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The General

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The General

NICOLAS LACSON

There were only two days left before the centennial, when the twins, just turned eleven, arrived in Bacolod with their father. They came on the second flight from Manila, although their father had lobbied for leaving on the earliest one, meaning they would have to be at the airport by four-thirty in the morning, at the latest. The twins had their mother to thank: she had argued that if the boys did not get enough sleep, they were liable to be cranky, and it was highly likely that their father, notorious for his short and fiery temper, would find them impossible to deal with. It was for the good of all, she had pointed out, and their father, after a while, sighed, conceded she was right—what mattered after all was that they went. It was surprise enough that the twins had asked, over dinner a few nights ago, when their father announced his plan to go to Bacolod, if they could come. Their father, pleasantly taken aback, lowered his fork.

“Really? You want to come?”

The next day, after getting over the initial shock, their father—instead of his secretary at the office—saw to it himself that the accommodations were arranged: a flight was booked, the lodgings reserved. They would be in Bacolod for five days and four nights, from the tenth of June to the fourteenth, when they would leave on the last flight. While they were away, their mother would remain in Manila and look after the office. All was set by the morning of the tenth, a sunny and humid Thursday, and the twins found themselves on a plane flying away from Manila, destined for their father’s hometown. Nicky, the older of the two by minutes, had brought along his Gameboy and a comic book while Raffy had neatly packed his knapsack with three volumes of *The*

Hardy Boys and the folded extra shirt their mother had advised them to take. When the plane lifted into the air and they felt an invisible hand pull on their tiny, seatbelt-strapped bodies, they secretly rejoiced over the fact that they were certain to miss the first day of classes, which began on the fourteenth. Nicky was seated by the window and his dark eyes shone as he leaned over Raffy, seated beside him, and whispered that perhaps if Mama took pity, they might just even be able to skip the second one. Raffy didn't answer; he merely adjusted the round pair of glasses perched on his nose—it was the only way they could be told apart—and went back to his detective book, although Nicky noticed that his twin remained stuck on the same page for a good ten minutes, staring at the print.

When finally they got off the plane, it was late morning, around ten, and the twins felt grateful after having been cooped up for over an hour. Nicky all the while had kept whining about how the window seat was useless since about all it offered was nothing but blue, blue, blue. The dimness of their spirits had only lifted when the pilot announced they would be landing shortly. The plane dipped and banked and shuddered, and the twins, for the moment, were afforded a temporary thrill—tugboats chugging along the glinting strait, a dark column of smoke rising from the green sea of sugarcane, and finally the traffic cluttered on the narrow city streets, which from above reminded them of toy cars.

"Why's there smoke?" Raffy asked.

"It's the milling season," their father replied.

On the tarmac, the sun fell full upon their faces as they walked squinting toward the terminal. Raffy commented there were fireflies in his legs and feet. Above, the sky was naked and cloudless. Nicky, apparently not yet finished, began to complain about the heat, about having to walk under it. At least in Manila, he claimed, you passed through a tube and it was airconditioned. Raffy quietly assented to this observation. Nicky then began to lag behind, dragging his feet, groaning, and feigning exhaustion. Their father, with a hand over his eyes, his bald head shiny like a cue ball, ordered him to hurry up.

"It's so hot," Nicky whined.

"What do you expect?" their father said curtly. "When you go down south, naturally it gets hotter."

They continued walking, following the other passengers, Nicky wearing a long face, still muttering complaints under his breath.

"Why can't you behave, like your brother?"

Nicky finally clammed up.

Their father led them to the terminal, where a lone conveyor belt cranked out the luggage slower than an old woman stirring a pot of soup. He was a squat bald man and his teeth were yellow from too much coffee. He wore a maroon Lacoste shirt, khaki pants, and a pair of shiny dark brown moccasins, without socks—a businessman on a holiday. He looked different to the boys, without the heavy-shouldered suit and colorful ties. The twins always heard their mother—who helped their father choose what to wear everyday—say that she was glad their father didn't dress like a *probinsyano* anymore, like when he had arrived in Manila. Nicky especially took this to mean that he dressed funny, like a farmer in one of their history textbooks—a straw hat, *tsinelas*, *camisa chino*, and pants hitched up to the knee.

Still, their mother always said that he was a brilliant man. Insurance was what he did for a living but his ruling passion was history, the degree he held from his university years. His desk in the office was lined with a calculator, insurance policies held together cleanly with paper clips, and checks awaiting his loopy signature. But at home, in the den, there was another special table, one where only he was allowed to sit at. It was clear save for a fountain pen bought in Italy when he had left the country for the first time at the age of twenty-three, and a thick ream of loose bond paper, the words all scribbled in his cramped illegible hand, comprehensible to no one but himself.

