

BOX OF BONES

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FIRST EDITION

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FOREWORD

I don't usually write forewords, but I thought one might be appropriate for *Box of Bones*, given the way the story came about.

I'd lived in the Philippines for three years between 2010 and 2013, and in early 2016 I returned for an impromptu vacation. I met up with some friends, and we drove from Manila to Mount Pinatubo, with the intention of hiking to the summit of the active volcano. What we didn't know until we arrived, however, was that the Philippines and the United States were holding a joint large-scale military exercise there. A Filipino soldier carrying an assault rifle politely told us we had to turn around or risk being flattened by errant bombs.

After a brief discussion, we decided to detour to Subic (ironically, the site of a former US Navy facility) to spend what remained of the day at the beach. A few hours later we were sipping frozen margaritas on a beachside patio when one of my friends—I'll call him "Dan" for anonymity's sake—asked me how the writing was going. I told him about the "World's Scariest Places" series, which features horror stories set in real-world locations. He suggested I write something about the Philippines. I told him I hadn't thought about it; he told me to pitch him a story on the spot. It went something like this: During a late-night bachelor party, a prostitute drops dead from a drug overdose. The attendees decide to chop the body into pieces and dispose of it in different dumpsters across Manila. They think they're in the clear—until the girl's pimp, a very bad and connected dude, begins hunting them down one by one. Dan liked the story, but the girls we were with didn't, telling me there was no connection to the Philippines except that it was set in Manila. They were right, so I improvised a second story, which ended up becoming *Box of Bones*, plot point for plot point. I can't elaborate much more than this without giving away the ending—except to say it's the ending that makes the story unique to the Philippines.

One other note worth mentioning is that the novella's protagonist was inspired by an American expat I got to know in Manila. The protagonist's entire backstory—the stabbing, the hospital from hell, you'll read about it—is based on true events.

PROLOGUE

“*Have you ever been this afraid before?*” a voice asked me from the shadows.



My name is Jim Livingston. I’m an American expat living in the Philippines. About six months ago I was visiting my Filipina girlfriend in her *barangay*—in colloquial terms, what they call either an inner city neighborhood or a suburb over here. There are close to two thousand of them in Manila. I didn’t know the name of my girlfriend’s *barangay*, and I don’t think she did either.

Her name is Candy. No, she isn’t a stripper. Bizarre given names are as quintessentially Filipino as a Filipino’s Catholic faith or ubiquitous smile. On any given day you would be hard pressed to walk around Manila and not bump into a Bambi or a Bogie, a Girlie or a Peanut, or even a middle-aged man called Babe.

Candy lived in a ramshackle cinderblock building. By the average Filipino’s standard, it was an okay place. It had a concrete fence and iron grates on all the windows. In comparison, if you were poor, you’d likely have a bamboo fence and bamboo grates, while if you were prosperous, you’d already have moved to a gated community, surrounded by ten-foot-tall walls and guardhouses, like where I lived. I wasn’t wealthy by any stretch of the imagination. I taught English at an international school. Even so, I was paid a Western teacher’s salary, which put me alongside the country’s business executives and corrupt politicians.

I was standing in the building’s second-floor dimly lit hallway, about to knock on Candy’s door, when I heard someone behind me. I turned to find Candy’s former husband barreling down on me, a large knife in his hand. I got my arms up in time to deflect his first attack. I shouted as he whacked at my forearms with the blade. Finally I got one blood-soaked hand around his throat, the other around the wrist of the arm doing the filleting, and drove him backward into the hallway wall. Perspiration beaded his mocha-colored skin. His brown eyes bulged furiously. His lips curled away from his teeth to show his gums. Spittle sprayed my face.

I opened my mouth, to tell him to calm the fuck down, when he bit me on the chin and held on like a pit bull. I shook my head, tearing free my chin, though his teeth took some of my skin with them.

My hands went instinctively to the wound. It was a stupid thing to do. With his knife arm freed, Toto—that was his name, like the goddamn dog—slipped the blade neatly in my right side, hilt-deep.

I issued a lackadaisical sigh, what you might make after sipping a cold soda on a hot day. My hands left my chin and went to my side in a futile attempt to plug the gush of warm blood.

I sank to my butt, slumping against the wall. Toto came toward me. I thought he was going to go for the knife, maybe to jig it around in the wound, or to yank it out and stab me again. Instead, he reached into one of my pockets and took my wallet.

His eyes flicked to the right. He stiffened, then fled.

I heard what he'd heard. It was a familiar sound: the chain and deadbolt on the other side of Candy's door unlocking. She appeared at the threshold, her black hair hanging straight and wet over her bare shoulders, a purple towel wrapped around her body.

I think she was screaming. I wasn't certain. The world had taken on a sickening tilt, and everything seemed to be sliding very far away from me, disconnected somehow. My eyelids felt as heavy as bowling balls, and I struggled to keep them open.

Then Candy was in front of me, telling me to wake up. She was dressed in jeans and a yellow top. Her friend was there too—Sam? I'd seen him around the *barangay* a fair bit and had beers with him once on his birthday. He'd been hanging out on the street with a couple of his buddies. Candy and I had spotted them from her apartment balcony, and we'd joined them. I bought everyone a round of Red Horse, the one liter bottles, from a tiny cage-fronted *sari-sari* store.

Candy and Sam hiked me to my feet, guided me down the hallway, down the staircase, outside to where a maroon sedan idled at the curb. Sam opened the door, and Candy eased me onto the backseat. She gave me a pillow to press against my side to slow the bleeding.

Then we were moving.

