The Storyteller

A Synopsis

Set in Malate during World War II, “The Storyteller” follows the lives of Saigo, a Japanese gardener, and Pepe, a Filipino boy. Told in a series of flashbacks by Pepe, now an old man contemplating the fate of a house he had left a long time ago, the narrative travels back and forth between Manila and America, between the past and the present. Fearing his death is near and his memory giving up on him, Pepe tells his grandchild about Saigo, the man who saved the house and his life.

The Storyteller

The spring mist from the mountains descended onto the white stone house overlooking the great valley. It crept across the fields and swathed the small town across the river. As twilight settled on the high plains, a solitary man put away his fishing tackle and prepared to journey home. On the foothills, where dandelions waltzed with the cowslips and the bluegrass, a flock of sheep stopped grazing and made their way back to the barn.

The white house sat on a hilltop amid flowering jasmine. Its grille gate faced the east and the long street between the bridge and the city center. A cobbled path led from the courtyard to a terrace with a fire pit and a wrought-iron swing in front of it. Soon the mist hid the terrace from view.

Through the mist, the old man on the swing made out the stand of tall prickly pears beside the log pile. He stared at the red flowers for a long time, his mind drifting to a far-off place as the lingering mist rose and fell with the cadence of church bells. Then a cry from the house startled him.

"Gramps? You out here again?" The boy in a hooded jacket, hearing the swing creak, had come out to scold the old man. "It's damp. You'll get sick."

"I enjoy looking at the valley at sunset," the old man said, "and watching the birds fly far below us."

“But you can’t see anything,” the boy said. Then, at a glance from his grandfather’s clouded eyes, he corrected himself hastily: “I meant, this mist is too thick for you to see anything. Your agent called again earlier, by the way. He said it was about the old house in Manila and it was urgent. I didn’t know where you were, so I told him you had gone to the market to buy seeds.”

“Well, your made-up story was true.”

“I’m running out of excuses, Gramps. Why are you avoiding him?”

The old man did not reply.

The keening of the cold wind went on. The boy went into the house and returned with a blanket. “It’s getting cold.” He gave the blanket to the old man and sat next to him. “I don’t understand why you like the cold.”

“I’m used to it,” the old man said. “Besides, the fire keeps me warm. Stay here and keep me company.” He draped the blanket over his shoulders and looked at the boy. “It gets misty more often, these days, doesn’t it?”

“Like your stories,” the boy said.

“You’re getting too smart for your own good.” The old man waved his hand in the haze. “Have I told you the legend of the mist?”

“No, but you’ve told me a hundred other stories.”

“Well, then, you have to listen to this one.”

“I’m too old for stories, Gramps,” the boy said. “Most of them aren’t true anyway.”

“You’re wrong, son. Stories are told because they are true. And because they are told, they are never forgotten. They become part of us.”

“Why don’t we talk instead about that old house in Manila?”

“What do you want to know?”

“You’ve told me nothing about it, except that it’s for sale.”

“That’s right. I’ve thought of selling it.”

“Shouldn’t you? Someone ought to live in that house. Pa said it’s falling apart and costs a lot to maintain.”

“You sure hear a lot, son. And you sure have something to say about everything.”

“Wouldn’t you have one less thing to worry about if you were to sell the house?” the boy persisted, his eyes following the mist as it crossed the terrace.

“Don’t you really want to hear about the legend of the mist?” the old man asked. “But all right, I should tell you first about the house and the place of my childhood. Sometimes the only way to tell a story is to go back to the very beginning.”

Several hundred years ago, at the southern end of a small colonial city in the tropics, bordered by a bay celebrated for its sunsets, a small fishing village stood amid swamps and marshes. Few people lived there as the constant flooding made it difficult to build houses. Though disdained by their conquerors, the villagers lived in peace with them, fishing by day and telling stories at night, singing the songs of their forebears, perhaps to forget their misfortunes. At the turn of the last century, when new conquerors came, a man from the New World acquired the wetlands and divided them into lots, which he sold to rich families. In no time at all, it seemed, the quiet fishing village was transformed into a wealthy suburb, with paved roads, houses, trees. Acacias lining the streets with foreign-sounding names sheltered travelers from the heat, and lamplight showed them the way at night.