"Papa, what are you doing?" Raffy asked one afternoon, when he was furiously at work on the pages. The twins were playing and had somehow burrowed their way into the den. "I'm trying to write a book," he answered, still scratching away with his magnificent pen.

"Why don't you just use a computer?" Nicky asked.

He threw his hands up in the air and sighed. "I don't really understand those things—they just slow me down."

Raffy said, "What kind of book? A mystery book?"

"Not really. More of a history book."

"Like the ones in school?" Nicky asked. "Those are so boring."

"But not all books are boring," Raffy said.

Their father just said, "It's a book about our family."

"About us?" said Nicky, his eyes widening. The twins, who had been crouched over the floor, dropped what they were doing, and sat up.

"Well . . . more about your *lolos* and my *lolos* and so on."

"Oh," said Raffy. "I like mysteries better," he confessed.

"No way! Comics are better!" Nicky said.

Raffy said nothing and after a while, the twins went back to playing.

When finally they were able to wrest their luggage away from the prying sweaty hands of the porters in numbered shirts, who jostled and hollered at the exit, they found a cab. Their father now owned nothing in Bacolod, had sold everything when he had decided to settle down in Manila and marry the twins' mother. They had to ride in a cab, which sped now along the main road. Their father, without fail, reminded them, beaming with pride, that this very road was named after the General, his grandfather and the twins' great-grandfather. He peered out the window, wanting to show them the family name emblazoned on a street corner, but he found a street sign only after four blocks because, on the first three corners, dust, soot, and rain had weathered and faded the paint away, leaving only a smudge, a faint outline of letters. There was no need to paint it in anyway, he said to the twins; everyone knew the street; it was the longest one in the city, stretching all the way north—to Silay and past it.

The twins though weren't paying attention. Every wall and telephone pole had been strung up with flags and ribbons for the upcoming centennial. Raffy remembered that on the TV back home specials on the revolution and its heroes and villains were being aired. Their father constantly encouraged them to watch. "It's important you know your history," he had told them.

The car rolled along, past more pennants and *banderitas*. "Even here," Raffy observed, admiring the floating sea of white, red, and blue that had been put up in honor of the centennial.

Then their father pointed out quietly that in fact that was what they were here for. The twins for a moment stared at him, bewildered. When they realized they had missed the turn-off to the Memorial Park, which was the first place their father took them to every time they came, Raffy asked why they had not gone to the cemetery. "This time's different," their father answered. "We're here for the General."

"The General—Lolo Anacleto?"

He nodded. The General—the twins knew of his legendary figure by heart thanks to their father, who had an elephant's memory for tales and anecdotes about the family. They practically memorized it: Lolo Anacleto, the General, famed Sang-ley *mestizo* revolutionary of Hacienda

Matab-ang (the wealthiest hacienda in Negros), President of the Cantonal Government, member of the Katipunan, an acquaintance of President Aguinaldo, although it was widely known that his sympathies and support lay with Bonifacio, their friendship sealed by a blood compact. There was a scar to prove it, their father would often tell the twins, and he had seen it with his very eyes as a young boy, a wound signifying the liberty that had been fought for.

Their father explained that just recently, he had gotten a call from his cousin Carmen, who was as in love with family history as he was. In the past they had together organized an enormous family reunion for all the General's descendants. Carmen rang him up in early May: the Bacolod City Museum was planning to put up an exhibit on the General—arguably the city's greatest hero—in time for the centennial. The centerpiece was to be his coffin, which lay entombed in the parish church of Talisay, his hometown. It was Carmen, in fact, who had suggested this to the committee, of which she too was part, and the other members had all thought it a dazzling idea to have the General laid out in the national colors, for every Negrense—and Filipino—to admire. They further agreed that Carmen should be the one to transport the General's coffin to the museum (she was the great man's descendant, after all) and blushing, she said it would be her honor. She had then suddenly remembered their father; thus, the call asking if he wanted to help her out, tag along. But their father had replied that he was swamped with work and the whole thing was for the moment put aside.

It was about a week ago when Carmen called again. She explained to him that she hadn't yet picked up the coffin; other things had needed attending to. But she had already managed to make the arrangements and all that remained was to pick up the coffin from the church and transport it to the museum. She had a pickup; men had already been hired to remove the coffin from its tomb; all angles seemed covered. The only thing missing was a companion and the May offer was reiterated. Did he, her *primo favorito*, want to come, to serve as Lolo's escort? "Oh come on," she cajoled him. It would be their one last adventure before they grew too old to do anything else except fuss over and spoil their grandchildren, she kidded. He had glanced cursorily at his planner, a useless gesture since he already knew his schedule was free. He would be there, he said, he would most

definitely be there. "I mean, how long has it been since you were last here?" Carmen said, before putting down the phone, and he—he had told her that he had never left.