Bright lights and neon flashed past the car windows. I swam in and out of consciousness. Candy was talking to me, telling me to stay awake, knowing as well as I did that if I closed my eyes for too long, I might not open them again.

The drive to the hospital seemed to take hours in the stop-and-go traffic. And maybe it did. I don't know. But eventually we made it, and then Candy and Sam were helping me out of the backseat, directing me toward a pair of big glass doors. The lobby of the hospital was like a hotel. Candy spoke hurriedly to a male attendant at a desk. Her tone became argumentative. I couldn't understand what they were saying, they were speaking Tagalog, but there was obviously a problem.

I went to Candy. "What's wrong?" I asked her, my voice little more than the rustle of dead leaves.

"This is a private hospital," she told me. "They want ten thousand pesos for the admission fee."

Which is roughly two hundred US dollars. I was reaching for my wallet when I remembered Toto had stolen it. Candy and Sam, I knew, didn't own credit cards, and neither would have ten thousand pesos in their bank accounts; Sam, I doubted, even had a bank account.

"I'll pay later," I told the attendant.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "You have to pay now, or else we can't serve you."

"Serve me?" I said, the dead leaves whipped into a tempest. "This isn't a goddamn restaurant! It's a hospital. And I need help." I removed the pillow from my side to show him the bloody wound.

“I’m sorry, sir—”

We argued with him for another five minutes before giving up and leaving.

I was in the backseat of the car once again, incensed with the hospital for turning me away because I didn’t have my wallet with me. I shouldn’t have been surprised by the ridiculousness of the bureaucracy, given shit like this happened to me all the time in the Philippines. Just that morning, a scant twelve hours earlier, I’d been having breakfast in a café with a British friend named Tony. I ordered an omelet; Tony ordered fried eggs and hash browns. His breakfast was served within a few minutes. When mine didn’t arrive after fifteen minutes or so, I asked the waitress what was going on. She told me the omelets were “out of stock.” I pointed to my friend’s now finished meal and said, “But you have eggs?” She replied, “Yes, sir, we have eggs.” I asked her the same question regarding ham, onions, and cheese. She affirmed all were available. “So how are omelets out of stock?” I asked her. “We have no mushrooms, sir,” she told me.

I didn’t even like freaking mushrooms!

We arrived at a public hospital maybe half an hour later. Candy and Sam led me inside to the ER. It was chaos, a whirlwind of voices, patients, nurses, and doctors. I could barely stand and had to lean against the wall. Candy joined the priority line for charity services, while Sam took off somewhere. I closed my eyes and fought the incoming waves of nausea and dizziness. Then Sam was back. He had a stretcher with him, though it was spattered with dried blood. I didn’t care. I flopped onto it and wondered when the hell I was going to see a doctor. A nurse came by and hooked me up to IV fluids (there was no stand to hold the bag so she improvised with coat hangers). Candy told me we were waiting for a bed to become available. I asked her how long it would take. She didn’t know.

It turned out to be an hour or so. A nurse wheeled me to the public ward in the basement of the hospital. It looked like a refugee camp in some war-torn country. Maybe a hundred patients lay in beds with stained sheets, or on pieces of plywood directly on the floor. Some were surrounded by family, others by piles of personal possessions, which made me think they might be living permanently down here.

My bed was in the corner by an open basement window. The ward wasn’t ventilated so the fresh air was welcomed, even if it smelled like feces and urine. A nurse came by at some point, examined my injuries, and told me I needed a blood transfusion. She fetched a waiver for me to sign. A clause near the end of it stated that if I contracted HIV, Hepatitis, West Nile virus, or some other malaise from the transfused blood, the hospital was not liable.

I gritted my teeth and signed away.

After the transfusion, the nurse gave me a couple of Tylenol—my blood pressure was too low for proper pain killers—then proceeded to clean and bandage the defensive cuts in my forearms and the big one in my side.

Then the bad news. I had a buildup of fluid—likely blood—in my chest, which needed to be drained. I thought a doctor would perform the surgery, but the nurse assured me she was qualified to do so.

At my insistence she gave me two more Tylenol before she cut a one-inch incision between my ribs. She inserted a tube into the space between the inner and outer lining of my chest cavity. She taped it securely in place and stuck the other end into some sort of canister, which would collect the drained blood.

I had never felt pain before like I did then. Not even the knife going into my side earlier.

I screamed and hissed throughout it all. I nearly blacked out. Then the nurse left and Candy climbed into the bed beside me. She spoke to me for a while, warmly, reassuringly, before falling asleep. I wished I could sleep. I couldn't. The tube felt like an invasive worm, causing me to spasm painfully at the slightest movement. My breathing remained hoarse and phlegmy. And worst of all, I wasn't sure I wasn't dying.

So I remained awake in that dingy dungeon throughout the longest night of my life, during which two patients passed away before my eyes, all the while wondering if I was going to be next.

—

Was I afraid then? Damn right I was, which was the reason all those memories came to mind when the voice in my head asked me if I had ever been this afraid before. But was I ever *this* afraid before, as in right at this moment, waking in a pitch-black wooden box I suspected to be a coffin buried six feet underground?

FIVE MINUTES EARLIER

Something was wrong. I was sleeping in an awkward and uncomfortable position. My arms were behind my back, beneath me. I tried moving them, but they remained where they were—tied together? Yes, I could feel the hard edge of something rigid—a zip tie?—burning into my wrists.

What the hell? At least, that's what I wanted to say, but a gag clogged my mouth. All that came out was muffled nonsense. I swallowed painfully and jerked myself into a sitting position—rapping my head on something hard.

