

Prodigal

SYNOPSIS

In the Philippines, where the number of islands can only be matched by the diversity of its people, Filipinos don't have a monopoly when it comes to observing tradition and concealing family secrets, even having a penchant for drama and over-the-top hysterics just to prove a point. The Filipino-Chinese community for one, even if they are located miles away from their country of origin, have brought along with them such pride for their own culture and customs -- religiously practised and followed with such blind faith.

In "Prodigal", the author paints a graphic portrait of a typical Filipino-Chinese family, which turns out not be so typical after all. They are referred to as the *lannang*, the Filipino-Chinese who need to live in the present but seem to be held back by their past. Two brothers -- Ah Bing and Ah Huat -- are pole opposites, one the good son, the other, expectedly the bad seed. Growing up together amidst the pressure of expectations, they go against the grain and the proverbial order of life, sticking up for their conviction, their own beliefs, and desires.

It may not manifest on the surface, but the brothers express such an unconditional devotion to each other, that it's almost too Filipino. What's unfortunate is that it takes a tragic incident for such emotions to unfurl, much to the chagrin of their traditional elders. But with it, other things are revealed: the secrets, the lies, and most importantly, the truth.

Prodigal

When he heard somebody call him Mr. Sy on that fourth day of the fourth month of the year, Ah Bing realized that at the age of twenty-one, it was the first time that he was given the responsibility of looking after his brother. There, in front of him, was the brown casket of *Ah Huat*, dead at twenty-five years. He was following it while carrying his brother's portrait behind his back, as if he was cradling a precious gem and hiding it from anyone.

"Be careful," said Auntie Aurora, his mother's elder sister whose plump size matched well with her deep voice. She has a penchant for drama and repeating embarrassing stories of others which irritates *Ah Bing* to the core. "Do it well. It's for *Ah Huat*."

He resented Auntie Aurora for ordering him around these past four days but *Ah Bing* had no choice, for she knew by heart all the protocols of a proper Chinese funeral and is the elder figure of the family. He couldn't even have a decent conversation with his parents after Monday, 11 in the morning, when *Ah Huat*, always the punctual one, was almost an hour late for his 9 a.m. meeting in the office.

Like other Filipino-Chinese, the *lannang*, he has two first names, one legal English name and a traditional Chinese name: Washington and *Ah Bing*, the bright one. His elder brother born four years earlier *Ah Huat* – the rich one – was

Wellington. As they were growing up, they even had a third name, which was only used inside the home: he was called Tonton, and his brother was Jewel.

Tonton was *ya giat*, so playful that he ends the day with bruises on his arms and legs that shake like bamboo or with grease smeared on his cheeks putting creases in an otherwise flawless white face which looks like a porcelain figurine. When he was growing up, he was increasingly restless. His parents, also with two names, Benson or *Tien Kua* and Lily or *Kui Giok*, never believed that *Ah Bing* had a disorder, like what their US-trained pediatrician had revealed. For them, it was just the Western way of justifying unruly childish behavior. *Ah Bing* simply lacked a few whacks from a bamboo stick. He was simply *ya giat*.

Then there was Joel, born with a darker skin, always referred, though jokingly, as the *huanna* – the Filipino – even though his bespectacled eyes were shaped like almonds, that seem to turn into watermelon seeds when he smiles, although rarely, but most often whenever he reads a good book and realizes that the ending is not what he had anticipated.

At the Chinese Catholic school in Masangkay, where they are taught to become 'schizophrenic' – speak English in the morning till 2 p.m, then shift to Mandarin/Fookien from 2 to 5 p.m. – his friends called him Wash, while his brother was known as Wells. *Ah Huat* was their batch valedictorian, while he was the class clown. Often, it was his brother's reputation – the medals from the Math Olympics, the Science Congress Best Invention, the Writing Competition Trophy, etc. – that saved *Ah Bing* from being kicked out of school.