This sense of anticipation he tried to incite in the twins as he explained to them in the car the upcoming enterprise. Nicky, curious, asked if they would perhaps be able to look inside the coffin, maybe see a skeleton, a skull, or even just a bone. Raffy, who had only read about these things in his mystery books, was equally excited by the prospect. To see a dead man's bones—that was what seemed to the twins the most interesting thing about the whole venture.

"I don't think you'll see any bones," their father said. "The coffin's likely to be sealed shut."

Their faces fell.

After a while, Raffy asked, "Who's Carmen though?"

"Carmen, my cousin—you met her remember?"

The twins shared puzzled looks.

"In Barcelona, some summers ago."

"Oh, Carmen who doesn't want to be called Tita!" Nicky and Raffy exclaimed—although they barely recalled—and broke into giggling. Carmen from Barcelona, who told them not to call her Tita Carmen but just plain old Carmen because it made her feel younger. They had met her on a visit to the Catalan capital, when the family had sought to escape the torrid Manila summer. She was working then for the Hotel des Arts, a posh establishment along the beach in Barceloneta. She had moved back to Bacolod two years ago—a year after they had met her.

When their chortling died down, Raffy confessed, "We have so many Tita Carmens. Sometimes it's so confusing."

"I thought it was the one who lived in that big empty house in La Vista," Nicky said.

"I thought it was the one from Silay, with all the birds in her house," Raffy admitted.

They fell once more to giggling, trying to think of more Carmens they were related to. Their father laughed along with them as they passed the plaza and the cathedral and the taxi continued to make its way through the slight traffic. The twins knew he was in a good mood: he sang along loudly to an old Ilonggo love song playing on the radio, the words deeply unfathomable to the twins, who all their lives had lived in Manila.

In a few minutes, the taxi began to slow down. The driver signaled left and pulled into the driveway of the hotel. "This is where we're staying?" Nicky asked incredulously. Raffy could see the gleaming lobby and hoped the answer would be yes. They had both harbored the thought they would be putting up at a relative's—just like the last time and most of the times before that.

Their father answered yes, adding that it was too bad that he and Raffy got their asthma whenever they all stayed at Tita Teresit's house, because she was such a gracious host, such a pleasure to talk to. "If only she'd stop smoking," he sighed.

The twins sighed as well, but out of relief: for once they would not have to endure dusty sheets and hard beds. No creaking floorboards that sounded like ghosts in the hallway, no strange photographs that seemed to return their stare, no lingering stench of cigarettes. But best of all, no more Tita Teresit and her breath stinking of smoke and alcohol, pounding them with an endless barrage of questions and comments, each one insinuating that Bacolod was much better than Manila. Perhaps that was why their father got along with her; he was a milder version of this blind, one-sided city love.

Tita Teresit, another of their father's numerous cousins, would often in fact be the cause of their greatest embarrassment, an inexplicable shame that caused them to hang their heads and remain silent. When she had found out that they had never learned to speak Ilonggo, she burst out, "*Dios mio*, what is this generation coming to!" On each visit she would inadvertently mention this to their father in one of the hushed (but still overheard) conversations in the *sala* surrounded by saints. "*Baw ka nugon*," she would say repeatedly, piously shaking her head and sneaking glances at the twins. "Too bad—they look so much like Lolo, too."

Then she would go on, enumerating the features they had inherited from their famous great-grandfather—his thick, wavy hair, the cleft chin, the bulbous nose that from a distance seemed flared like a horse's but upon closer inspection contained a geometric sharpness and definition. Then the eyes, the slightly imperceptible Oriental slit at the edges, the color the darkness of pits—wild, Moorish, capable of anything, from treachery to heroism. But that was the irony of it, Tita Teresit claimed: two boys, who were almost exact replicas of the General, the greatest man the line had ever sired, and yet they couldn't utter a single word in Ilonggo to save their lives.

"But I bet you," she would always say, finishing up with a languid drawl on her cigarette, "even their penises are of the same length as the General's."

They checked in, left their bags in the room, then they were back out (stopping only for a bathroom break) on the road again, driving through the city. They passed Robinson's, the only mall in the city, where the movies showed a month late. The twins pointed this out and their father said quite defensively that at least it was half the price of a movie ticket in Manila. The twins rolled their eyes. The traffic on the road lessened as they approached the old Pepsi-Cola bottling plant. The heat grew hazy and the surroundings blurred into a vista of sugarcane.

