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Moonlight Laundry

Bienvenido N. Santos

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Moonlight Laundry

BIENVENIDO N. SANTOS

A month after the burial, I was walking home after class one evening. We had been dismissed earlier than usual and I had nothing much to do. Sol had not returned to school. If he had, I would have walked home with him, at least, part of the way. I usually walked home alone or rode a *calesa* if it was raining hard. That night I decided to pass by Calle Evangelista and stop by the Moonlight Laundry, where a few years back I used to take Don Magno's suits and dress shirts. The laundry man and owner was Sol's uncle, a bachelor named Tasing. Sol and I used to have free meals there. Tasing was a good cook. Remembering this, I walked faster hoping to find him preparing supper. It would be delicious, like Chinese food, which Tasing adored.

The Moonlight Laundry was housed in a five-door building with dirty walls. The laundry itself occupied an end door over which was the painted sign: Moonlight Laundry. A half-moon showing the profile of a human face was stamped over the name. Under this, in smaller letters, were the words: Prop.: Anastacio Gomez. There was nothing shabby in Tasing's laundry. The walls of the shop were clean like the clothes he wore and the suits and shirts he laundered. The counter was a shining board which he was always wiping with a cotton cloth that was once an undershirt. Every afternoon, he placed a bamboo screen near the door to keep off the sun and the dust. The screen was painted green and decorated with lines showing a red moon on a linear bay.

It had been a long time since I had been there, but Tasing would remember me. He enjoyed my teasing compliments, especially when I called him by the name of whoever happened to be the movie idol at the time. He particularly liked being called Ramon Navarro whose singing of the "Cuban Love Song" he imitated. He would press my hands, running his fingers on my palm, and embrace me. Although I recoiled at his touch and his scented embrace, it was fun teasing him. Besides, he offered me zarzaparilla and cookies, not to mention the big meals.

His voice was soft like a woman's. He could pass for Sol's brother. They had similar features, although Tasing was the effeminate one. He powdered his face, shaved his brow to make it wider and plucked his eyebrows and extended them, bowlike, with a charcoal pencil. He wore a ring with a big stone, an imitation jade. His favorite gesture, while he talked, was to bend his left elbow, hands up, shake his fingers as though to move up the cuff of his shirt, but actually, to show off the stone that somehow sparkled under a light.

"What do you do with your money?" I asked him once. I suspected him of being a miser, of hiding his savings in a secret place somewhere in the shop, which he also used as his living quarters. Back of the counter and rows of glass cabinets full of newly ironed suits of linen and silk and well pressed woolens, a stairway led up a mezzanine where he lived alone.

"What money are you talking about?" he replied, his tone mocking. "Your Don Magno got all the money."

"It isn't money. Now, tell me what do you do with your money?"

"One day you'll have yours. You're a smart kid and very good looking. How many girl friends do you have?"

"Not as many as you have."

"I don't have girl friends. I don't like girls. They're cats."

"Boy friends then?"

"Oh, there are some who like me, but I don't like any of them."

"Take your choice. You are rich and too beautiful to be without one."

"You be my boy friend. Come on, be my boy friend. I'll take care of you."

It always ended like that, with him making a proposal that sounded less and less like a joke with repetition. Sometimes he enlivened his offer with practical details: if I wanted, I could study my lessons up in the mezzanine or drop by at night from school and he would have warm and delicious food for me.

"You do that," he said. "That would be my contribution towards your education. Then when you become rich and great, even if you would not know me any more then, I could still tell my friends that, in the old days, I gave food and..."

"Thank you," I interrupted him. "But your boy friends will not like it."

"I have no boy friends, I tell you," he insisted. "Nobody really comes here except you and, occasionally, that lazy, good-for-nothing nephew of mine."

Once or twice I remembered meeting Sol there, indeed. He had been sleeping in the mezzanine. His intention, according to him, was to find a quiet place to study, but he always ended up eating and sleeping only.

