

SINS OF THE FATHER

By G. Scott Platt

Much of the furniture has been moved out of the house. By the roadside that fronts your lawn, past the Bermuda grass, the mover's truck whirrs under the shade of the Flame Trees whose amber petals spin towards the ground. In the truck, a man waits, seated beside the driver who clamps the wheels with his oversized fingers, eyes towards the sky. The clouds split like wrung tin cans, their edges sharp as steel blades. You're in the living room flanked by the empty bookshelves that used to house your books; luggage piled near the door. The air hints of old wood and boiled peanuts about to rot from their shells radiating from the yellowing paper and boxes stacked in the corner. You hear the screen door by the kitchen grit close and open from the wind. You hear the mango trees in the backyard shedding off bad fruits, overripe, hitting the ground with soft thuds that diffuse the scent of vanillin when they crack open. You ask yourself what you will remember more: This old house - its crumbling ventanilla and capiz shell windows - or what surrounds it: the mango orchard, a brook, a path that leads to the river, the molave and kamagong trees, the birds that drilled homes into their trunks.

On the second floor, your step sister hums Erik Satie's *Gymnopedie No. 1*, and you wonder how she learns of it when you hide your vinyl records under the floorboards of your room. By the stairs, your father clears his throat; his shoes grate against the staircase. His gun holster rubs against his belt, leather scraping against cloth, metal against skin. He's in his Philippine Constabulary uniform. You're sure of this, because you smell musk, hints of turpentine from the metal polish and gaseous odor from the gun cleaning solvent that sticks to his clothes. He stands on the same spot, fifth ascending, where he once punched you in the stomach, then your chin. You remember this because you broke a tooth and dribbled blood in your mouth. You were twelve. You didn't notice the slight rise in your voice that angered him. Your mother had just left, without notice, without leaving a trace. You harbor slight suspicion your father had something to do with her disappearance.

"Jess," he utters your name in a hiss, in a tone that refuses to trace the rising inflection of a request, always a command, "the movers will pick the rest of these tomorrow."

His voice cuts deep, guttural but the sibilant trails off between his clenched teeth. You can't see his face but memorize how it looks, a younger version of the pope - John Paul II who you see on TV too often these days - but with skin fairer, red from humidity and heat, thicker brows, deep seated eyes that darken slightly around the lids. Everyone mistakes him for a Turk, not one of Spanish descent. Except for your wood brown hair, streaks dipping at your eyelids, you resemble your father. Only you're thinner, often struggling to straighten your back from crouching too often. You hear him from where you stand on the spot where a couch used to lay across a shelf. The same couch, now upturned in the mover's truck outside, on which you saw them - your step sister, skirt rolled up to her waist, slumped on your father's lap. You knew something was wrong and yet couldn't determine it, apart from the fact that you rose too early one morning.

Yes, Papa." You say only the answer he wants to hear.

“You sleep here for the night. Wait for the truck until morning. Then, you help the men load the rest of the furniture.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes. I will sleep here for the night.”

Your electricity has been cut off now, bulbs removed from their sockets, rooms emptied of beds and from the ceiling, wires dangle where the broken chandeliers used to hover. Tonight, you'll spread newspapers on the floor and imagine how good it is to light a candle for a change because you will be alone in this house for the very first time. Tomorrow offers a different life, one you dread. You don't fear the farm or labor and the tedium of cutting rice stalks with a scythe until your fingers bleed and your arms serrated by the crop's tapered leaves. You had a glimpse of that life months ago when he brought you to your grandfather's house beside the farm. You helped your grandfather's workers harvest *paray*. You fear that your father sees no logic in sending boys to school. There's always farming for them or the military service as long as one knows how to fire a gun. You are not good with guns. You read obsessively. He sees no future in it. He hates the books you read or when you read. You believe that a future with him ceases somewhere, humdrum and cyclical. But at thirteen the only thing you learned is to obey.

“Tomorrow, you'll start work in the farm to weed out the fields. Understand?” He continues.

“Yes. I understand.”