"Imagine," their father said with an encompassing sweep of the hand, a grand gesture, "all this was once the General's."

"It's all grass," Nicky said.

"No—it's sugarcane," their father said, quite defensively.

A monstrous truck loaded with bundles of cane clattered by. The cab pushed forward, past cleared land and the real estate being developed on it and, gradually, traces of the city disappeared; they were outside of it. Even from inside the car, they could detect the odor of ashes and burning earth, and from the window discerned the thin gray line of smoke they had seen earlier from above. Their father, sensing their discomfort, reminded them it was milling season.

The twins crinkled their noses. They continued to look repulsed until they finally got used to the persistent odor of burning. Some minutes later, their father instructed the driver to turn right at a dirt road beside a dilapidated billboard that read "El Fuego Resort: 40 Km Away!" The driver veered sharply, the wheels caught on a large lump sticking out of the dust path, and the car lurched forward. Wary of more rocks, the driver slowed the car down; he didn't want to damage the suspension. It was a very narrow path, an alley in the outdoors, shaded on all sides by tall stalks of cane. They crawled along at that pace, their father explaining that this road led to Hacienda Matabang and that Carmen lived nearby, when the car surged forward violently and sputtered, emitting a loud cough. The driver swore, shook his head, and when the car began to shudder and backfire, he finally brought the car to a complete rest, got out, and popped open the hood. Their father fol-

lowed. The twins he told to stay in the car. He consulted with the driver and returned to the window Nicky had rolled down.

"Something broke," he told the boys. Then he added that they were almost at Carmen's and they could simply walk. The house was just at the end of the road, anyway.

The twins clambered out. The end of the road was still a good distance away; they were only at the beginning, having just turned off the highway. After their father paid the driver, they set forth, trudging through the heat. Raffy, asthmatic, complained about having difficulty breathing; Nicky once more feigned fatigue by walking like a drunkard, and was set to complain about his legs, when the twins heard the beating of hooves.

It was an old brown man, without any teeth or hair, atop a shoddy wooden cart drawn by a stubby horse. They all watched, breathless, as the mare and its shriveled chauffeur approached. When it was within proximity, their father waved and asked the man to stop. "What's he doing?" Nicky wondered, watching their father approach the man and say something in Ilonggo. They couldn't hear any of the conversation, but eventually, their father called them both over.

"He's going to let us ride," their father said. The boys looked up at the old man. He gave them a gummy grin. Their father hoisted them one at a time—first Nicky, then Raffy—onto the cart. The twins sat on each side of the old man. "What about you, Papa?" Raffy asked, when he saw that there was no space left. Nicky edged a little closer to the old man, as if to make space.

"It's okay. I'll walk. Don't worry about me."

The old man prodded the horse into motion and it broke into a slow bumpy trot. Their father kept up beside them, his bald head covered with the sheen of sweat, his shirt stained with perspiration. For some time, it was just the regular, rhythmic clacking of hoof beats upon the road. The old man beside them said nothing—just gazed ahead dreamily, his mouth working tirelessly on the thing he chewed. Silence took hold of them all until Nicky shouted, "Look!" and a crumbling two-storey high mansion appeared, imprinted against the pastel blue horizon. Nearer they noticed its closed shutters, the white paint flecking off its walls, a spacious verandah that opened out onto what must have been a spectacular view of green, and adjacent, a gigantic gnarled tree that engulfed the house with its leaves.

"Is that Carmen's?" asked Raffy.

"No, that's Hacienda Matabang. It's the General's. We used to call it the *casa grande*—the big house."

"Does anyone live there now?" Raffy asked again.

"Ghosts," Nicky butted in. "Wooooo."

Their father ignored him. "A caretaker comes once in a while."

"I bet it's haunted," Nicky added. "By the General's ghost."

"I wouldn't mind seeing Lolo's ghost," their father answered.

"So where does Carmen live?" Raffy asked.

"Just across. She helps take care of the house, too. Trying to turn it into a museum."

"It looks old," Raffy said.

"And haunted," Nicky repeated.

Their father said nothing. He turned to the cart driver and asked something in Ilonggo. The old man was first silent then gave a long reply, talking in a slow, hoarse voice, occasionally looking ahead thoughtfully into the horizon, still chewing. Their father and the man continued to converse and then eventually it was just their father talking, groping for words, and the man nodding along, as if to say he understood. The old man said a few words in reply and it was after when he suddenly began to sing. The words were in Ilonggo. The song was slow and sad and the old man's voice was grave and throaty and the effect was powerful because of the late morning silence.

