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Perfect Sunday

JOSE L. AYALA

WAKING UP at five o'clock a. m. on a perfect Sunday can be a very spiritual experience specially if one, like Jorge Santos, the hero of this story, has no intention of ruining such a crisp beginning by going to Mass.

Today I shall visit my long-forgotten grandmother, Jorge promised himself. He got up, stretched, brushed off all traces of his grassy slumber from his *camisa chino* and *maong*, and let his gaze flow gratefully over the graceful form of the girl jogging towards him, her breasts nodding an agreement with the world at large, affirming the flawlessness of the morning. Jorge hastily rubbed away two hard pieces of grit from his eyes and strode to the nearest public rest room.

Five minutes later a relieved, washed and fully-awakened Jorge emerged triumphant along with a handful of other transients.

Strewn all over the park and in varying states of sleep or of awakening were couples, trios, quartets, whole families and gangs, dots and clusters of people who, for one reason or another, had decided to spend the night unmolested by walls and ceilings.

It's too early to see my grandmother so I might as well get some exercise into my body, Jorge reasoned. Not being much of an athlete, Jorge contented himself with sprinting a glorious 100 meters before collapsing on the grass and gasping for air. After catching his breath he bought a pack of menthols and lit his first of thirty sticks for the day.

This woman has five children and is trying to win her husband back from another woman by drumming herself back into shape, thought Jorge as an obese, middle-aged jogger jiggled past.

This one is a virgin and she hasn't had even the shallowest

French kiss, concluded Jorge as a nubile young thing sashayed by in all-white running gear. (With her I would be gentle and thoughtful. I would place pillows around her and drape sheer linen on the lamps so as not to make jarring her first taste of earthly pleasure.)

This one would be a nun, thought Jorge as a straightbacked and braided girl passed him with angular strides. (With her I would ruthlessly release all her passions so as to dissuade her from wasting her senses in seclusion. Perhaps, instead of following a religious path she would instead plunge into social work and discover the True Lord in the slums. At night she would come home to me and I would wash off the dirt and grime of her calling like a male Magdalene.)

This one is . . . is . . . is . . . Jorge stammered mentally as a sleek, tawny and long-limbed tigress loped away, her hair waving good-bye. (With her I would be passive and subservient. She would wring her pleasure from me any way she wished. . .)

Without hesitation, Jorge sank deep into an athletic reverie in which he metamorphosed from an untouched innocent to an intellectual schooled in the oriental arts of love to a muscled and bronzed Greek god, tireless and benevolent. Two hours or so passed in this manner until an old woman flanked by private nurses in white hobbled across his line of vision and Jorge remembered his long-forgotten *lola* and the visit he promised himself to make.

But first to breakfast, thought Jorge, feeling like a vast and empty cathedral. A nice warm glass of *taho* would be just right, he thought as he got up and started walking towards Mabini, the sin street.

For thirty minutes he walked with a vision of serene gobs of milky soy bean curd marbled with liquid gold *arnival* floating in his sky-clear mind like a cloud.

He found what he was looking for near the old church. He borrowed a cracked glass from a sleepy *carinderia* waitress and had the taho vendor fill it up with a peso's worth of gentle breakfast. He sat down on a fire hydrant and savored his communion with the morning.

Across the street a city dump truck gradually filled with yellow-and-red-shirted street sweepers brandishing long-handled *walis tingting*. Jorge tongued three yielding balls of *sago* and watched the truck roar off to some sacred cleansing ritual.

A group of white-shirted teenagers made their rounds of motorists who had parked their cars overnight on the public thoroughfare, noting each collection on their clipboard sheets. Jorge felt in his pocket for a peso coin and paid the taho vendor.

Two effeminate foreigners breezed out of the restaurant a few meters away, one tall and caucasian, the other dark and curly-haired and wearing what looked like a priest's *sutana*. Jorge let the last sweet drops of arnival trickle down his throat. He burped, returned the glass, and commenced his five-block walk to his grandmother's house.

A tiny maid stood watering the gumamela-bordered lawn. She looked up at Jorge as he peered over the fence's spear points.

"*Ano'ng kailangan mo?*" she demanded, wielding her spout of water like a limp sword. "What do you want?"