Even though both of them were complete opposites, *Ah Bing* admired and respected his brother. On his part, *Ah Huat* always supported him, even finishing his high-school English thesis project on Alzheimer's which confounded his

teachers as to why someone – they knew its *Ah Huat* – would want to discuss this disease. He finished high school, albeit too late for his 18 years, since that was the same age when his brother already earned his degree in Economics, *magna cum laude*. *Ah Bing*, who was the life of a party, quietly resented the fact that he evolved from being '*ya giat*' to '*ya kap shiaw*', the stupid one, for how could he not believe it when everyone stamped that label on his head. When he accidentally bumped the vase, he was *kap shiaw*. When he flunked his Math subject, he was *ya kap shiaw*. When he forgot to put the car's gear to neutral when he turned on the engine, smashing the electric post in front of the house, he was *tsin kap shiaw*. The superlatives just grew every time.

His name became a joke among Chinese teachers who suggested the brothers to switch names. When it was too ironic to call him *Ah Bing*, a terror teacher, who was nicknamed 'Hitler' by his students, suddenly called him *Kap Shiaw*. That elicited a roaring laughter in the class. His face burned with humiliation, like the *angpaw* envelopes given during Chinese New Year. That incident spread like wildfire in school and reached *Ah Huat*. In an act of defiance, he barged in the teachers' room which was usually off-limits to students, fuming like a dragon with raging fire in its belly.

"Stop calling him *kap shiaw*!" protested *Ah Huat*. "You don't have the right to say that, even teachers have no authority to say that. *Di tua kian shiaw*." The last sentence rang of rebellion -- an A student pointing his finger to an elder, shouting at the top of his voice for everyone to hear about the disgraceful act committed by a respected teacher. *Ah Huat* committed the ultimate taboo – a student publicly shaming a teacher.

He was not contented with the confrontation. Bringing the case further to the principal, *Ah Huat* defied the order of the establishment: "I'll go if he's not going."

But I'll stay if you kick him out." He even threatened to transfer not only to a different school but to its fiercest rival which has been dangling benefits and scholarship to his parents' face ever since – a Protestant Chinese school in Quezon City.

"I'll beat your team in the Math Olympiad," said *Ah Huat*. It was no Sophie's Choice for the principal. The school had to win the Math Olympiad no matter what to ensure its reputation among the Filipino-Chinese community, which translates to more enrollees in the coming school year. Mr. Chua, the Hitler, was immediately relieved of his teaching post and returned only after *Ah Huat* graduated.

From that day on, nobody dared call *Ah Bing 'kap shiaw'* even among his classmates who used to toss that name for fun. His teachers tried to avoid him – and allowed him to pass his subjects – lest they incur the wrath of the “school’s precious asset”. Years later, the incident reached the level of an urban myth and the real story, like other shameful stories of the *lannang*, became shrouded with mystery.

It was a daily routine for Lily to see *Ah Huat* up by 7:30 for breakfast, to hear his goodbye '*gua be khi lo'* at 8 and for him to reach his office in CGI, an investment company, at exactly 9. *Ah Huat* was never late, worked systematically, dressed smartly, and dealt with people and subordinates with utmost respect. He was recently promoted as an Investment Officer after being an assistant for years. It paid well but Lily would always ask her son why he would not want to be involved in the family business.

"Look at all your cousins. Almost all of them are working in the family business. They have chauffeur-driven cars while you take the LRT or the MRT, sometimes the jeep and tricycle *pa*. Are you not tired? It's been ages since you worked for that company," Lily said a couple of times over a breakfast of noodles with slices of raw carrots topped with a generous serving of chopped spring onions -- *Ah Huat's* favorite.

"Ma, it's not that I don't want to be involved. I want to prove myself first and accomplish something. It's different when you know how it is to rise from the ranks," *Ah Huat* said.

"Well, again, all your cousins don't know that. And they're having the time of their lives -- touring Europe, watching Broadway plays, going to Disneyland..."

"-- and wasting their parents' cash!" *Ah Huat* blurted.

His parents found their son's behavior strange -- for who turns away from a fortune served on a silver platter, from a life of comfort with secretaries, assistants, maids, drivers. But then again, how could they complain when their 'golden child' never gave them anything to complain or worry about, never asked for money, never went home drunk, and never surprised them with a lovechild. When he decided to work after graduation, he never asked for recommendations from his parents' coterie of *kumpares* and *kumares*, business associates, or relatives.

