

TALKBOY

By

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Set mostly in Guam, Isla Marianas, *Talkboy* is a collection of short stories depicting Jose's growth from adolescence into adulthood. Oral traditions weave with a post-colonial narrative demonstrating resistance, rage, and understanding. A grandmother describes her experiences during World War II. Detention is painting bus-stops under the sun with fist fights. A spirit visits for only a brief moment. *Talkboy* ultimately shares a deep love and appreciation for home.

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Dedication

For my familia.

No One is an Island – For Georgie by Teresia Teaiwa

I understand that we are islands
because of the ocean.

I understand that the ocean
has the power to separate and unite us.

I want to be an ocean!

What keeps us here?
Islands in an ocean.
What makes us leave?
Islands in an ocean.
What calls us back?
Islands in an ocean.

Hale' Chamoru – Chamoru Genealogy Project Quote

Fan hasso i mañaina yan i pengga-ta maseha amånu gaige hao.

Remember our ancestors and our ways no matter where you may be.

Talkboy

Side A

Nowhere Near

Nobody lives anywhere close to Uncle Jose and I haven't seen him in over a decade.

When he passes away we have his body flown back to Guam from Philadelphia.

Shipping his body is cheaper than if he were to fly alive. Do the rosary-do the funeral-do the-whole-damn-depressing-thing. He dies of unknown reasons at forty-four years old.

Forty-four years of age. Unknown reasons. Doctors can't find any sort of abnormality or disease of any kind.

Mom says it's because of loneliness. She also tells me he used to love recording stories whenever he felt homesick. We always tell him to call home more often but he never does. I take leave from teaching and book a flight straight for here. Uncle Jose's got this one bedroom apartment on Spring Garden and 12th. Or is 12th and Spring Garden? I come alone because mom's busy pulling sixteen hour shifts at GMH and says that seeing unc's home is gonna make her uncomfortable. After a day wrapping shot glasses and beer mugs, I find a box of audio tapes in his bedroom closet. This has got to be uncle's stash of stories. Buried under layers of jeans and khakis in a see-through Tupperware. Along with a tape recorder, Talkboy, along its side in small print. It's old school. Fat like a can of spam. Laying across the plastic box, a strip of duct tape with, Memories, written in black marker.

Listening to this has got to be personal. But uncle Jose is gone. And I would've loved to have gotten to know him more. I move to the sofa to look out the window. Also, my flight leaves next week right before Christmas rush. So I've got some time. I aim the sofa out the window, shower, and come back with three bottles of cabernet sauvignon and uncle Jose's collection of tapes. The first tape I listen to has written in

silver marker, Nana 2008. I sink into the lazy-boy and place the recorder on its armrest.

Okay uncle Jose, let's see what you've got to say. Side, A.

Click ... WRRR -

Maria

I'm pretty sure talking shit about my Nana counts as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Nana is sick. Her fever seems serious. This pulls the familia together from California, Texas, Hawai'i, Saipan and of course, right here in Guam without hesitation. It doesn't matter how old we are. Whether one's a doctor, teacher, a custodian, we all love grandma. None of us say outright, I love you nana.

There's love in the hands which tug weeds in the back yard. Brown sticky shoulders bumping against one another in the kitchen. All the windows are open and the breeze doesn't stop. Usually, hardly any wind ever comes around nana's house.

My uncles usually hang out at the back yard. A cooler of Budlight and Corona sits in the middle of their circle. Two oil drums turned barbecue pits at the side. They make me chop tangantangan some days to dry in the tin shed out back. Aunties drink coffee around the table, leaning in when it's their turn to tell a story.

Before I leave the island for the twelfth time I need to sniff the back of my grandmother's hand like it's my last time. I'm not wishing for death of course. I just really like coconut oil.

Nana reminds me when she's watching *Young and the Restless*, when I'm pushing the cart in Hafa Adai mart, when another relative passes away, when GPA cuts the power twice in the same month, and when women leave me; *Pain is temporary. Bear it.*

I boil a pot of water for chicken kudo. Nana likes arozcado but I always end up making my rice too soupy for her. Cuz I like soupy. Slurping is half my fun. Today, me and my sister Tasi have the duty of taking care of her. Tas is two years older than me. She's actually my half-sister. She's half haole. Nana said mom dated a guy in the military before she met dad. Mom packed up, moved to the states but didn't like it. Nana says she felt suffocated by the environment.

Whenever I ask grandma about it she says, "Something happened, she screwed up." Nana reassures me that she will do her best with me and Tasi. Until this day, grandma still buys me t-shirts for no reason and offers to make me her favorite chorizo fried rice on Sunday mornings. I make fried rice for her now but she jokes that I still have much to learn. Nana does note, that me and Tasi's cooking skills are improving.

Tas is about to get her BA in Nursing at the University Of Washington. She can definitely rescue me from severe ear infections or broken bones.

Growing up, Nana used to read stories to Tasi a lot. Tas loved the ones that would talk back to her when she pulled on the tab. Grandma would take her shopping for blouses and shoes. Take her to McDonald's whenever she asked and got her a strawberry milkshake every time. Where ever she is, grandma talks to anyone about Tasi. 76 gas station. Barrigada Mayor's office. Hagatna post office. Micronesian Mall. Kmart. San Roke church. Front pew with all the techas on rosary evenings.

That's the basics summed up. Truth is – it always killed me, seeing Nana spend most of her time with her. In family photos, right – All the cousins would huddle together. And she'll be off in the corner or not in the shot at all.

“Nana's getting better, right? Slowly but surely.” Tas stirs the pot, dropping in onions and carrots. Slips some pumpkin tips in without a splash.

“She told me yesterday that if I pray enough Hail Marys eventually Mary would hire someone else. Maybe a Saint Thomas. And we'd all be praying fifteen Hail Thomases. And that I should spend that kind of energy on my paintings instead.”

“You should paint something to lighten her up, Jose.” She takes the spoon out. “Something that makes her feel like she's out getting fresh air again. And don't paint none of that dark gothic shit either. Fuck around and give her a stroke.” She gasps and knocks on the tiled counter. She pulls a wooden cutting board to her, knocks on it. “Son of a.” She is referring to my phase of an obsession with typhoons. Especially freeze frames of being in its eye. It's beautiful. A wall of dark clouds a mile high up all around. And I'm in the middle of its chaos with the sun shining through with cool breezes.

“I'll think of something.” I take over stirring the pot at a low simmer. “She used to like teaching us weaving. You still remember how to make a turtle? I can still make my short finned fish. How about I make one that has us stringing something together on the old living room mat? She'll like that, yeah?”

“You remember when I dropped the tuperware of chicken kelaguen on that mat? Holy. But yeah, that's a good idea. Sounds good. Chagi this fan, tell me what you think.” She scoops a table spoon, blows it softly.

I try it. It's monge'. "Definitely gof monge'. She'll dig that, man." I smack my teeth. "Yeah, maybe I should paint the mat with your mess all over it."

"Okay, *man*." She imitates me with a deep bass of a voice. "Can you not be so gross, Jose? Why don't you make yourself useful? Grab a bowl and go give her some. Don't forget her glass of water." Nana likes to eat with a fork and a spoon. I make sure it's there with today's *Marianas Variety*. "Latsadik." Tas pushes me away with her eyes.

...

In my grandmother's room she tells me stories. About what it's like growing up in a Japanese camp. About how many guys tried to win her heart before my grandfather. About her grandmother, a master Surihana. Today she's sharing one about the war. She just starts talking about these things out of nowhere sometimes.

Nana also likes to joke that if she dies she will haunt me. Wait until I'm busy making love and right when I'm about to cum – she'll blow my face. Whisper into my ear, Buenas Jose.

"Are you listening, Jose? Jose."

I blink a few times. One of my uncle's cockfighters perches on Nana's fence. Its red feathered chest facing the street.

"Earth to Jose. Earth. To Jose."

Jose responds, Earth! "Sorry Nana, hu'ungan. I'm listening."

"So, anyway, before I was rudely interrupted." She waves her hands to an invisible crowd around her bed. "I was walking out of the old church in Malesso'. You know –"

The one Japanese soldiers raped young girls in. Every other evening. Every evening if they liked you. After the liberation, sailors called for *comfort* women as well.

Her hands could brush a thousand hills. “And I had my Nana’s hand and I squeezed it.” She winces. “I squeezed her hand so hard – so hard – I’m surprised she didn’t bend down and slap my face! We ran to our neighbors shed. Hid under that thin tin roof. We used our Bibles to shield our eyes. My nana was shouting to the families running down the road to the kids, *Adahi y chalan!*” She weaves an explosion in the air. “And *kaboom*. The whole street lit up in a flash, boy. But I held onto nana’s hand for my dear life. *Ai*, my hand was hurting after-” She sinks back into her bed. A body pillow at each of her sides. The portrait of Jesus with his palms out, watching over. You know, the one with a stream of red down one side and blue on the other.

“I think that was too much excitement, even for me. That’s enough stories for now my boy. I’m getting a little tired.” She shuts her eyes.

“No worries Nana, get some rest.”

I grab the dishes, refill her glass of water, and turn the doorknob so it doesn’t latch too loudly.

There’s a picture of Pope John Paul II in the hallway from when he visited Guam in the 80’s. Thousands went to the cathedral that day for him.

I give him a high five when I pass by.

...

Tasi is passed out on the couch. It’s so hot today my balls stick to my thigh. I’ve already showered twice this afternoon. I want to wake her up just so I can hear her skin peel off the plastic.

I shouldn't wake her up. Should I? I move the lazy boy a few feet to the right. I slide the 3 foot tall porcelain Mother Mary to the left. I want a clear precise route of escape to the front yard from here.

I tilek her ear. So hard I see the blood rush to the skin. She begins a low growl.

And I take off.

Her skin rips from the couch right before I push the screen door open. She screams something in Chamoru. I'll be sure to add that inspiration to my next typhoon masterpiece later. My breath is quick and when I come back into the kitchen I remind her that it's her turn to go and give grandma her dinner.

Every word that comes out is a breath I try to catch.

She slaps the back of my shoulders with the broom. When I turn around she's staring at my chest. Her shout drowns out the thump in my chest. Fucking stabbing me with the bottle of the broom handle. She laughs.

By the time we both catch our breaths I remind her about Nana's dinner. And that it's her turn to cook tonight.

Chicken thighs that our uncles barbecued earlier today. I make a cup of finadeni to go along with it. Nana makes it the best mixing soy sauce and peppers the way she likes. Nana says a donne' tree that has never been picked has the hottest peppers.

She picks from the same bush of donne' in her back yard, everytime. Plus, grandma will know if it's Food Network or not.

Tas pours some tea, "This is the longest Monday in the history of the world." Humidity helps this process. "Can you make another pitcher of iced tea? Don't make it sweet either. I can't stand it too sweet."

I push her down the hall with my nods. “I can’t stand it too sweet.” I say this in the softest squeakiest voice possible.

She takes her zori off and flings it at my face. It bounces off my nose and a small plume of dust makes me cough.

...

Tas calls me into the room to join her. Says Nana wants to tell the both of us a story. One right before I brush my teeth and call it a night, sounds good.

I walk into the room in my boxers.

Tasi scoffs, “Tai respetu, Jose? Nana can see your dick swinging. Go put on some clothes.” I come back with a pair of cargo shorts stained with water color and charcoal paints. “I guess that’s better.” She shrugs.