"Is *Manang* Elsa in?" Jorge asked politely, determined not to let this stranger ruin his day.

The maid dropped her weapon on the grass and with a suspicious backward glance disappeared into the mansion.

Jorge sighed, walked around the corner to the green metal gate, leaned on it and looked up at the grilled window on the second floor from which a sassy Japanese spitz had yapped down at him on his last visit ten years ago.

Is she awake? Jorge wondered. (What does she look like after all these years? Will she remember me? I was thirteen the last time she saw me. Gave me a long sermon on going to Mass and not smoking and drinking. Gave me a plastic rosary from the Carmelite monastery. Will I kiss her on the cheek the way my rich cousins used to? Or make *mano*, touch her knuckles to my forehead like a child? Will she ask me why I and the rest of the family failed to show up for *Lolo's* funeral five years ago? Will she ask me why we failed to show up for my uncle's funeral three years ago? Her favorite son, dead from too much liquor in the gut. If I said we didn't have enough money to buy plane tickets would she say we could have come over by boat? My cousins from Spain came over. My cousins from the States came over. The Santosos from the nearby south did not come over. Guilt, guilt, guilt. Maybe if I had a glowing degree like most of my cousins it wouldn't be too bad. Master in this and Doctor in that. I've got a guitar and a song in B-flat. My dad's getting thin and my mom's getting fat. My sister's

black dog just brought home a rat. Will I inherit anything when she dies, hope she dies, no I don't really care but I do. Will she serve me dry biscuits on a wide silver tray and force me to eat my peas? Will she remember the time she caught me at her *aparador*, playing with the little parcels of hair wrapped in little pieces of paper with dates on them? Will she remember the time I dropped the new missal she had just given me into the toilet bowl? Will she remember the time her dog bit me and I made a mess of blood on her newly-changed bedsheets? Dropped a scoop of ice cream on the fresh morning paper. Took the last cookie from the can. Bumped into the Christmas tree and broke a bauble. Only one who comes in a cab and not in a car. Only one whose mother doesn't come along on weekend visits. Only one whose father doesn't wear a *barong* or *americana* to work. Will she even let me in the house?)

Pondering his immediate future while leaning on the anxious gate, Jorge stared without really seeing at the second floor window.

Something inserted itself into the windowframe — a round, wrinkled face with absurdly short braids of white sticking out on either side and round spectacles enlarging even rounder eyes: Manang Elsa, the loyal cook.

"*Sino yan*," she demanded. "Who is it?"

"*Si Jorge po. Anak ni . . .*"

"*Ay! Si Georgie pala! Sandali lang hijo!*" She popped out of the frame.

Jorge straightened up, tucked in his shirt, rubbed his eyes, and took several deep breaths. He murmured the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. (Dun dun dun dun. . .)

Manang Elsa bustled out the front door on her short legs and opened the gate. She turned around, looking on the ground for the words she might have said in greeting this long-forgotten relative of her *señora*, and bustled back into the house. Her back was clothed in faded flowers. It was flat and broad from years of sleeping on the floor in a mosquito net with the dogs. Jorge followed her into the *narra* air of the house, smelling old, memory-wrenching smells.

Nothing has changed, thought Jorge as he took in the faded young faces of his uncles and aunts on the sala wall. (That's my dad in his toga next to the closet door behind which Lolo keeps

all his screws and broken tools and jar caps and broken pipes and balls of twine and bent nails and faucet washers.)

Everything has changed, thought Jorge as he stepped on a spot in the floor that used to sag and no longer did. (Where's the piano? I wonder which relative got it. White sheet over Lolo's armchair. No cigar stubs in the ashtrays. Is the smell all in my mind?)

Up the hardwood stairs climbed Jorge, feeling smaller and smaller the higher he climbed.

At the top of the stairs he caught the hem of Manang Elsa's duster flying around the corner of the hall leading to his lola's bedroom. He looked out the grilled window down at the green gate where he had been standing just a moment ago.

I'm still there, thought Jorge.

The formica-topped table on which the dog used to stand was still under the window but there was a color t.v. on top of it now. The grandfather clock against the far wall was still there, still swaying its pendulum back and forth.