Dazed, a spot on my forehead smarting, I stared into the blackness. My heart beat faster in my chest as my thoughts weaved together a scenario I didn't want to contemplate.

I raised my right leg. The toe of my Converse touched what my head had struck. I fanned my leg left and right. Two sides, maybe twenty-five or thirty inches apart, or about the same height as the box I was in.

Only it wasn't a box, was it? The dimensions told the truth. It was a coffin.

I was in a motherfucking coffin.

Moaning into the gag—it was no longer muffled nonsense; it was high-pitched panic—I writhed from side to side, my wrists straining at the binds that held them, the bed of brittle sticks crackling beneath me—

Sticks?

Bones.

I went still. The darkness swaddled me, overwhelming and suffocating and terrifying. The only sound was my breathing: short, deep snorts, like I was hyperventilating.

I told myself to calm down. I fought to slow my breathing and the panic that had ballooned inside me to the point it felt as though my chest might burst open like in those *Alien* movies.

My restraint lasted all of three seconds before I lost total control, screaming into the gag, flopping around like a fish out of water, snapping the bones beneath me, kicking madly at nothing.

In my hysterics a small, reasonable voice whispered: *Oxygen.*

The word turned my insides to cold mush, and I forced my body still. *There was only a finite supply of oxygen in the coffin.* Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ.

My breathing continued too fast, too loud, my chest heaving up and down. I closed my eyes, which made no difference in the blackness, and focused on taking deep, steady breaths.

That small, reasonable voice returned, asking me from the shadows of my mind whether I had ever been this afraid before. I thought of the night Toto had stabbed me, everything appearing in crystalline clarity—Candy's *barangay*, the struggle with Toto in the hallway, the unhelpful attendant at the private hospital, the dungeon-like space at the public hospital, sitting in

a bed like a hastily patched ragdoll, wondering if I would see the morning—and I dismissed the memories as quickly as they had come. Because the answer was simple.

No, I had never been this afraid before, ever.

I kicked the lid of the coffin. I bellowed into the gag. I yanked and twisted my wrists against the zip tie binding them until the hard plastic bit into them and they bled, and then I kept yanking and twisting, hoping the blood would act as a lubricant. It didn't.

While I struggled to hold onto my composure and sanity, random memories popped into my head, those of my childhood and high school and college, of my family and friends. It was as if my life were flashing before my eyes, what you heard people talk about when they were moments away from dying. Only I wasn't dying. Not yet, at least.

Still, the memories came, stuff I hadn't thought about in years, if ever, all of them underscored by a current of dread and loss, an unsettling feeling that they were somehow no longer mine, as if I'd forfeited them somehow.

One in particular was of me in grade two, sitting at my school desk, a crayon in my hand, a piece of paper before me. I'd drawn a horizontal green line to represent the grassy ground. Below this, near the bottom of the page, a brown box, and a yellow stick figure inside the box. I was working on a speech balloon above the stick figure's head, carefully spelling out the word in it: "Grrrrrr!"

I recalled this day as if it had been yesterday. My teacher, Mrs. Janis, had instructed everyone in the class to draw a scary picture for Halloween, which she would put up on the hallway wall. Most of my classmates chose to depict ghosts and witches and skeletons, some tracing their ghouls from the stack of Halloween-themed books on Mrs. Janet's desk. I had recently seen Michael's Jackson's "Thriller" video on MTV for the first time, hence the zombie crawling out of his grave.

I had found the drawing roughly six months ago, before I'd moved to the Philippines. My parents had wanted to clear out their garage, and a lot of the junk taking up space belonged to me. The drawing was in a moldy box alongside a coffee mug decorated with popsicle sticks that I'd made for Father's Day, a raised plaster mold of my small hand I'd made for Mother's Day, a Superman lunchbox and thermos, some Transformers and Gobots, and lots of glossy eight-by-ten class photographs that usually had me sitting in the front row because I was consistently one of the shortest boys in my grade.

Now tears did warm my eyes as I contemplated the possibility that I might never see my parents again. I tried to tell myself this wasn't true. But I was only fooling myself, wasn't I? Because I was trapped inside a goddamn coffin. I had no way of breaking out of it, let alone digging through the dirt stacked on top of it. My only hope would be for someone to rescue me.

Who?

Cherry would know I was missing. I'd been out with her when I was...what...abducted? She'd tell her *barangay* captain, who happened to be her uncle. Nevertheless, he was a lazy know-it-all who would likely suspect we'd had a fight and I went back to Manila. Consequently, he'd do little more than patronize her with false platitudes until she convinced herself of the illogical scenario that I'd returned to Manila in the middle of the evening without telling her.

My school would wonder about me come Monday morning when I didn't show up for work. Yet they wouldn't be concerned enough to do anything until at least Tuesday, or maybe even Wednesday, and by then it would be too late. I would already be long dead, starved of oxygen.

In fact, it was already difficult to breathe. I had no idea how much air a coffin held, but I suspected it likely wouldn't be much more than five or six hours' worth. Presuming I'd already used up an hour or two—and it very well could be more than that—I was left with three or four hours at the most before I sank into a coma from the buildup of carbon dioxide.

This can't be happening, I thought desperately—angrily. Stuff like this happened to other people. It wasn't supposed to happen to you.

But of course why shouldn't it?

—

After I'd graduated college I'd moved to Japan for a year to teach conversational English. I lived in the heart of Tokyo, near the Yamanote line. Despite Tokyo's massive size, it was probably the safest city I'd ever visited. The Yakuza aside, the only crime perpetrated to any real degree was white-collar stuff. Robberies and murders were virtually unheard of.