Southeast of the bay, near a church with a cult following among barren women, stood a

two-story mansion, white as ivory, beneath a canopy of narra trees. By day the house shone so brightly in the sun that passing neighbors had to shield their eyes. By moonlight it shimmered like silver. A cast-iron gate opened onto a thriving garden of sampaguita, santan, and *dama de noche* that ran along both sides of the house. The imposing structure had intricate stained-glass windows, and graceful railings and grillwork. The tall windows and *ventanillas* allowed the house to breathe and offered a broader view of the garden.

A stone cherub rested atop a three-tier fountain at the center of the garden, head upturned as if listening to a song from the sky. Cobblestones on one side extended to the backyard, where cacti rising to great heights kept out trespassers. On the other side was a guava tree with a tire swing hanging from a branch. The boy, the only child of the couple living in the house, spent most afternoons on that swing if he was not chasing butterflies around the garden.

The mist hung heavy in the air and darkness engulfed the great valley, setting birds wheeling in the sky.

"That was my city and the house of my childhood," the old man said. "Now I'd like to tell you everything I remember about the man from whom I heard the story of the mist. I have never told anyone else about him. Not your parents. Not even your Granny. I just feel now is the right time. He was an enemy—this I understood later on. But he saved me, in every way a person can be saved." The old man fingered the blanket wrapped around his body, a handwoven cloth, now well worn, that he had refused to discard despite the pleas of his family.

"I don't get you, Gramps."

"He told me stories. Many stories. Although I was very young then, I still remember them well. And like his stories, he lives on in my memory. I no longer remember everything about him

so clearly. But sometimes, like today, I hear his soft voice as I sit here in the dark." He gazed at the fire burning in the pit and the wisps of smoke rising from it. The boy fell silent, and for a long time neither one spoke.

"There was no garden when we moved to the old house years before the war," the old man went on. "The grounds were bare. No flowers scented the air, no trees offered shade. All we had was a dried-up fountain with a dusty stone cherub. But a year before I turned seven, a man showed up at our door to offer his services. Then things began to change. 'I will make you the finest garden in the neighborhood,' he promised, in an accent very different from ours. At the time we had been hearing rumors about a rising imperial nation from the north that might invade our cities and destroy them. But Papa and Mama felt no distrust for the gardener, even if he looked nothing like us. His eyes were smaller and he had a pale complexion. Because his manner was so gentle they could find no fault in him. His eyes showed no anxiety and his voice entranced. The very next day he was hired.

"At first he would ignore me while working in the garden. But soon he started calling me by my nickname, which he pronounced "Peh-peh" with a fluttering intonation, as if it were a melody from a foreign land. If I tell you the story of the gardener, I should also tell you about Pepe, who was very much like you, if memory serves me right."

Pepe woke up to the sound of bells pealing and sparrows twittering in the guava tree outside his window. Sunlight streamed through the curtains and gilded everything in the room. From the window he saw worshippers walking into the church. Then his eyes turned to a tiny figure in the garden, raking smooth the soil around the fountain. He flew down the grand staircase and was out of the door in a flash.

“Saigo!” he called, running toward the gardener, who turned and smiled, a cigar in his mouth.

There were days, particularly when the gardener was working in the backyard, when Pepe was forbidden to go near him. But today was a good time, Pepe thought.

“What are we doing today?” he asked.

“Why, planting more flowers.”

“But we already have so many.” Pepe scanned the carefully tended lawn and pointed at the rows of flowers and some herbs. In only two years the gardener had made good on his promise. The garden was nothing like the others in the neighborhood. Even to the mansion, its air of austere simplicity seemed alien.

“You don’t like them, Pepe?” Saigo dropped to his knees and removed weeds.

“I do, but…” he said as he started to do what the gardener was doing, “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?”

“You don’t look like a gardener.”

“Does it matter what I look like?” Saigo said with a laugh. He plucked a sprig of sampaguita. “Look at these. They’re not as pretty as the others, but just smell them.”