“Ekunguk, you two. Sah this is a sweet one.” Tas sits beside her on the bed. I sit on the floor near the window to catch some breeze. A fan oscillates at a corner in the room. “So, it was the final year of the Japanese enslavement. I had gone across the village to deliver a bag of rice to one of the cadets. I don’t know their names. They were always changing. Monday was Satosan, Tuesday was Masatosan. And so on and so on.” She clears her throat. “Well on this particular walk a bee stung me. It hurt so bad I didn’t deliver the rice on time. The walk was usually a half-hour. It took me an hour-and-a-half just to limp there. That made the Japanese very angry. Very very.” She shrinks in place. Stares at her toes underneath the sheets. “Later, on the *same* day, me and a few other women went with two soldiers to fetch cigarettes and sake for a party they were having. One of the Japanese asked if I had a husband. When I didn’t answer

him – he stabbed my *leg*. I still have the scar.” She points to her left thigh. “The bastard plucked it out and kept on marching. My leg was a faucet.”

“How’d you walk Nana?” Tasi asks.

“I ripped my sleeve sah I was lucky to be wearing a long sleeved shirt. I tied it on the top of my leg here.” She reaches for her leg hidden under the floral quilt. Points at it. “Lanat he stabbed me and yelled some bullshit again, his baka. He proceeded to then continue walking down the line. We never stopped marching. No matter how hungry or thirsty we were.”

I pinch my shirt at the chest and start to fan myself with it.

“When we reached the camp they tied me up to a wooden post in the playground.”

She pauses to catch her breath. Tas and I don’t rush her. “They had the nerve! They beat my leg purple. The right leg this time, I guess they figured my left had suffered enough. And once they couldn’t tell the difference from blue and purple – they left me there. Those fucking Japanese didn’t quit, boy. Lemme tell you.” I get up and move the fan closer to her. “They left me there well into the evening. Until they sent my sister to untie me.” Nana takes a breath to clasp her hands. “It was quiet. Your aunties took me down from the pole. Dressed me. Cleaned my cuts. She clears her throat. “I was walking okay two months after that. See, they could rape me and your aunties but that is *not* how we wanted to be remembered.” She looks at me and then back to Tasi. “Both of you need to realize that’s why its important we tell our stories. We are survivors. Those kinds of people ... They can’t live in your heart rent free, jiablu.” She takes off her reading glasses. “Now. Both of you. Go take a shower and get some sleep. Make sure everyone outside has enough pillows. Jose, there’s extra blankets in the hallway closet.”

Tas tucks her in. “Don’t worry, Nana. We got this.”

“And Jose. Go brush your teeth jlablu. Sah I can smell your breath from here. It’s kalakas. Do you kiss all the girls in the city with that nasty ass mouth?”

That makes me laugh. It makes Tasi laugh even harder.

“Cover. Your. Mouth.” My grandmother says as she pulls a pillow towards her.

I walk out, blowing my death on Tas’ back. She turns around to hit me with a right-cross. Straight into and down my chest.

“See what happens when you mess with the ladies, Jose? Nobody likes to be harassed, stupid. Now go to bed.” Nana yawns and shuts her eyes.

I turn the knob so the latch doesn’t shut too loudly.

...

When Tasi screams for me from Nana’s room I fear the worst. My steps try to hurry like a sprint but the house isn’t that big. Sure feels so right about now.

Grandma’s not on the bed. I only see Tasi’s back at the master bathroom’s doorway. Grandma spits fluoride into the sink. “Lanat, there’s no need to scream. It’s like you won the lottery Tasi, my girl.” She wipes her face with a towel. “An old woman walks to the bathroom and suddenly everybody loses their mind. That’s the problem with your generation. Panic panic cry cry sad sad. Do you want a trophy?” She pokes my chest. “Mai’ la. I want to see my garden.” Tasi takes her right arm. I take her left.

We spend the next hour in the yard. Grandma reminds me when to pick the pumpkin tips and that she wants her avocado tree to continue growing long after her death. She loves avocado and believes everyone should, too.

I like cutting thin slices of it to dip in soy sauce and wasabi. There's a pot with an orchid, just a little longer than my pinky, resting behind one of the tree stumps. Last week, I cut down a dead coconut tree with the chainsaw and make chairs out of them. I bend down and place the orchid in the sun. Nana thanks me.

"Let me tell you a story about the first orchid I ever grew." She sits on a tree stump. The coconut tree just stopped bearing fruit. Leaves too. Tasi goes inside for some Kool-Aid before Nana begins. She hands us each a glass. "Now, as you may already know – orchids aren't from Guam. So you're wondering where I got it, right?" I don't have time to squeeze in a word. Tas raises a finger with a thought. "Well, I'll tell ya!" She squeezes her hands under her lap. "Now, in my experience, orchids were something like a reward. An incentive for a week's worth of hard work." She pauses. She laughs. "I stole it from the Japanese captain's wife. She always kept a few orchids under her bedroom window outside. They were pretty. White with purple on their edges."

"You didn't get caught?" Tasi asks.

"Of course not! Lanat, everyone that saw the orchids afterwards were scared. But not me."

"Where'd you grow them?" I ask.

"Right here." She points to the backyard. "I grew them back there when we had two taotaomona trees. I planted the orchids between them."

"We had taotaomona trees in our backyard? How come you never told us?" I ask but I'm really nervous.

"Relax Jose. The trees were from Hawai'i. There not the kind like ours."

I don't know if that makes me feel any better. They look a lot like ours.

“Anyway, the Japanese never came around the taotaomona trees. There were talks going around in the camp that taotaomona were ripping soldiers' guts out because they would pee in the jungle without asking permission.”

“I wonder what could have done that.” Tas places a finger on her lip. “People spreading rumors? Get the Japanese nervous?”

“I just said. Hello.” Nana taps on an invisible microphone, “Clean your ears with a Q-tip neni girl, the TAO-TAO-MO-NA. Came and ripped their intestines out – for all the frogs all the babui and all of God's good creatures.”

I sip my Kool-Aid. Stain my lips an orange red.

“My orchids grew there until they died. And amazingly, the captain's wife never asked where they went. That woman can rot in Hell.” She points out the window, “I always ended my walk in the garden. With my orchids.”

I got nothing.

“Jose. Why don't you make yourself useful and go run the bathtub for me, nen. I want to soak for a bit before my favorite soap comes on.”

Tasi helps her to her feet.

I stomp the ground at that rooster before I go in. Fucking thing flares its neck at me. Always so damn loud.

...

Painting the human body is a challenge. Painting two young cousins weaving more mess out of coconut barbs a bigger one. Painting this for Nana?

“Why does my right shoulder look like I bench press? And my left looks like I have four fingers?” She examines her left hand. Counts uno dos and at tres gives me a middle finger. “Fix that, *man*.”

I think of twenty different ways to smother myself with a pillow. I take a damp sponge to fixing our bodies’ proportion. A quick swipe to the arms. Sketch an outline.

“Better. It’s starting to make sense, Jose.”

“You know what really makes sense?”

“Not your face.” She grabs her car keys and heads out. “I’m going to get a movie. Want anything?” Before I could say anything she cuts me off again. “I mean, if it doesn’t involve your face.”

My eyes go into at’tan baba mode.

I start painting again. Tas’ favorite yellow pair of zoris, the ones with the flag of Brazil on its toe divider. I paint it at the mat’s side, leaning on my light up shoes.

After two days’ worth of painting, an additional two more to let the paint settle, I knock three times on Nana’s door with it under my arm. A standard canvas. Same size as Pope John Paul II right here. I give him a fist bump. He’s clutching a staff of the cross.

“Hey Nana. I got a little something for you.”

She’s reading her bible by the window. Seated on her bathroom stool. Blowing cigarette smoke outside. “What you got there, Jose?” A koko chirps outside.

I explain the painting to her. How I miss weaving in her living room. And why Tasi’s shoulders have blotted lines. She laughs.

“Tasi looks like only her upper body is dancing.”

I agree with her but also remind her that Tas can be a rowdy party-goer if she wants. We are not leaving Guam with Tasi looking like an angel. Nope. I tell Tasi this. She just rolls her eyes.

“Jose, let me tell you a story before you go back to school.” Nana kills her cigarette. Sends me to get her a glass of water and I come right back. She lights another. “On the day the Japanese left the village everyone had already fled into the jungle. The lucky ones, for that matter. Several were taken to the caves. And you already know what happened in the cave.” She lowers her head. Raises it again to blow smoke from below the window. A layer of it floats below the ceiling. “My Nana had already ran into the jungle with everyone else. I stayed behind. We heard rumors that the G.I.s were coming. So, I wanted to watch what happened.”

She looks at the ceiling. “There were gunshots in the distance. BR-RAT BR-RAT. Explosions in the rice fields.” She opens her palms the same way she hands orchids to me. “I looked down the trail to the fields expecting to see a rush of G.I.s. Chunks of cement from the captain’s barracks were flying all out into the air.” Her fingers flick the air like she’s nipping thorns. “The Japanese fired into the jungle. It was like they were trying to cut the jungle in half. They disappeared in there. Later. With all that fire and smoke.”

The rooster yells outside. I suck my teeth.

“Leave that chicken alone. It’s too stupid and will probably die its next fight.”

I sit at the foot of the bed. “So what happened? How long were you hiding for?”

She pulls a toke. “Stop moving around so much, jiablu. If you keep still I can tell you the story.” She looks at me for a second like I just won the award for being smartest

in the class. “We hid for just a little bit after that. One of the G.I.s spoke Chamoru, waved us to come out of the jungle.” She looks at her hands. “Water was the first thing they gave us. Followed by chocolates. Gave us each white shirts and pine green slacks. I can’t forget that green. It was so itchy and stiff.”

“So everything was okay, right?”

“The Japanese used to have us beat each other if we ever spoke Chamoru in their classroom. They would line us up – boys in one – girls in the other. And our two lines would face each other. The sensei would shout, Ichi! And you’d have to slap the person in front of you as hard as you can. Once. He went on, Ni! And two more hard slaps. My partner didn’t want to slap me hard. The sensei saw this.”

“What the hell.” I swear in front of Nana. I usually don’t.

“Hu’uh. The sensei picked him up by his collar and belt. And *threw* him against the chalkboard. We were just in elementary! Jiablu.” She rubs her cigarette butt deep into the astray. “When the United States came with their teachers. Everything was the same. Except if you spoke Chamoru instead of English, you were beaten at lunch time. Out in the courtyard again for all eyes to see. With a skinny stick of bamboo. Right there under the American flag.”

“What grade were you exactly, Nana?”

“Third and fourth grade.” She sits back in her chair. “Remember, Jose. When you go back to the states. Don’t allow anyone to walk all over your education. Be smart, Jose.” She takes the astray, flushes the grime down the drain. “Ni’ hi. Let’s go outside.”

She walks me out to the garage. Tasi already has the truck's engine warming up. Our flight leaves in two hours. But grandma doesn't want us to miss our flight or rush. So she encourages us to leave a little earlier.

Several uncles and aunties stay behind. Tas and I hug her again before jumping in the truck. Tasi opens her eyes wide when she fights off the crying. Looking like she's surprised during funerals and soaps. Nana smiles, wishing both of us a safe flight.

When I put the truck in reverse she says something. I roll the window down. "What's that Nana?"

She raises a finger. "I said, promise you'll come back. For a visit, ma' sea. Just for a visit."

Tasi beats me to her one last time. My belt takes an extra second to unbuckle. Tasi amens her first. I clasp Nana's right hand. When my nose touches her knuckles and I breathe in her coconut oil, I say, "Promise."

She places a shoebox into my hands.

"It's a tape recorder. For you and all your silly stories." She looks at it in my hand. "I didn't waste my time wrapping it. I figured, why should I wrap such a small thing? Waste of paper-waste of time. This isn't Christmas." She nods, "Un. It's old. I bought this for you when you were just seven years old because you couldn't stop moving or talking. I saved it though, until I thought you'd make it useful." Nana hugs me close. As if she was hanging off me. "Be happy. Be safe."

...

Back in Philadelphia, I piece together poster boards and lay them all out on the floor. Looks like a queen sized futon. I start a project just for my grandmother: The

hills of Talofo'fo'. I do this as messily as possible. My hands shake like they have caffeine in them but I'm too much in a hurry to get all my emotions out. Seeing her again left a certain kind of joy I can't put into words.

