

TREASURE HUNT

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The chicken livers quivering inside a rusty pail seared the memory in the boy's heart.

The pail was wedged tightly between the faith healer's legs. It was partly hidden by the soiled bed sheet that draped the slatted bamboo bed where the healer made his patients lie down. As they reclined, each one would whimper about the pain that was bothering them. From his stool, arms hanging between his thighs, the healer would bend low and mumble a prayer directly on the patient's distressed body part. The boy was squatting on the floor almost behind the healer on the raised stage, where he sneaked to escape the rancid humidity of the wailing crowd. His father sat among the patients waiting below. After each prayer, the boy saw the healer quickly lift the hem of the bed sheet to scoop out a gob of jellylike flesh from the pail. Then the healer, in

delirious prayer, would lay his clenched fist where the patient's illness festered. With a sleight of gesture fast as lightning, he would press bluntly on the patient's skin while rotating his fist, as if prying out the tumor, the abscess, or whatever alien growth was tormenting the victim. Shorter than a flash, he would open his palm to show a brownish-purplish flesh to the patient, who would go into a frenzied ecstasy, regain composure—and pay—as the healer dropped the piece of chicken liver back into the pail.

The patients in line and the thick audience in the courtyard chanted with their hands up in the air to the healer, swaying like stalks of wheat, ready for him to harvest.

When his terminally sick father took him to that grimly mystical place, the boy was only twelve, but he could already understand. They were not going to watch a 3-D movie or trade bets at a basketball game. It was not their usual trip together to the swimming pool at the neighborhood Y—the one sure thing that he could count on every Sunday afternoon. There, his father bragged endlessly how he was once the fastest swimmer among his tribe of Tagbanuas from Coron Island in the Philippines. His father had been his closest companion. For all that was new and fun to do, the young boy was the scheming instigator, and the older man was the willing accomplice.

But this faraway trip was different. It would be to a sweaty place of blind belief and dark magic. “Alipio, my son. *Ipyong*...come by my side.” The boy understood how deep his father’s need was from the way he wheezed out that nickname. “I want you to come with me. It’s a long trip from Washington, D.C., to Manila, but it’s my last chance. Modern medicine couldn’t do it, but maybe my faith can.”

“I believe, I believe,” his father gasped at his own moment of ecstasy upon seeing the lump on the healer’s open palm.

But weeks later after they returned to the U.S. he died anyway. Maybe his faith was not strong enough. Or maybe the chicken liver had already grown too big by the time the healer made his father believe that it was taken out of his left lung.

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Alipio got the letter a decade later.

Strangely, it was his mother who delivered it during a rare visit from Middleburg, Virginia, to D.C. “You still hate me, don’t you?” were the first words she spat out. “Hi,” he answered, although what he really wanted to say was “Yes, a lot.” She could have at least greeted him with “Nice apartment. Congratulations on your new job.”

But unspoken words were their staple. He himself had questions that he never found the courage to ask her since his dad died. Some things were clear. He did remember that she sold their house quickly and had a huge yard sale where she got rid of his toys, video games, and dollar-store gifts from his father, keepsakes that meant a world to him. Junk, she said. And just as quickly, she sent him away right after his dad's burial to live with her unmarried sister. But he could not explain why she remarried so quickly. That new husband Jim, was he already her boyfriend while his dad was sick? Was that why she never joined them at the pool on Sunday afternoons?

"Sorry, but Jim and I can't afford the storage anymore," she said, disrupting his trance over the sealed envelope on his lap. "It's been ten years, you know. Random stuff we had to get rid of. But anything that looked important, we kept in the back shed. You're welcome to take whatever you want. I mean, within the next month because we do need space in the shed. But I found this letter for you. I thought you should have it sooner."

Yeah, it's been ten years, he knew only too well, filled with countless nights of shallow gasping with his eyes locked open in the dark.

"Do you want to maybe go somewhere to eat? Grab some of your old favorites?" she persisted, seemingly unaware of how his appetites have changed

as a grown man.

“No thanks. I’m fine,” he said, strained by how hard it was to wind time back to some old affection, when there was so little of it to start with. “I’ll come around next week to clear the rest of his stuff.”