Having said that, a twenty-three-year-old female Australian teacher I'd met there, Janet Stanton, was raped and killed by a Japanese man. She taught him English outside of her regular teaching job at Nova, usually in cafés. On one occasion, however, they met at her apartment. It was a Sunday morning. She'd figured her two flat mates would be home—only they made last minute plans to go to Harajuku to check out the Cosplay scene. When they returned later that afternoon they found Janet's lifeless body in the short, deep bathtub, naked and bruised, her head shaved.

That same year I went to Thailand for a weeklong vacation and randomly bumped into two college friends, Amy Pierce and Crystal Branning, on Ko Phangan island. We spent the next few days hanging out on the beach and staying up late. After the September full moon party, I returned to Japan and they went to Bali—and were in Sari Club the night it was blown up. Amy had left early and was in her hostel two blocks away when the car bomb exploded (she'd told me the shockwave had shattered the window in her room). Crystal was dragged semiconscious from the rubble of the pub and died on the street.

And then maybe three months ago, a friend of a friend, a German guy named Heinrich something, was shot dead right here in the Philippines, in downtown Manila, at eight in the morning while he was on his way to work. A car pulled up to the curb of a busy street, someone

stuck a gun out the window, and then Heinrich was on the sidewalk, bleeding out like a stuck pig.

The reason for the attack? He had been fooling around with the girlfriend of an “important” Filipino dude behind the dude’s back.

Even as I was thinking that stuff like this—buried-alive-in-a-coffin kind of stuff—shouldn’t, couldn’t, be happening to me, I also found myself wondering whether Janet and Crystal and Heinrich had told themselves the same thing in the moments before they died.

My fingers curled around a bone. It was long and curved, probably a rib—or part of a rib, because it had snapped, leaving a jagged edge along one side that tapered to a sharp point. I gripped it in such a way to work it like a saw to cut the band of zip tie between my wrists. After a few futile attempts, however, I conceded that the bone saw wasn’t going to succeed. It was too awkward to use behind my back; I couldn’t exert the needed leverage. I would need to get my hands in front of me.

Was this possible?

Looping my arms beneath my butt and then up and over my legs would have been difficult enough had I been lying on a green lawn under a blue sky. In the claustrophobic coffin, it seemed an impossible task.

Nevertheless, I was short on options, and so I bent my legs until my knees touched the wood lid of the coffin, then I lifted my pelvis a few inches into the air. I pushed my wrists down my backside. They stopped short of the underside of my thighs.

Come on, I thought, and pushed harder. I grunted with the effort. Perspiration trickled down my face. My shoulders screamed in protest, while my stomach muscles clenched so tightly they trembled.

Then—I did it! My bloodied wrists were beneath my thighs.

I scraped my knees along the lid of the coffin until they were pulled up to my chin. I stretched my arms as far as I could toward my feet, then I stepped backward over my wrists, one foot at a time.

When both my arms were in front of me, I celebrated with a muffled laugh that might have been a sob.

I immediately yanked the gag free of my mouth, leaving it hanging around my neck. I sucked back deep, stale breaths, sounding like someone suffering an asthma attack. I smacked my dry lips together until my saliva glands secreted some moisture.

“Okay,” I said. The word came out a shaky whisper, yet it seemed very loud in the darkness. I rolled onto my side, shoving my butt against one side of the coffin and feeling around the bed

of bones until my fingers brushed the splintered rib I'd used earlier. I gripped it in both hands and attempted to saw through the zip-tie again with an absurd jerking-off motion. This proved as ineffective as when I'd tried the same thing with my arms bound behind my back. I simply couldn't generate any leverage.

"Fuck!" I said, flicking the bone away. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

I twisted onto my back again and pounded the coffin lid with my fists.

"Help!" I shouted as loudly as I could. "Hel—" My voice cracked. "Help," I finished quietly, knowing no one could hear me.

In frustration and desperation—and perhaps a degree of madness—I slammed the insides of my forearms against my hipbones, my elbows flaring out like chicken wings. I was hoping the lateral force would snap the zip-tie. I repeated this action several times, ignoring the pain in my wrists as the plastic carved deeper into my flesh.

I gave up. I screamed and kicked at nothing and threw my weight from side to side.

I'm going insane. I'm going freaking insane.

"Help!" I shouted. "Help me! Please!"

Silence. Deep, eternal.

The silence of the grave.

No, that wasn't true. There was my breathing, and there was my heartbeat. I could hear it in my head, a *whump, whump, whump* that matched the rapid pace of my breathing, and I wondered how many heartbeats I had left, for it would be a reasonable number now, one I could count if I so pleased—

No.

I wasn't going down that track.

I wasn't giving up.

I pressed my wrists together. The lacerations beneath the zip-tie itched more than they stung. I pulled my arms in opposite directions, the left one toward my feet, the right one toward my shoulders. The zip tie slid off my right wrist but got caught on the back of my hand, still a good inch before my knuckles.

There wasn't enough slack—

Slack.

There was *too much* slack.

I brought my wrists to my mouth. I bit the errant end of the zip-tie that stuck out from the locking mechanism. I jerked my head, pulling the zip tie tighter until zero slack remained.

I counted silently to three, then brought my forearms down against my hipbones, the same as I did before, using as much force as I could muster, not pulling short in anticipate of resistance but driving down through my hipbones, through the floor.

The zip tie snapped.

I probed my savaged wrists with my fingers, touching the slimy blood and deep cuts gently, hardly believing my arms were free of one another.

“Okay,” I said to myself, my state of mind buoyed by the small success. “Think. Think. Think. Think.”

But instead of trying to figure out how to now get out of the coffin, I found myself wondering how I got in it in the first place.