Paint drips blots that strain from my fingertips. I pray shades of grey, white, and black all together in between my hands. Then I use my palms to guide me all over the floor. I take turns between brushing and palming.

Then I don't care about my lines. And when my arm tenses from painting too much, I flick more paint onto the canvas. I punch the canvas. Take the back of my hand and slap the canvas. But I never scratch it. With every ounce of energy left in me, I push the oils out from underneath in my slopes and hills. Let my loneliness have a chance to speak through the muddy green.

At certain moments, if it requires my slow steady attention, my cheek comes close. A few inches away from it. I study every movement of every line. I change its course if it doesn't *feel* right.

My lower back begins to ache.

After several hours into the evening I take a break with some whisky. Stand back and take everything in.

Hills look washed out. As if someone doesn't want to ever see these hills for some reason. And I let the clouds float on their own, mixing oil with water.

I'm sure when Nana gets this in the mail her first words will be, Ai 'Sus Maria si Jose.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR – I nudge a picture frame of the family just a little closer to my bed. I don't need to move it. I need an excuse to touch it. An 8 X 11 shot of Tasi and Nana laughing over poker. I take this photo behind grandma's house. A panorama over money leaves and hibiscus already in bloom. Shaded under the lemai tree with nothing but pugua, a 12 Pack of Budweiser, and laziness.

This year I almost pour out my last Olde English from the refrigerator. I'm thinking, hey I'll pour out some for the familia back home, right? Keeping it real. But that's my last forty. Any money I have is for rent, keeping the living room light on, the bedroom light on, and the refrigerator cold. Grandma says I should start a fire with all the scratch canvases in my closet to keep me warm during this winter. In the beginning I think, I'm not gonna burn these things. These are precious to me even as garbage.

By the sixth time I burn everything, I say fuck it, and lose count.

What I wouldn't do for a heater right now. Holidays mock me the worst around here. I miss family around the table. There's no table in my apartment. I eat off the floor. Tomorrow's Thanksgiving. I'm gonna enjoy a bottle of Brooklyn Lager while staring at the red brick wall in my bedroom.

I'm not going to do that. Who does that?

Sometimes I feel so lost I forget all about Philadelphia. I forget the ninety-nine cent empanadas across the street. The surprised way my co-workers say I speak English well. So well, I should consider becoming a translator. Motherfucker, a translator for what?

It's winter, man. I shouldn't waste tapes on these fools. A boy returns my wallet once. I'm at the airport going through customs and it slips out. He tells me to be more careful about my belongings.

So, I don't know what I'm gonna do tomorrow. Taya family. taya lover. Just me and I with my Brooklyn Lager.

And two spicy level five pork empanadas.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR –

Where All The Love Goes For Jose

Our bodies roll around the asphalt, burning holes into my jeans at the knees. My head throbs and throbs until I squint hard enough to get the blood flowing to my forehead again. Flashes of white keep me from seeing what's at my sides. Pebbles find their way into my mouth.

Captain Bruher, my mentor for the latter part of my high school, lands a solid fist straight to my cranium. Ponging back and forth between the street and his one-tvos. Standing over me he doesn't look like much. Even though I'm sprawled out puffing-heaving-wheezing. When he fixes his collar I grab his ankle and yank him to the ground. He's heavy so he falls fast. I lock my legs around his right. Slip-his-foot-under-my-arm and turn to my side. He throws his fists at me, shaking, and shaking. Looking like the mahimahi I caught last summer. I stretch my legs long enough to their end and pause.

How can it be that I've come to this point? I trust this man. His family? I want one just like it.

No.

No, this isn't real. It can't be. Mr. Bruher, I'm going to break your ankle. Can I just say again, this isn't what I want, or wanted. I clench my teeth. Breathe through my

nose. He's screaming. His cries run out onto the street, into people's garages, and nobody tells me to stop.

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I meet Julie, only daughter to Bruher, in the church choir. Same practices held on Thursday nights with the local manamngu. Nana used to sing in this very same one. The first time she ever brought me here, she says I kept popping my gum throughout mass that she made me go to confession right after to apologize to pale'. I remember this. But I remember it differently. As I recall, pale' is just so *boring*. I don't apologize to him, I just say mass was great and that I think St. Peter probably shouldn't have denied Christ those times.

Mahnong Steve's roosters tell me it's almost time for practice. I swear if we sing Abe Maria. I don't think there's ever been any serious renovation in this church. Looks the same way it did back in my grandparents' wedding photos. Column. Column. Mosaic Saint. Altar. Mosaic Saint number two. Jesus Christo reaching his right hand out over the congregation, his left hand behind him, waiting for his mother and Magdalena.

You know what, whoever made this altar should be making millions of dollars.

Bruher gets stationed on island for two years and settles in this church. It's the nearest Catholic church to base, so that could be why. Not unless it's this Jesus.

Captain Bruher first reaches out for me when he needs a jumpstart to his minivan. Mass has just ended and I finished putting all the chairs back in Mahnong's shed. So many people have started coming to church that we have to put chairs out around its

walls. Canopies and everything. Mahnong Steve installs fans into the walls outside that oscillate right to left. They're made to be removable in case it rains or someone wants to steal them. He is the only one I know who smokes Marlboro reds.

"It's good for my complexion." He tells me.

My Toyota Hilux isn't the fastest when it's just started and I think that makes Bruher almost say, that's alright, I'll find another way, because his chin sinks deep into his chest like I stink.

After a few turns of the engine his van is humming nicely.

He introduces himself and invites me to have lunch with him and his family next Sunday after mass. He says he can't do today because now he wants to buy a new battery and then this would have never happened. We laugh. He puts on some aviators and says, "Hey, how old are you, Jose?"

I tell him.

"Because if you're interested, I know a buddy who can recommend some good colleges for you. He's actually, a recruiter for the Air Force. Not trying to pressure you or bring you down with this. I'm just putting it out there in case you'd be interested." He nods. "The Air Force will *pay* for your education, too. A friend of mine studied engineering and is retiring now with those skills honed and perfected – throughout all his career."

"Alright, alright." My head bobs up and down like I'm listening to a nice beat.

"Alright." He shakes my hand and we get into our cars.

Julie waves goodbye to me as they turn onto the freeway. Her light brown hair dark in the shade of the van. She's got a cute button nose that I can barely see from here. I pull into reverse, light a cigarette, and lock eyes with the Jesus statue. Dead in sight through one of the tall windows facing the parking lot.

His eyes aren't visible from here but his reaching hand is. His palm an additional bleach of white from the sun.

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The following Sunday, after scarfing down steak burritos for lunch at Captain Bruher's house, he offers me a coke and we sit on his backyard patio. His house has a view of the ocean as his backyard. He doesn't say anything until my coke's half-empty.

"Beautiful, huh?" He asks. I almost reply, no shit.

"God's daily reminder, you know? I can be down but views like this are a great push to move on to the next day."

"How's school going for you? About to graduate – top of your class?" He smiles and points at me.

"No, I wish I could be top of the class. But I hate everything but art. I can paint for hours. I sometimes forget to eat lunch and dinner until my stomach growls me to sleep."

"Why not take art in college?"

"I don't wanna go to college Captain Bruher. I mean, it's not just that. It's the thing with the money."

“Thing? What thing? Can’t be a thing if you don’t have money to call it a *thing*.”

We laugh.

“I’m telling you, son. The Air Force has never disappointed me. There’s little things here and there will urk you, sure. That’s life. Politics like that are normal everywhere.”

“You’re gonna tell me they pay for my college? I don’t have to work?”

“You will work, Jose. Of course you will work –”

“No, I mean I don’t have to do anything else on *top* of what I’d already be doing.”

“You’ll be alright. Think about it some for a bit.”

We end the conversation talking about how Pale’ likes to think no one ever notices its him making the bathroom all smoky from his cigarettes. I laugh but I think it’s a little too hard because Captain Bruher just smiles.

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What does it mean when every haole man I meet feels like they need to save my life? Church goers say Captain Bruher is a ‘well-mannered well-traveled’ man. From New Mexico to Colorado. All the way to Germany. New York to Arizona. Guam to Korea. Philippines to Indonesia. How many other Jose(s) yan Josette(s) does he encounter-will he encounter?

My words find a way onto filler paper and travel themselves onto Julie’s hands in communion lines or beside each other in a pew. Julie spends meticulous amounts of time folding letters to me. She is taking this Japanese class over in DODEA and they’re

teaching origami. She makes me little frogs, cranes, and stars. It's a new image most of the time.

That shit's too complicated for me so I just crumple mine into little balls or wind them up into sticks like for a fire. In her latest letter I write, *Wish to date the coolest Chamoru boy? Please draw a box. Scratch a check across such said box. Reply with hearts that flutter in and out of box. Thank you, please.*

There's an extension out back of the church that Mahnong Steve built for the entire village. I love it when it rains and Julie and I are back here. It's like the rain plucks the tin from a high rattling to a low splashes of rain. Anybody can fall asleep on one of the hammocks back here. Manong Steve has his own, made from fishnet tied between two coconut trees.

Julie reaches for the pancit and I go for the karage. Our tongs touch. We laugh and people skip over us in the line. Across the fiesta table a manamgku stares at us from behind her bifocals. She shakes her head, sucking her teeth, "Tai respetu, these kids."

Few of our friends laugh, Julie's CCD classmate grabs the tongs from our hands.

I kiss her. My heart goes too fast and I start shaking my leg in place. Julie's face softens with red. "Mmm-mmm." She giggles. "This is quite the romance, Senor Jose."

I lean in for another. The rain doesn't stop for us. No one in the line says anything to us now. Money tree. Coconut. Beetle nut. Pugua. Rain drops push their blades down to a bow and Siracha and fina' deni' fill up my nose. I can tell which lumpia is made by Pale' Francisco because it's literally double-fried, over-fried, burnt black at the edges.

An aide walks over from the church's back door. She clears her throat, "Not today."

When we leave each other's lips a thin strand of saliva breaks an inch between us. We wipe our chins. I don't know what to say so I tell her she looks red like a shrimp.

"Yeah? Well your face is purple like ube."

The aide tells us to get our food and eat quickly because practice is about to start soon.

Julie reminds me to pack up and follow her to California. That's reaching a bit. I don't know what to do after high school.

Before we head back into church we stop by the fountain. Mother Mary watches over a three-foot deep pool laced with tadpole necklaces. I peed here four years ago when Pale' took too long smoking in the restroom. He slapped my ass hard, made me aim out of the pool for a second. He's not a perv. He's just Pale'.

"Promise to email. I made a new address." She writes it on the back of a 7-11 receipt for King Car and Pocky.

justine88@hotmail.com

"Who's Justine? Is that your saint name or something?"

"It's a cover, doofus. A pseudonym." She stuffs it into my side pocket. "I'm feeling pretty good to be honest. Kind of excited."

"Yeah? I'm glad, man. Everything will be okay. Just gotta be patient I guess."

I don't tell her how beautiful she looks to me.

“Now. Let's show these nuns that we can sing better than their grandmothers!”

Julie drops the paper and pen in my palm and jumps to her feet. “Don't leave your head in the clouds too long. Maybe we'll see each other a lot sooner than you think.” She heads for the church's back door. Julie starts a slow c-walk down the main aisle to the altar.

I should tell her but I never do.

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When Captain Bruher finds out Julie and I kiss, he loses his mind. He pulls up to my house, parking right in the middle of the road. Me and everyone else on the street are drawn out by his crazy parking and shouting.

Bruher's van door pings open as he marches into my garage. I meet him halfway out front on the curb. The sun starts to set, shading Chalan Islan Guahan in blots of purple, blue, orange, and red. Not even that helps Bruer's face seem more appealing.