Wonder if it still sounds, thought Jorge. As if to oblige, the clock struck 8:00 with a familiar eight-note melody. Goose pimples.

I must attack, thought Jorge, not retreat. He strode towards the bedroom.

Suddenly, there she was, emerging from her door with Manang Elsa behind her, the Queen and the chambermaid. She smiled a white, perfect porcelain smile and lifted her hand in benediction. Jorge fought the urge to kneel and, instead, whispered "*Mama*," bent, and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She took him, held on to him by the arm and led him, let herself be led, to the dining room. Manang Elsa, her duty fulfilled, bustled off into the kitchen.

Slowly, ceremonially, grandmother and grandson made their way to the dining room, feeling each other's weight and presence, a vague sense of disorientation imposing a silence between them. The house leaned over to one side and let all sounds pour out the grilled window and into the street below.

Jorge eased his grandmother into the green armchair facing the t.v. and looked around uncertainly for a seat for himself. He decided on a strict dining chair, pulled one over to his lola's side and sat down, hands-in-lap.

They sat silently for five swings of the clock's pendulum, the

time it took for each to mold memory around reality.

Jorge let his lola grow thinner and lighter. He let her hair come undone from the bun she used to wear, sprayed it a silvery-white and draped it over her right shoulder. He touched her lips with some flirtatious shade of red lipstick and painted her nails a dark crimson to contrast with the sky-blue dressing gown she had on. He plucked out all her eyebrows' fierceness and drew a line there for them to follow. He filled in the lines around her neck with talcum powder. He turned her from a heavy, thick, upright and righteous *doña* in grim colors to a slight and fragile old woman with streaks of Spanish tradition running like blue veins beneath her fine skin. (The youth that escaped you is coming back. For whom? Too late?)

Doña Santos allowed Jorge to stretch upwards and sideways. She let him don the large-boned physique of her late husband. She let his hair grow thick and curly like the hair of her son's wife from the province. She let his fingers grow long and strong like her husband's and her son's and her son's brothers'. She let his skin grow dark, darker even than the local blood that cast its shadow on her Spanish lineage a long, long and tired time ago. She let his features go their own way and his face she permitted to grow lines of independent thought and piercing dark eyes where there used to be eyes that, somehow, were satisfyingly insecure. She turned him from a sweaty, overly shy yet underfoot grandson into a towering stranger whose blood was hers but not quite.

"Jorge," said Doña Santos, smiling whitely.

"Mama," said Jorge, thanking her in his mind for speaking first. Someone dropped a pan in the kitchen.

First round, thought Jorge. Doña Santos came out punching.

"And how is your father?" she said, waving at some vague space above and behind her. "I hear he has a farm of his own now?"

"My dad is fine. Getting thinner but he's stronger than ever. He's growing some coffee and cacao up in a mountain . . ."

"Ah. So he is getting thinner? Your mother does not cook for him on the farm? You know, a wife has to stay with her husband always. That is a wife's duty. Do they not stay together?"

Lines of concern made her face grow longer than it seemed possible, making her look all of her seventy-two years.

"Since my brothers and sisters started going to school in the city my mom's had to stay with them and look after them. They

have an apartment there. My dad comes over every . . .”

“Ah!” she said and looked down at the polished narra floor, slowly shaking her head, saddened by the strand of white hair she saw there, white on wood. “So they do not live together . . . And your mother, how is she?”

“Oh, she’s fine also. She enjoys living in the city. She’s a very good cook now and . . .”

“Ah, yes, yes. Did you take your breakfast already?”

Jorge, confused by the sudden shift, felt in his right sock for his cigarettes. Still there.

“Yes Mama, I had some taho before I came over.”

“Ah yes, Taho. Very good for your health. *Este*, do you want to take your lunch here? Let me know so Manang Elsa can prepare food for you. You know *naman* how it is today. Food is very expensive that’s why I am very careful about my budget. Do you want to take lunch here?”

She looked at the clock, giving Jorge a time limit within which to give his answer. Tick, tick, tick . . . Jorge refused to be knocked out so easily.

“No, Mama, I have to be somewhere (where?) before noon.”

Doña Santos looked at Jorge and smiled whitely.

Round two, thought Jorge.