"Why's he singing?" Nicky asked their father.

"I asked him if the house was haunted. Some nights, he says, he hears singing. Says it's the General's ghost, moving about the rooms in the house, lamenting the death of his wife, singing the song he sang the day she died."

Nicky listened to the old man. "That's what he's singing now? The General's song?"

"Yes. In fact, my dad would sing it too. A *composo*—that's what we call it here."

"Now that fellow's father," he went on, pointing at the old man, "worked for the General and one day took him to meet Lolo. But he tells me he doesn't remember much about the General now, except for his famously thick moustache and that song—and the fact that the main road's named after him. So I was telling him about Lolo's role in the revolution against the Spanish. It's too bad people forget so easily," he sighed.

They were nearer to the General's house now. The old man was still singing. The veins in his neck bulged as he belted out, the twins guessed, the story of the poor General's broken heart. The words rang out louder and clearer in the hot stillness. Then their father joined in, singing from memory, his voice low and deep and bottomless like a well, and together their voices carried over the fields. Old men, Nicky thought, slapping at a fly hovering by his knee, who could understand them.

"This is Carmen's," their father said, ringing the doorbell. The old man continued along down the road, where there was a faint wisp of smoke, a thick gray strand of an old woman's hair in the sky. The twins and their father stood on the dusty path, facing a black iron gate, their view no longer obscured by cane. On the other side of the road stood the General's house. The rich dark mahogany of its front door was punched through with holes, the rotting and splintered wood remembered only by the termites. The lawn was tangled with weeds.

Their father shook his head sadly and the twins heard him mutter to himself that he would have to talk to Carmen. If they were to turn the house into a museum, it would need a lot of work. "She must be busy with the centennial exhibit," he said to himself.

When no one still came out, their father rang the doorbell once more. While they waited, Nicky began to toss dusty pebbles he had picked up from the ground; Raffy noticed that all the windows of the General's house were shut, barring any sunlight; like the sleuths he idolized he kept his ears pricked, listening for any snatches of song, but the General's ghost was silent—it must have been the heat, he thought—and soon the gates swung open and a boy let them in.

Up they went—the gates revealed a long driveway and an airy bungalow at the end of it—past a black pickup with mud-caked wheels. A dog was barking and the air was a blend of smoke, fruit, and melted brown sugar. Their father said it was *bayabas*, the maid cooking it into jelly. The boy showed them into the house and Nicky said he had to pee. Their father asked the boy where the bathroom was. There was one right by the front door, he pointed out. To the left rose a staircase, where by the first step, just before the banister, stood a large porcelain vase about as tall as the twins. Raffy thought Nicky might have liked it because of its design: it looked like the stuff in Nicky's comic books. In bold relief, armor-clad samurai crossed swords and

emerald-scaled dragons slithered around cherry blossoms, their forked tongues twisted like taffy around beautiful chalk-faced, night-haired geishas wearing distressed expressions and elaborate kimonos. The handles at either side of the oversized amphora were hand-carved extensions of the relief—two dragon heads, each with a jade-studded eye. Raffy pointed it out to Nicky when he came out of the bathroom. “Wow,” Nicky said, glancing at the vase. “Cool.”

“It’s the General’s,” their father said. The vase had been imported from Japan and, with its twin, had once stood as sentinel at the bottom of the General’s coveted mahogany staircase. This was the only one left though; the other jar had been looted by the Japanese during the War. He was explaining this when Carmen came down the stairs. She was tall, about their father’s height, with pronounced cheekbones and peach-colored skin. Kisses and embraces were exchanged; she led them into the living room where they tumbled thankfully onto the sofa. A maid brought in glasses of Coke, fizzing in ice.

“Please, have something to drink,” Carmen said, offering each one of them a glass. “This weather’s really something. Awful. Biboy, will you please bring in another fan?” Their father began by telling Carmen about the taxi that broke down, their long walk, and soon they were deep in conversation, exchanging stories. The twins sat back, half-listening, relishing their Cokes. What a cluttered living room, Raffy thought, noticing the shelves and tabletops, groaning with books with ripped spines and yellow, flaky pages: *Philippine Ancestral Homes* by Zialcita, *Gaudi: His Architecture and Life*, *The History of Negros* by a fellow with the bizarre hyphenated name of Modesto Sa-onoy; also, black and white photographs of *mestizos* and *mestizas*, and a collection of china with the family seal and beneath the seal the inscription *Hacienda Matabang* embossed in sky blue. Nicky’s eyes, on the other hand, were riveted to the floor cluttered with boxes and crates, some of them packed and sealed with masking tape, others with their contents bared: handwritten letters and correspondences in Spanish, portraits of men in uniform, a monocle, a fountain pen, a violin, a medal, a saber, a revolver.

