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Two for the price of one

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ABSTRACT

'Two for the Price of One' was written when the author was a student at Goddard College's MFA in Creative Writing Program in Plainfield, Vermont. It is a self-contained memoir excerpt whose major theme is the child's developing sense of responsibility, and it explores the universality of dread at the knowledge of one's own guilt. The events recounted take place in Metro Manila, Philippines, during the early 1990s. The piece is a chapter from a larger work in progress that juxtaposes the author's tumultuous childhood in the Philippines, with his migration to and fragmentary life in the United States.

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Matt circled our bed, scratching his bowl-cut head with his tan arms. 'Oh no. This looks bad', he said. It was already bedtime, past night prayers, yet somehow, I'd managed to find a way to get into trouble.

'Help me remove the sheets, quick', I pleaded with my older brother. 'We don't have much time before –'

Nana Ming, the housekeeper, suddenly entered the room. It was her room, too, in which she slept on her own bed. She brought two ceramic chamber pots, one wider than the other. Fearing that we'd trip and fall, grandma Amparo – father's mother – forbade us children from going to the bathroom downstairs at night.

Matt and I tried to block the mess I'd created from Nana Ming's view, but she was so much taller than us that it was futile. Her eyes popped out. 'What in the world happened?' she asked.

Right then and there, I started crying. Nana Ming never doled out punishment, but grandma did, and I was worried she might tell her. Grandma had once caught me yelling *Putang ina mo* ('Your mother is a cunt') at my eldest brother Mark, who was taunting me from the top of the stairs, saying my nose was the size of a tomato. She removed one of her wooden slippers and struck me in the buttocks with it. When I said that I'd heard her say those exact words to a neighbour, she struck me again for my impudence. It wasn't so much the pain that I dreaded, but the humiliation accompanying it.

Nana Ming saw the ink stain, a black archipelago surrounded on all sides by blue. Between sobs, I told her that I'd found a funny looking bottle in one of the drawers.

Curious, I wanted to know what was inside, but the cap was screwed on so tightly that my efforts to pry the bottle open ended up splattering the ink all over the bed.

'Please don't tell on me. I didn't mean to do it.'

She sat me down on her bed and started fanning me with her straw mat fan. 'If madam hears you crying, she's gonna wanna know why. Then there's no way we can keep this a secret.' She got up, pulled the stained sheets off, and tossed them into the hamper. 'There. Problem solved.'

I watched her replace the sheets with new ones – white this time. They smelled like moth balls. It amazed me how easily she could make problems go away. 'Thank you, Nana Ming', I said.

Nana Ming gave me a big hug and sniffed my neck and armpits. She loved the smell of my hair and skin and seized every chance to get a whiff before bed. Though it was strange, I didn't mind; I liked the attention.

'You're welcome, my dear. Now wipe them tears off your face.'

*

Nana Ming sliced the watermelon in half, and each half in fourths. It wasn't very big, but its dark green rind and red-as-lipstick centre dripped with so much fluid, I knew we were in for a delicious treat. I took a seat at the kitchen table and watched Nana Ming sashay to the sink with the knife and cutting board. She was a morbidly obese woman in her fifties, and for that reason wore loose-fitting clothes.

I took delight in watching her chase after mice and cockroaches. The rolls of fat on her body responded to her every movement like a seismograph. Each stomp of her foot sent fierce vibrations through her sagging arms and belly, not to mention her breasts, which were the size of cantaloupes. I'd seen them bared; they were almost sentient, the brown nipples like watchful eyes. I liked to pretend that it was her breasts that scared vermin away.

She wasn't always this fat, she'd told me, and I'd seen pictures backing her claim. Father was also in these pictures, but much younger – fifteen to twenty years younger – and skinnier. Nana Ming had started out as a junior maid in grandma Amparo's manor, and over the decades, worked her way up to housekeeper. Now, she enjoyed free rein over the kitchen, barking orders at her subordinates. I would often watch her cook, knowing she'd let me have a taste without my having to ask.

Cressa, my first cousin once removed, took a seat next to me. She'd been staying with us at grandma's for a few days now; I didn't understand why. My brothers and I lived at the manor, away from mother and father, during school days because of the shorter commute. But Cressa wasn't even old enough to be in school. She was only four – two years younger than I was.

The girl had a habit of following me around like grandma's pathetic poodles, doing whatever I was doing, sitting wherever I was sitting, which I found more annoying than flattering. Sometimes I just wanted her to disappear. I thought she was an attention hog, and I didn't like the idea of her replacing me as the youngest in the household.

'Where's my share?' Cressa demanded. She loved watermelons, and was even more impatient for her share than I was.

'It's coming, my dear', replied Nana Ming, who ate her portion while standing. She took two pink plates from the wooden dish rack, one for me and one for Cressa. On each she placed two generous slices of the fruit.