Then the discussion would shift to *Ah Bing* and Lily would always sigh and say: "*Aya...Gua em chai iya bhe tsong sya lo...* I don't know what to do with him. He failed in all colleges he applied at, even the most substandard school. He doesn't even want to do errands for the factory -- he's either bored or too lazy. He always

plays with the computer, I don't even know what he's doing. If all of his computer time can be compensated, he would become a millionaire now, *ya hogia lo*." Lily complained while remembering the time when *Ah Bing* got home as the sun was about to rise with a face so beet-red, as if all his blood rushed to his head.

Ah Huat would not agree: "Ma, don't lose hope on *Ah Bing*. There is this thing on multiple intelligence that I recently read. It just says that a person is intelligent on certain aspects and tasks."

"*Aya*, those American studies justify mediocrity. For us *lannang*, its either you have it or you don't. It is that simple. It's up to you to believe or not," Lily said, then lowering her voice, in a whisper-like tone as if spilling a secret. "Look after *Ah Bing* after we're gone from this earth. You are the brother – the *Anhya* – after all."

"Ma, don't say that," *Ah Huat* dismissed it, like he had just heard a rumor from Auntie Aurora, who always drops by during the weekend to dish out juicy Binondo gossips while wolfing down her sister's pork dumplings, *bola-bola*, and *gohyong*.

His dad, on the other hand, would regard his son's initiative to find work as "*Ah Huat's* phase" whenever his wife would raise the business succession issue. "Obviously, we can't pass it on to *Ah Bing* unless we want all our hard-earned money to go down the drain."

"*Ah Huat's* one-of-a-kind. But someday he will come back to head the family business and expand it beyond my imagination," his dad always said with optimism when asked by business associates on why his eldest son would

usually be absent during meetings. He spoke too soon the moment he heard his wife's scream over the cellphone that echoed an unspeakable tragedy on that early Monday morning.

When he was called Mr. Sy on that fourth day of the fourth month of the year, he thought that the woman was calling his father. *Ah Bing* glanced around and remembered that his parents were left behind at home. They could not come to *Ah Huat's* funeral for it was strictly forbidden. Auntie Aurora went home to freshen up and he was alone at the morgue. He had to pick up some papers and it puzzled him why he needed to sign so many documents. He did not even bother to read since everything was a blur. The morning's tragic event went by so fast and it was already near midnight when *Ah Huat* was wheeled inside the room in a casket chosen by *Ah Bing*.

Nobody was there to welcome them. In front was the brown casket containing the body of *Ah Huat*, dead at twenty-five years old. He stepped forward and looked at his brother's face. Like every dead person, *Ah Huat's* face looked like as if he was just sleeping and could spring back to life at any moment, wiping the make-up caking on his face, and making crazy faces, and shouting to everyone, "Halleloo! I've fooled all of you." But then *Ah Bing* realized that it was only his imagination running wild, something that he seems to be doing every day of his twenty-one years.

He noticed that *Ah Huat* was wearing a suit.

"He hated that suit!" he told himself. He remembered how his brother bought this gray suit yet opted to wear a short-sleeved *barong* during a college thesis

defense even though his classmates wore sleek business attires with ties and cufflinks. He even despised wearing a tie around his neck, complaining he can't breathe properly, as if a snake was resting on his shoulders ready to strangle him.

"He hated wearing that particular suit," *Ah Bing* repeated, stressing the irony that his brother was now stuck with an ugly gray business suit, a blue-and-white striped tie, and a hairstyle that emphasized hints of baldness, perhaps for eternity.

Ah Bing was waiting for his brother to complain -- or to "*stand up for what is right*" in his brother's words -- but there was only the deafening air of silence, and a whiff on an unfamiliar synthetic scent emerging from the casket. In the early scenes of hysteria and commotion, *Ah Bing* remained calm and composed. He suddenly grew up from being a carefree boy to a serious man when he pulled his Mom away from crushing the lifeless body of *Ah Huat*, still warm yet stiff, joints semi-locked, lips turning into a shade of dark violet, mouth wide-open as if gasping for air. *Ah Huat's* eyes were staring blankly at the emergency room ceiling and his father closed them gently. "It's not a good day to look at the sky," said *Tien Kua* whose name means '*to look at the sky*'.

The first day of the fourth month of the year just ended. It was already past midnight. At that moment of silence, when he finally felt so close to his brother, *Ah Bing* cried.