“And how is, *este*, the one next to you . . .?” She sketched a long fall of hair down the back of her head.

“Eileen. She’s fine, in fourth year college now, taking up Communication Arts. . .”

“You know your cousin Leo?” Doña Santos said eagerly, pride in her voice and in the way she rounded her mouth. “He is now finishing his masters in business administration in America. He is the only Filipino in his class . . .” Her eyes wandered out the window to the tall bank building peering down her dress from across the street. “I received a letter from him last month. On my birthday.”

Oh shoot! thought Jorge. (None of us remembered!)

“*Ikaw*,” she turned her blue-gray eyes on him, searching for some sign of higher education in his face, “what course did you finish?”

“Uh, I, uh . . . (No sense in pulling punches.) I took up A.B. English but I didn’t finish it.” (So there!)

Jorge returned her gaze as steadily as he could. Her eyes faltered

and moved down to her hands. Her lips sagged. She plucked the skin on her palms.

"Why did you not finish?" she whined. "You know it is hard to get work without a diploma?"

(Now! Attack!) "But I have work, Mama."

She scratched an imaginary itch on her ankle. She spoke to her knee. "Work? What kind of work?"

"I play the guitar and sing every other night at a folkhouse in Quezon City."

Actually beginning to enjoy the conversation, Jorge took out a cigarette and lit it with his disposable lighter. He got up and looked around for an ashtray, knowing there weren't any in the dining room. He took a deep drag and flicked ash out the window. He resumed his seat, holding the cigarette away from his lola. Doña Santos looked at the cigarette, then at Jorge.

"So, you are a musician. Like your *Papa*? Do you also play the piano?" Her thin fingers fluttered in the air before her.

"Mmmmedyo. A little only." (Confidence, confidence!)

"*Sayang*. I gave the piano to your Tita Belen. . ."

(Tita Belen!? But she already has two pianos! Unfair! Unfair!) "That's alright. I wouldn't know where to put it if you had given it to me," mumbled Jorge.

". . . you did not tell me you could play," Doña Santos continued. "If the piano were still here you could have played for me *sana* . . ." She smiled with her teeth. "Where is this place you sing. . . what is it? This . . ."

"Folkhouse, Mama." Jorge stood, flicked ash out the window and sat again. He took a drag and blew smoke at his jeans.

"Ah, folkhouse. Is this like a nightclub? A *cabaret*?" she asked, pronouncing the "t."

"No, Mama. Well, a little like a nightclub, only there are no dancers, no girls. People just come in to drink beer and listen to music." Jorge blew smoke at his shoulder.

"Ah. That is good. No girls. You know? At night? When I look out the window? I can see many foreigners walking with Filipinas. Bad girls, these, *este*. . . prostitutes. Bad girls."

"Yes Mama, that's because you live so near Mabini . . ."

Doña Santos folded her hands and pressed them to her breast. She tilted her head. A fly parked on her shoulder.

"Before," she continued, "it was always quiet at night. Now,

there are always many *lasenggo*, drunk men, in the street. Fighting and shouting bad words. Six o'clock *pa lang* I tell Elsa to lock the gate and the doors. It is dangerous now. And there are many girls, bad girls, very young . . .”

She looks almost wistful, thought Jorge, not knowing how to respond.

In the ensuing silence Jorge grew intensely aware of his smouldering cigarette and the inch-long ash it had accumulated. He cupped his hand under it. He felt like he was beside a tall building that was about to topple down on him and that he wanted to wait until the last second before running away.

In the distance he heard the old church's bell toll for the next Mass.

Round three, thought Jorge. He got up to get rid of the butt. The ash dropped soundlessly to the floor. He stepped on it and flicked the burnt filter out the window. It, too, dropped silently.

Doña Santos noticed none of this. She was looking at the clock, checking its time against the church bell.

“Did you hear Mass, Jorge?”

(Uh oh.) “Mmmmmass?” Jorge dispersed the flattened ash with a scuff of his foot and walked over to the window. He took a deep breath, feeling again like a vast and empty cathedral, only this time it wasn't hunger. “Mass,” he said, matter-of factly.