Now and then Sol made himself useful by helping when there were customers and Tasing was busy ironing. Tasing did everything himself: washing, starching, drying, bleaching, and, finally, ironing. He took time passing the charcoal-heated iron over the suit, pressing it hard, back and forth, and viewing the result, bending over back, like an artist. But what to me was most impressive was the way he kept his sweat from smudging his work. Perspiring as he worked, he could tell the precise moment the globule of sweat was going to drop and he would wipe it off or catch it in the air with obvious

grace. He was proud of his work and enjoyed it. The meticulous care and studied rhythm with which he pushed the iron on the cloth, forward and backward, seemed natural with the man, as if it were possible for one to be born to be a laundry man, to clean the dirt off other men's linen, with finesse.

His room up in the mezzanine bore the mark of the fastidious occupant. The bare floor was shiny, including what showed under the well-made bed. The coverlet was pink and where the edges of the pillow showed, was an embroidered green like a sea-weed or monogram. There was not a crinkle on the bedspread. Sol was sitting at the only table, the first time I came up. He had been sleeping with his head on his arms on the table, not on the bed which he dared not rumple. The only thing out of place at that time was Sol's book, lying face down where he had left off before falling asleep. On the walls was a framed picture of Tasing himself, in coat and tie, with his left hand with the ring cupped under his chin, and colored to exaggerate his feminine features. On the dresser was the same picture, a smaller size, in black and white. The dresser had an extension that served as a frame for the mirror against the wall. Pasted against the upper right hand corner was the same picture again—there was no mistaking the pose and the pompadour—in a still smaller size. Near the dresser, toward the entrance, was a door curtained in green all the way down. There were all sorts of bottles on the dresser, arranged symmetrically, with the enlarged picture on the dresser bearing the brunt of attention.

How long had it been since I saw him?

The laundry shop was partly closed, but there was a light on. He must have been out, cooling himself somewhere nearby, lying down on a bench by the doorway, fanning himself as he used to. I called, "Tasing! Tasing!" intoning the name in such fashion as I remembered would tickle him. I looked up toward the mezzanine, thinking I heard a movement, but it was dark there. Surely, he could not have been asleep that early. Before I could call again, there he was, standing by the kitchen door.

"Oh, Tasing, how are you?" I said, walking towards him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his voice edged with annoyance, perhaps displeased with my unexpected coming. But why? He could be joking, his peculiar way of saying that I was welcome, after so long.

"Oh, Tasing," I said, trying to sound hurt, "how fickle you are and how heartless! You can see how starved I am, how much I need your company and you ask what am I doing here."

"There's nothing here you can eat," he said, sitting on a stool by the table on which was a huge pile of dried wash.

I went to the cupboard. "You're not telling the truth," I chided him. "I can smell something fried, like fish. Is it milk-fish, Tasing?"

"All right, I'm a liar," he said, "Everybody tells the truth except me."

The first pot I opened contained mackerel cooked in vinegar with the soup hardened into yellow fat. The fish were stuck in the bottom. He must have neglected to remove them from the fire on time. But they looked good enough. I sniffed over the pot. "Ah!" I exclaimed, "Who cares about the truth now?"

Tasing snorted so hard, I glanced towards him, afraid he was going to spit at me. "What's the matter, my friend?" I asked, "Aren't you really glad to see me? Just because I'm, as usual, starved to death?"

"Starved to death, as usual, starved to death," he repeated, his voice more girlish than ever, "I think everybody's starved to death."

"Well, then, what are you waiting for?" I asked. "Shall I get an extra plate?"

He turned away, grunting in disgust, as he said, "Who wants to eat?"

"Well," I replied, humoring him, "I, for instance, I want to eat!"

I rolled my shirt sleeves, saying I would be happy to wait on him. In return for this succulent dish, I was willing to serve him.

"I shall even wash the dishes afterwards," I promised.

"Come on, Tasing,"

There was no place for my plate, so I pushed the wash a little towards the far end of the table.

"Don't touch those clothes!" he shouted at me. "Don't dirty them with your hands."

I looked at my hands.

"My hands are clean," I said.

"That's what you all say," he retorted. "But none of you are clean."