“Now, make sure you don't leave anything of value.”

A police car stops outside. Its tires roll over gravel. You walk towards the door to get a good glimpse of them dragging their luggage towards its trunk. Across the street your neighbor, a housewife in her sundress, pulls a hose towards the flowers - gumamela, daisies, periwinkles - and covers the hose's opening with her fingers. The water jets out of it, as thin as the cords of rain. Any moment now, Lola Inyang, from one of the houses fronting yours will look up at the mangos in her orchard. She'll let loose her gray hair and wring her headband around her wrist. The car moves and your step sister waves at you. She wears your mother's lipstick and chiffon dress. You father locks his gaze towards the road, refusing to glance at you, mumbles something, words you recognize by reading his lips: Stupid boy. He sits beside Magdo, also in his police uniform, the youngest and the nicest one among your father's subordinates. Many times, he'd empty his pocket of coins, candies and small bills and give them to you. The convoy of police car and the mover's truck turns towards the church of San Nicolas de Tolentino whose twin belfries imposed its red baked bricks and cream-colored dome. It verges towards the main highway, the Iloilo-Capiz road, off the street that fronts your house. On the second floor window, you watch the tail end of the truck disappear.

The first time you saw a communist rebel, you were eight. You were bringing lunch to your father at the police station at the town hall and by mistake, you opened a door that made way to a jail cell. A man in worn out jeans and blue 'Baikin Kun' shirt, bearing an image of an anthropomorphic tooth, squatted on the floor behind the iron bars.

"Are those for me?" he asked

Startled, you said nothing, frozen in your tracks. He started laughing. Around him drifted a fading film of dried sweat and urine.

"Sorry. I made a mistake." You said with a growing curiosity. Before turning back towards the door, you finally asked, "What are you here for?"

"Subversion."

You knew what it meant. Your father had brought home boxes he labeled subversive materials. You'd sneak in his study when he left for work and would go over novels, magazine article clippings, books which at first glance seemed innocuous. Most of them about free speech or civil liberties, peaceful dissent. To you they posed no harm. There were materials about Gandhi or Thomas Paine, Emmanuel Lacaba, Karl Marx and Henry David Thoreau. You had read Thoreau's Walden Pond before and it made you think of the brook behind the woods - a great place to build a lone house and live in by yourself. You didn't understand how anyone was sent to jail for owning or reading them.

There had been times you wondered about your own freedoms. Your father decided everything for you - the time you get out of bed, the way you comb your hair, the clothes you had to wear to school. He assigned you chores. You had house help but there always existed tasks that would make a man out of you - cleaning windows, changing light bulbs, lifting and moving heavy objects, carrying buckets of water from the faucet outside to the dirty kitchen. Most importantly, you were required to help clean his M-16 rifle after he emptied it of bullets. You knew how to disassemble parts of a rifle and put them back together. He'd empty his gun magazines of bullets, letting them fall on the floor so you could pick them up piece by piece and clean them one by one.

He turned surprisingly nice when your mother stayed home. No flicking of fingers on your ears and a hand smacking your back when you weren't sitting straight while eating or when you were too slow at responding or handing him the things he needed. For him, everything must be swift, soldier swift. But your mother stayed home rarely. She had her own insurance business to tend to, away from town. Most times, she'd be home to play mahjong and entertain young men who she said helped her with her business.

"Who is he?" You asked her one afternoon after you got home from school about the young man in the living room.

"Richard. He helps me market these insurance plans."

“It took you so long to open the door.” You tell her.

“We were probably too busy with our planning session.” She'd say, ruffling your hair. Sometimes, she'd pinch your nose.

On this particular afternoon, she wore a long flowing dress. She loved red or ones with neon prints and floral patterns which she often accessorized with large gold jewelry. She'd always put on red lipstick. She'd toss her brown hair, permed, bouncy and teased around the edges.

You saw her luggage ready near the door. “When will you come back?”

“In a week or two. Or when I needed to be. Listen, don't tell you father anything I do or who I bring to this house. It's my business.”