“Mr. Bruher? Sir? What's going on?”

“I trusted you, Jose.” He points his finger at me. He reaches into his back pocket.

No words of salvation come to mind.

“Whoa, hey man, I didn't do anything wrong.” My hands go up.

He throws my love letters down at my toes. “You're just a user, huh? Typical.

Locals just use use and use.”

Before I could get a word in he's grabbing me by the shoulder and my feet go out. The telephone pole down the street swivels like an udon when my head slams against the pavement. My head pounds when I squint this hard. I have to breathe in and out. Through the nose and out the mouth. My breath escapes me.

"I can't wait to lock your ass up." The first punch doesn't hurt so much. His toe on against my two front teeth that hurt a lot. These are my permanent set of teeth. I lose them both. His first stomp to my stomach doesn't make me cry neither. "I'm happy to make the phone call, Jose." I try kicking up at him from the ground, try squirming away to get my balance. I reach my hands out away from him, try and find a balance to pull myself up. But he's smart. He grabs my right ankle and yanks me to him. The sudden jerk makes me wince.

He catches his breath. Huffs and puffs then bends down to mount my chest.

He shoves my face into the road. It burns. Sweat from his palm drips down onto my nose. It's salty.

My elbow chips against his temple. He groans allowing me enough time to kick him off.

"Fuck you." I spit the road when I stand up. My shoulders beat the air in ones and twos.

He tackles me down to my side again.

This is my street. I know this. This is my home.

He punches me in my ribs so hard I don't know why I'm not spitting blood. He kicks my shins with his steel toe boots. Now I can't walk. So I crawl to my back.

"You shouldn't have disrespected me in the first place. I told you. That's my *daughter*, Jose."

I don't say anything in defense. I'm not about to let this man murder me. He stomps on me hard but begins to get weaker by his sixth kick. Grabbing his heel gives me a chance to catch my breath. To put aside the pain in my ribs for just a second. And I get ready to make sure this motherfucker never walks again.

"What are you doing? What are you doing what are you doing." Over and over again Julie screams at us from the van. A few neighbors come out. Each with a cell or house phone in their hand. My palms pulsate intensely when I let go.

He looks at me standing to his feet. Even when he dusts himself off he stares at me. I know what he is thinking. I know who the savage is here. A mango bounces off my forehead.

Julie's got a handful of mangos in her hand. "Get up." She doesn't look at me. I pick up the mango. Mr. Bruher should swallow this whole.

I stand up and spit out a thin stream of red. I do have blood.

Bruher leads Julie to the van. Shuts her in the front seat. He walks back in my direction.

"Never again. Don't come around us anymore. You think about coming near – don't."

They drive away. I chuck the mango tree into the jungle across the street.

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Trying to roll with a man like that is like swimming against the current. He is always going to be right, fast enough in the right, where not even typhoons can make him swallow salt water.

Julie never speaks to me again. Ever. Bruher leaves the church just as quietly as when he first arrived. And when him and Julie are gone, I try talking to Pale' about them. Anything. An update on what school Julie may have gotten into – and if Bruher is still ending goodbyes with, God bless. He says they're doing well, that he wishes them well. He changes the subject. What's for lunch? My grandmother would be proud of me serving the church.

When everyone but Pale' Francisco leave the church I tell him that my ride's coming. Choir practices can stretch so far into the afternoon sometimes. He says alright and heads out in his 1986 Toyota Corolla. It jolts when he shifts into second onto the highway. He takes good care of that little tin can.

I use one of the old oil drums the custodian stores in the backyard of the church. I start a fire with some dried tangantangan and breathe in a cigarette. It's not so bad in the lot. There's rarely ever no one on the church grounds.

I let the flames reach a foot above the barrel's top. Take out my Ziploc bag of love letters from Julie.

Zip them open. Look over the way her letters are soft at edges. How each letter is folded into different shapes; boxes, hearts, bells, a dove.

I toss the dove in first.

Some of the wood must have been wet. My smoke goes grey. I use one letter to mask my mouth. I throw them in like frisbees that ping against the barrel.

No worries Nickolas Bruher. Your daughter is safe. And I will always be thousands of miles away from her.

I feel my pockets to see if I have forgotten any letters. I find two more. I throw the one shaped like a heart in. Julie's 'Love you always' spins a disc into the fire. Why not open one. Yeah. Open.

I unwrap the letter shaped like a triangle. Julie gave this to me two days before her father beat my ass. It reads: *Holy Crap Jose! Can you believe I'm leaving? You know I love you, right? I like this, to be honest, being apart from you. Increases our bond. Makes me miss you more. I look up at the moon some nights when I'm at Tarague beach. You know that lifeguard tower? It's a good place to think. It's usually empty. I don't know why they have a lifeguard tower with no lifeguard. Basically, what I'm trying to say is this: Go there and think of me. Remember me, okay Jose? Hopefully things calm down a lot sooner and we could chat! I'm going to keep your letters with me, no matter where I go.*

She ends it with a little heart over her name, Julie. The flames are hungry eat holes into the paper without hesitation. My tears glaze over my eyes in a mosaic.

There's nobody here with me so I wait by the fire until it dies. But it doesn't die as fast as I would like.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR – Tell your stories. That’s what Nana used to say so often. Just tell them. My mentor in college reminds me when I lose my way, to listen to my ancestors. My friends say I have too many stories. My boss down at the office asks, how are you going to pay your rent? With Hansel-and-Gretel-beginning-something-something-end- stories?

Motherfucking hansel-and-gretel.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR –

Mahe' tok

The strobe light circles the yard in moving red, blue, and yellow spots. Bodies sway in cha-cha left-one right-two. Dancefloor is made from pallets donated by neighbors next door that we slapped down like a puzzle. Another let us borrow two coolers big enough for stuffing bodies. We use concrete blocks to hold up a long piece of cardboard as a makeshift table. The box meant for a refrigerator. I find it in the jungle, amongst an oven, shoe rack, and mattress. The neighborhood always parties like this. Sometimes just me and my generation on the street. Other weekends it'll be the elders, turning into the morning long with mahjong, Johnnie Walker and Newport smoke. Tonight, on the street, everyone is out celebrating the first of the month.

Swish, goes the basketball net, there've been many elbows clipped against shins for lay-ups under that net. Clapping of slippers against the street start the night's

soundtrack. With skateboards popping off the asphalt like the street's made of fire. The techno version to Cyndi Lauper's *Time After Time* plays with no bass line (because I blew out the woofers last month while fishing) and three of my friends arrive with another piece of cardboard. They slip it onto the street like sliding SPAM onto a hot skillet. All wonderfully sponsored by Pay-Less.

We always take from Pay-Less supermarket, thank you very much.

Last week, a shopping cart. My mom finds it in the backyard. I try to hide it by placing banana leaves on it. But everything seems out of place when there's a pile of fucking banana leaves in the middle of the yard for no damn reason.

She screams a bunch of things in Chamoru and throws the closest object near her, at me. In this case it's a clothespin basket. But she doesn't throw the basket. She picks each-individual-pin out one by one. A blue pin. A white pin. Red.

I push that cart back to the store all by myself. I see two classmates drive by. One honks and throws up peace. The other flicks me off with a smile.

I walk up to the sidewalk with a red plastic cup filled with seventy-percent vodka, twenty-percent ice, and ten percent orange juice. A splash for color, yeah? I sit on the curb just in time to watch my neighbor's lay-up light up the crowd. Everyone plays basketball in their zoris. A majority of them wearing scotts or those cheap plastic ones you find at any mom and pop's.

When the song comes to an end I see head lights draw onto the front yard. The tires squeak to a halt. It's a charcoal black CR-X. Someone steps out. I burp. The

shadow walks under the street light, revealing his chrome G-Shock. It's Larry. When he walks over I can hear change rattling in his pocket.

Larry is a born and raised island boy. Born in Guam, raised in Hawai'i. Since his parents' divorce four years ago he followed his mom out here. He was the first one to introduce himself to me back in freshman year. Best friends since.

Strobe lights scan his baggy navy blue jeans. His white shirt looks tie-dyed. Nobody notices the bat. The party is really a pre-party for graduation next month. Everyone is excited to leave to some university in the states. Me and Larry will stay on island doing god knows what.

He looks at me but doesn't say anything. He has that face on that tells me shit's about to go down. He likes to talk about how his face gets him the best pussy. That a price on that face is way too unaffordable, even for military officers. I say it's overpriced.

Nights like this are usually hit and miss. Sometimes we end up eating at Kings by 3AM with drunken laughter, fried rice, longaniza, and over easy eggs. Some nights we get into small kinds of scraps. Enough to get the blood flowing. I take a few big gulps then down all my drink.

When Larry walks up with that stoic face of his, I ask him all I need to know. "You driving?"

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On the drive there Larry tells me about this Chuukese guy that keeps talking shit about him behind his back at work. George, his name. They both work the loading dock at K-Mart. I tell him he's just trying to find an excuse to fuck up someone Chuukese. He keeps one hand on the wheel and says, maybe that's his purpose in life. To rid the Marianas of them.

How will he feel if I tell him he's a Mirconesian, too? I won't tell him this today. Probably never will.

I unbuckle my seat belt and take my cigarettes out from the pocket in my hoodie. Tap a joint loose from the inside. Light it. The first hit pulls like fresh steaming rice in my chest. There's barely any traffic out tonight.

I pass the joint to him and say, "You going prophetic again?"

"Bro, they're everywhere in Hawai'i. Nobody likes them there either." He takes a few hits. "Don't worry."

"What's he been saying about you at work?" We pass the prisoners of war mural painted along a wall in Maniglao. The black silhouette of a head on its flag. Chamoru soldiers looking like they've been marching for days. One points to the sky.

"That I'm lazy. *He's* the one who's lazy. I unload shipment faster. Get my audits in faster. He ain't shit." He passes the joint back. Blows it out onto the dashboard. "See, the thing is, he acts like he's friends with me. But the minute I turn around, like go out to the floor and get some pizza, he'll make fun of my work ethic." He shifts gears.

“Well, sounds like you’re just sensitive.” I roll up the window because the truck in front of us doesn’t change their oil. Makes me cough a bit. “Who’s telling you these things?” I flick the driver off when Larry passes him. I can’t see whose inside because their tint’s too dark.

“My co-workers fool. Who else?”

“Sounds like you’re in the wrong.”

He looks at me then back to the road.

“But you’re my boy.”

“Good. We’re almost there.”

Ahead the sign reads, *Hafa Adai, Welcome to Sinajana*. Larry turns into the middle lane and pulls into a neighborhood. He shuts the engine off at a cul-de-sac’s entrance. I tell him to turn off the radio and tie my shoes. It’s important to make sure your kicks stay on nice and tight.

Larry tells me he has some bud under my seat. I grind it up and roll another joint. A pit-bull outside in someone’s yard is chained to a tree. It doesn’t bark. But it doesn’t look away from me either.

I finish rolling my joint right when Larry rubs the front tire into a curb. He cuts the engine and jumps out. It’s George. He’s in his Kmart uniform heading for his truck parked near his driveway. I rush out the car, lighting my joint on the way.

“Sup, bitch.” Larry shoves George into the truck. This sets off his alarm.

“The fuck?!”

And clap. Larry's right knuckles slam into his chin, beating George's. Larry's left hook and uppercuts go to and from George's face like he's trying to steal his nose. His cheekbone. His right ear. Temple. His big ass forehead.

He tries to use the fender to help him up. I slam my heel into the back of his hand. And twist it. He cries out. I grab the back of his head and bring it into my left knee. His head bounces off the driver-side door like he's stressing over an exam. I pass the joint to Larry.

George's blood runs out of his mouth. Down his chin and onto his faded red collar. The 'K' on his breast probably faded from too many wash cycles. Long streams of blood run thick with phlegm out onto the asphalt.