Pepe drew closer. Though he already knew what the flower smelled like, he inhaled its perfume.

“You seem too smart to be tending flowers,” he insisted.

Saigo exhaled smoke and smiled. “And you seem too young to be asking smart questions. When we forget what we look like, we remember a hundred other things.” Saigo leveled the ground and spread seeds on it. “I like what I do, Pepe. Look at these seeds,” he went on, pouring

some onto the boy's palm. "Before we know it they'll spring up from the grass, bloom at night, and be the beautiful flowers they're meant to be. Just like you. In no time you'll be a big boy, fine looking, brave, and strong."

Pepe asked, "Did you always take care of gardens, Saigo?"

"In some places, yes," Saigo said. He watched Pepe plant the flower seeds. "You're doing well. But don't dig too deep; the seeds may die before they reach the surface. Don't plant the seeds too shallow either, or the wind may blow them away before they even get a chance to bloom. Finish that and wait for me here." He rose from his knees and strode across the sun-dappled pathway to the backyard. He returned with pots of plants in a wheelbarrow.

"What are we planting now, Saigo?" Pepe stared at the spiny plants while continuing to till the soil around the fountain.

"They're called cacti. They have spines, so be careful when you touch them."

"They look like those scary-looking plants in the backyard, only smaller."

"Ah, those. They're cacti too, only a bigger kind."

"Why are we planting them, Saigo?"

"Because cacti hardly need any water and are not as delicate as flowers," he said. He then pulled them slowly out of the pots. "They don't need much care. And if something bad happens, say, bad weather, and all the flowers here stop blooming and the trees shed all their leaves, the cacti will survive. Sometimes when they feel like it, they grow bright red flowers. You'll see."

"Where did they come from?"

"From a place where the sun never sets."

"I didn't know there were places where the sun never sets." Pepe looked up at the sun and wiped his hand across his brow, sweat soaking through his shirt. "What about you, Saigo, where

did you come from?"

"I came from many places," said Saigo. "I travel a lot. And I won't be staying long." He set the pots on the ground

"Why won't you stay?"

"Because one day I'll have to leave."

"Why?"

"Because I must, Pepe. I have a family too."

"So you will leave me."

"Not if you need me."

"Why did you leave your family? And what brought you here?"

"Duty," said Saigo. "Duty brought me here. Like everyone else, I have a duty to fulfill."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll know in time. Right now, you don't need to know the meaning of everything I say." Saigo leaped to his feet and beckoned to Pepe. Then he picked him up and put him on the swing. The sparrows in the tree, startled, flew away. Standing behind the boy and drawing on his cigar, Saigo began to push the swing and whispered to him, "Do you want to hear a story you have never heard before?"

Pepe nodded as the wind lifted the swing higher till he almost touched the leaves, his feet up in the air.

"That was Saigo," the old man said, pulling the blanket across himself and the boy. "My mother and father were always away and the housekeeper was always in a rush, so I had nobody else to talk to but him." His eyes alighted on the prickly pears and he watched the red flowers

fluttering to the ground.

"I didn't know much about his past," he continued, "except that he had a wife who couldn't bear a child. I remember asking him many times why he looked different. He always replied, 'Because no two people are alike.' Asked why he spoke so well in a language not his own, he said, 'Because I once lived in the New World.' But every time I asked him about matters he didn't want to talk about, he'd say, 'You want to listen to a story?' And I'd be so eager for it that I'd forget about my question."

"Sounds like you, Gramps." The boy zipped up his hooded jacket against the wind whipping across the terrace. "He sure was a cool gardener."

The old man was silent. After a while he said: "It won't be cold much longer."

"It's almost summer," the boy agreed. "Was it hot where you came from?"

"You don't want to know," the old man said. "I can still remember clearly those hot days in the old house as if they'd happened only yesterday."

The boy got up and fed more logs into the fire. The flames cast shadows that quivered like ghosts. "Will you sell the house, Gramps?" He held out his hands to the fire.

"I don't know, son."

"What's stopping you?"