During breakfast this morning with Tony—or coffee, given I’d never bothered to reorder the “out of stock” omelet minus the mushrooms—Candy called to invite me to spend the weekend at her family home, which was in the far north area of the country, in a landlocked province on Luzon island called Kalinga. It was her father’s birthday on Saturday.

I had yet to meet her parents, and I had no interest in doing so. Nevertheless, I was unable to come up with an excuse on the spot, Candy was insistent, and I ended up agreeing to go. We met at the Manila Victory Liner bus terminal that evening and boarded the eleven o’clock bus. We arrived in Baguio at five the next morning, where we switched buses for the final six-hour leg of the journey, which included a fair share of twisty and bumpy mountain passes.

Candy’s hometown was a sleepy little place of roughly ten thousand people. With its cool mountain air, pine trees, and slow pace, it was a world apart from Manila, and I immediately liked it. There was still the typical poverty you found everywhere in the country—tumbledown buildings and barefooted children and loitering street-dwellers—but thanks to the abundant greenery it didn’t seem as depressing as when you saw it in bigger towns and cities.

We flagged down a trike, loaded our luggage onto the roof, and crammed into the sidecar. The driver was a maniac, often driving on the wrong side of the road to skirt traffic, but he got us to the hotel I’d booked online in one piece. We checked in, cleaned up, then took another trike to Candy’s *barangay*. Her family’s house was a decent size, and it appeared her parents had gotten carried away trying to build a third floor some years before, because only one crumbling wall was ever constructed. It jutted from the original roofline, rusted rebar poking out the top of it.

Butterfly wings beat in my stomach as we followed the beaten path to the front door. I’d heard enough stories about foreigners meeting their Filipina girlfriend’s parents for the first time to know there was way too much protocol involved. Tony, who’d lived in the Philippines for a number of years, and who’d dated his share of Filipinas, reassured me: “Just don’t hit on her mom, and don’t say anything negative about Christmas, and you’ll be fine.”

I didn’t have to worry about either of these faux pas, as Christmas was still six months away, and Candy’s mother, it turned out, wasn’t hot. She met us at the front door, a plump and witchy looking woman with wild black hair and premature wrinkles. Her appearance suited her though, given Candy had told me she was a bona fide sorceress.

Sure enough, Grace—that was her name—immediately commented on my dry cough, which I’d had for a while, a result, I believed, of my lungs struggling to adapt to Manila’s pollution. I told her I was fine, I was taking medicine. She boo-hawed this, led me inside to the living room, and produced from a cupboard the tools of her trade: a glass cup, a bamboo straw, a stone the

size of an apricot pit, and a bottle of potion. She explained that she'd found the stone while swimming near a waterfall in the middle of the island when she was a young girl (this last point caused her great amusement, as if the concept of a young Grace was inconceivable), and a subsequent dream taught her how to use the stone to heal people, which she'd been doing ever since. In quick order she dabbed the potion on certain parts of my body, half-filled the cup with water, dropped the stone in it, and blew air through the straw into the water. The water turned murky—a sign, she said, that she was removing my sickness.

Afterward I offered Grace the Belgium chocolates I'd purchased from a Marks & Spencer earlier in the day. She beamed. Filipinos love chocolate, and they've brainwashed themselves into believing if something is imported, it's better than anything made in the country, so imported chocolate was about the best gift you could give.

Candy led me to a cement area that served as the back patio, where her rail-thin and balding father, Fau, was sitting in a chair, drinking a bottle of beer. It was a little past noon, but his glassy eyes hinted that he was already well on his way to getting wasted. I said hello. Unlike Grace, he didn't speak English and simply smiled at me. Candy got me a beer, told me to sit and relax, and went to the kitchen to help her mother with lunch. I sat in a chair opposite Fau, and we gazed out at verdant green jungle, sipping our beers in silence. Occasionally he would chuckle at something mysterious, or look at me and raise his bottle in cheers.

I finished the beer quickly and joined Candy and Grace in the kitchen. Food was piled everywhere: fresh produce, fish that looked as though it had been caught that morning, chunks of meat cut from a recently slaughtered animal. When I mentioned there was only the four of us, Candy told me that some of her relatives would be joining us for dinner—and as I discovered over the next couple of hours, “some” meant thirty or so uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, and nieces.

Candy delighted in showing me off to everyone. A gaggle of aunts kept asking us when we were getting married, which freaked me out because Candy and I had only been together for six months and had never spoken of this. They also barraged me with interview-like questions about my personal life and work. They asked the same questions over and over, and I was pretty sure they were testing me, trying to make sure I wasn't making anything up.

I escaped the interrogation and wandered over to Candy's five uncles, who were huddled in a corner, sharing a bottle of Spanish brandy. They were all pretty drunk, and I heard a lot of “*nauubusan English ko dito*” (I'm running out of English words to say) or “*nosebleed na ako*” (a gag among Filipinos that they bleed from their noses when they use more of their mental capacity than usual).

Dinner was a feast—and I mean fifteen-plus dishes on the long table at all times. Pork belly, barbecue chicken skewers, noodle stir fry, paella, greens with adobo, fruit salad, and so much more stuff I didn't recognize.

When the karaoke got rocking after dessert, I went out front for a smoke. The night air was brisk and scented with pine needles. One of Candy's uncles—Calyx, the know-it-all *barangay*

captain—joined me, and after some small talk mentioned he was running for election, and in a not so subtle way hinted at the cost involved, which he couldn't afford.