“Maybe like your father you do not go to Mass, *'no?*” She shifted in her seat, letting the heat escape. “It is very easy to go to Mass today. Before, you have to hear Mass only on Sunday. But now, even Saturday, you can hear. In the afternoon, I think. Yes. Saturday afternoon.”

Jorge turned to face his lola and leaned on the windowsill with his arms crossed. Doña Santos was hunched forward with her hands choking each other. A matter of life and death.

“Even Communion,” she continued, “Communion today is very easy. You do fasting only for one hour before having Communion. And now you can even hold the *hostia* and put it in your mouth by yourself And the priests today are very kind. The *padre* in the church even gave me a key to the back door so I do not have to walk around the church to the front . . .”

She reached down the front of her gown and pulled out a silver crucifix and two silver keys strung together on a silver chain. She held the pieces of metal on her palm — talismans that hardened

her body against the weight of the invisible cross on her shoulders.

"Did you hear Mass, Jorge? " Echoes in the empty cathedral.

Jorge felt the distance between them expand and contract in time with the beating of his heart. At one moment Doña Santos was a strange but remote and insignificant figure far away on a polished wooden horizon only to loom up suddenly, magnified a thousand times, her wrinkles like deep ravines, her eyes threatening to suck him deep into her brain. (Did you hear Mass, Jorge?) The echoes fell into cadence with Jorge's heartbeat and the vertiginous throbbing of the space between them. The beat grew faster and faster, building in tempo, the echoes overlapping and finally merging into a continuous drone rising in pitch and volume, (Did you, did you, Mass, Mass, Jorge, Jorge, hear, hear, did you, Mass, hear, Jorge . . .), the zooming out and rushing in of Doña Santos' face and eyes turning into a blue-gray blur until, suddenly, Jorge found himself inside her head, looking at himself through her eyes. Did you hear Mass, Jorge? he heard himself ask himself with her voice, a long, thick silver chain of chromosomes and history binding their egos together. (She knows, I know, we know, she knows, I know, we know, we know know know know . . .) echoes in the empty cathedral, breathless and voiceless, too loud for the ears, a chanting of dead relatives and their loyal servants, a howling of their dogs, a wailing of children being stretched upwards and sideways by ancient ambitions and unfulfilled, unrealized dreams, a shrieking of time and rusty nails being wrenched from grandfather clocks and hardwood. (Mass, know, hear, you, I, we, hear, know, Mass, hear, hear, hear, know, know, know! ! ! ! !), an infinite mass of sound and compressed time and space that congealed into a quivering brain of blinding white primeval jelly, (*parang taho! taho! taho! ho! ho! ho! ho! ho!*) laughed Jorge, seeing at last in the heart of cosmic whiteness the Truth, the Answer to Doña Santos' question: YES! YES! YES! shouted Jorge, adding another wave to the chorus, pushing the white mass past its surface tension and causing it to EXPLODE! into microscopic manshaped blobs of organic matter, jetting out of Doña Santos'/Jorge's eyes and out the window to rain down whitely on the tight black asphalt, on the green expanse of the park, on the lewd morning litter of the sin street, on the holy roof of the old church vibrating to the last notes of the Sacred Celebration's entrance hymn.

"Yes, Mama," said Jorge, "yes, Mama, I went to Mass this morning."

Doña Santos leaned back, took a deep, relaxed breath, and smiled, beamed, at Jorge. "Ah. Good. Very good."

Jorge returned her smile, uncrossed his arms, and crossed over to her. He sat on his haunches beside her chair and gingerly held the silver chain between his fingertips. Doña Santos unfolded her hand to show Jorge the three metal objects.

"What is this other key, Mama? "

"Ay! " she exclaimed, amused at herself. "That is the key to the big freezer. You know how it is these days, specially with your Papa . . ."

She dismissed the memory with a wave of her hand that ended on Jorge's shoulder. She gripped it and pulled herself closer.

She whispered: "Go to the kitchen and tell Elsa to bring us some ice cream." She gave him a quizzical look. "You still like *sorbetes*, no? "

She picked one of the keys and handed it, crucifix and all, to Jorge. Again they smiled at each other, conspirators now.

Without even looking, Jorge knew that the world outside the window was evenly coated with thick, white serenity.

Amen! thought Jorge as he rose from his genuflection.