The paper house came. Three paper vehicles arrived too, a BMW, a Mercedes Benz, and a Lamborghini, that seemed to pop out from some glossy car

magazine. Even a Boeing 747, made from carton, with a cut-out of a pilot in the cockpit, was sent in. They were all placed by the entrance of the room, whose door was draped with a black cloth. Soon, the paper mansion was adorned with Christmas lights as *Ah Bing* arrived to find the workers scrambling to find the electric plug. He scratched his head at the sight of the gaudy and colorful Chinese mansion which was almost five feet tall. He peeked at the living room and saw an ID-size photo of *Ah Huat* pasted on the wall.

"How could *Ah Huat* live here when he is a fan of minimalist architecture?" he asked himself. There's even a paper-cut servant, a maid, and driver and soon they would be out of work and helplessly burning in the conflagration doomed like slaves to a dead Pharaoh. *Ah Huat* believed in a classless society that he argued with Auntie Aurora regularly about that issue. Auntie, even with her prophetic voice and strong presence, gave up. It seemed that his brother was the only one who can outsmart their Aunt.

"What's this doing here?" *Ah Bing* asked to no one in particular, while holding up a box that resembled an iPad, complete with stickers representing the widgets. His brother hated Apple products so he picked it up and threw it in the trashcan.

He entered the room and saw Auntie Aurora already barking orders to her staff. One was busy setting up a table of food as offering for the dead. There's another one setting up the mini-buffet section where the drinks and snacks are for the living. Another one was folding paper money, arranged ornately like deli meat in a hotel breakfast buffet. Auntie lit two incense sticks and its smell later filled the room.

"Don't forget to light a new incense stick once the old one is spent. Only two sticks for the dead. Remember that, *mang kap shiaw*," *Ah Bing* heard it again, the

dreaded words that his brother despised. "And if you're not doing anything, help *Inday* fold the paper money. Gather it in a box, then give it to the *boy* to burn it outside. There's an area for that. The more money we burn, the richer *Ah Huat* will be in Heaven."

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He came back home after the second day since he had to change clothes and gather *Ah Huat's* things for burning. It was eerily quiet when he and Auntie Aurora stepped inside their living room. The lights were dimmed, the television was on yet it was mute, while the electric fan gave out a gurgling sound. Lily was preparing some noodles for dinner and Dad was busy reading the Chinese newspaper while his feet were comfortably hoisted on another chair.

"Pa, Ma, we brought some food for dinner," said *Ah Bing*.

His dad mumbled and had something else on his mind. "Who came last night?"

"Auntie Linda was there. His *ninang* also, Auntie Fely arrived. Then there's your friend, General Fidel, with five bodyguards in tow. He was asking why you were not there," he replied.

"What did you say?"

"I said it was against our custom for parents to be present during their dead son's wake."

"Well, what did he say?"

"He asked if you have even visited. I said no, which he and I naturally found weird. Why wouldn't you want to see your son for the last time?" *Ah Bing* knew he veered from the *correct* answer and had spoken something which should not be even said at the first place.

Auntie Aurora cut him short. "Haven't I told you that it is our tradition that elders cannot pay their respects to the young ones? It defies the natural order of life. It is the children who must bury their parents, not the other way around."

"Auntie, it's not about respect. I just think it's just normal for parents to be at the wake of their son. Why do Americans or Europeans do it? When Michael Jackson died, his parents were at the funeral service, haven't you watched that on TV? When my *huanna* classmate died, her parents were at her funeral, even at the burial! And so far, nothing bad has happened to them. They're still alive, for God's sake!"

"Shut up, *Ah Bing*! Respect your Auntie!" It was her mom's voice emerging from the kitchen.

Auntie Aurora, suddenly emboldened by her sister's defense of her, continued. "He is a prodigal son. *Bwe chue dit*. He defied the order of things." It suddenly pained *Ah Bing* to hear that judgment. It is the greatest irony, for *Ah Huat* had always followed rules in his life only to defy the *order of life* when he died.

"In fact, I watched a documentary on cable where a Taiwanese parent was whipping the sides of the coffin of their dead son with bamboo sticks for defying the order of life. It was an act of correcting that disrespect."

Ah Bing didn't know what came into him but his temper flared. "Auntie, what channel was that? Animal Planet? Is that about the episode on animals eating their offspring?"