Like a piglet, Cressa mashed her face into the watermelon, making loud slurping noises. The girl had no table manners whatsoever. Father would have surely yelled at me had I done such a thing in front of him. She ate even the white part of the rind, and might have devoured the green part, too, had Nana Ming not taken it away from her. There was juice all over her sleeveless white shirt, and food particles in her black chin-length hair. If it wasn't for her light complexion, I'd have mistaken her for a beggar child, a *pulubi* – which is exactly what Nana Ming called her.

I couldn't eat as freely as Cressa did because I was already in my school uniform; Nana Ming had bathed me, powdered me, and even combed my hair. I was envious that Cressa got to stay home all day, watching cartoons on grandma's TV, or watching Nana Ming water plants in the backyard.

Just when I finished my first slice, Cressa demanded a third. 'I want more!' the girl said petulantly.

Nana Ming refused. 'We gotta save some for the others, sugar pie.'

Cressa started banging her hands on the table. The banging was loud and rhythmic, like two for every second or heartbeat, accompanied by her chanting, 'More, more, more.'

I found it so unbearable to listen to that I finally snapped. 'First you act like a pig, now you act like a monkey!' I screamed into her ears.

Cressa was startled, then her eyes began to water. 'You're mean', she said. 'I don't like you anymore. I don't like it *here* anymore.'

'If you don't like it here, then leave!'

Cressa was taken aback. So was Nana Ming, who said, 'That wasn't a nice thing to say.' I considered apologising to Cressa, but felt that her poor behavior justified my harsh words.

I continued eating as if nothing had happened. Then I drank my glass of calamondin juice, which Nana Ming had prepared by squeezing a handful of the marble-size limes into a pitcher of hot water, then adding sugar. When it was time to go, I grabbed my book bag and walked with Nana Ming to the front gate.

I waved goodbye to Cressa, but she didn't look in my direction. She just sat mute at the kitchen table, fiddling with her fingers.

Nana Ming gave me my daily allowance of five pesos and pried open the rusted gate. Together, we walked up a mud path to the end of the block, where we flagged the nearest approaching tricycle.

Cressa isn't going anywhere, I thought.

*

When classes ended, I found Nana Ming outside the school compound, chatting with the security guard. 'Want me to carry that for you?' she asked, gesturing to my book bag as we walked towards the central boulevard and into the market.

'No, I'll manage.' I lifted the sleeves of my school uniform. 'See, I've got muscles', I said, grinning.

Nana Ming chuckled. 'That's very impressive', she exclaimed, pretending to be astonished.

'Why are we going the market?' I asked.

'It's a surprise.'

But Nana Ming wasn't able to keep her surprise secret for very long. The moment we reached the fish stand, I knew she was going to make grilled surgeonfish for dinner. I

was elated. I loved surgeonfish. I loved watching the skin roast over the fire, and I loved dipping the juicy white meat in vinegar.

Nana Ming haggled fiercely with the vendor. She summoned the name of another vendor, who had supposedly given her a better offer. By the look in his eyes, the vendor before us clearly recognised the name of this competitor. Nana Ming suddenly feigned disinterest in the poor man's merchandise. I almost felt bad for him. She scoffed at him and his 'outrageous prices', turned to leave, but as soon as she began walking the man begged for her to stop. 'Fine, lady. You win. Sixty pesos per kilo.'

A smile began to form at the corner of Nana Ming's lips. I smiled, too. Her victory was my victory. She was careful not to show it to the vendor, though. She walked back towards him with her chin up. She carried herself regally – a real queen of the marketplace.

Nana Ming said she needed to buy more things. She never learned how to read or write properly, so she never made grocery lists. Still, she didn't seem to have much need for the alphabet. The ease with which she catalogued items in her mind amazed me, as did her ability to find what she was looking for with one quick glance. The only time she ever needed help in this department was in deciphering the letters sent to her by her nephews and nieces from the provinces, outside of Metro Manila. Because I was the voracious reader in the household, I happily read these letters aloud to her, just as I happily read grandma's newspaper in the morning.

I went to the nearest candy stall. Nana Ming told me to stay within her line of sight. The marketplace was huge and crowded, and it was easy for children to get separated from their parents. I loved the marketplace, but my pale skin made me very conscious of the dangers it posed. I had the palest skin in school and at home – even paler than Cressa's. To top it all, my hair wasn't black; it was brown. According to grandma, that made me a veritable target for evil men who kidnapped children for ransom, children who *looked* like they belonged to wealthy families. And I believed her, especially after a boy from my school went missing. But it wasn't because he was pale-skinned. It was because his parents showed off their affluence, by buying him a pager and colored underwear when everybody else wore white Hanes briefs. The boy was eventually rescued, but the police had to get involved.