"Find his keys. Shut that shit off." Larry takes a look around. George's groans are soft. I tell him it's okay to take a nap and pat him on his shoulder. Take his keys out of his side pocket and the alarm shuts off with two sharp chirps.

We pin George up against the front tire of his Toyota hilux. With the roach on his lap for when he wakes up. A little something for the pain, yeah? I can't tell if he's looking at me because his eye is too pokpok. He coughs out a, "Go fuck yourselves."

The front screen door slams open. His mother comes running out – screaming her fist at us. She runs up to Larry, shoves him out of her way, and kneels at her son's side. We're already getting in the car when she starts shouting at us. I see her in the mirror walking up. Death in each of her steps. She continues shouting but the engine's roar to a start muffles that.

We head straight for Kings afterwards. Larry is a little upset that I left the roach back there. I tell him, you can't be angry all the time.

At the restaurant I order a Country Brown. Country gravy over diced chorizo, eggs, and fried rice. Larry laughs at me because I tell him I have detention the coming week. Detentions are really more like community service. Loving ways in which to give back to our fruitful community. That's what the principal tells us every time we report to the office. Larry has accumulated seventy-two hours. I have earned three hundred and forty-four. I should get a trophy.

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I have to paint a two bus stops this week. Monday through Friday for four hours each day after school. Right here in Tamuning. First, two good coats of white. Then I have to write inspiring messages like, Stay in school! The Army's Be All You Can Be!

I paint local kids with books and the sun rising behind them. The paint brushes we use suck. They've never been properly cleaned. But it's still a good break away from campus. Sometimes, I get into detention just so I could sneak in my tag name. I hide J-O-S-E in the hills, clouds, and faces. A giant cloud in the shape of a J, an S for a girl's long ponytail. I do my best at blending it with the whole image. School officials won't notice it till the summer.

George is with me too. He's my detention 'buddy' for the week. He doesn't talk to me. I don't talk to him. He just paints.

I don't bother him. He doesn't bother me. We only communicate when I need to use a color or when he wants to use my brush. The school aids do a good job remind us of their presence by rushing us to finish.

"I want you to know." I keep painting even though I know he's talking to me. "My mom came out the house to what happened. I didn't tell her shit."

A long orange exclamation point completes another Army slogan. I paint its outline first.

"But I'm not a bitch. And I should've called the cops. I'm gonna handle things my own way." He doesn't look away from me. As a matter of fact, he even takes a step closer.

"Look bro, I don't give a fuck if Jesus himself comes down and tells you, you're going to heaven. My life isn't about helping you." I pick up an almost empty five gallon bucket of white paint. It flies in the air aimed for his face. He ducks and parries it to by the side of his face.

Aides rush over from under a mango tree. One of them already shouting, famikilu!

"Fuck me, huh? Fuck you motherfucker. Fuck you. Fuck fuck fuck you." His spits flies from behind his fists. His spit his my cheek before his right fist does. A boonie dog runs across the street into the jungle near our bus stop. I duck under his hook and aim an upper cut to his left cheek. He turns right when I throw the punch. My middle knuckle connects with his two front teeth and this cuts me open.

George tackles me into the wall we just painted. Chamoru soldiers marching, sweating, watching us fight. He slams my head against the wall so hard I don't feel the body shots at my liver. I cling onto his shoulders and use my elbow to pin his head into the wall. I push all my weight into that elbow. He knees me in the nuts. Grabs my hair and knees me in the nose. My vision goes flashing white for a second. And my dick and balls go stinging numb like a shotgun blew it out my ass. I'm on the floor so fast I know it's a world record. One aide restrains George under his arms. The other kneels besides and sucks his teeth, *tsk tsk*.

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We think we ain't gonna talk to one another no more. But the aides have other plans. They both tell us to make ourselves useful. So the next day on Tuesday, they brief us before leaving campus out in the hot ass parking lot. It's so hot that when I wipe the sweat off and it splats the concrete – it disappears in seconds.

Introductions come first. Hello, my name is Jose. He says, Hello I am George.

We stare at each other. He looks tired. Sighs a bit then looks away.

One of the aides speaks up, says they're glad me and George get along so wonderfully. The aide pushes another question about our favorite snacks. George kicks the dirt.

I like Ox & Palm corned beef. He likes the 99 cent slurpees at 7-11.

This doesn't get us moving into deeper conversation.

Another aide pulls up in a bus big enough for twenty-some bodies. The aid drums on the horn, smiling from behind his shades. When we step on the bus I tell him not to worry about us today. We're not fighting today. We're good.

I don't want this motherfucker breathing over my neck every minute. George sits across me, four rows back.

Our conversation picks up again when we start painting. I roll the first coat of white over a jaggedly spray painted METH RULEZ and put a cigarette in my mouth. And smoke while I paint. At least the aids let us smoke. There's no railing to keeps us from walking out into traffic six feet away on the highway.

"You got a ride, George?"

"You and Larry are lucky to have cars. That guy thinks I work less than him? Psh, I walk to work." He starts on the ceiling. "Nah man, I don't have a car."

"Ever try one of the used car lots down at Toyota or Nissan? Might be able to find something worth it down there."

"I work at Kmart, remember? No way I can do rent and a car."

"What's your mom do?" I dip my roll into the gallon.

"She works at a bakery."

"Damn, so she —"

"Wakes up early at 5AM on the weekdays. At least she doesn't do weekends."

He dips for some fresh paint. "Shit's hard."

I look at the soles on my Adidas for a moment. I'll draw the sun like this. "How often you working at Kmart again?"

"Part-time. They fucking always put me right under forty hours. Thirty-nine. Thirty-nine and a *half*."

I don't apologize for clipping him in the chin last week. I never get the chance to. George looks out at traffic for a second. The aides leave the radio on from the bus for our listening entertainment.

Two hours later we take a break.

"Want a cigarette?" I hand one to George before he could say yes. Green and yellow paint spot and smear all over my arms. The aid tosses a ladder to us from the bus. They stay in there most of the time. Out of the sun.

"You got me with a good knee last week. I gotta say, man."

I nod my head.

"You should start fighting professionally."

"You should stop talking shit about people."

He looks away from a slick black R-32 in traffic to me. "What? Who the fuck's talking shit? What does he *think* he heard?" He takes a pull.

"Nah man, you know what you're saying."

"I never said anything. You all need to do a better job checking up on the facts before you go around fucking shit up."

I watch traffic again. Water drips from a drainage pipe off the second floor of an apartment. A tow truck goes by, hauling a Toyota with its front end scrunched in.

“You calling my boy a liar, George?”

“Yeah. Yes. Yes he is a liar.” Luke 23:34. That’s what pops into my head. This motherfucker doesn’t understand shit. “And I can guarantee you that if you go down to my work – you’ll find out that I never talked shit in the first place.” His heels rubs his cigarette bud into the ground. He turns around back to pick his roller out of the bucket.

...

On my last Friday in high school, I meet up with Larry outside on the steps leading to the principal’s office. Right before the bus picks me and George up for the journey back into Paintville. I put headphones on and slip my hoodie up.

Larry needs to know when to ease up on his anger. That he shouldn’t give a fuck about any kind of noise people start about him. I’m sure imagining that is a lot more lucid than him bringing his uniform to work.

Rumors isn’t something we like to start. Classmates start that shit. I don’t want any unwanted attention. Larry needs to lay low for a while. That might help cool down that temper of his. Shit, mine too if anything.

I can see why the lot’s a good place to meet. Wide open for about an acre. In the open. Always hot as shit though.

“What’s good, man.” We slap our hands quicker than a second and pound bones.

“Where’d you come from?”

He lights a cigarette with his fancy tourist Guam seal zippo. “Just got outta the principal’s office. He wanted to follow up – make sure that my ass is out in detention next week.” The school knows we’re best friends so they separate our hours. “Same shit. Making sure I got everything together for graduation this weekend.”

He hands me the zippo. I light my own stick.

“How’s detention with that Chuukese?” He laughs a little.

“It’s actually good, man.”

“What?” A massive cloud of smoke comes out his mouth. His laugh cuts into a cough and his eyes glaze over. “You serious? Man, are you being soft?”

“No, really.” Parents begin lining up in their cars making traffic lead out to the highway. “He’s not so bad when you get to know him. Also, he said he never started anything. No rumors or nothing but I’m like yo, there’s no looking back after that.”

“Right. Whatever man. You need to stop sucking his dick. That’s what you need to do.”

Getting any sort of information into Larry’s feeble fucking mind is like playing basketball with broken zori. When that thing pops out in its center to hold your toes. Shit just doesn’t work.

“Don’t give him too much room. Let him take control like that – he’ll be running all over you in no time.”

“Why are you so negative?”

“I ain’t negative. I’m honest. These people already taking our jobs and healthcare. Don’t you remember last month when we went to Happy Mart?”

“Happy Mart XXII?” I ask. “Happy Mart thirty yan forty times fifty.” I laugh.

“Yeah man. All those Chuukese were there cuz it was the first of the month. Fucking buying all the steaks and good shit.”

“Chamorus do that too, dumbshit.” I lean against a Handicapped parking sign. “Everyone does that shit.”

“I’m gonna buy all the fucking steak. Short ribs. Barbecue all of that!”

“Bitch you don’t even make enough to buy one piece of steak.”

“True. True.” We watch underclassmen load cars with their bags and books and shit. “But at least I can always make SPAM steaks.” He flicks the bud away. “Alright. I’m out. See you at graduation fool.”

“You’re dumb.” I place my cigarettes in my breast pocket.

I hear the bus rattle to a stop before I see George already inside. He peeps his head out the window with his dreads hanging and swinging from side to side.

When I turn around Larry is already gone.

On the bus ride to do a second coat I start up convo again with George. “So what’s your plans after grad? Going back to Chuuk?”

He looks out the window. Never really makes eye contact with me. “No. I can’t do that. That’s too easy. I’d feel ashamed if I did something like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

He watches a car speed by. “Me and my mom moved here for a better life. I can’t go back to Chuuk. Not now, at least. I’m thinking of going to college maybe somewhere in the states. Get a good job.”

“Nice. I’m sure your mom will be proud of you.”

“She’s all I got, man.” He draws a breath. “I’m gonna be workin’ while I get my degree. I’m thinkin’ of being a mechanic. And send whatever money I can back to her.” Now he looks at me. “Why you so interested in my business?”

“Because I’m nosy.”

“Go stick your nose up some dog’s ass. Rub it. Sniff it. And take deep breaths.”

We laugh.

Apparently the aids hear this shit, too. So now, everyone’s laughing. Everybody in our tiny little magic school bus. Great. Hee-hee har-har.

We even laugh a bit throughout the day whenever someone brings this shit up again.

Very funny. Grand kuxikas.

...

Graduation is smooth and quick. A good two hours of bullshit congratulations that won’t make any difference in me finding a job. We have the ceremony out in the football field. It takes me a few minutes to find Larry already with a wall of leis around his head.

We say fuck yeah we did it and pound fists. My community service is officially at an end!

“You trying to eat after this?” He asks. I can see it in his face. Kings. Country Brown.

“Fuck yeah, let’s do it man. I’m about to order Country Brown, Criss-Cross Chorizo fries, and a huge-fucking-huge crepe.” I hold my hands apart like I’m holding a heavy bowl.

“Better not bring your new best friend George.” He laughs, pulling a flower away from his nose.

“What? Nah man, fuck that guy.” A family walks in between us, shouting where to take pictures.

“What? Did you say that you’ll do anything for him anytime anywhere?”

At first I assume he’s mocking me. But then I realize he really doesn’t know what the hell I’m saying. It’s too loud. A boy shouts from behind me. He raises his arm to pass a camera and knicks me on top of my head. He apologizes and jogs over to his friends under a coconut tree. I hope a fucking coconut falls on your fucking head kuxika. “I said, let’s go eat.” I fan my hand to my mouth like I’m eating.