"Memories," the old man said. Then: "I don't remember the house well now. I don't even remember what my room looked like, or if the garden was really huge. Memory plays tricks on us. But I remember the flowers, the swing, and the many times I daydreamed about Saigo's stories. As I chased after butterflies flitting from flower to flower, Saigo would tell me why their lives were fleeting. And if I wasn't sipping nectar from the santan, like any other kid in those days, he was stringing the flowers into bracelets and crowns. But nothing that good lasts."

The boy returned to the swing and shared the blanket with his grandfather. “What happened, Gramps?” he asked.

“One night,” the old man said, “when the moon had deserted us, I heard the thud of giant shoes.”

The windows had stayed open that night to let out the heat of summer. Pepe was reading a book when he heard the sound of hooves clopping in the distance. He sprang to his feet and reached his bedroom window in time to see the first threads of smoke rise from the church. Someone was burning trees again, he thought. Then he heard a faint rustle in the garden and some stomping of feet. But he saw nothing. Telling himself he had just imagined the noises, he went back to bed and closed his eyes. He opened them again when he heard harsh voices in a foreign tongue followed by screams and the sound of bodies being dragged across the floor. He sat bolt upright just as a man in uniform dashed into his room.

“Saigo!”

“Shhh. Hurry, Pepe. We have to go.”

“Where are Mama and Papa?” Pepe looked at Saigo’s strange clothes. He was in khaki trousers and a shirt with a red collar patch and a badge pinned to it. He also had a cap with neck flaps tied under his chin.

“Not now, Pepe. Now we must go.” Saigo grabbed a bag from under the bed, stuffed it with the boy’s books and clothes, and hoisted it onto his shoulder. He peeked out the door and, seeing no one, pulled Pepe out of the room even before the boy could find his shoes.

As they sneaked toward the balcony, Pepe saw men on the ground floor who looked and dressed like Saigo, and he heard pleading voices. He knew those voices. He would have called

out to his father and mother, but Saigo clapped a hand over his mouth and snatched him up. Pepe's eyes welled with tears.

"Stop crying," Saigo whispered. He ducked behind the banisters just before one soldier looked up.

Smoke began to envelop the house. Through the smoke, Pepe caught a glimpse of his father weeping. This was all just a bad dream, he told himself, closing his eyes tight. But the cries grew louder. His eyes now open, he saw someone hitting his father with the butt of a rifle.

"Papa!" he wanted to scream, but Saigo's hand was tight over his mouth.

Saigo rose to his feet with Pepe in his arms. They stole along the corridor in the gathering smoke. His mother saw them but she quickly looked away so the intruders would not notice them.

They reached the balcony, where a ladder led down to the backyard. Saigo climbed down the ladder with Pepe, all the time looking around to make sure that they were not seen. Pepe spotted a swarm of fireflies hovering behind his *dama de noche*, like fairies dancing. He was slipping into reverie when he heard a shout that sounded like an order from inside the house, then a loud bang. His heart thumped hard. Then a second bang and a third echoed through the house. He started to shriek. Saigo covered his mouth with his hand until Pepe gasped for air. Tears flowed from his eyes, but the fireflies, no more than tiny specks of light in the dark, he could still see.

Saigo and Pepe hunkered down amid the giant cacti. The cries stopped after a while and the foreign voices died out. The intruders had finally left the house.

"Where are Mama and Papa, Saigo?" Pepe asked.

"They're in a better place now."

“You’re lying! I heard those shots!”

“Those were fireworks you heard. Fireworks to light up the moonless sky.”

Pepe fell silent and thought about what Saigo had just said.

“Remember the story of the fireflies?” Saigo went on. “And why they come out only at night, especially when there is no moon? Like the fireworks you heard, they light up the sky. They glimmer to keep their loved ones safe.”

Saigo tapped a spot on the ground close to where they were hiding and pulled a small wooden trapdoor open. A narrow stairway led down into the dark. Pepe looked at Saigo in surprise, then Saigo took his hand and together they walked down the steps.

The place they found themselves in was no more than a hole about five feet deep. Sampaguita vines on the walls kept the soil in place, and a heap of clay sealed the top while letting in some light through a small hole. Except for a few objects—a mat and a blanket with books on top in one corner, and a candlestick and a phonograph in the other—the ground was bare.

