his head, a piece of the jigsaw puzzle, the final color tile on a Rubik's cube...

He picks it up, uncrumples it, and carefully pulls the manuscript out of the Ziploc. In the dying afternoon light, Fidel re-reads what is supposedly written. His face stiffens. Michael Borja's words are now gone. What have replaced it are the severely left-slanted, florid strokes of Felipe's handwriting. The letters are like rice stalks after a typhoon, as Felipe himself would have put it. An old familiar voice ripples across the fusty century to speak to him. Fidel gazes, thunderstruck. "Impossible!"

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Hello Fids,

Remember me? My old friend, if you're reading this, then my calculations are spot on. Arrived here in 1892. Yes, in the exact way Michael Borja disappeared at the Lawton LRT station. I bumped into him in a plaza in Binondo. He was easy to spot—how couldn't I? In 1892, he was the only person in the whole world who was wearing a "Regine Velasquez Live at the MOA Arena" t-shirt. You could have spotted him from the belfry of the Quiapo Basilica.

I don't understand how this whole thing happens. Borja and I have been discussing this phenomenon, and so far, this is how we understand it. The "magic spot" seems to be an extremely rare micro-wormhole, something like a tear in the fabric of space-time, and it seems "activated" in a regular cycle—note the exact date and time it

only works. It appears only when our planet is at that specific spot in its orbit around the sun, or something like that. Is this anomaly activated by gravity, small and large nuclear forces, cosmic radiation? We have no idea. And here's something weirder: Borja says he appeared in 1892, then a year later, he returned to that magic spot and jumped again, so he's thrown back to 1892. But his 1893 self did not find an 1892 version of himself wandering around Binondo bewildered. He retained his memory of having jumped in 1893. Still with me? Now when I arrived here in 1892, it's his 1893 version that I encountered. Shouldn't the whole thing supposed to reset each time you jump back to November 23, 1892? Shouldn't I encounter a Michael Borja fresh from his suicide attempt in 2010, and not one who had lived a year until 1893, then returned? Alright, talking about this makes me all dizzy.

I have so much to tell you, but I have limited space, so I'll go over the highlights. Met Rizal a few days before his execution. I didn't waste time—I told him outright I had come from the future. Of course, he scoffed and yelled for the guards. But he calmed down when I showed him the old two-peso paper bill I had been keeping in my wallet—who knew that shit could still be useful, right? I told him about the future China, and he was gobsmacked. I told him about Germany, and he was speechless. I told him about the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the man crumpled to his knees and cried—"the women, the children," he whimpered. I told him that was in retaliation for the nasty things the Japanese did in Asia, including our country, which happened to have a lot of women and children, too. I wanted to tell him a lot of things, world-changing discoveries and revolutionary shifts in human thought that have taken place long after he passes on, but we didn't have much time. I also didn't want to push him too hard—the guy was

obviously depressed; tell him something, anything that's remotely upsetting, and he'd just break down and cry. He was at the end of his tether, missing a lot of people, his loved ones, the things he loved doing. Fids, he was just a man, after all. But when I told him that after this, after he passes on, his likeness will be in every street corner, that there's not a city or town in this country that will not have a street named "Rizal." Heck, an entire province will be named after him. That the name "Rizal" will be synonymous to an incorruptible ideal—wasn't that the very thing he had been working to achieve all his life? And you know what, a strange peace washed over him. The man was transformed. He became exactly that calm, composed character in that Marilou Diaz Abaya movie. He thanked me and politely excused himself, and I took that as the cue to leave. When I left, he was poised to write something; he was gazing wistfully at the lamp on the table.

That was last year, Fids. We were not able to save Rizal—Borja and I spent many nights debating on the wisdom of saving him vis-à-vis letting him die a martyr's death. In the end, we decided we did not want the country to lose its idea of Rizal dying for the country. Maybe we've committed a mistake, yet I believe we needed that kind of drama, that passion play. But right now, we're seriously thinking about what to do with our knowledge concerning Bonifacio and Luna's fates. We have plotted a timeline, a masterplan stating the things we should change and how, and we're trying to decide if we're not being completely insane. Our work in the past year made us realize we're up against quite influential adversaries—let me just say that there are foreign organizations embedded in this country that are not as innocent as they seem. They hold the puppet strings that limit our actions to certain ends—them, and others who operate in the shadows.