This was what I'd been hoping to avoid: the idea I was supposed to be financially supportive of Candy's family, even if I barely knew them. I could support myself and Candy comfortably, but not her entire extended family. Tony had cautioned me that some family members would likely approach me for money. He'd heard it all before: "The roof blew off my house in a typhoon" or "The baby's sick" or "I can't afford the school fees for my children." He had no sympathy, saying, "If you're poor, don't breed like bloody rabbits. If you can't afford to feed, educate, and clothe your kids, that's not my bloody problem. I'm *not* Filipino, and I don't give a toss what they expect from me."

I sort of agreed. I was dating Candy, not her family. I wasn't going to be their bank machine. I'd even told Candy this on the bus ride up here, and she'd understood.

So I listened patiently to Calyx's spiel, nodded non-committedly, then excused myself when my smoke reached the filter.

I declined the karaoke mic, I couldn't sing for crap, and eventually convinced Candy it was time we took our leave. I got hugs, kisses, and high-fives from everyone, then two of her cousins insisted they drive us to town on their motorbikes, regardless of the fact they were shitfaced.

When we arrived at the hotel, it was still relatively early—eight p.m.—so Candy and I went down the street to a busy bar. We got a table next to an open-air window that looked onto the hustle and bustle of the street. Young guys with their friends walking past shouted "Hey Joe!" to me. They've been calling Americans that since World War Two. It's a derivative of GI Joe. It wasn't an insult; they were just being sociable.

I was pretty drunk from the seven or eight beers I'd had throughout the afternoon, so I nursed a Sam Miguel Light while Candy had a halo-halo (a dessert that literally means "mix-mix" and combines shaved ice, evaporated milk, boiled sweet beans, gelatin, and fruit).

At one point I went to the toilet, which was located in an outhouse in the yard behind the bar. On the way back inside, I heard someone else in the dark, turned to look behind me—and woke up in the coffin.

—

I explored a lump on the back of my head with my fingers. It was tender and sore, maybe the size of a tangerine.

So someone had attacked me out behind the bar. But who? And why?

Was I robbed?

Seized by a thought, I patted down my pockets. Mt heart dropped. *No phone*. I hadn't thought about my phone until then, but now that I had, I realized it had been my only chance at escaping this death trap, my only shot at summoning help.

I shouted for the countless time, driving my fists and knees into the lid of the coffin. I did this again. And again. And again.

Oxygen.

I didn't care.

Oxygen!

I got hold of myself.

I wasn't breathing so much as I was seething.

I squeezed my eyes tight—and realized I wasn't thinking straight. I wasn't robbed. Robbers wanted your stuff. They didn't give a crap about you. They certainly didn't go to the effort of burying you in a coffin.

That was personal. Something orchestrated with sick or vengeful malice.

Yet I hadn't pissed anyone off. I wasn't Heinrich. I wasn't dating some important dude's girlfriend—

Toto?

Impossible. Candy's ex-husband was a bastard—a crazy bastard—but he was in Manila. No way he'd followed us all the way to Kalinga, jumped me, and buried me in a coffin—

Toto's from here.

Jesus Christ, it was true. It was how he and Candy knew each other. They'd grown up in Kalinga together. Candy told me they'd started dating in high school. When she was seventeen she went to Manila to find work, and he came with her. She got a job at a Jolibee fast food restaurant; he did construction. They got married. The next year she became a personal trainer at Fitness First. He quit construction, content to mooch off her, spend the days getting drunk, and occasionally beat her.

Candy told me she would have divorced him, but she couldn't. The Philippines was the only country in the world in which divorce remained illegal. She couldn't seek an annulment either, because to do this she had to establish that the marriage was defective from the beginning, meaning that either she or Toto had to have been underage at the time, psychologically incapacitated, a carrier of an incurable STD, etc. These exceptions, however, did not extend to infidelity, physical abuse, or plain old "irreconcilable differences."

Consequently, Candy simply packed up her stuff without Toto knowing and moved to a different part of Manila. Not long after this she and I met at the gym where she worked. Toto eventually tracked her down and began showing up at her new place and harassing her. One night he came by when I was staying over. I answered the door holding a wooden spindle from a broken chair and told him to get lost, threatening to beat the shit out of him if he ever touched Candy again. He was surprisingly compliant, refusing to look me in the eye and sulking off without further aggression.

Tony later told me I was an idiot to have confronted Toto like I did. "Last thing you want to do is make a Filipino lose face, mate," he said. He went on to tell me what happened to his buddy, a US Marine, who used to rent a room in his duplex. After the Marine got off duty, they would often go to the *sari sari* store for a few beers and *pulutan*, or finger food. One night the Marine became loud and insulting toward the shop owner, who took the abuse stoically. The following week the Marine's cocker spaniel went missing, and after searching the *barangay*

without success, he stopped by the *sari sari* for a beer and *pulutan*—which, unknown to him at the time, was his dog.

I didn't take Tony's allegory seriously—I should have, but I was still new to the Philippines then, naïve about how things worked here—and as a consequence I ended up in the public hospital with seven stab wounds and a tube sticking out of my side.

I pressed charges, though Toto was never apprehended or arrested. He went into hiding long enough for the cops to lose interest in finding him, if they'd ever been motivated in the first place.

I never went back to Candy's *barangay*. Instead, she ended up visiting my place in the compound more and more, eventually moving in.

The months slipped past. Candy and I didn't hear from Toto again. I never forgot about him—my scars reminded me of the attack on a daily basis—but I ceased to consider him a threat. I figured he'd buried his beef with me.

But he never had, had he?

He'd been waiting quietly for another opportunity to finish what he'd started—such as when I'd be on his turf again—and there was no better turf than his hometown in a remote province.