"*Di bwe hiao phay seh! Di yah kian shiaw!*" His mother immediately entered the room and snapped at him. She scolded him for having no sense of shame for being so boldly opinionated and disrespectful in front of an elderly. "Go to your brother's room. Gather things that will be burned this Thursday. Stop questioning our beliefs; it has been practiced for thousands of years. It's for your own good!"

"It's crazy, Ma," *Ah Bing* faced his mother, her barren face showing frailty that it seemed another wrong word would totally shatter her. "*Anhya* has always been good to you, always followed your rules and now you're treating him like he had committed a crime. Is it now a grave sin to die in an accident?"

He looked at the empty faces of the elders. His parents aged in a matter of hours. Lily brought out five cups of noodles, with one cup having more slices of raw carrots topped with a generous serving of chopped spring onions.

"Before I go, I just want to say something. Thursday is really just a weird day," he quipped to no one in particular to break the tension before he finally dragged his feet upstairs.

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The lady monk just kept a serious face. She was saying something in Chinese very fast that *Ah Bing* had a hard time understanding what she was uttering. She was flipping a thick book with worm-like characters printed on the pages.

Auntie Aurora told the lady monk that *Ah Huat* was born on the year of the Earth Sheep, in the morning, around 3 a.m.

"*Chi ge pai si lo,*" the lady monk said slowly, putting stress on each word. "*Mang ke chap di tiam.*" Like a Supreme Court judge, she commanded that *Ah Huat* should be buried on a Thursday, and his coffin must already be covered with earth before 12 noon.

"Thursday!?" *Ah Bing* raised his voice a bit, flip-flopping between surprise and protest. "Isn't it obvious that his friends, classmates, or officemates have work that day?"

Auntie Aurora just looked away, a pound of flesh turning around her neck. She began saying some things to the lady monk and their conversation suddenly turned to whispers. Auntie got a small notebook and jotted some lines in its pages. Her face absorbed each word, as if she was Fatima receiving the Lord's prophecy.

The noise outside the Chinese temple was unbearable for *Ah Bing*. Nearby was Tutuban and Divisoria and all forms of commerce – from shops selling drinks to stalls selling fruits and China-made goods – have sprouted around the temple. The *tai diok ah* – the mainland Chinese who have recently arrived in the country – have made profit selling various gems, ornaments, and lucky charms especially during the Chinese holidays. *Ah Bing*, a third-generation *lannang*, despised these *tai diok ah*, who are sometimes unruly, unkempt, and noisy. Their halting *Tagalog* was always made fun. More than once, Filipinos talked to *Ah Bing* in that way: "*Ikaw daan lito. Wak ikaw daan lito.*"

"I was born in the Philippines. *Marunong ako mag-Tagalog*," he replied this phrase a lot of times. And when he was not in a jolly mood and it was some *kanto-boy* or vendor selling *kastanyas* along Ongpin who crossed him, he would add: "*Ayusin mo ang pagsasalita mo ah!*"

"Your *angkong* was once like that vendor," Auntie Aurora said after noticing *Ah Bing* grimacing in front of a *tai diok ah*. "Your Grandfather arrived in this country with nothing but only with the clothes he was wearing, he didn't even know how to read nor write. He bravely sold goods in the street, then he opened a bazaar somewhere in Quiapo. With enough money, he opened a small factory which expanded through the years. Look at what he had accomplished. His sons all graduated from college. His sons married decent women. We have lively *pamangkins* like you and *Ah Huat*."

Auntie Aurora realized that he referred to *Ah Huat* as if he was still alive and she corrected herself. "*Gua u chaw mung kaw*. Let's get back home to discuss this with your parents."

Chaw mung kaw – Auntie Aurora was dramatically portraying how her body hair raised and how she shivered from what the lady monk revealed. *Ah Huat* died on an inauspicious date. "Ghosts are hungry. You're not diligent in making offerings to the dead that's why this happened to *Ah Huat*. According to the monk, there was a story about one of your ancestor offending a powerful witch. The bad luck perpetuated, a lot of your family's first born sons are destined to die at a young age. Look at Andy, he died at 33 with leukemia. Erwin, first born of your Linda, died in his sleep at 29 years. *Chaw mung kaw!*"

In his head, if it was only allowed to laugh, he would now be rolling on the floor. "Auntie, it's as simple as an accident. *Anhya* was at the wrong place at the wrong time," he said while shaking his head.