Nicky’s eyes widened, riveted on the gun. He stood up but their father held him by the arm. “Don’t touch anything,” Nicky grumbled and sat down again.

Carmen faced the twins, her eyes twinkling. “Your dad tells me you had quite an adventure this morning.”

"We had to ride in a cart," Nicky said. "It was really hot."

"And there was this old guy with us, singing. Papa said the song was what the General sang when his wife died," added Raffy. "And Papa was singing, too."

"Ah, the General's *composo*," she said to their father, smiling.

"I still remember the words. Thought I'd forgotten it but some things you just don't forget. My dad used to sing it with the other men during wakes to pass away the time."

Carmen smiled at the memory. She stood up and said she wanted to show them something in her room. "It'll be quick—we have to get going soon to pick up the coffin. The museum wants it in by two at the latest."

She led them up the stairs. In her room was a large armoire, a full-length mirror, an airconditioner, a neatly made four-poster bed, and a side table with a lamp. She told the twins to sit on the bed, which was made of a dark, reddish mahogany. On the headboard was carved the same intricate seal Raffy had seen on the china displayed in the sala. The bed was the same one the General and his wife used to sleep on in the *casa grande*, she explained. "On this thing," she smiled at them, "I sleep like a baby."

She patted the bed. "Come, sit, try it out." The boys got on, testing the mattress, touching the smooth mahogany, running their fingers along the ridges of the carved seal, as if searching for a trace of their dead great-grandfather. But it seemed to be what it was—just a bed. "Maybe a ghost sleeps on this bed, too," Nicky wondered aloud. "Maybe beds come with ghosts."

"I wouldn't mind sleeping with Lolo's ghost. I probably sleep with it every night," Carmen laughed. "Look at this." From the bedside table, she passed a black and white picture in a frame to Raffy. An old woman lay on a bed—the General's bed—on her back, feet pointed upward, her entire body covered in a white sheet, save for her head. Her eyes were closed.

"You remember the song about the General's dead wife?" Carmen said. "That's her, your great-grandmother. Taken on the day she died."

She looked like she was merely asleep, Raffy thought. It seemed that her eyelids were slightly darker and swollen, like their father's eyes, when their mother stayed out late and he couldn't sleep, anxiously awaiting her arrival. But Raffy discounted it; the picture was old; he'd

been reading too many detective novels. He gave it to Nicky, who pronounced it, "Creepy," with a shudder. Nicky wondered how a man as big and influential as his great-grandfather could cry over a woman. Their father looked, too, then returned it to Carmen.

"We'd better get going then," Carmen said. "Let me just get some things ready."

Raffy said he had left the book he had brought along in the sala. Before anyone could say anything, he was out of the room, bolting down the stairs to get it. Carmen was putting some things in her bag, telling Nicky about her retriever, which Nicky wanted to see before they left, when they all heard a loud crash come from below. They ran out of the room. On the landing, their father buried his face in his hands. "*Hijo di puta*," he swore.

"It's okay," Carmen kept saying to Raffy in the pickup. She rubbed his back with her hand; he was wedged between her and Nicky. Their father sat in front. Biboy drove. "It's okay."

Through tears he had tried to explain that it had been an accident: he had picked up his book lying on the coffee table in the sala and headed for the stairs. He'd taken his glasses off to wipe them clean and then had come the miscalculation: unable to see clearly, he missed the tread of the first step, felt his foot slip downward, and instinctively reached out for the first thing within arm's reach to steady himself—the vase. It wobbled then came toppling down with him. He'd hurt his elbow. It was still a bit sore but the pain was nothing compared to the scolding he received from his father.

"Be more careful next time," their father had growled, explaining that due to his carelessness, a priceless memento had been lost. Raffy said nothing as their father babbled on about "historical value" and looked over at Nicky. Nicky felt pity because their father could be harsh; being the one who received the brunt of their father's temper, he knew what Raffy must have been feeling. Worse, Raffy thought, the most embarrassing thing was being scolded in front of Carmen, who unlike their father had been a darling about the entire incident. She had held his hand after she'd given him some ice to put on the elbow and *agua oxinada* to clean the scrapes. He'd kept mumbling he was sorry and she in turn reassured him in a soft voice that it was nothing, really—at least he hadn't been hurt seriously. "It's just a jar," she said, and explained that if Lolo had to pick between his jar and his great-grandson, he

would most definitely choose the latter. This made Raffy feel slightly better.