“Oh – I thought you said *George* was your best friend.”

Now he’s just being a nuisance. “No – that punk will never be my friend.” I shout it this time as loud as I can. Laughing afterwards. I allow myself to be engulfed by everyone’s happiness around me.

Larry laughs and points behind me. It's George. He has candy and plumeria leis
And a bright blue balloon shaped like a graduation cap. He doesn't say anything.

His mom slips through the crowd just in time to find us staring off. "You must be
Jose." She shifts her purse under her arm. She reaches her arms around me and gives me
a hug. "I forgive you, my boy." She gently takes my hand and places an envelope in it.
"It's okay." She does this so lightly I barely feel the paper in my palms.

George must've told his mother we've been in detention together.

I got nothing.

"Come boy, let's go. I don't want to miss our reservation at Niji." She motions
to George. She smiles at me before turning back into the crowd. "Congratulations,
Jose."

George is still staring at me. When I finally open my mouth with no sound he
nods. He nods and walks into the crowd. Disappearing back into the masses of black
gowns. I hear Larry's laughter begin to fade into the foreground. It picks up.

I open the envelope to find a card inside.

*Congratulations on your very big day. This is only the beginning of a fun and
exciting journey!* At the top right hand corner is the date written in black ink; *May 15,
2004.* At the bottom an *All the Best, George's mother, Cynthia.*

And a fifty-dollar bill.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR – How do we come to know mercy in our lives? When a cop decides not to give me a speeding ticket? When the cashier decides my groceries don't cost one hundred and twelve dollars when I only have eighty bucks? How about when a boonie dog licks itself on the side of the road? In the hot sun. Licking its mange because nobody wants to take it home to love it. Even after seeing blood fly from fist after fist after fist. How can anyone stop themselves – How can I stop myself – during those moments for mercy?

I believe mercy reveals itself best through patience and understanding.

Tasi shows me mercy all the time. Sometimes she calls me up, asks about my rent and how am I holding up. I borrow money from her a lot during winter to help my heat bill. I haven't paid her back yet. Really pushes my stress level into grey hair territory.

I am drinking a lot because it helps me find a balance in my darkness. Doors that lead to patience and understanding. Gives me time to smoothen out, relax and decompress. There's something there that feels familiar like Ypao's sand in my hands. Happiness is a choice, that's what I hear people say so often.

How can someone so full, talk to someone so hungry? In a much more radical way? Or is this just an outlet for foolish, childish, random thoughts?

Can I drink enough till I have patience for mercy?

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR –

Side B

Sleepiness starts to creep up on me. I take a bathroom break. Pop open the last bottle of wine. Have a glass of ice water with my wine.

Flip to side B for more of Uncle Jose, and enjoy the heater underneath the windowsill. A SPAM beach towel warms my legs. Uncle Jose is *super* chaud.

Click ... WRRR – WRRR – WRR –

Tasi

Forgetting my culture's way of life can be like a near death experience. No words fall out my mouth. This is what I feel whenever Nana tells me a taotaomona story. She does it so well every time.

I call up Nana to wish her a happy eighty-seventh birthday. She wants to tell me about Tasi and her taotaomona friend or *friends*.

I have forgotten so many stories she's shared with me.

This story starts randomly out of nowhere like –

“Make sure to use real coconut milk. Because if you use those lite kinds or soy it's going to taste gross.” We're talking about tanaktak. “If it's done that way, it's finished. Your pot is a waste. Now you're lost and don't know what to do.” She pauses for a sec.

“Did I ever tell you about your sister going off in the jungle? Said Taotaomona called her?” She doesn't wait for me to answer. I nod my head like she's in front of me. And I'm looking up at her like it's first grade all over again. “She was six ... seven. She

was six years-old. I remember because it was right after her communion. When we came home. She looked so beautiful in her dress. Her Nina paid for that. Si Theresita, ai bless her soul may she rest in peace.” She pauses. Raises her voice, “Are you listening?”

“Yes, Nana. I’m here.”

“Are you sure? Or are you off in god knows where. Are you taking any drugs?”

She never waits for me to answer. “What was I saying?”

“Sorry Nana. Shoot shoot, go ahead.” I flip all the lights in my apartment off.

Turn on the bedside lamp.

“We ate at her Nina’s place, too. Your uncle Ricardo killed one of his pigs.

Almer and Alan – the Perez family who lived down the street at the time – they helped your uncle Ric. Then I made red rice, potato salad, shrimp kelaugen, kadon pika, what else ... ai it was a busy day.”

“None of the aunties or cousins helped you?”

“*You* should’ve helped me, jiablu. But you were still too small so your only duties were picking your nose and chasing Auntie Mag’s chickens. You *loved* those chickens. Remember? Ai they were so stinky.”

I had *one* chicken. She won’t ever let that up. Never-ever-eh-eh-ever.

“Of course they helped me Jose. Do you need a time machine?” She pauses. I try not to laugh by humming, Yes yes and yes.

“It happened when we were going to break the piñata open. Your cousin Barbara bought that one. It was a dinosaur. All the kids got candy. I said, Everyone better have candy – I bought these candies for this, sah, my nen’s communion. If I see any of you stealing your candy will be mine.” She laughs. “Ai, that was a good one.” She takes her

time talking here. Like waiting for someone to leave the room. “I went crazy. Where is she Where is she Where is she? They were playing in the kiddie pool. Front yard. Tasi said she was going to the bathroom.

Lanat, Barb was the last one who saw her. Almost all your uncles went looking for her. Before they left I made sure to see if anyone else was missing. You know these kids, always off sneaking sneaky into everywhere and my digging into my backyard for taro.” She takes a breath.

“Nana, where’d you find her?”

She sucks her teeth. “Jose, can you wait? Oh my god. Are you ready? Do you have your toothbrush and panty? Your deodorant? Sah your fahfah is always po’sadun.”

I thank her.

“So, anyway. Your uncles Antonio and Dan found her.” She stops. I hear shuffling. Something rubbing against the phone.

“Nana? You okay?”

“Yes. Of course I’m okay. Why you keep asking stupid questions?”

I don’t know – I – I have nothing. Nothing as always. And I’m always gonna be fine with that.

“They found her. Sitting down. A *quarter mile* from the house. Under a whole bunch of taotaomona trees, near the freeway. There wasn’t enough social gathering for her at the party so she went looking for more. Different. New.”

I laugh a little here. She does too.

“No but seriously, boy. Don’t make fun of them because I don’t want to be visited. It’s okay. There’s no need for that, umbri lai.”

“She was alright?”

“She was fine. She was just sitting there, they said.”

There are a few moments growing up in which I never doubt my sister. And when Nana tells me this I know it’s gotta be true. And I gotta ask, Why?

“I didn’t get a good chance to talk to her until later that night. After everyone balutaned all the food home. I put her to sleep and asked her one more time.

Tasi, why did you leave your party? Go so far away?

Because the taotaomona called me, Nana.

Are you sure? What did they look like?

It was a old man. Like you.

From the party? You sure it wasn’t one of your uncles? Or cousins?

He was asking me to follow him.

What was he wearing?

Church clothes, Nana. He was wearing cardboard pants like uncle Tony. And a long white shirt.

Sleeves?

Yes.

Tasi. You followed this man. Who you did not know. Out onto the freeway to taotaomona trees.

Yeah.

Why?

Because he asked me to follow him. He was really bright, Nana.

What happened at the trees neni?

He disappeared. So I was waiting for him there.

Are you sure?

Yeah. Do you know where he went?

I tucked her in and went to sleep. Nobody ever saw an old man like that at the party. It could have been any old fool walking around.”

This makes me want to interview Tasi right now. “Grandma, did Tasi every go back to those trees again?”

“No. Not that I know of. That placed has long been bulldozed, my boy. There’s a 7-11 there now.”

“Oh.”

We finish our conversation. She reminds me that she’s going to live for another ten years. Tells me to come home whenever I can afford it. And that she has to run and catch bingo with her girls at the center.

After hitting end on my phone I search for Tasi’s name in my directory. I’ll call her tomorrow.

...

When Tasi calls me later that week, her birthday picture pops up. I took it last year when I pushed her face into the cake. I spent one hundred forty bucks on it. Money well spent. I let the phone ring just so I can laugh a little looking at it.

Getting some more back story on this isn’t too hard. Tasi says she remembers the man. States for a fact that it wasn’t any of the family or friends.

“He couldn’t be a stranger, either. When I saw him I just remember thinking – who is this man? Why does he want me to follow him? Then. I was at the trees. Weird huh?”

I slip into my bed. My feet extra warm with three more layers of blankets. “Tell me more about this man.”

“He had a smell.”

“Of what? After shave and moose?” A handful of uncles come to mind.

“No ... He had a weird smell ... I can’t really describe it. You remember how chlorine smells in swimming pools?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the smell did the same thing chlorine did – to my nose. I kept thinking, Man, what’s with this guy? Why the heavy dipping odor, you know?”

“You never spoke with him?”

“He was always too far ahead. No matter how much I tried to catch up. Honestly, I don’t remember that much.”

“*Seems* like much.”

Whenever taotaomona reveal themselves to me, the following day is always tense. I don’t know if I’m going to wake up with bruises or wake up with bruises and a fever. Everyone’s grandma tells the kids at a young age, If they pinch you and you don’t get sick – they like you. If you do get sick – you must have done something disrespectful. And you should right that kind of wrong quick.

“I haven’t thought about that man in so long. It’s really been ages.”

I ask her if she wants to talk about work and if everything else is copasetic. She doesn't cater this question.

"He was real white up close. Like, he kinda glowed." She pauses. "He looked like a slither from real far away though ... you know, like a cat's eye. Or a tiger. When their pupils are —"

"I get it."

"Okay. But it was a slither of light. A real dull light. In the middle of the day. On the side of the road. In the hot sun."

"This doesn't make any sense to me."

"I don't think it makes sense to anyone. Not even me."

"Why would he show himself to you, though? I don't understand that part."

"Remember that time I said it doesn't make any sense to me?"

We finish playing investigators and call it an evening. I tell her goodnight and sleep warmly. She tells me to hurry up and pay a visit so I can cook my fried rice with chorizo again. It's nice to hear her voice. Real nice to speak to both of those fools in the same week.

I should do this more often.

...

I answer. It's the usual check-up call. Eventually, the conversation steers toward that man again. And the trees.

"You know what? I can't say what it was. But when I visited those trees I felt like something had to be done. I don't think I was supposed to be waiting. I was probably meant to find something there."

“Well, did you ever go back there?”

“I did. Nana doesn’t know this. But I went back there before the construction company started their business.”

“Hop the fence?”

“No. Just a line of caution tape was there at the time. The backhoe didn’t demolish the jungle yet.”

“What’d you find?”

“Yeah yeah, give me a second. You can never wait can you?” She groans and I start smoking. Open the window, pat a leaf on my baby orchid growing on the window sill, and continue listening. “There was another girl. She looked about my age too. Maybe a younger, five. She was holding her knee.”

“By the road? Tree? Where?”

“Underneath one of the trees. She had scraped her knee playing in the jungle. I said she could follow me home for some ointment. She said aloe vera’s better. And there’s plenty in the jungle.”

“She was there by herself?” I like playing hide and go seek in the jungle. Played it all throughout childhood.

“Get this, she was playing with the duendes.” She pauses, “I know. Crazy, right? She said there were *six* other duendes with her. Dancing under the other tree. They ran inside the jungle and the girl went after them.”

“You follow them?”

“No. Sun was going down. And she seemed totally fine.” Her phone shuffles. “Construction crew came the next week. Tore everything down. Funny thing is, that was

when I decided to become a nurse. I saw this girl – and I immediately wanted to help her. It made me happy, helping her. Helping *people*.”