Saigo took a box of matches out of his pocket, struck one, and lit the candle and his cigar. Pepe curled up, shivering, on the mat and closed his eyes. A hush had fallen in the cellar; only the distant rumble of vehicles could be heard. Saigo sat next to Pepe and pulled the blanket over him, watching his face and the streaks left by his tears.

“Pepe?”

The boy opened his eyes but turned his back to him and faced the wall and the flowers. Saigo had once told him: “To the one who breaks it, the fragrance of the jasmine.” He still couldn’t understand what Saigo meant.

Saigo went on smoking without saying another word.

After a long silence, Pepe asked Saigo again without looking at him. “What happened to Mama and Papa?”

“They’ve gone somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“To the great mountain.”

“Where is that? And why can’t I go with them?”

“It’s where fireflies come from. Do you remember how fireflies came to be?”

Pepe tried to turn and sit up. Despite his growing fever, he watched Saigo move about the cellar, casting shadows on the walls. And as the storyteller’s voice resounded through the night, his sorrow, for a moment, was forgotten.

Long, long ago, there lived a boy and his father in a wooden hut by the river at the foot of the great mountain. The boy had lost his mother at an early age and his father’s solitude made him very sad. Every afternoon he prayed to the great mountain to make his father happy. He prayed for many years until the great mountain took pity on him and commanded the loveliest sprite in the kingdom to make his wish come true. The sprite was to stay with the mortals until the boy became a man.

One day, while father and son were working the land, a beautiful lady appeared. She said she had lost her way and asked them if she could stay in the hut for a short while. The father was so struck by her beauty that he could not speak. Though their dwelling was small, the boy said, she was welcome to stay.

The father and the lady spent time together day and night. Her stories eased his sorrow and his songs soothed and charmed. Soon they fell in love. The hut filled with songs and

laughter, and glowed like the sun from so much happiness. Blossoms scented the air with their perfume. The river teemed with fish.

Years passed swiftly and the boy soon became a man. The father had grown old and his eyesight was failing. But the lady stayed young and beautiful, her face unlined and her brow unfurrowed. Alas, one day the great mountain decreed it was time for her to return.

While father and son slept one moonless night, a path opened up for her through the forest. The sprite glided gently back to the great mountain, heartbroken and crying silver tears for those left behind. The tears took wing and flickered across the night sky, a reminder to the mortals that, although she was gone, she would still watch over them and be their light in the darkness.

"Your Granny loved that story," the old man said. "I remember after she died you would dream she looked up at you and smiled from her coffin. I would rush to your room when I heard you scream and read to you from your favorite book to help you go back to sleep." He stared at the fire as it cast a sunset glow on the terrace. "I dreamed of your Granny again recently. I thought I had forgotten her. Ghosts, like memories, appear when you least expect them."

The boy looked at him, tugging at his hood against the blustery wind. "Did you ever see your parents again, Gramps?"

The old man pulled the blanket about them.

"No," he said. "I was feverish for days after Saigo took me down to the cellar. When I was well again, I searched the house for them but saw no one there. Saigo wouldn't have abandoned my parents; he liked and respected them. I never found their bodies, but the fireflies behind the *dama de noche* became a familiar sight after that."

“We lived in the cellar for three years,” he continued. “Most days he was at the camp near the hospital and not too far from the church. He forbade me to go anywhere close to that camp. A creature living in a tree preyed on children, he reminded me again and again. ‘Never leave the house,’ he always said. ‘Never go out of the cellar without me.’”

The wind brought a salty smell that reminded the old man of the time he and the gardener had gone fishing.