“I never tell him anything.”

She'd always ask you if you need money. You'd often tell her you didn't but you wished she were home more often. She'd hand you a wad of bills anyway.

“I'll bring you more comic books when I get back.”

A redolence of her scent would swell around the house for days. Some odor similar to peach or something else with a mixture of sandalwood, lilac, a smell of which was often wedged inside her shoulder bags which you, at times zip close and open, the scent too familiar wafting, comforting. But you resented her every time she broke her promise to come home, and you'd look out the window until all the jeepney or the buses that whisked by were reduced to translucent rings of smokes. If your father were on a mission, you'd climb before sunset a guava tree on which you had a good view of the road. You'd wait until dark or until the last bus or the last jeepney passed. But from early evenings, everything halted - the roads, long, stretching endless planks of black.

On days your mother was away and your father was sent on weeklong missions, you'd retreat to the woods at the back of the house. You loved reading under the shades of the trees and would gaze at the hornbills that slit the skies as they glided from tree to tree. On the river and valley beyond the woods, life spilled out in mornings a certain cycle. Then, some surety of existence abound - a wife feeding her pigs, men splitting firewood on their yard, an old woman cooking in an open kitchen boiling a pot of coffee or stirring gruel. At times a few men readied fish hooks and worms to catch catfish in the river that offered almost nothing but an effluvium of murk and dried leaves, bubbling along moss-covered rocks.

And even when your step sister moved in, she let you do what you wanted as long as you left her alone with her friends to chew gum or wait for a Rick Springfield to play on the radio. Then, she'd check herself out in front of the mirror, fix her hair, put on some bright make up. Other days when you were tasked with purchasing necessities from the market, you'd explore the river on your way. Then you'd linger a bit at the coconut grove on the edge of the banks, dip your feet in the water, watch how people lived their lives.

When for many weeks, your mother didn't come home, you asked your father about her. He said she might have run away with her new boyfriend.

“Why didn't she come back for her things? Or for me?”

“You're useless and dumb and slow. You'd make her life miserable.”

But you doubted this story. There had been many times, the police car stopped by your house in the middle of the night because your father forgot something. There was always a man or woman in it, hands tied behind their backs. Their faces, often bruised, lined with abrasions, their lips swollen. Your father's men would tell you not to mind them. Rebel commies, subversives, they'd say. You'd overhear the other policemen joking about burying them somewhere, saying the chief would make them disappear and if they escaped, the chief would hunt them down.

In the town market, you'd overhear fish dealers and vendors talk about your father - some rumors of how he lost his patience hunting for a rebel boy in the mountains. Skillfully evasive, he was a few years older than you. Your father made him dig up his own grave.

Its flame twitching, the candle burns, cradled in a chipped, faux-metal holder you salvaged from the yard. It looks antiquated, something a priest would use in a mass. You place the candle in the middle of your room, which now smell like sawdust and mold. You stretch a layer of newspaper in one corner. That is where you'll sleep. The candle's wick is too long and the flame surges from it so you come near and hold the burning thread between your fingers. It hurts at first. With the pain subsiding, you pinch off a part of the wick and light it again with the matchstick. It's dark around your house. You see a tiny quiver of a leaf's shadow every time the clouds fold and thin out. Outside, furrows of black and white light from the TV screen leak out of the homes that line the roadsides. The whole town tunes in to a colorless broadcast that recycles plaudits and good news - a building is built, a bridge, a road unraveled and a farm turns ripe for harvest.

You squat in front of the flame as if you were Siddhartha on meditation. You think about your father and other relatives who expect you to arrive at the farm with the rest of your valuables. Tomorrow, you'll be back to picking bullets on the floor. You'll clamber like a dog to reach for ones that roll away. He wants to see you crawl under the table and chairs, or reach under the shelves and in between sills. Your fingers will turn dark green. They'll smell of nickel. His face will beam from pleasure.