A glass jar of pink bon-bons caught my eyes. The color, the gelatinous composition, the confectioner's sugar coating – all of it nearly made my mouth water. 'Twenty-five centavos apiece', said the vendor, an aging woman with graying hair. A milky white film covered both of her eyes.

I reached into my pockets and found just enough coins to buy one piece. I wanted two, but I'd used up the rest of my allowance on fish balls, cheese ice cream, and raw mangoes with shrimp paste.

But then an idea came to me.

I gave the old lady my coins. She unscrewed the metal lid and tilted the jar towards me. I dug my hand in deep, but instead of grabbing one bon-bon I grabbed two. My heart was palpitating. I was afraid I was going to be caught. I yanked my hand out immediately and stuffed the pilfered items into my mouth.

The lady smiled warmly at me. She did not suspect a thing. I felt terrible. I was now a thief. My teachers would say that I'd broken one of God's Ten Commandments: 'Thou shalt not steal.' Worse, I'd conned an old woman, who probably had children and grandchildren of her own to feed.

I fled the scene of my crime and ran to Nana Ming.

*

We returned to the manor to find the junior maids in panic. One of them, an olive-skinned teenager named Emily, who coughed as much as she smiled, approached Nana Ming with great trepidation.

'What's the matter?' demanded Nana Ming.

'Well, it's just –'

'Quit dawdling and just say it.'

'Cressa's disappeared!'

Apparently, Nana Ming had forgotten to latch the gate behind her, and the junior maids had not been 'vigilant' enough in their watch. But none of that mattered. I was the one who had told Cressa to leave.

Nana Ming dispatched Emily to deliver the news to Uncle Dandy – Cressa's grandfather, and father's older brother. In two hours' time, both he and grandma Amparo arrived at the manor. A meeting was held in the conservatory. Nana Ming and her junior maids were summoned. I was not.

I remained outside in the courtyard, with grandma's poodles. I couldn't hear everything through the screen door, but what I heard was enough to implicate me. All the maids had heard my outburst in the morning.

'Do not blame a child for your incompetence!' shrieked my grandmother. 'What if Cressa gets kidnapped?'

'Yes, madam', sighed the maids. 'We're terribly sorry, madam.'

I couldn't stand that people were being reprimanded for my wrongdoings. Though Nana Ming had not uttered a word, I knew that the blame fell heavily on her. She was the housekeeper. I also worried that father would find out.

The meeting lasted until sundown. When Uncle Dandy saw me, he gave me a sympathetic smile, patted my head, and left.

Nobody said a word over dinner. We ate our porridge solemnly, while Nana Ming put away the bag of surgeonfish. There would be no roasting them that night.

*

After dinner, I hurried upstairs, passing by the oil painting of grandma and grandpa, who died of a heart attack before I was born. The old couple looked straight at me, following me with their eyes, their smiles half-mocking. Thinking that the painting was possessed by some evil spirit, I ran.

Kid-napped.

I remembered a *Manila Times* article I'd read. It mentioned something about a little girl being raped. I didn't know what 'raped' meant, but I knew it was bad because they'd found pieces of broken bottle inside of her. The article said she later died of an infection.

When Nana Ming entered the bedroom, I was praying to the crucifix on the wall. Praying that Cressa would turn up soon. Praying that she would neither get kidnapped nor 'raped'. Praying that Nana Ming would not be punished severely, or at all. Praying that I might be forgiven. And promising that I'd do good from now on.

'I'm sorry Nana Ming', I said.

She sat on my bed, next to my already sleeping brother, and wrapped her arms around me. 'You've got nothing to apologise for, my dear.'

Nana Ming tucked me under the sheets. Before turning off the lamp, she whispered, 'Now wipe them tears off your face.'

*

I returned to the candy stall by myself, without Nana Ming. I could feel everyone staring at me – the fish vendor, the fishball lady, the toymaker. But they were just tending to their customers, minding their own merchandise.

I gave the sweets vendor fifty centavos. With unsteady hands, she unscrewed the lid and tilted the glass jar towards me. Instead of grabbing two bon-bons, I took only one.

A few days later, news arrived that Cressa had been found. Fortunately, she'd been taken in by a hospitable family, who alerted the authorities immediately. According to them, a pretty looking girl like Cressa, however poorly dressed, could not have been a parentless *pulubi*. And they were right.

Cressa went home with Uncle Dandy. He promised to buy her all the sweeties she wanted. She would never again spend another night at the manor, and I can't say that I blame her.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

Mike Alvarez received his MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, and is pursuing a PhD in Communication and a Graduate Certificate in Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Mike is also a Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow, and is writing a book titled *The Paradox of Suicide and Creativity*, which will be published by Rowman & Littlefield's Lexington imprint.