Ah Bing remembered the shouting and the blaming game that ensued at the hospital. Mom was beating her chest, threatening to crush her ribcage. She blamed her husband for not forcing *Ah Huat* to be driven to work since *Tien Kua* cited rising gasoline prices. "It's because of your stinginess that we lost our son! If he didn't have to commute, he would not have been hit by a crazy taxi driver," her mother shouted pointing her finger to his face, the only time she did *that*. Tears flowed liberally and there was only anger in the room. "You're one hell of a stingy *intsik!*"

His father blamed her for failing to convince *Ah Huat* to join the family business. "If you convinced him during many breakfasts that he should work with us, then this accident would not have happened in the first place! You are a weak mother!"

They blamed everything – the balmy weather, the irresponsible traffic enforcer, the errant taxi driver, the bad Makati roads, even the *feng shui* of his bedroom. In the midst of the hysteria, Auntie Aurora who rushed at the hospital first suddenly remembered the face of the guy that met her at the E.R. The *huanna* guy, brown-skinned like *Ah Huat*, taller by a few inches, with a mole on his lower left jaw and a distraught look on his face, told her respectfully the words they dreaded to hear: "*Pumanaw no po si Wellington.*"

"And now, we have to blame the ghosts and our ancestors! I don't know what to believe anymore." *Ah Bing's* protest just landed on deaf ears. Auntie Aurora then gave his mom some yellow papers with red Chinese words inscribed on it to

repel the bad energy and spirit and some jade pendants to bring in luck and good fortune. Their attention is now focused on how to *move forward*.

Auntie continued his edict: "It should be on Thursday morning. The casket should be lowered before 12 noon. He is an Earth Sheep, so people with the sign of Ox should avoid going to the funeral march – it's *chiong* for them."

Chiong – clash – and *Ah Bing* remembered the Clash of the Titans movie where gods versus gods fought each other. *Chiong*. Is it a clash between the tiger and the snake? Or is it between the rat and the horse? "What if all of *Anhya's* friends or officemates are all *chiong*? Should they avoid him like a disease?" he raised this rhetorical question.

"Sure they can all go, have a party and have some drinks at *Ah Huat's* burial. Well, if they want to have bad luck," Auntie Aurora sarcastically said. "What do these *huanna* know? They have their own customs and we have our own. What's the harm in following our customs if it will bring luck to you, your family, and the future generations of your family?"

In that moment, his father's stoic face peeked out of the newspaper he was clutching with his fist. "We have to make sure that death in the family will not be succeeded soon. We have to break the curse so we will stick to the rules no matter what." *Ah Bing* connected with his father's eyes and saw it was a bundle of sorrow. With those words, everyone was dead silent.

It was seven on a Thursday morning when there were still only a few people inside the room. The glass casing on the coffin was lifted. A white pearl was

inserted in *Ah Huat's* mouth and *Ah Bing* peered closely. He touched his brother's fingers and felt they were ice cold. He found it amusing that the gray suit and tie still didn't look good on him.

"*Di ya kap shiaw!* I told you to remind me to put this inside your brother's mouth during the first night and today's the last day," Auntie Aurora mildly scolded him. "This pearl will light his way in the afterlife. He should now be able to walk in the right path."

"Auntie, knowing *Anhya*, he always walks the right path." He thought what he really wanted to say is that *Ah Huat* may suddenly rise and strangle her for repeating the *kap shiaw* word over and over again during the entire wake.

Ah Bing suddenly remembered that he brought the short-sleeved polo *barong*. He instructed one of the helpers to pick it up from a box labeled 'clothes'. Before the glass casing was returned back, *Ah Bing* placed the *barong* on top of his brother's suit. *At least he is ready for a costume change.*

"Don't forget to bite the grass I gave you. It is to deflect bad spirits since they will think of you as an animal," Auntie said that with a slight smile on her face, which became a rare act these past few days. She did not notice what he had done.