I thank her for sharing the story with me. Tell her she needs to help herself by getting sleep. And when we hang up I slip my phone back into my pocket. Light another cigarette.

One day, when I die, I want to find these taotaomona. These six duendes. I don't know what will be the first thing I'd talk about with them.

I'm definitely gonna tell them I still use aloe vera. I have a small pot growing in my living room. On the kitchen counter beside the achote seeds and onions.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR – Ha! So this is a frustrating one. Thought I lost this fucking thing. When it comes to remembering important things like this, I'll remember some crazy shit like Tasi high kicking a girl in high school in the face. Then administering first-aid right after. Sometimes I ask her how people treat her out in Washington. She says things aren't so bad in the city. The further you get away from metropolitan areas the greater the intensity. We laugh. She reminds me about when I rented a house after college. I like that one, she says.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR –

A Little Something I'm Working On

All of my work is done in my home garage. Four months ago, I order a slab of limestone through a third party at Home Depot. I have to sign a form declaring it will not be used as a weapon. Because you know, limestone is dangerous.

It arrives on the back of a semi, a long bed just for my stone. It's exactly five feet high. And Three feet wide. I usually put on Brudda IZ or the Fugees to help me get into the groove of things. My neighbors like to play Taylor Swift and Katy Perry whenever they're hanging out outside. I also never told them how much hearing Miley Cyrus makes me want to gouge out my eyes. Pop them with a spoon, *plop*, right out their sockets. The suburbs.

Sometimes neighbors pass by my garage. I have to leave the garage door open for inhalation. Nobody wants to be breathing in dusty stone. That's brutal for the eyes. I look a little too closely at it too sometimes. So staring out into an empty street is comforting. I post up two fans to oscillate, put on my gloves, ear plugs, and goggles. I get to work.

During my second week of carving this, one my neighbors walk into my garage. White man, Eagles cap, beer belly, and cargo shorts. His steps seem hurried, like he can't wait to tell me something.

I clench my chisel real tight. And meet him halfway.

A golden retriever follows him inside. This man never really takes the time to make eye contact with me. He stays locked – right on the stone.

“What you got there?” His dog follows its nose underneath my shelves and to the bottom of my stone. “Hey! Get!” He grabs its collar and apologizes immediately. “Is this supposed to be a chalice?”

I blink a few times. UPS drives by. Birds chirp.

“No, it's actually a Latte Sto –”

“Are you Chinese?” His dog pants at his side. “Have you ever tried that new Linda's in Chinatown? Supposed to have the best duck fat.” He rubs his hand on the dog's head. “So, what's this supposed to be? A Chinese Stanley Cup?” He walks up to it.

I tell him it's a Latte stone. It's a little something I'm working on. A symbol of power, pride, and family. Explaining the shit makes me feel like I'm in the eighth grade again. In Chamoru class with Senora Blas. “It's definitely a symbol of pride for me and my culture.”

“Or, it could be a good stool, huh? Say, if you can't reach nothing in the yard, just roll this over and you got yourself something to work with. Can you imagine taking this thing to a Giants game? That'd be cool huh? You'd get a chance to show off your

culture too.” He takes out a stick of gum. Offers me one. I don’t take it. “I think it’s great what you have here. Can’t wait to see it when it’s finished. Or, is it finished?”

When the sun comes over the trees across the streets, it reveals millions of dust spots floating around in my garage.

“Yeah, it’s far from finished. Still gotta carve more. I can’t even think about polishing it yet.”

“Well good luck!” He walks out just as fast as when he first came over. He never tells me his name. I move out in four months and I never see him till then or ever again.

...

Chamoru class. Second floor FBLG sixth grade. Senora Blas stands at the front dressed in her favorite blue blouse. The one she says makes her look as bonita as her mother.

“So does anyone have any questions? Remember. Weave as much fish as you can! The patients are going to love these” We’re weaving fish for the cancer patients at GMH.

She reminds me of Nana, especially when she sits at her desk humming Abe Maria. When she walks up to my desk her perfume makes me scratch my nose.

“Hafa bidadamu, Jose?”

I cover my graffiti with a pile of leaves.

“You remember the steps, right?”

“Hu’ungan Senora.”

“Good.” She walks down the row. “Remember, as much fish you can make! As many as you can. You have until the end of class.” She shouts over the thirty-two little heads of black and brown hair.

I fold my drawings up and stuff them in my bag with my color pencils. I get to work.

By the next time Senora checks up on me, I have a pile of coconut leaves bent, split, and ripped. I chuckle a little bit when she sighs over my disaster. She tells me to take it slower. And continues her rounds up and down the aisles.

“Psst. Hey. Marcy.” I nudge her elbow in front of me.

“What’s up?”

“How the heck you doin’ this? I can’t do this.”

“Yes you can.”

I put my finger on my lip. “Marcy I am asking you for *help* Marcy. Assistance. Pleading dear desire here.”

She laughs. “Grab two new ones. I’ll show you what to do.”

I follow her hands every up and over palm and under.

“Got it?”

“Yeah, thanks dude.”

“Sure, no problem. Lemme know if you need anything else.”

My fish has a body. A fin and tail. The bottom fin is too short. By my third one, I’m pumping out these little fishes like a factory. I ask Senora if I can go out and get some more in the jungle by the playground. She says I’m very funny and gives me more from behind my desk. I tell her I’m serious and when she holds up one of my fish she congratulates me. I wiggle my feet a bit under the desk.

...

Dust is bad. Shit. Is everywhere. It's the third month in and I *still* have to sit out on the front lawn for this. Waiting for the fans to blow it all out. The base of the latte is coming together nicely, though. Got a good line all the way around and the middle is just wide enough. I never once think about sitting on the this until that guy mentioned it.

I light a cigarette. Get a good buzz going to relax my hands. My right one shakes a bit after I make fists.

Two haole women walk up to me. Both dressed in black yoga pants and running shoes. One with shades, the other without. They say hello and introduce themselves. They look over my shoulder at the latte.

I'm not making this stone to show off. Let's be clear. I feel like that's common sense one-oh-one for an artist. It *has* to come out. I wish there was a place where the noise or dust never bothered anyone. I'm almost apologetic to the suburbs.

"That looks amazing. I see you're busying yourself over there?" Shades asks. I suppose that's the culture here.

I thank her. The other asks, "Where'd you get such a big rock like that, anyway? It definitely looks like it's not from any of the forests around here."

I explain everything again. The thousands of dollars I spent. Proving I'm a United States citizen to the salesman. And that I wish I had a private space.

They encourage me to finish strong and not to work too hard.

After half an hour I head back in. Run my fingertips across the hull and feel for any rough spots. I hold my breath sometimes. Even if my mask is on when I'm that close. I find an edge and clip it clean off. I take breaks only food and smokes. And water. I always need water.

...

I throw up my arms like I'm drowning. Marcy and I have teamed up to create a whole swarm of fish. Hers definitely look a lot better than mine. Long fin. Short fin. No fin. I sniff my fingers. Keep sniffing. Marcy calls me gross. I say, I know.

I push my chair out and head for Senora at her desk. I want her to know how frustrated I am that I can't get the fins right. And how can we best remedy this situation.

"Jose my boy, I want you to remember something. When you're creating something, don't worry about perfection. Just get it down." She pauses. "There's no such thing as a perfect fish. Not until they're on my plate!" she laughs. "Hafa Jose? Go and make some more. Keep it up, son. You're doing a good job."

I want to eat poki now. Oh. I want to put my poki in these fish! Like food to go. I thank Senora, walk back to my desk, and tell Marcy my fish-wrap idea. She says I'm dumb. I say I would eat it if she made me one. Jiablu.

The bell rings and we put all our fish in trash bags. Tie them up and leave at the front of the class for Senora. She thanks us, and we thank her, then we walk out.

...

On the last week of October I finish the Latte stone. Right before winter hit.

I walk around it for the thousandth time. I've positioned it right in the middle. Lots of space to work with. How many different ways it can be seen.

There are shelves in my garage. Work desk with a sandwich and bottled water. Four oscillating fans designed for gyms. It doesn't allow me to look away. I take a few steps back till I end up on the street. It's dark with shadow in the middle. Glows at the top because of the fluorescent light. Sun's about to go down.

When I head back in a white man stops me from down the side walk with an, Excuse me. Mid fifties, bald-brown hair at his sides, polo shirt, khakis. He must be a retiree.

“Hi there young man.”

How’s it going.

“I’ve been noticing you carve this the last couple o’ weeks. Pretty neat stuff.”

“Thank you.” I just want a shower. Shower and open up a can of my favorite beer on the couch. Maybe a glass of whiskey. I can do whiskey.

“Yeah ... so um listen, I noticed you don’t wear your shirt sometimes. And I have four *teenage* daughters that don’t need to be seeing things like that.” We don’t look away from each other. “See,” he holds his hands out like he’s just caught a fish, “I believe that home should be a safe place. I’m sure you feel the same way. Everyone does. I can’t allow things like this in my neighborhood. I hope you understand.”

Oh. My shirt’s always off. Never thought that’d be a thing.

“And those tattoos? What are they? A symbol of your country?” His finger runs down through the air. Tracing Nana’s heritage in the blades of my tattoos. “Usually, when you move to a new country you learn how to adapt their ways. I’m sure you’ll lose that accent.”

I light a cigarette.

He walks away before I can say anything. But I don’t want to say anything. He lives just four houses down, the one with the six garden gnomes in the front yard.

I go inside, shower, and grab a beer from the fridge. I drink it outside on my front lawn. Why wear a t-shirt? This'll be the last chance I get before winter comes anyway.

Finish a third of my pack smoking and drinking into the night.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR – How many times can I tell the same story over and over without it losing a bit of itself? In the same way sand washes stone I ... need to find this happiness. What have my stories done? Nowhere near do I feel any closer to joy.

Remembering my ancestors during these times usually don't stand at the foreground of my priorities. I really should prioritize better.

Here's one of my favorite taotaomona stories.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR –

Returns

Gimenin real, this is a true story. I'm not making light of the situation. I'm home.

Visiting Tasi and her new family in the village of Yona. Yona rules.

Tasi has just given birth. Now, I don't make it to the hospital but my plane touches down just in time for her return home. She's married to this haole' dude. A pilot for United. He's flying back from Taiwan right now. Won't be home for another four hours.

I say her whiteness got her white dick and she says my chamoru chorizo is smaller than a vienna sausage. But vienna is sweet, though. We laugh but I assure her, vienna is low-maintenance, long living, and a good snack anytime anywhere.

Her baby sure is beautiful, though. She's got these velvety-kinda brown eyes. Same color as Nana's old wooden storyboards. The ones grandpa made before he died. Tasi names her Mia, a shorter version of Maria, after grandma. Nana was born December 16. Mia here was born last week, December 17.

We hangout outside on her back patio with the baby. I sit on a cooler. Tas pulls Nana's old rocking chair towards her. It's got this notch on the right front end. From when I tried spinning it in a circle. My ass hurt for two days after that.

Mia's blonde curls match the size of her ten small fingers and ten tiny toes. I tell her she has stinky toes! A stink-stink. But she just looks at me. At her mom's nose. Then at the jungle. Tasi's got a half-acre of smooth wide open cut grass for her backyard. I know she will ask me to cut it before I leave back to New York.

She's got the jungle as a thick fence all around.

"Where do you find a house in Yona, with a half-acre back yard?" I stand up, open the cooler, and take out a beer. When it *cssks* open I slowly start relaxing. "Lucky, man. Sure is beautiful."

Tasi unbuttons her blouse and starts breastfeeding. Mia shuts her eyes. "Nice right? Can hold lots of parties. Barbecues," she touches Mia's pinky with hers, "and your little christening."

Tangantangan takes much of the space in between the jungle, wrapping areas like a net.