“One day, just before dusk, Saigo took me out of the house. Earlier that afternoon he had rounded up Papa’s fishing gear while I gathered earthworms and put them in a jar. The air was somber and the road stark under a red sky. It was an unusual day. Nothing could be heard, no shelling or cries, just the calling of seagulls. Nothing could be seen, no vehicles or sentries, just the ruins of houses black with smoke, jutting out one before the other, crying for atonement that would never come. We inched our way forward, scurrying from tree to tree. Once we got to the bay, we climbed down to the rocks so we would not be seen from the road. Our eyes scanned the horizon. There were ships at sea, but they were too far away to notice us. We prepared the fishing rod, watched by squawking seagulls hovering over the water. I asked him, ‘Saigo, how big is the sea?’ ‘As big as you imagine it to be,’ he replied, threading the reel. I looked up at the birds. ‘I think it’s as big as the sky,’ I said. ‘Perhaps,’ he said and showed me how to mount the reel and hook a worm. Then he cast the line into the water, swinging it from side to side till he was sure that it was in the right spot. ‘Do you want to know the story of your city?’ Saigo asked. I nodded. And just before nightfall, he began to tell me the story.”

This story goes back centuries, perhaps a thousand years, to when the sea and the sky

loved each other. By day the gentle waves of the sea serenaded the sky with the most haunting melodies ever heard. At night the sea glittered with diamonds from the sky, luring mermaids and fishermen.

The people thrived on this harmony. They were blessed with rain from the sky and fish from the sea. In return they worshipped the sea and the sky, offering them their ingenuity, exquisite works of art woven by their hands. But then the people learned to trade. They began giving greater honor to the sea and praying for bountiful fishing. They wanted to trade fish for more objects of desire. They stopped looking at the sky, for the harsh light blinded them and darkened their skin. The rain oppressed them too. And the stars no longer filled them with awe. The sky felt spurned. Before long the sky and the sea embraced no more.

One fateful day, the sky erupted in a fit of rage. Rain flooded the sea until the water surged to unthinkable heights, gigantic waves wiping out the clouds. Still the raging sky was unabated. Unable to hold so much water, the sea let some of it go, flooding the villages. Many people drowned. Those who survived had to drink the seawater in their wells. When the salt water became more than they could bear, they cried out, *"Maalat, maalat!"* After years of despair, the sky took mercy on them and the rains stopped. The seawater ebbed and the wells filled once more with freshwater. The people called their town "Maalat" to remind themselves never to take the sea and the sky for granted. The name changed to "Malate" centuries later. The sea and the sky made amends. People went back to their normal lives. More communities were built and flourished into one glorious city.

"I was born there, near the sea," the old man said. "We never went back to fish as the bay

became crowded with ships. It was too dangerous. Sometimes, though, Saigo would come home with fish he had caught. When he was around, I spent whole afternoons in the garden or just stayed in the house. But I always slept in the cellar. I got sick many times. It was too cold down there. Saigo would nurse me with guava leaves and herbs, whatever we had left in the garden. In time I got used to the cold and even learned to find comfort in it." He smoothed the blanket and ran his fingers over the small holes in it.

"He'd be gone for days, and then he'd come back with food, mostly bread and cans of soup, and jugs of water. But more often than not, I slept hungry. When he wasn't around, I read books to amuse myself. He ordered me never to leave the cellar without him, so I didn't. I was too scared, though if enemies were coming I would have known from the clomping sound they made with their shoes. The shoes were plucked from dead Americans' feet and were too big for them. Saigo taught me to always listen for that sound. Once I heard it, I had to put out the light and cover myself with this blanket. It would make me invisible, he said.

"Whenever sorrow visited us in the cellar, Saigo would say, half to himself, 'The world of dew is a world of dew, and yet...' He told me that the words came from an ancient poet who lived through the death of two wives and five children and the burning down of his house. Everything, even love or grief, he said, is fleeting, like dew from a flower. Yet our hearts grieve. And our lives are forever changed.

"Sometimes, he'd play a record, the only one we had, on the phonograph. I remember the tune but not the words. It was soft and flowing, like a feather wafting in the air. With that song playing in the candlelit room, he would read me stories. Most of the time we just sat there, listening to the silence piercing the walls. But in my head the song played on."

The mist had thinned and was slowly retreating to the mountains. The birds, flapping

their wings, gave out curious cries that startled the boy out of his reverie. He rose and put more logs on the fire while the old man continued to sit on the swing and stare at the sky. The clouds were slipping away to the east and the stars were coming out.