Raffy's eyes were still swollen as they made their way to Talisay. It was just past eleven thirty. Their father was still a bit grumpy but his mood seemed better now—he was singing along again to the radio. "Feeling better?" Carmen asked Raffy.

He nodded. In Carmen he saw a new friend, an ally, and he wanted to say something to her. He asked why she had moved back to Bacolod from Barcelona. "Didn't you like it there?"

She began to explain that she had gotten homesick. It was different when you were home. Never mind if what she had left behind was a city as beautiful as Barcelona.

"Well, I wouldn't move from Manila," Nicky said. "Have you ever been there?"

"Many times," Carmen nodded, "and—"

"Are you like Papa?" Nicky interrupted again. "Papa told us he wants to be buried here in Bacolod in the Memorial Park, too, beside Dada and Wawa."

"I—"

"You should come to Manila," Raffy said. "And we'll be your tour guides!"

The car rumbled on, and eventually a welcome arch appeared above them. "Wel-come-to-Ta-li-say," Nicky read aloud. He turned to Carmen. "So we're here for the General, right?" They were, she nodded, in order to pick up his coffin—just as their father had explained it to them earlier.

"Will we see any bones?" Nicky asked. "Or a skull?" He crossed his fingers in hope.

"If you opened it, probably. Most coffins though are closed pretty well," she said.

"That's what I told them," their father said.

"So we won't see anything?" Raffy asked.

"Boys, boys, boys," their father said from up front. "Leave Lolo in peace will you? Turn up that airconditioner," he added, turning to the boy. "*Ka init gid.*"

It was noon when they arrived in the town proper and came into the dusty plaza. The flag at the center lay still. There were *banderitas* here as well, strung like Christmas lights across telephone poles and the grandstand. In the benches under the shade of tiny trees surrounding

the plaza, old men played chess, women picked lice from each other's hair, and their children played a short distance away, running barefoot and black-soled on the scorching concrete. The pickup slid through the gates of the church. The Angelus tolled; there was a moment of prayer and even the twins sat still.

"He's buried in one of the side altars," their father explained when Raffy asked why they were going to the church.

"I already called in advance," Carmen said, "and told them we were coming. The woman I talked to said to drop by the parish office first."

Inside the office, they waited on a ragged couch, listening to the whirl of a fan. An old woman with shocking white hair and dark-rimmed glasses sat at a desk, punching the keys one finger at a time; with the other hand, she used a spoon to eat from a plate. The woman waved to Carmen and spoke to her.

"They've just taken it out," Carmen said when they left the office. "But the men are eating lunch. They left it inside the church, beside the altar. We can look if we want, but we'll have to go in through the side—the front doors are locked. On Thursdays, they lock up the church."

They made their way to the church. The twins, growing weary from the heat, lagged behind Carmen and their father, who had begun to sing the General's *composo* once more. "I can't get it out of my head," he confessed with a chuckle. When they reached the side entrance, they pushed the wooden slabs open and the hinges sang out, rusty with time. Birds in the naves scattered at the sound, startled by the noise. They entered, a hush falling over them. No breeze, but the air inside was cool and calm, almost like being underwater, like being in a bubble. The sunlight falling inside through the stained glass and the open windows was gentle and the church was lit up and golden. Where the light did not reach, there was a shadowy but inviting darkness. They walked further in and felt assured by the watchful gazes and alabaster smiles of the saints and the Holy Family.

"It's so nice in here, isn't it?" Carmen said.

It really was. The twins fell with relief into one of the pews. They spotted the coffin, a large box of dark gilded mahogany illuminated by the rainbow-tinted panel of stained glass above, lying beside a life-size glass-encased replica of Christ carrying the cross. "You boys want

to look?" their father asked. They both said they would stay and rest for a while.

"It's the heat," Carmen said. "It makes you tired easily."

The two adults made their way up to the coffin.

"You think we'll see anything?" Nicky asked.

"Probably not."

"Yeah, probably not," Nicky repeated, with a sigh.

They were hungry and tired and this they admitted to each other. They slumped into the pews and remained still, hearing only their breathing, savoring the break. It had been a long morning. They watched the two adults, who stood before the coffin, silent, their eyes full of admiration for what lay before them. Their father was telling Carmen something. He liked to tell stories and he told them wonderfully, although mostly they were about the family. Nicky and Raffy strained to listen; they couldn't really hear what their father was saying, failed to catch which story he might have been telling. There was just the echo of it across the empty church. But they could see that there was something aglow in their father. They both somehow understood, just by watching him, that it was being home and being able to be proud of his ancestors that made their father very happy. They watched now as the two adults inspected the coffin. Their father tested the lid, which came up slightly, with about enough space for a finger to pass through. But he quickly lowered it, and clucked his tongue repeatedly. Carmen put her hands on her hips.