We talk about work. That she hasn't seen a good movie since ever since. And that we both didn't care to attend our high school ten year reunions. Whatever happened to Larry? Hmph.

We watch as much of the sunset as we can. Before the lemai trees cut us off from seeing the rest. Head back inside, I grill us up on chicken stir fry and life is good. I serve that good stuff up, spinning on my heels from kitchen to dining table.

She sways Mia from side to side, real lightly, "You're dumb." Shakes her head.

I warn her it's hot, to take a step back – and say, Wow, Jose, what a *delicious* sweet *smelling* dinner. My body cannot wait to consume so much glory. My stomach can't – take – much more." She tilts her head, draws her finger to her hip, goes back and forth, "This motion here? It's my spit. Kalakas, right?" She laughs. Mia blinks three times.

Tasi prays grace over the table and keeps Mia in her left arm throughout dinner. I offer to help but she says it's okay. I say it's because you think I'll drop her, right? I'm not gonna drop her. She says she trusts me. Not to worry. And in the event that I ever *do* drop Mia she will dropkick my toenail. I laugh but she doesn't. That's okay. It's okay to not have a sense of humor.

After dinner I hold Mia in my arms for the first time. We wade in the carpet living room with me dancing on my toes. Tasi's passed out on the couch, knocked out. I give her a quilt – ha, it's Nana's old quilt from when Tasi was born. Where did she hide this all these years? This girl, lanat where's my quilt?

Mia coos in between the crease in my elbow and I wanna squeal. But I don't. I don't man. I hold that fucking joy in until it hurts my head. Pulsing in my cranium like boOM boOM. When she does this her two little pink lips barely move and I say, "Are you speaking? Whatchu you saying baby, girl?" She coos again. My palms are like mini-pancake heaters for this little one.

I put Mia down in her crib real gently, making sure not to let her head hang back. She really sleeps better than any of us. I should probably change my entire apartment living room into one huge futon. With twelve-foot tall dolls of all my favorite super heroes and books with like five-hundred thousand sized font.

I place the crib right beside Tasi. Give her another pillow. Her living room is air-conditioned with a nice champagne carpet. I have forgotten what carpet is. I miss the shit so much I decide to sleep on it tonight. So, I dig in her closet, pull out a few blankets, create a makeshift futon on the floor, and throw down a pillow. And. I. Am. Out.

...

I can hear the ocean. I don't see it. I don't see anything. But I can hear it pulling and pushing the shore back and forth. It's getting fading in, becoming clearer. Louder. It's at my ears. No. No, I can't be drowning I'm not dying. This isn't death.

I know this is Guam because I don't hear any birds. I know I'm not in Rota. Tinian. Or Saipan. Then the stars open up. One by one by the millions. Like Mahnong Steve from church, when he flicks on all the lights for six o'clock mass.

This is a beach with no hotels, no tourists, nobody.

I stand up. Dust sand off my arms. Blink a lot.

There's just one coconut tree here. With tall hedges that got to run up several hundred feet. The coconut tree stands out front of what looks like a pathway. It's cold. My breath, hard nipples, and shrinking penis tell me this. I walk inside.

Plumeria fills the air with just enough to leave you wanting to smell more. It's quiet here. Warmer here. There are walls and walls of these flowers stretching in every which way. Around every corner. Who has the kind of time to create shit?

I press my fingers against the shrubs when I walk by. Feels wet. Like it just rained. I come to an intersection. Hear whispers. I follow the path to my left. I blink once and I'm in the backyard of my Nana's house.

There's her row of orchids, tied with chicken wire to an old tree stump. Her pots decorate her back yard like turtles leaving the beach. I used to hide my toys there. I walk up to a waist-high one completely filled with soil. Baby tomatoes start to sprout and I rub a leaf inbetween my fingers. Sweet. I lift a stone over, take out the spare key.

BKAW! Holy *shit* this fucking chicken. In a blurry red and orange it flaps its wings at me. It shouts again its neck gets tense. I grab that rock and I chuck it so hard it flaps up and away into the neighbor's yard. Its mid-air flapping looks more like climbing.

This is definitely home.

When I walk inside I pass the kitchen. I vision feels distorted. Then I'm in the living room. The hallway with St. John the Baptist and St. Roke limited edition six-inch idols. They glow yellow on the shelves under the hallway light.

Nana's door is shut. I don't smell any coconut oil or hear Days of Our Lives. It's quiet now. Where is the sound of the ocean?

Nana's door doesn't open when I turn its knob. I twist it slowly to the left. The right. Then left again.

...

"Hey fool." Tasi shakes my shoulders. "There are three bedrooms in this house. Pick one." She's brushing her teeth. Looks at her watch. "It's only nine."

I wipe mugu out my eye. "Shit, well it felt like midnight."

"You're jetlagged. Go shower. You can sleep in the first room on the right." She walks down the hall to her room. "I'll cook us some breakfast tomorrow."

My head pounds.

Sometimes there's comfort in dreaming. We even look for miracles on our toes. As if hope will come down from heaven on high when you're ready to receive the Holy Spirit. Over the top like suddenly stopping a tsunami with prayer.

I wash up and go to bed. I fall asleep immediately.

...

With a flick of my zippo I get some light. The cave is so huge I can barely make out the ceiling. I know touching one of these stalagmites will hinder its growth back a thousand years. So I tip toe around them. Hold my hands out for balance.

I hear waves again and it sends me into a panic. Why am I so scared? What is this?

So I keep my lighter open and light a cigarette. I follow the sound of the ocean up a mound of limestone. I know I'm dreaming when because my steps are wide and far, without and gravity pulling me towards the earth.

When I get to the top there is nothing on my mind but seeing this world. Before I forget it I want to hear it. Smell it. I put my lighter to the sky, there's a stadium sized hole in the cave. I close my zippo. Allow myself to keep staring till the back of my neck aches.

Until one cloud finally passes over.

A light draft passes by from a crack in the wall. Water runs down like a mask, peeling back layers of red, brown, and yellow for my flame to see. I see the beach down below. I must be in a cliff.

And there it goes. Cliff. Beach. My toes in the sand. The tape recorder in my right hand. And a leaf for weaving in the other. I turn my palms towards me. Closing

my eyes does nothing. I still see the fucking beach. The fucking sand. And fucking stars. I try to listen for anything. For an ambulance roaring down 34th street. My landlord calling me, telling me heater's broken and won't be fixed till end of March. The excessive beeping the copy machine makes at work. Change falling out the kiosk.

Nothing.

I suppose I shouldn't expect something. Perhaps I shouldn't expect *anything* to happen.

...

Fried rice, garlic-spam, and eggs wake me up in the morning. The light sizzle on the pan. Mia's cooing. And J.D. Crutch on the stereo. I yawn as I pull the curtains apart. Say good morning to that big ass back yard and make my way out to the kitchen.

Every day of my life is different no matter how mediocre. But when familia's in the kitchen smelling, like it's Sundays at Nana's I have to wrestle for the first in charge with the remote control.

"You need to put duct tape on your mouth." Tasi works hard, dicing green peppers, onions and chorizo. "Mia screams. Jose sings. I should file you under my taxes as another baby."

I glance at Mia in her stroller. She looks at the latte stone salt and pepper shakers on the table. To the window above the sink. Her little head sways from left to right like she's saying no. I tell her, "That's right. Your mother got you that yard to set you loose like the wild feral beast that you are!" I give the tip of her nose my pinky. "Why are you so *tiny*?" I sniff her cheeks hard. I grab her stroller and pull her up with me at the table. I offer Tasi some help with setting the table and prepping drinks.

“You were talking in your sleep last night.”

“Yeah? Like what.”

“Not sure. I couldn’t make it out. Something like, Make sure – Make sure.” She sips from her coffee. “Sounded like you wanted someone to do something. That’s for sure. I’m going grocery shopping soon. Would you like anything? Like a nose strip or one of those crazy things to stuff up your nose.”

Tasi can say whatever she wants. I’m hungry. Food’s ready. And Mia’s sleeping. After breakfast Tasi goes out shopping and I stay home with Mia. Which is really just her chilling in her crib beside me while I watch tv.

There’s no breeze so I sasa my legs and allow sleep to take me again. When Tasi comes home and finds me crashed out I’ll tell her Mia leads by a great example.

I go into my dream ready to defend myself.

...

Courtyard again. Stars out. People in white walking in and out of the maze. There’s benches that circle a fountain in the middle. I sit on one. Nobody ever comes to join me but they’re all in conversation. Trading smiles and maybe gossip. But I never hear them. As a matter of fact, I only hear the ocean. I usually don’t care much for dreams. Only sleep. But this dream ... I don’t want to wake up from it.

The fountain is simple. Small. Very small. Tiny. The size of a shot glass. Water doesn’t shoot out of it, it simply flows over. Everywhere is grass except the several feet of limestone around the fountain.

I hear the water flowing. Nothing else.

After a few minutes it's just me in the courtyard. When I look back down to the fountain – there's a message. Written in puddles on the stone.

Sa'aina Ma'ase.

The minute I try to figure out its meaning Mia's screaming wakes me up. She must be hungry. My arms flex with nervousness when I start feeding her. It's my first time. Got to get it right. Easy right?

Her nose is so small I ask her how can you breathe?

Tasi's keys rattle at the door and she drags her feet in. Bags in hand. I place Mia back in her crib and help unload the car. Put the baby monitor in my pocket. The other beside her crib on a bookshelf. We meet at the trunk.

“Hey, what does sa'aina ma'ase mean?”

“Thank you.”

“Like si yu'us ma'ase?”

“Yeah, but without the god part in it.”

We place the plastic bags on our wrists. “Is that what everyone's saying now?”

“I don't know, Jose. Just help me bring the bags in.”

The baby monitor cracks static, “Fan hasso i –”. It's a woman's voice. Sounds elderly. Tasi and I look at each other for a moment. “Amānu gaige hao.” It cracks then becomes clear just like my phone. “Ai, bonita si neni girl.”

The bags tumble back into the trunk and we run to the house. Tasi beats me to her crib. Each step feels like a leap. My shadow, my heart, and my balls are still trying to catch up with me.

There's no way another person could be in the house.

Did I lock the backdoor? I locked the backdoor. I didn't lock the backdoor.

Tasi doesn't say anything standing over Mia's crib. I ask if she's alright but she doesn't say anything. I rush beside her and look in. Mia's still out cold. I let out a sigh that could bring down the house and check every closet, every bedroom, under every bed, and even the cabinets in the kitchen and under the bathroom sink. Nothing. No one.

"Who would break into the house, not steal anything, but stop to say Mia's beautiful?" Tasi asks, using her finger to glide down Mia's cheek. "Could it have been a taotaomona?"

I have nothing to say.

We don't know the identity of this woman. Who she is or where she came from. Static over the monitor does a good job distorting any tone that's in the voice.

I know it. And then Tasi knows it. She looks to the floor then smirks when she's figured something out. We share them with one another and know, it had to have been nana.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR – What happens when one is so exhausted and spent? When nobody understands and I'm so far gone that remembering what the ocean sounds like, will turn into some kind of folklore. Over Tumon's reef where bottles break and scar deep into the flesh. Inches and inches, then meters then meters, and feet to miles. This is how far my heart rips. Patience swears it'll get ahold of me. But I haven't heard from it in ages.

How simple, familiar, and old.

WRRR – WRRR – WRRR –

Click.

On the flight back to Guam I bring all of Uncle Jose's collection of tapes with me. Hand carry because I don't want it to be damaged by anything or anyone. Turns out, he has three shoe boxes worth of these tapes.

I only listen to a few of them. I want to save the rest so me and mom can listen to them together. I wonder if Uncle Jose knew me and his sister would be listening to these one day. He had to have been recording these things for someone.

Or, perhaps honestly, just for himself.