You walk towards your parents' bedroom and open the window that has the view of the backyard. Mosquitos gather around you. You still hear the screen door close and open downstairs. You try to recall some joys, some laughter that may have ricocheted off your walls, kindness, a few gracious words, forgiveness. There isn't much. You try to think of something that will make leaving more difficult: The fog that lifts its veil, revealing the plains and valleys dotted by clumps of green and the river that gently winds towards the bone white pumice rocks. You often come upon this sight early in the morning just before the sun rises. On days when you wander off to the

forest behind your house, the slope where you stand gives way to flat lands pockmarked by ponds, reed and young toads circling them. You can see the river from there, and in some good days, you and your friends take a plunge into its deeper waters before going back home. On rainy days, there's so much life among the land and the trees - birds flying back to roost after a downpour, insects rising from a blanket of dried leaves and fallen branches from which the scent of resin swells, snails sliding down the tree trunk, the smell of leaves, bushes and shrubs intermingling with wild oleanders, minty but dark and deep reminding you of the bees' propolis. The whole religion of occurrences will then slip into a strange geography: Roads and highways uphill lined by houses and structures - a town hall, a market, a small bank, a public library fronting the plaza - and behind those, the heaving valleys and plains, a vast expanse that cocoon the lives of those in the center.

The parish priest of the St. Isidore in Tubigon, Bohol tells you that you come upon a farmer's church. You tell him it's your first time to see a church like this. You are fascinated by the sea that surrounds the building, anchored upon the rocks and part of its lime mortar foundation submerged in water that rises and recedes on its walls, the embossments of angels and devils on its facade. The sea unravels its vastness and all the other structures and things around it are small and insignificant. There's a part of the sea that meets the sky. Nothing exists between it and the horizon. You can see the mountains at the distance, beaches circled by coconut groves, spilled milk on tufts of green. You've chosen this place because it doesn't look anything like a home to you.

The parish priest, Father Borja is thin. His veins fan out of his hands. He smells like Old Spice and a hint of primrose which you'll discover later, a remnant of his bath soap. He cocks his head and heaves to one side when you speak. His voice is often sympathetic and encouraging. You present your father's gun to him, the spare bullets. You tell him that if ever they come across dead bodies, ones they can find within and around your town, buried, punctured by bullets, they can compare the shell's serial number to the ones you brought. You tell him of your suspicion - that your father may have something to do with your mother's disappearance. You tell him you worry about your own safety.

“Do you think you can offer me a place to stay?” You ask. “I work hard.”

“Temporarily, yes.”

It will be very difficult for you after that. In the future, you will try hundreds of odd jobs made tougher by tasks to complete in church, the piling school works. He asks if you're willing to testify against your father, not in the near future, maybe someday.

“When the dictator is ousted.”

You say yes. He offers a new birth certificate, a new name. You say any name will do.

“As long as there's no letter 'S' on it.”

He laughs, possibly thinking of the most absurd reasons.

“Tell me how you escaped.”

“It wasn’t really an escape.”

You don’t tell him you took things of value - that is if your mother’s jewelry was worth anything - that you stole a wad of bills from your father’s drawer. But you tell him you have left the candle burning in the middle of a room littered with newspapers. You tell him you’re not sure if the house burns down.

It is still dark when you take the path down the river towards the valley in which a short cut winds up to the town center. Your neighbors must not know that you’re leaving. At the bus station, right next to the market, across the the town plaza you see no one you recognize or one who recognizes you. Someone parks his tricycle in front of the municipal hall where the police station stands but you know that at this hour, your father’s men are asleep inside. Across it, the skewed kalachuchi cradles the Shrine of the Tree of Bondage, around which the Spanish had once tied the natives if they refused forced labor. Rizal’s monument stands behind it. There’s a certain sourness in the air that surrounds you. The Batuan trees, from which, this town got its name from are in full bloom and the fruits remain green. You wear a cap you pull down to your face and drag the luggage with all the things you may need including your father’s gun and some antique silver ware, vinyl records, a few books.