Soon, people came in even it was a Thursday morning. *Ah Bing* recognized some faces who were present during the past few nights and some new comers. He is the younger brother so he had the task of honoring *Ah Huat*. Three lady monks entered the room. Soon, they started chanting some Chinese mantra, in a sing-song manner that soothed yet stifled at the same time. He faced his brother's portrait – his black-and-white graduation photo – and kowtowed several times, his knees numb from clashing with the cold white marble floor. *Ah Bing* was

alone – clad in white T-shirt and white pants – but surprisingly, he felt calm. There was silence except from the unfamiliar Chinese prayers interspersed with the clicking of a mini-gong. He wondered if *Ah Huat* understood the words.

He glanced at the back and saw the faces of the mourners. There were a few ones crying but there was no hysterical outburst like what Auntie Aurora did on the first night, as if she had lost her son, for she was childless. She did not only defy the 'standards' of what a beautiful Chinese lady should be, she was barren.

"I would have wanted to have a son like *Ah Huat*," Auntie Aurora said to *Ah Bing*. "But on second thought, I know many things about your family and your brother that you don't know. That day in the E.R. confirmed my suspicions. I saw that *huanna* and your brother a couple of times in a Makati mall."

"So what? What do you mean by that?" *Ah Bing* felt cold, dead-cold, as his body felt numb but the drive of defiance took over him. "Auntie, let's not disrespect *Anhya*..."

"I'm just saying that he's paying not only for the sins of the past, but also for the present," she said in her 'moral-police' tone of voice.

"I don't believe you Auntie. And if you would continue spreading these rumors about *Ah Huat*, I will ask him to visit you when you are in the shower!"

Auntie Aurora was visibly shocked and speechless at how his nephew has transformed. There was now conviction and maturity in *Ah Bing*'s voice that she hasn't heard before. Watching him as he kowtowed several times, she was suddenly conscious of a sudden rush of admiration for the boy who everyone had assumed was doomed to fail. He was now his brother's defender.

As he kowtowed, *Ah Bing* tried to remember some fond memories of his brother, but couldn't force himself to cry. Time went by so fast and the huge volume of paper money burned during four days will surely make *Ah Huat* seem like an instant lotto winner.

When the prayer was over, there was no eulogy or tribute for *Ah Huat*. The young ones, who have departed the earth so soon, have no right to earn the respect of elders and the community. So when he was called Mr. Sy by the funeral coordinator to ask if the funeral procession will go on as planned at nine, he was now carrying *Ah Huat's* portrait.

"Be careful," said Auntie Aurora. "Do it well. It's for *Ah Huat*."

The funeral march started slowly. After around 10 minutes, the mourners hopped on the rented coasters, buses or in their own vehicles. The convoy was long yet orderly, led by a small truck containing various earthly possessions of *Ah Huat* that will be burned for his use in the afterlife. *Ah Bing* rummaged through his brother's things the previous days and in the truck were his clothes, his bed, his drawer, his computer table and some of his clothes. He kept items that were still unused or slightly used. His mom would have wanted to burn the computer since *Ah Huat* used it often.

"Ma, I don't think he wants us to burn his computer. It's so impractical. I can even use this. I don't think he even wanted us to burn his things or that paper mansion in the first place. Remember, he's an environmentalist and he always

wanted to recycle or reuse things," said *Ah Bing*. "I'll just erase all of his files and send his work files from the computer to his co-workers."

He clicked the file folder named "Work" and there were some documents, contracts, and proposals that he emailed to his assistant at work. In the "Work" folder, there was another sub-folder entitled "Work" and another sub folder. When he clicked it, the computer screen showed hundreds of photos of *Ah Huat* with a brown-skinned guy, slightly taller than him and thinner, with short hair that's groomed well, with a mole on his lower left jaw. The photos showed them together in coffeeshops, in a park, in malls, in the train station and they were walking side by side or holding hands, having a laugh or making faces, hugging tightly and kissing passionately. As *Ah Bing* browsed the folder, he saw scanned copies of hand-written love letters, airline tickets, movie passes, etc. The evidences revealed they were lovers for more than five years.