She stopped to look back before closing the door. He hoped for a tiny second that she would explain why she became colder and more absent after he and his father returned from the faith healer. Or at least say honestly that love was never there and she did not want to fake it to a dying man. But she didn’t. As she left quietly, he strung together the “little secrets” that his loopy aunt had been snickering about all through his adolescence. Meant to tease and taunt, no doubt because he was a lingering annoyance and a financial burden, the doled-out “revelations” all eventually added up to a possible answer. There was a snippet about his dad needing a green card. A tidbit about his American mother peddling a sham marriage for \$10,000, then carping after the ink had dried that her 50 percent discount was too high. And something else—so hush-hushed beneath his aunt’s vulgar fit of giggles and smoker’s cough—that “for a loveless marriage, things went ga-bumping and ga-humping anyway on too many horny nights” during his dad’s carefully planned stay-overs at his mom’s place, complete with a parked toothbrush and planted male underwear to dress

up the fake union in case of a raid.

Which led to the missing explanation that his aunt held back as her cruelest secret: Was he the unplanned baby? Was he a mistake that his mother never wanted?

Outside the envelope, his name was written in his father's handwriting:

For Ipyong, when the right time comes.

Inside, the letter was brief:

My dearest son,

Did you have to go?

What did you find?

What will you do?

Dad

Go where? And why? Was he supposed to be looking for something? Was this a reminder of something Alipio said to his father before he died? Gazing out the window, through the brick wall across the street, he tried to remember the distant deathbed scene.

"Ipyong, there are things you don't know that could be hard on you when you find out," his father struggled to talk, halting until the pain eased somewhat and he could recover his breath. "I wish I can tell you truthfully, as a

father should tell his son. But time has run out..." His father winced as he turned on his side to look directly into Alipio's eyes.

"Remember our Sundays at the pool?"

It was in that pool where as a small boy he learned from his father how to swim. After just a few Sundays of supporting his belly with both hands, his father said: "I'll let go now, okay? Stop grabbing my arm. Don't be scared. I'm always here beside you. I'll be ready to catch you if you sink. Ready?" His father let go. The boy had always trusted that calm voice and let go, gliding alone. As he kicked to move faster, he glanced back and saw his proud father silhouetted against the silvery water, arms outstretched, throwing him a glistening smile.

Alipio looked down and remembered his father's last words as he reread the letter.

"Ipyong, if ever anything hurts you badly, if you have to escape, I want you to go to Coron Island. Its beauty will give you such comfort that you will not want to leave. I want you to look for all that I treasured as a child—the boundless water, the throbbing silence of the deep, nested between a bed of coral and the cloudless blue canopy of a sky. You will find me there because after all this pain is over, I will return home. We will swim together. Like fish

in the ocean.”

Alipio understood that his father would soon go and was trying to leave behind a lasting connection between them.

“Promise me?”

With the unsure voice of a child, he said what he knew his father wanted to hear to make his departure sweet.

“Yes, I promise.”

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Alipio did not know that keeping that promise would require such an arduous effort. Maybe that was his punishment for doing it ten years late. It took almost fourteen hours from Washington D.C. to Seoul. After a four-hour wait at Incheon Airport, he finally connected to a five-hour flight to Manila, where the limited travel options required an overnight stay. The next morning, he took a one-hour domestic flight from Manila to Busuanga Island. Two days into the journey and he was not even there yet; he still had a 45-minute van ride before he would arrive in Coron Town.

His jet-lagged head felt like a swollen appendage pulsing with ill humor, but he did not waste any time. After just one night’s rest, he went to the dock at sunrise to hire a boat that would take him to a white sand beach yet to be

picked from the seemingly countless islands dotting the Coron Strait.

He quickly zeroed in on a lime-green boat that screamed its name in maroon italics: Ddjoe Charmer's Heart Wings.

"Hey, where is the boatman? Is there a Ddjoe here?" he called out, turning around twice. The scraggly kids around him stared but did not answer, making him feel like a just-landed alien who was betraying his American interior despite his brown Filipino exterior.

After several thuds of coconuts falling on the sand, the answer came scurrying down from the crown of a forty-foot coconut tree. Boatman Ddjoe, who looked just a few years older than Alipio's early twenties, had a fluorescent smile, and the whole package held out an intriguing promise—the garish paint colors, the boat's string of happy nouns that somehow made strange sense, and the coconuts that were quickly loaded inside.

"Yes, sir, Ddjoe truly is my name," Ddjoe affirmed as he started the boat's engine.

"Why two Ds? Why not just Joe?"

"Because my father stuttered. The day after I was born, he went to the municipal hall to get my birth certificate. The town clerk asked for my first name. But my father had a sudden attack. Ddh! Ddh! Ddh! The clerk copied

down each D! The official paper says there are five Ds. But I use only two.”