Clearly, the fellow was not well. I had come at the wrong moment. After all this time, I should choose this warm, oppressive night. Perhaps persons like him had occasional tantrums and the only thing to do was humor them. So before sitting down to eat, I went over to him, putting my arms around his shoulder, but instead of reciprocating what I meant to be a conciliatory gesture, he pushed my hands away.

"That's what you all do when you want something," he said.

I laughed self-consciously, more certain than ever that it was, indeed, the wrong night for me to come. But it was a little too late to do any sulking myself and leave. Besides, I was famished.

I sat down and ate while he remained seated not far from me, saying nothing at first. The food was good; the fish was burned a little only on one side.

Obviously, something was wrong with Tasing tonight. Now he was talking to himself or was he telling me? He was say-

ing that there's nothing like cleanliness. I wanted to agree and say that, as a matter of fact, it was next to godliness. Then, in the same breath, he was talking about God. He sounded like a preacher, rehearsing a sermon, cursing the ungodly, casting them all to hell. Now it was economics, my favorite subject, but he kept saying, money, money. Money was not everything. His rambling sermon included loyalty, what mourning meant. The more serious the subject he chose to talk about, the more girlish his voice became, high-pitched, squeaking. Some black clothes are not fast, he said. As a laundry man, he knew what he was saying, but when he began to talk about women, he sounded silly. Evidently, he knew nothing about them.

Occasionally, he lapsed into silence and glanced towards the main entrance as if he were expecting a customer. In those intervals I could hear sounds up in the mezzanine. When the noise was loud enough for both of us to hear, I said, "You have rats in your room."

"Yes, indeed," he answered, biting his lips and glaring at me as though I had sent the vermin there to pester him. "Rats, that's what I have up there."

"Don't worry about them," I consoled him. "I'm going to help you." I told him how it was in Villa Magdalena where we had tried poison, mouse traps, cats, but nothing would stop them for a time, until I thought of something. I starved the cats in the day and let them loose at night.

"You should have seen what a bloody mess there was when morning came, but that was the only way we got rid of the rats," I told him.

Tasing shook his head, smiling broadly, then chuckled, tentatively, as if testing his capacity for whatever effort was involved, and passing the test, bent down, his body shaking, then roared up his head, laughing, laughing so hard, tears stood in his eyes.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared, pointing at me, "You think you've got rid of all your rats."

I was about to reply in anger when lightning flashed, lighting up the kitchen through an open window, followed by thunder. "It's going to rain. No wonder it was beastly warm," I said, ignoring his laughter completely, as I brought the used plates to the kitchen sink.

The lightning continued ripping the skies, closely followed by thunder after thunder clap right over my head. Tasing stood by watching me washing the dishes. Now and then it seemed he slapped his thighs and roared with laughter.

"Try another method, Fred. These rats aren't easy to destroy," he said, still laughing. My ears burned. I wished the next lightning would strike him.

"I don't care whether you believe me. I was just trying to help you," I retorted, hoping my voice showed the anger building up inside me.

"Or maybe the rats ran all the way from the Villa to my shop, I mean those that your hungry cats had not killed," he said, shaking with laughter.

I wanted to smash his face with the plate in my hands, but when I turned to him there was pain in his eyes. He was not enjoying this at my expense—the nonsense, his demoniac laughter—something was wrong. He was hysterical. No use getting burned up or better still, go.

"Well, Tasing," I said, "I'm going now before I get soaked in the rain. I'm sure it's going to rain. Perhaps it's raining now." I listened, but heard nothing.

He had quieted down. He was sitting at the table again, his chin on his hand. The heat must have touched him, or perhaps, being the way he was, he had similar periods corresponding to a woman's menstruation cycle. He looked so miserable as I bade him goodbye, I was ashamed of myself for nearly losing my temper. I felt contrite.

"Well, Tasing, thank you very much. I was so hungry when I came. Now, I'm full. But I must hurry. I'll see you again. And the next time I come, I shall eat with you again,

but I shall bring the food myself, your favorite food. Chinese dishes, Tasing!" I spoke pleasantly, meaning every word I said. As I walked through the door, he didn't raise his head to look at me nor say goodbye.*

* A section from the forthcoming novel "Villa Magdalena" to be published by Erewhon Publications.