"You still haven't told me the story of the mist, Gramps," the boy said.

"Ah yes," the old man said. "But it's not a nice story."

"Come on, Gramps! I want to hear it."

"And so you shall," the old man smiled.

There was once a boy who lived in a lonely house in the middle of a forest. His parents had died long ago, so he had nobody to take care of him. But the boy was strong and independent. He spent his days gathering fruit from the trees and fishing in the river nearby.

One afternoon, before sundown, he decided to go for a walk and visit the place where his parents lay buried in a forgotten town. He took a lamp and a blanket with him because it was dark and cold. With only the lamp to light his way, he went deeper into the forest than he had thought he would. The wind was gentle but the leaves rustled, as if in warning. He ignored the sound and walked on.

As he drew close to the gate of the cemetery, he smelled a foul stench and saw a big circle of fire in a tree up ahead. The boy had heard enough about tree demons to recognize one, and had the shrewd instincts to know that he had to do something fast before the tree demon spotted him. He blew out the flame of his lamp, lay on the ground, and covered himself with his blanket. The creature, malevolent but not so smart, took him for a corpse left unburied. It jumped down from its perch causing the earth to shake and pulled the blanket off the boy. Relishing the thought of its rival's envy at this catch, it carried the boy to its hideout inside a dark cave at the

edge of the forest. This creature of the night loved to eat children, dead or alive. It begrudged them their laughter, their games, and their mad imagination, and longed to be like them. After deciding to cook the corpse the next day and eat it, the demon laid the boy near the bonfire and went to its sleeping corner.

The boy peeped through a hole in the blanket. The sleeping demon was tall as a tree and had thick fur all over its body, and it wore a loincloth made of sheepskin. The boy's eyes roved the cave occupied by bats and saw a huge ax beside an enormous cooking pot. He was petrified with fear and indecision. Then he heard a snore so loud that it drove the bats out of the cave. As if on cue, he rose as quietly as he could, made sure that the creature was asleep, and took the ax. Slowly he moved to the sleeping demon and, swinging the ax with all his might, beheaded it. Black blood filled the cave. The boy fled as fast as his legs could carry him.

But not far from the cemetery, he met another demon leaning against a tree and staring at him with interest. The creature knew that the boy had come from its rival's cave and wondered why he had been freed. The boy, sharp-witted as he was, quickly said that he had been let go because he had revealed to the other demon the secret of how to become human. The demon's black face lit up and its red eyes popped. Emboldened by its credulity, the boy said that for the demon to become human, he had to drink all the water in the river, the source of human life.

The demon galloped to the river and lapped up all the water until it burst, its stomach no longer able to hold the water. A thick layer of droplets floated in the air, concealing the boy from other evil spirits as he made his way home.

The mist now stays up in the mountains and appears only from time to time, when needed.

"And that is how the mist came to be," the old man said.

The fire had faded to rose ash, but in the warming wind and with his eyes on his grandfather, the boy didn't notice. Fallen red petals and wisps of ash floated through the air. The boy sat back on the swing, a thought coming to him: "Gramps, what happened to the house in Malate?"

"All the houses in the neighborhood burned to the ground," the old man said, "except ours. The house kept a dignified presence for a while, but the gate and the railings eventually rusted, the stained glass windows broke, the fountain and the statue almost tumbled to the ground. The house stood like a phantom haunting neighborhood strays and scaring even the soldiers away. The trees died and the flowers withered. Nothing was left of the garden but the cacti and the fragrance of dead flowers."

The phone in the house rang. The boy jumped to his feet. "I'll take it," he said, and after a glance at his grandfather, he disappeared into the living room. When he returned, the swirls of mist had dispersed and a bright full moon was shining.

"Who called, son?" the old man asked.

"Your agent, Gramps."

"What did he say?"

"Someone else wants to buy the house."

"What story did you make up this time?"

"I said that you were away and would call him soon."

"That's good."

"I also told him that…that you may keep the old house for the family. I have yet to see it after all." The boy pushed back his hood. He had a gentle face and a shy smile, as he looked at his grandfather and at the streaks of moonlight on the terrace.