The Ceres Liner bus leaves early. You will pass one more time by your house, when the bus takes Confesor Drive towards the highway. The candle still burns next to the kerosene lamp you place next to it before you leave. Their glow whisks ghostly shadows on the wall. The bus turns towards the cemetery. You'll remember this one because of the three Byzantine arches at its entrance and the Gothic rosette carvings on the walls of its mortuary chapel. When you were young, this was your idea of a different country. You remember a few relatives who were buried there but you were too young to understand sorrow. Past the cemetery, a few emaciated cows graze the fields. Harvest is over and the land doesn’t offer much except for wild shrubs and grass losing their green. Soon, you’ll see the golf course of Sta. Barbara and its manicured grass, reminding you of the ponds and the plains back home. The water sprinkler releases water in fountain-like, circular spouts. In less than an hour, you will reach the port of Iloilo. You will take a ship to Cebu and decide where to go next when you get there. Any moment now, before sunrise, in your neighborhood Nang Clarissa will open her bake shop, the smell of margarine and pandesal will escape from her tiny windows. A hardware store will raise the metal door open, out of which the scent of paint and rust will escape. Across them, a truck will deliver at Charo’s fruit stand, some unremarkable apples that have lost crunch and color. You will think it’s a beautiful day. So will they. The tricycles and jeepneys will be out on the streets and your neighbors will bring out their brooms and clean their yards in unison when the sun rises.

You will take a plane home, after thirty years, and will land at an International Airport built adjacent your hometown. At the terminal, you’ll breeze through the chatter of tourists huddled together, families with crying toddlers. A mother breastfeeds; a businessman flips through the

newspaper as rays of light break through the oversized glass panes. You'll whiz through the sound of wheels and luggage and echoing voices from the announcement towards the blur of the stalls that sell cigarette, pasalubong, chocolates and pastry, and the images of passengers slumping on benches amid the clutter of bags, the smell of sweets, luxury and import goods. You'll overhear conversations in a language you can no longer recognize but sense the sadness of. Above this multitude, a constellation: Flat screen televisions announce the burial of a dictator in a hero's cemetery. A dictator's son declares that his father's sins aren't his own. The crowd that gathers around the TV glance at their cellphones to burrow deep into something that's forgotten.

Your mother will wait for you at the lounge with a boyfriend she's already introduced on Facebook. He's younger than you. She knows why you come home.

She says, "I know you're not here for him. But he can no longer walk."

You'll say nothing.

"Most of the time, he barely remembers."

He has Alzheimer's. You won't feel sad about this. You will not ask her why she didn't look for you. You don't mind. You will not ask her if he tried at least. What did it matter? Hiding has become your expertise. You refuse to dig up your own grave, sort of.

"I thought it was better to stay in a hotel. I've already booked a room."

She'll nod, looking disappointed. Before landing at the airport, you made a promise you'd stay with her, for a short time at least.

"I'll see you for dinner tomorrow, though. I'll call." You'll say.

She'll nod again. Her chest will slightly heave. You'll think her eyes well up, but you'll turn your back before you see anything drip.

A car which will take you to your hotel waits outside. You tell the driver to take you to Confesor Drive first. That's where your house used to stand. He will say he isn't sure where that is.

"It's near the Iloilo-Capiz Road. The main road? That's difficult to miss."

"Only a part of it is still intact." He'll say. "The airport has been constructed on it, but I'll take you there."

Along the Old Iloilo-Capiz Road, that's what it is called now, you scan for things that are familiar - a house with capiz shell windows, a flame tree, a mango orchard, manicured lawns and gardens, Bermuda grass, sari-sari stores. There'll be none. Instead, you see concrete, paved paths, blocks of sculptured stones, the runway that has taken over the plains and the valley, the heat of the sun escaping from them like amorphous ghosts. The street where your house used to stand

reveals an expanse of an airfield. What lies before you are things completely unfamiliar, unknown, nothing that your memory will be able to cleave unto.

It's not until you closed the door of your hotel room that you will cry, possibly for the first time in your life - not because your father is old and will have no memory of who you are, not because your mother easily learned to live a life without you. You will weep for the small things, the trivial, forgotten, small things.

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