So it wasn't sealed.

Their father and Carmen walked back to where the twins had remained.

"So that's Lolo?" Nicky asked.

"The General himself, your great-grandfather."

"Can we look, Papa?" Raffy asked.

They might as well; they had gone all this way.

"Go ahead. Carmen and I are just going to look for the men to help us—we need them to nail the thing shut and then help us to carry it to the coffin. I wonder why it wasn't closed," he added.

"The men might have accidentally opened it when they were taking it out," Carmen said. "Better close it—it's going to burst open in the pickup on the way to the museum unless we do something about it." Soon the adults left, Carmen saying they had better get moving.

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General—hero of the revolution in Negros, their great-grandfather, whose blood wound and coiled through their veins.

He was indeed nothing but a heap of bones.

The surge of adrenaline was replaced by an immense disappointment.

“That’s all?” Nicky just said.

“We’d better close it now,” Raffy said. “Before Papa comes back.”

Their small fingers reached for the lid but they were suddenly stopped. Like an answered prayer it came; first like a whisper, the lace over the altar fluttering once, then again, and a soft breeze appeared from nowhere and brushed against their tired, disappointed faces on this hot, end-of-summer June day. But then the breeze touched upon the brittle bones left exposed by the opened coffin, resting its invisible hands upon the skeleton, like a poker stoking the red-hot, quickly wilting embers. In an instant, the bones disintegrated into thin air and the beautiful light inside the church was suddenly alive and twinkling with dust motes, swirling like snow, which the twins had never but always wanted to see.

For a moment they didn’t know what to do. Then, together, straining once more, they finally brought the lid down with a resounding thud. The General was gone, blown away by that fugitive breeze, particles of him swept everywhere and nowhere—under the pews, into the dark cool corners, out the windows. In vain, the twins ran to one of the open windows, watching hopelessly as he floated away, seeing nothing of him—only the little cemetery at the back of the church and its white glinting crosses, and a thin column of smoke, ash and dust that rose and billowed into the sky, like a silver necklace, because it was June and it was the milling season.

“We shouldn’t have opened it,” Raffy said.

“It’s all your fault,” Nicky shot back.

“You were going to open it first.”

“Because you called me a girl.”

“You were first,” Raffy said. Beneath the rims of his glasses, the skin was wet and salty. It didn’t matter—they knew at bottom they both had a hand in it. They glared at each other.

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” Nicky said.

Raffy said nothing first. Then: “Okay.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart. Shake on it if you want.” He offered his hand.

No one had to know, no one needed to find out. They shook hands; they crossed their hearts again; hoped to die, because the guilt was unbearable.

They were about to head back to the pews when Carmen and their father returned with the men. He saw them by the window. "What you boys looking at?" he asked, walking over.

"Nothing," they said in unison, their voices shrill.

"Nothing?"

They couldn't answer. All they could think of was the General, gone forever, dissipated into dust, drifting over the parched brown earth, and the cloudless sky that was blue, blue, and blue. The men were already hammering nails into the wood, Carmen supervising. Their father smiled and peeked out the window. He was still humming the *composo*, he couldn't get it out his head. They stood there not saying anything—there was no breeze coming in anymore, the twins noted. It was only their father singing in a soft low voice, almost a hum, and Raffy remembered the picture of their great-grandmother. "Papa, how did she die anyway?" he asked meekly, wanting to dispel the terrible silence.

"Who?"

"Lola—the General's wife."

Their father looked at them. The twins waited for him to answer. He looked away then told them, staring out the window. It had been Lolo who'd done it: he'd beaten her and she didn't survive it. Raffy asked, his voice a whisper, "Why Papa?" And when he didn't answer, he asked again, more softly: "Why?"

And their father said: "Do you remember when Mama and I fought because she had a boyfriend? Lola had a boyfriend, too. One night Lolo caught her with his own brother in his own bed. Carmen's bed now."

No one said anything and they could hear the nails being driven further into the wood.

"And his brother?" Nicky asked, softly, almost breathlessly. "What happened to the General's brother?"

There was no answer; their father was lost deep in thought. Then finally, he spoke.

"He was a great man, boys—perhaps the greatest this city will ever know."

He said nothing else, and they all looked out the window. There was nothing much to be seen.