The past will push us back; it will resist being changed. Time is like a raging river, and our puny attempts at changing its course feel like tossing a few ineffectual pebbles into the raging waters. But what if we could do something that's significant enough to create a rivulet, or even alter the river's course?

By the time you read this, it will be 2016. By then, you will have known if we have successfully effected positive changes. The world I left this morning at the LRT station was a world that survived the American occupation, two world wars, Marcos' martial law, the death of Ninoy, coup attempts, worsening poverty levels, and various political scandals that are too many to mention. Now ask yourself: have these upheavals still taken place? Did they happen? Because if they did, then Borja and I must have made a mistake, we have failed, and we would have spent living in these dark years in futility and died in vain.

Right now, it's November 1897. Those winning lottery numbers from the 1890s I got from the National Historical Institute proved to be very handy. We're billeted at the Hotel de Oriente, in room 22, the same room Rizal had occupied. This befits our newly acquired social stature, but we're careful not to attract too much attention. We keep to the schedule to avoid introducing so many uncertainties in the timeline. Change enough number of details, even the smallest ones, and you might end up holding toilet paper right now and not the manuscript that should save us all. Of course, when you do decide to return, it will be 1892 again, and things are going to happen as if for the first time. You will encounter a version of me who does not yet know what I would do beyond November 23. So mention to me the contents of this letter, especially warn me about not to drink anything from the house of a certain Mariano Ramirez on November 27, 1892—

that bout with explosive diarrhea was execrably nasty, and I'd rather let a deranged donkey drag my naked cojones across Escolta on a hot summer's day than undergo that ordeal again. If not for Borja's nifty pharmaceutical talent—he made me eat some kind of clay to calm down my bowels—I would have been dead.

At the moment, Michael Borja's at the hotel dining room squabbling with the Chinese cook about what he did to his eggs. I could hear the shouting from here. So Fids, if you're following, have some presence of mind: plan out everything, down to the smallest detail. For starters, please don't wear anything like a goddamn "Regine Velasquez Live at the MOA Arena" t-shirt and please bring a small portable water filter, will you?

Tonight, we're going to commence with Phase 1 of the Grand Plan, which should lead the country's future to a different timeline. If we succeed, you should see the astounding effects of our attempt at changing the course of history, hopefully for the better. Wish us luck, Fids.

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The past will push us back; it will resist being changed. But what if we could do something that's significant enough to create a rivulet, or even alter the river's course?

Those words echo inside Fidel's head as he runs out of the house. There's something about the letter he could not quite put a finger on, some sort of dissonance, a foreboding. Why did Felipe sound like a kid burdened with the most terrible sense of uncertainty? And what in hell was that "Grand Plan?"

He's opening the rusty gate when he senses something strange. Did somebody cut down the trees? It's as though the sky has cleared up and the evening sky seemed brighter than he remembers. So he looks up and tries to make sense of it all. His jaws drop: gone are the tall skyscrapers and condo towers that previously lined Taft Avenue. There's still the LRT line, visible beyond the sparse tree tops of gentrified Malate. He walks absent-mindedly, like a child who had woken up in midday in an alien place. People walk around in the rush hour mindless, vapid, automatic—an inkling of a terrible, unforgivable mistake germinates in Fidel's heart. He almost stumbles into the makeshift stall of an old lady selling newspapers. His eye catches the headline: "Pres. Bongbong celebrates 51st anniversary of Marcos government."

He stares at it, his mouth open.

"Jesus," he mumbles. "They must have fucked up."

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Exactly a year later. November 23. Lawton LRT station. Pres. Bongbong, dictator for life, has declared the day a holiday on account of his son's birthday, so the crowd is thin. Fidel stands on the fifth tile, his eyes resting on the Y-shaped crack. He shifts the weight of his large backpack on his shoulders. The station's wall clock says 10:44 AM, the second hand counting what might be the last moments of Fidel's life. *I hope there's no train*, he mutters to himself. *Please, give me one chance*. But as if on cue, the train emerges round the bend, its deep *chug-chug-chug* like the pounding in Fidel's chest. Fear quivers in his throat but he swallows it. He mutters a silent prayer. *If Felipe could do it, so can I*. There's only a moment to decide. He turns to the woman beside him. He

whispers, “Would you like to see something that will burn in your brain for the rest of your life?”

The woman’s brow knits in confusion. “Do I want to see a *what?*”

Fidel flashes a nervous smile. He says, “Don’t blink.”

He awkwardly hurls his body forward. The world screeches to a stop.

[END]