—

The ringing of my cell phone caused me to sit up quickly, rapping my head on the lid of the coffin.

The ringtone mimicked that military bugle call that's played to wake soldiers at dawn, and for a moment I was completely disorientated, thinking I was in the army myself. Then I saw the pocket on my right leg lighting up. I was wearing flight pants that had cargo pockets on the front of the thighs. The pants were new, and I wasn't used to the location of the pockets—which was why I'd overlooked checking them earlier.

Now I jammed my hand in the ringing pocket and yanked out my phone. I held the screen a foot from my face, squinting at the fierce light of the display.

It was Tony!

I slid the touchscreen lock to the right and said, "Tony!"

"Jimmy! Where...mate? Fancy...beer?"

"I'm in a coffin!" I said, my words raspy. "This isn't a joke. I'm in a fucking coffin somewhere in Kalinga, Candy's province. In Luzon. Tony? Tony?"

"Jimmy! Mate...hear me?"

His voice crackled with interference. There also seemed to be a lot of people talking in the background.

"Tony? Listen to me—"

"Cutting up...the Fort. Get...ass... See you, mate."

The disconnect tone sounded.

I cursed, at the same time realizing Tony cutting out didn't matter. I could call someone else.

I had my phone.

The time and date read 3:06 a.m., Sunday, July 30. Which made it about six hours from when I'd been at the bar with Candy. Yet this didn't tell me how long I'd been in the coffin. It could be anywhere from thirty minutes to several hours.

The battery indicator was green and half-full. I said a silent prayer of thanks for the iPhone's decent battery life. My last phone, some Chinese brand I'd bought from a used-phone kiosk, would have almost surely been dead by now, or almost dead.

I had six missed text messages.

I navigated to the inbox and discovered all the messages were from Candy, all since I'd vanished from the bar. They ranged from curious to angry to concerned. The last one was sent just past midnight, three hours ago. It read:

Anak ng toka! Where are you, Jim? I'm worried. My mom is worried too. Call me.

Anak ng toka was similar to the American expression "Son of a gun!" only it meant "Son of a tofu!" Candy often substituted "tofu" for "sweet potato" or "shark" or some other word that suited her fancy, and she only used the expression when she was seriously peeved off.

I was about to call her, but I hesitated. Although the phone's battery might not be a problem, my credit balance would be. I'd yet to sign up for a monthly plan with one of the country's telecommunication carriers, which provided generous or unlimited talk time. Instead, I bought credit—or "load," as they call it here—from convenient stores. It came in one hundred, three hundred, and five hundred peso amounts. Calling someone to talk ate it up in minutes, but if you stuck to sending text messages, which was what I did, it lasted a while.

I had no idea how much credit I had remaining. I think it had been a week or so since I'd topped up. Yes, last Friday. I'd ordered a masseuse to my place for an hour and a half massage. She got lost in the maze of streets that made up my compound, and I'd been texting back and forth with her, giving her specific directions, when I got a "Message could not be sent" notification, indicating my balance was zero. The masseuse continued to text me, each message becoming more irked when I didn't reply, until she finally called me. I remained on the phone with her until she found the place. She had not been happy with the ordeal, considering the paltry money she earned from the massage likely wouldn't cover the credit she had wasted calling me. Needless to say, it had been a pretty half-assed massage.

But, yeah, that was last Friday. I topped up my credit the next day. I think I purchased the five hundred peso load, and if so, I likely still had a good chunk left.

At least, I hoped I did.

So the question became: should I call Candy and risk running out of credit, or send a text message?

Jesus Christ, Jim! You're buried alive in a fucking coffin! You're not texting someone to come get you out!

Okay, I would call someone. But who? Candy? How was she going to help me—?

Ava Roberts.

She was American, one of the few female Western expats I'd met thus far in Manila, and she worked at the US Embassy.

I'd been in the country maybe three days when a teacher I worked with invited me to a party thrown by two Filipino sisters from an affluent family. I didn't know it at the time, but the party was an annual thing, the event of the year, and it attracted a massive gathering of expats: Americans, Brits, Aussies, Canadians, Kiwis—even an impressive number of French and Spaniards.

The venue occupied the penthouse and rooftop of a tall residential building in downtown Manila. I'd been out on one of several patios, smoking a cigarette and taking in the panoramic night view of the city, thinking I would never be invited to a party like this back in Chicago, when Ava came over and said hi. She was maybe five ten, my height, and wore a canary-yellow, one-shouldered gown (the party had been fancy-dress). She was attractive with a slim waistline, milky skin, and a pile of golden curls stacked like a crown atop her head.

“So you know Denise and Angela?” she asked me.

“Who?” I said.

“They're sisters. This is their place.”

“Ah, right. I think I met them when I'd arrived. You know Rick?”

“Wolfie?”

Rick's surname was Woolfson, so I assumed we were talking about the same person. “Yeah, we teach at the same school. I came with him.”

“You're a teacher?” She sounded impressed, though I didn't know why she would be.

“I'm not really a teacher,” I told her. “I'm just traveling and teaching.”

“Right.” She gave me a curious smile. “So you're a teacher.”

“I'm not a *real* teacher. I didn't go to teacher's college or anything.”

“My friend teaches at ISM—she said it's really tough to get hired there. You definitely need a teacher's degree. Or at least CELTA or something?”

“Well, that's ISM.” Which stood for the International School of Manila. Tuition was about twenty-five grand a year. The students were mostly the sons and daughters of diplomats and the like, and a lot of them ended up going to Harvard or Yale. “I'm at the Korean International School. You're supposed to have a teacher's degree there too, but they're a bit sketchy. I told them I was working on one during the interview last year, and that was good enough. They never asked again.”