Alipio could not recall the last time he laughed this much. He felt the moist, tropical air fill his lungs. Poor government clerk, he visualized, scrambling to faithfully record a barrage of Ds in block letters with his indelible official pen! Did he lose count? He played with saying as many Ds as he could with machine gun speed, with the boat’s chugging engine keeping rhythm, while Ddjoe kept score and cheered.

As the boat gained speed, Alipio stared at the caves dotting the razor-sharp limestone cliffs wrapped around Coron Island. Did his father climb up the barbed rocks to explore those caves as a child? He loved to boast about having descended from the Tagbanuas tribe that guarded the island’s natural wonders.

“Ddjoe, what’s inside those caves? Have people gone inside them?”

“My father did. He was also a boatman before I took over. Like my father, I am a Tagbanua. We know those caves well. There are bird’s nests inside. We collect them. We have to risk our lives. And fight bats too! Bats a foot wide! But the caves also hide something else. Something people kill and die for.”

Alipio felt an unfamiliar thrill as Ddjoe revealed with a flourish that the caves hid heaps of gold—in ingots and bullion, in sacks and chests—stacked deep inside by Japanese soldiers as they were retreating from the Americans at

the end of World War II. There was a boom in the 1980s in trying to find all that gold. That's when his father decided to stop being a boatman to join in on the treasure hunts.

"Did he find any?" Alipio asked while noticing Ddjoe's playful stare, as if he were shaping an answer that Alipio would enjoy hearing.

"What my father first found was a hermit guarding one of the caves," Ddjoe continued. "Fine ashes spewed out of his mouth as he spoke. His hair grew in patches. Thick cat whiskers bristled from his nostrils. Slimy centipedes crawled out of his mouth."

Ddjoe leaned over toward Alipio, squinted his eyes, and held his trembling fingers near Alipio's cheeks.

"The hermit is full of hatred. He holds the map that leads to mounds of gold. Without it, you crawl around in circles. The dark tunnels become smaller. You scream for help. But no one hears. You lose your light. You gasp for air. You slowly die."

Mesmerized, Alipio had to jerk his head to wake up. "Did your dad grab the map and run?"

"No, because the hermit made him an offer: 'I'll give it to you. But I want something in exchange.' Did the hermit want a share of the gold? No! He

wanted so much more. My father turned around and ran.”

“He ran away without the map?”

Ddjoe almost fell off the boat as he reenacted grandiosely how his father tried to grab the map, when suddenly the hermit hissed like a snake, his raised lips letting out scaly black insects with serrated claws. His father sprinted away as fast as he could. But the hermit’s voice followed him in pounding echoes that pummeled his shoulders like blocks of stone.

“Give it to me! Give me what I want!”

Long fingers of ghastly winds reached for his father from behind, sucking him back. But his father was able to escape.

“Yeah, without the map...” Alipio whispered half sarcastically.

“But he survived! He asked the village elders what it could be that the hermit so viciously wanted. The eldest Tagbanua explained that the hermit was cursed. He had been guarding that cave for a hundred years. He could only be saved if a child was sacrificed in his place.”

Alipio’s right knee jerked as Ddjoe revealed that the chosen child must be drowned in the largest of the thirteen hidden lakes on Coron Island. “As soon as the last bubble from the child’s lungs appears on the water’s surface, the hermit’s spirit is freed. But that child’s soul will take over as the new guard at

the mouth of the cave until another sacrificial child can be found to take his place. Who knows, maybe after another hundred years.”

Cold shards of sweat tickled Alipio’s neck. “So which child did the hermit want?”

Ddjoe put his face near Alipio’s such that they almost shared their breaths. “I was my father’s only child. So that last bubble would have been mine.”

Alipio fell silent, then chuckled nervously. “Who told you all this weird stuff?”

“My father!” Ddjoe declared, preening as he lit the wood shavings under the charcoal grill that sat on the far end of the boat. He was going to grill fresh fish on the moving boat. Alipio watched as Ddjoe slit the belly of the fish, scraped away the scales, cleaned it out with salt water, and stuffed it with chopped tomatoes, onions, garlic, coarse salt, and chili peppers. What a bounty, Alipio marveled. Fresh fish, sausages, marinated pork chops, vegetable kebabs, sticky rice, mangoes, papaya slices, and cute finger-thin bananas. He ate using just his hands, and with a ball of rice pinched at the tip of his fingers, he visualized infested hermits, gold and greed, monster bats, human sacrifice, and bubbles from the final gasps of drowning children.

Boatman Ddjoe had just regaled him with fable and feast, Alipio mused, as

saltwater sprays from the boat's outriggers lapped his face and made his meal more savory.