Ah Bing was not shocked though he never realized that his brother could do *that*. He would have wanted to tease him and say that he had known about *that* ever since especially on the day when *Ah Huat* feigned fever to avoid his female JS Prom partner. He did not like sports, especially basketball or boxing, even when it was a Pacquiao fight. *Ah Huat* did not even introduce a single girlfriend to his parents unlike him who had already clocked in eight girlfriends when he reached twenty years old. *Ah Bing* transferred all the photos in a USB and wanted to burn it on Thursday for it to reach his brother wherever he is. He got a confirmation after years of speculation, at last. *Ah Bing* felt closure.

It was already 11 when the convoy reached the memorial park in Paranaque. The traffic at the SLEX on a Thursday morning was snail-paced that they had to call

for additional police escorts to keep their convoy moving. Instead of a slow march, the mourners took a brisk walk when the funeral car entered the gate since the final resting place of *Ah Huat* was at the opposite end.

Auntie Aurora kept looking at her watch and made the "elbow sign" frequently to signal the funeral coordinator to hasten the proceedings. The three lady monks continued their prayers. It was time for a final look. *Ah Bing* was handed a bunch of incense sticks whose smoke caused a sting in his eyes. He distributed two sticks each to close friends and relatives who bowed in front of the casket.

Amidst the organized chaos and rushing to meet the 'dead-line', *Ah Bing* saw a familiar face. The guy, who was with *Anhya* when he died since his name was on top of his cellphone's contact list, stood out for he came in black, holding a few stems of red roses. It was *his* way of mourning.

Ah Bing rushed towards him and handed two sticks of incense, now slightly stouter for the wind blew softly and flamed the embers. He did not say a word but his face, full of pain, of love, of love-cut-short, of seeing his beloved die in his arms, suddenly pained *Ah Bing* too: "*My Anhya is really gone.*" Like what that nameless stranger seemed to convey in his face: "*The love of my life is really gone.*"

The stranger in black was the last to offer his respect to *Ah Huat*. He awkwardly bowed, as if recoiling from an aching stomach. *Ah Bing* knew that the stranger wanted to stay near his brother, to have a last look, to touch his face for the last time, to offer the flowers and put it inside the casket. But, the stranger knew that it was forbidden, like their relationship, even if borne out of love. From the nod of the guy, the lowering of his eyes, to his quiet composure, it was a final act of love and respect. Contrary to what others have said about his brother not being

able to live a full life, *Ah Bing* now disagreed for he knew his brother experienced how it was to love and be truly loved in return.

"Who's that guy who dared to come in black!?" Auntie Aurora asked *Ah Bing*, echoing what others would not dare ask. "And why would he bring red roses? It's a no-no! How dare he disrespect the dead?!"

But *Ah Bing* did not want to hear anything of it. "He's a close friend of *Anhya*. Can we just leave it at that?"

"Oh, I see. It's that guy," Auntie muttered under her breath, suddenly losing her dominance over *Ah Bing*.

Ah Bing approached the stranger and gave him the USB stick. "I think this is for you."

"Thank you. I'll always pray for him." It was all the guy had said letting the tiny device vanish inside his palm as he turned around and never looked back. On the horizon, *Ah Bing* saw black smoke rising and smearing the clear porcelain white sky. He heard the crumpling sound of *Ah Huat's* things being 'cremated' and imagined the burnt things suddenly popping in his Chinese mansion somewhere in the sky. He then wondered what his parents were now doing at home, what his mom would discover as she finally erases traces of *Ah Huat* in his room, what his dad would do after he reads the last word of the newspaper, and how *painful* it must be for them to be forbidden to say their final goodbyes.

Suddenly, a loud alarm from Auntie's cellphone broke the silence. It's like a morning wake-up call and everyone got an adrenaline rush. "It's two minutes before 12! Where's the duck? Where's the duck? Who's holding the duck?" The

“unlucky” duck, being offered to the ghosts and which will absorb the “bad luck” of the family, will surely turn in some dinner plate among the memorial park's caretakers as it will be released in the open after the casket has been lowered.

The men rushed to close the casket and pushed buttons to start lowering it in a deep hole in the earth.

"Don't look! I said don't look! It's bad luck to look at a casket going down. *Kap shiaw*, turn around!" *Ah Bing* found it amusing that Auntie Aurora was shouting to no one in particular since her back was on him.

Ah Bing spat the roll of grass that's threatening to scatter in his mouth and block his throat. Even as the clock ran a few seconds after 12, he grasped on to his brother's casket until he couldn't reach it anymore.

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