“Were you working on one?”

“No.”

She laughed. “Mind if I borrow your lighter?”

I took my Zippo from my pocket and sparked the flint. She touched my hand, guiding the lighter closer to her cigarette. She bent forward, providing me a view of impressive cleavage.

She stood straight again and exhaled. “Thanks.”

“What do you do?” I asked her.

“I work at the embassy.”

“Neat,” I said, guessing this might have been the case. Most of the expats I knew were either teachers, suit-and-ties with international conglomerates, or embassy workers. “The American one?”

“Do I sound British to you?”

“Could have been Canadian.”

“Yes, the American one.”

“What do you do there?”

“I’m a consular assistant.”

“So you help people who get in trouble over here?”

“Sort of. I’m more of a point of contact to the families of people who get in trouble.”

We ended up spending much of the party talking to each other, and sometime in the early morning we went back to her place together. Thanks to her State Department housing allowance, she lived in a posh three-bedroom apartment in Fort Bonifacio, Manila’s newest and most expensive development. We had a glass of wine, a few more cigarettes, and ended up in bed together.

We continued seeing each other for a while. We never went on one-on-one dates. Rather, we’d go out with our separate groups of friends and at some point during the night “bump into” each other. Eventually, however, I started to avoid venues where I knew she would be, and then I started to ignore her calls and put off replying to her text messages.

My change of heart had nothing to do with Ava. She was a great person, and we were in fact quite compatible. Yet things were moving too fast, and I didn’t want a Western girlfriend. My mentality was that, while living overseas, I should be dating locals. You got to know a lot more about the country and the people and their culture that way. It’s why in Japan I only dated Japanese girls, and got fairly serious with one named Yumi before heading home after my one-year contract.

Ava took the hint. We still ran into each other when we went out, as the expat community was tight for such a large city, and everyone seemed to end up at the same spot on certain nights, but we no longer ended up going back to her place, or mine.

The encounters were always awkward, even more so after I began dating Candy. Ava heard about Candy through friends, of course. She asked me about her once, and she seemed pretty blasé about the whole thing. So much so I would have thought she was over us had it not been for the party she threw shortly thereafter, which was on the scale of Denise and Angela’s penthouse extravaganza—only Ava made a point to have a guest list, and not invite me.

I scrolled quickly through the phonebook for her number. I found it and pressed Call.

One ring, two, three—

“Come on, come on, come on.”

—four, five—

“Hello?” Ava said. She sounded sleepy.

“Ava! It’s me, Jim.”

“Jim?”

“Can you hear me?”

“It’s a bit staticky. Are you okay? You sound—”

“Can you call me back? Right now? I don’t have much credit, and it’s really important.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Call me back? Okay?”

“Okay.”

“*Right now.*”

“Okay, Jim, what’s—”

I hit End. I stared at the phone in the dark, the bright screen, the photo of Candy and I that functioned as the wallpaper. Her lips were puckered, kissing me on the cheek, while she looked sidelong into the camera, her bark-brown eyes sparkling. We took it in one of those video arcade photo-booths you can find in most major malls here.

I counted the changing seconds on the phone’s clock.

Seventeen...eighteen...nineteen...twenty...

Why wasn’t Ava calling me back? Could she not get through? Had I been lucky getting reception before? Had it knocked out completely?

I had one bar. I moved the phone to my right. Two bars.

“Come on, come on—”

The phone vibrated. I was already swiping the screen to unlock it when the bugles started trumpeting.

“Ava?”

“Jim?”

“Ava, you have to listen to me. This isn’t a joke. You have to help me. Okay?”

“Yeah—okay. What—”

“I’m in Luzon, in Kalinga province. Candy’s hometown. Someone attacked me. I just woke up, and I’m in a coffin.”

“What!”

“Listen! You know the guy who stabbed me? Candy’s ex, Toto? I think he did this.”

“Buried you in a coffin?” I could hear the skepticism in her voice.

“I swear on my life this is no joke, Ava. I’m running out of air. I don’t know how much is left in here. I need you to help me. Contact someone at the embassy, tell them where I am. Kalinga—do you have a pen?”

“One second...” I heard rustling, a drawer bang. “Yeah?”

“Kalinga. K-a-l-i-n-g-a. In Luzon. Her hometown is Tinglayan.” I spelled it out as well. “Do you have that?”

“Tinglayan in Kalinga.”

“I was at Candy’s family home for her dad’s birthday,” I said, the words spilling into one another. “We went to a bar afterward. I don’t know what it’s called. It’s on the main street. I went out back to the bathroom. Someone jumped me. I woke up in the coffin. Get the embassy to call Candy. Get them to find Toto. Shit! I don’t know his last name. But he did this. It has to be him. He grew up in Tinglayan too. He must have heard I was here.”

“But why did he bury you?”

“I don’t know! So no one could find me?”

“All right. I’ll call my boss right now—”

“Tell him to contact the local police. Get them to go to Candy’s house—and Toto’s. They have to find him. I don’t know how much air I have left.”

“I’ll call right now.”

“Call me back. Or get the embassy to call me back. I need to know what’s happening.”

“Okay. Jim, God, okay.”

We hung up.

I exhaled a quivering breath. I should have felt better. Something was happening. Wheels were in motion. Nevertheless, I was still wiggling out with adrenaline, my gut a hard ball of dread. Because this wasn’t the States. It was a sleepy rural province in a developing country. Were the police going to get off their asses and do something? Were they going to find Toto? Was he going to play dumb?

It was 3:10 a.m.