The trip to Paz Island took two hours. As the boat slowed down on the gentle slope of the white sand beach, Alipio asked, "So what's your father doing now?"

Ddjoe paused before tipping the anchor overboard. "He's gone. He got lost at sea when I was starting college. Went out in a storm, never came back. That ended any ambitions I had. I took over supporting the family. So here I am. A boatman, not an engineer."

Ddjoe loosened the rope as if he were lost in prayer. "He told me so many fantastic stories. Over campfires at the beach. By stars, by moonlight. I believed them all. Even when he was making fun of me, this dumb kid who bought everything he said. The drama. The magic! They made people happy. I learned all his stories by memory, and now they're mine."

Alipio waited awhile to make sure it was all right to ask.

"Do you miss him?"

Ddjoe remained silent.

"Yeah, me too. Very much," Alipio whispered as he juggled in his mind if

Ddjoe could be the buddy-brother he had always wanted, the one whose willing ear could make what he held inside weigh less.

Ddjoe dropped the anchor slowly, like he was lowering a coffin into a grave. A small fish darted from the bottom of the boat as the anchor hit the sand. Flooded with feelings from when he was twelve, Alipio thought the darkish water creature was a piece of chicken liver. He sat legs hanging from the edge of the boat, but could not make himself plunge into the blazingly turquoise waters—not with what looked like brownish-purplish flesh bobbing near his feet. Ddjoe pushed him out, laughing. “Don’t you know how to swim?” Of course he did, fondly remembering that pool and that special Sunday when he broke free, who he learned it from, and his parting words.

After this pain is over, I will return home. We will swim together.

Alipio kicked off with the fiercest of breaststrokes as he chased the fish that dived deeper and swam faster in every direction, urging him to follow.

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As he sat in the Manila airport’s economy waiting area for his midnight flight to Korea, Alipio wondered if he was doing the right thing. He was trying to avoid wasting the unused portion of his nonrefundable plane ticket. For what? The return flight from Manila would be even more horrendous than

coming over. He'd arrive in Seoul before 5 a.m. and have a six-hour wait before boarding the fourteen-hour flight to Washington, D.C., if he was lucky. Flights were being delayed and canceled all over because of the heavy snowstorms pummeling the U.S. Northeast. Amid the airport din, the first question in his dad's letter started ringing in his ear.

Did you have to go?

What choice did he have? He had known for a long time that he had to flee. He could no longer keep up the appearance of being near his mother, whom he rarely saw. He could not bear receiving any more of those preset gift boxes that she sent him every Christmas, as her way of keeping in touch without exchanging words, to avoid the questions that she knew he had. And he'd had enough of his aunt's "little secrets," which was her form of revenge for having been forced to raise someone else's accidental son.

The icy grip of a void and vacant life waiting seven thousand miles away made him pull out his phone and dial a number. Another question buzzed in his mind.

What did you find?

"Ddjoe, do you think there's really gold in those caves? I mean, it's possible, right?"

He sensed right away from Ddjoe's long pause that there was none. With the honest voice Alipio was hoping for, Ddjoe finally conceded: "I have to tell you, that tale is too old. It was crafted for tourist consumption. I don't think those caves hide anything. But why are you interested? I told you all that happened—that gold was cursed!"

Alipio grinned as he listened to his fabulist friend admit telling a tall tale, then defend it as fact, all in the same breath.

"Okay. Maybe no gold, but there must be something else," Alipio persisted.

Ddjoe spoke as if in a dream, with words etched inside him by his own father: "There *is* something greater than gold. You and I, we are descendants of Tagbanuas. We once were hunters, but the glitter of modern life has distracted us. We have become ungrateful for the gifts given to us by those who came before, and entrusted through us for those still to come. We need to stand guard again, to defend the wealth we already own—the fertile ocean, powdery coves of pink sand, cliffs and caves, the cool water of eerie mountain lakes. These are our treasures! Our riches sing from our shores that teem with children swimming—"

"Like fish?"

“Like sharks!”

Alipio traced ever-tightening circles, stopped, and turned his back to the departure gate. Deaf to the final call for the Korean Air flight to Seoul, he walked out of the international airport toward the shuttle van that transferred passengers to domestic flights.

He pressed the phone harder against his ear as Ddjoe’s voice started crackling at the other end: “Hello? Hello?”

He thrust a hand into his pants pocket to clutch a folded letter, so tight there was no chance to escape the answer he found to the last question inside.

What will you do?

“Ddjoe? Ddjoe! Are you still there? Rev up Heart Wings! Get her charcoal grill ready. We’re going on a treasure hunt!”

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