The old man rose to his feet with the help of his cane and ruffled the boy's hair.

"But I just remembered something, Gramps." The boy drew away from the old man.

"What is it?"

"You still haven't told me what happened to the gardener."

The old man looked at the great valley before him.

The small town on a long, narrow swale below the hills shimmered in the moonlight. At its heart was an old church, spires visible above the houses and mirrored in the river. The ancient river, a doorway to the outside world, wound down the valley before dropping into the sea. In the morning the sun uncovered wooded hollows nestling between the ridges and golden streams flowing back to the riverbed. At sunset the mountaintops glowed pink, and the whistling of the wind mingled with the chatter of birds and the murmur of voices heading home.

Artillery shells squealed, their trails stretched across the sky, and a heavy pall of dust hung over the city.

"I can no longer hide you down there," Saigo said. "And I may not be able to save this house for long. We must find another place." His eyes surveyed the area. "There," he pointed at a corner of the house that had just burned down next door, the lot completely covered by debris. "With luck we may find the tunnel connecting to the church. I heard you have plenty of those here." He handed him a shovel. "Let's dig, Pepe. Let's dig quickly."

"Are we digging my grave, Saigo?"

Saigo dropped his shovel and turned to him. "No," he said, his hands set firmly on Pepe's shoulders, "we're digging our new home, our temporary home, that is. You'll be all right. You will not be alone."

As they were about to dig, a huge shell dropped from the sky and landed directly on another house.

“Go to the cellar!” Saigo told him. “I’ll be right back.”

Pepe dashed to the cellar, his muscles stiff and his body weak from hunger. He scanned the cellar that had been his home for three years. Gone were the sampaguita that covered the walls, and the candlestick and the phonograph; they had all been exchanged for food. He burrowed under the blanket on the mat covered with books. When all was quiet again, he sat up, lit the oil lamp, and opened the only book Saigo had yet to read to him.

Hours later, when Saigo still had not returned, he was seized by panic. The thought of Saigo in danger made him crawl out of the cellar to look for him, for the first time ignoring his warning.

The blanket around his body made him nearly invisible in the smoke-filled air. He called out Saigo’s name, his voice hoarse with alarm. But all he heard were fireworks and voices wailing. Suddenly he heard the thump of shoes. His heart started pounding. He dropped to the ground, covering himself with the blanket. A man appeared. He paused for a moment when he saw the covered figure on the ground, pulled out a weapon and aimed it at the figure, but then changed his mind and headed for the house. The thump of shoes died away. Pepe felt a tap on his shoulder. He jumped. It was Saigo. He pulled Pepe close and hugged him.

“You’ll be all right, child. You’ll be all right,” he said. He told Pepe to run back to the cellar, and then he slipped off and vanished into the house.

As he was about to climb down into the cellar, Pepe heard a loud whine above him. It was the sound of the sky being torn apart. He ran back to the garden and saw a large black bird emerge from the smoke and hover overhead. At almost the same time, a shot rang out in the

house. Trees lurched and the grass rippled in the wake of the large black bird. Thick swirls of dust rose from the ground. He covered his ears. His vision blurred and he felt queasy. He thought he would faint when the large black bird descended and giant men from the sky reached out to pull him up and carry him away. He cried out Saigo's name, the wind whipping his spine, but the clatter of the black bird's wings drowned out his cry. As the large black bird lifted off with him and its wings swept the smoke aside, he looked down and searched for Saigo but could not see him anywhere. He saw only the roof of the old house and the skeletons of trees around it. One of the giants offered him a candy but he shook his head. He looked at the red city on the horizon, the burning ships on the bay, and the golden streaks of sunset.

Then, before the large black bird flew away, Pepe saw Saigo.

He was sitting on the grass against a leafless guava tree, his arm bathed in blood. A gust of wind pushed the swing gently and spun around the dry fountain. A red petal dropped on his forehead. Another brushed his cheek. Then a shower of them, from the back of the house, bright red blossoms gliding past him into the air. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigar and put it in his mouth. A faint smile crossed his face, as he puffed out invisible smoke and looked up at the large black bird soaring into the sky.