

DANNY OBILLO

THE PHIL

GOOD

FATHER

JOEL

[SAMPLE]

THE PHILOSOPHER JOEL

Danny Obillo is a London-born writer of Filipino parentage. He makes a cracking bibingka.

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The Philosopher Joel

Danny Obillo

Mum once said to me, 'sometimes P's are equal to F's...' etc.

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Follow the landscape with both your ice and your mind (only one).

Follow the mountainous peaks and the river's contours.

Learn your own nature.

CROUTSIN TIGER

DEEP WITHIN PROVINCIAL PHILIPPINES the Foreigner squatted.

With the main road behind him, he faced into the glorious provincial hills- or the “Mountains” as locals had generously nick-named them. The shadow of one amputated tree stump, from a row of three kept him strategically (and thankfully) hidden.

In between the Foreigner’s fingers, a balled-up wad of used parchment paper turned. He was still thinking of *siopao*. He imagined his teeth pushing through that warm-pillowy rice bun, unveiling the secrets of the hidden meat, barbecued perfectly and infused with a sweet but lightly peppered trace. Again he tried to push, but nothing.

The Foreigner was waning. His surf-shorts were left hung on his calves as his mind finally caught up to what his body had been screaming to him. His eyes darted from side to side and his senses became amplified. He felt a fuzzy cloud of static settle over his ears, receptive to everything around, though his neck refused to turn to either side for fear of somebody actually watching him in this most private moment.

Amongst his many recent failures, the Foreigner struggled to hold an important thought. One that disguised itself within his many other confusions, an important detail had been lost in there, somewhere. Absolutely nothing was coming- in or out- as though his bowels were as empty as his push to find any type of enlightenment here in the Province.

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Those previous few hours' worth of solid walking seemed to last forever and these final few meters— before he found the perfect spot to do his business (a spot visually identical no matter where he stopped)— had amounted so far, to nothing.

The Foreigner was left looking at yet another rice terrace, although this time the emergence of a foreign morning hue rendered his view nothing short of stunning. It looked beautiful and the Foreigner's knees were inexplicably drawn to an innate beauty of which his only references were a dozen or so postcards he had collected and sent back home to random recipients during his travels.

This early-bright stained the sky with a blinding gleam that eased his tensions somewhat. Overhead, an ashen, long-billed crane soared above him and landed gracefully onto the furthest stump as both bird and man, for a few seconds, stared each other down. Eventually the crane down-folded its wing-tips into its large athletic body as if to give the Foreigner a go-ahead to conclude his business.

The Foreigner felt his knees once more— his body wanting to travel forward, to get closer to the pretty picture in front of him. Eventually his heels touched together and his knees seized. Push. Success!

His relief was short-lived as suddenly, the calm was broken.

A distant silhouette whispered a sense of movement. The profile of a lone man, obscured by the back-lit gleam of the sun had himself perched close to the crane. He mimicked the bird's darting head, throwing food up into its reach as the bird caught each gift graciously. The shadow looked directly at the Foreigner, turning to him abruptly as if he too were a magnificent crane, but with slippers on.

'HOY YOU! You are nearly pinished?' the man shouted.

'I hab a tissue if you want it.'

The Foreigner looked away immediately, shaking his head as though that would reset everything into calm again, but no. He heard a soft thump land close by and he turned to see a half-tube of toilet paper gently roll toward him, stopping perhaps half-a-foot out of reach. The plomp made the ashen crane unfold its wings as it flew powerfully away. The mysterious figure had now positioned himself in front of the tree stump and looked deep into the Foreigner's eyes.

‘Quickly now, Clooney!’ the man said loudly, rustling a clear plastic bag with another two toilet rolls inside its belly.

‘Clooney?’ the Foreigner asked, gingerly wiping himself, feeling incredibly handsome, even if compromised.

‘You do know you’re doing your business exactly in my thinking space? HOY!’

The man adjusted the handles of his plastic bag and hung it onto the bare branch of a nearby guava tree.

Carefully, the Foreigner arose and pulled up his swim-shorts.

‘HOY!’ The man shouted. ‘First, you wash it.’

The man walked towards a water pump which had been previously hidden by a mass of thorny bushes around. He pulled down on the steel lever a few times until the sound of rushing water cascaded onto the small concrete basin.

‘You go.’

As the Foreigner washed up, the man averted his eyes until the sounds of splashing and rubbing stopped. Once happy, the Foreigner tied up his shorts again and caught a clearer view of the figure.

He was an older man, short, but with a strong posture that made him look slightly taller than he was. His dark face had those typical provincial whiskers, but unlike most, his were well groomed. The old man wore a bright white polo shirt with its collar upturned. His denim shorts were frayed, but equally as clean.

‘Jords,’ the old man said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Jords Clooney, you look like that one,’ he said. ‘Hoy! Wass that mooby called again? That good one I like?’

The Foreigner was suddenly caught racking his brains, using his wit. After an entire night of self-loathing and procrastination, the old man’s question provided welcome change to the rot of his overthinking.

‘*Ocean’s Eleven?*’

‘No, not that mooby, that’s a different one now,’ the old man said, picking up the toilet roll the Foreigner sloppily left behind. The old

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man tidied it away into the hanging bag.

'*Three Kings?*' the Foreigner continued, still listing films he had both seen and enjoyed.

'No, BRRRR!' the old man said abruptly, making a noise like the wrong buzzer on a game show. 'Next one plis.'

'*The Men Who Stare At Goats?*'

'Haa? Stare at the goat? What's that one? You like to do?'

'No, that's what the film is called...'

'...Oh, there's a plenty goat here. You can stare at it until you both grow old!'

'No. That's the title...'

'...Why would you stare at it only?' the man said, confused. 'Like it's just sitting there and you want it to do something? What's the goat going to do, Jords? Dance?'

The Foreigner suddenly found himself stuck once again. He couldn't think of any other titles as his previous headaches quietly returned.

'HOY! Yes!' the old man exclaimed. 'I know it now, it's a *Die Hard*. I like that one.'

'Oh,' the Foreigner replied, resigned.

*

A CRICKET RUBBED ITS knees together and a tiny frog prepared to leap into an unseen ditch. The old man looked at both, resisting to catch either. The Foreigner watched as the old man balled up his fists which proved to be as large as bread rolls. He then looked down at his own hands and stretched out his fingers- his own girth was nothing in comparison. Eventually the Foreigner upturned his palms facing the sky as though summoning powers from the almighty and after a short while in prayer, he asked the old man:

'Can you teach me your *Kung Fu?*'

'Exkyos me?'

'I would be honoured if you could teach me your *Kung Fu*... master.'

'Haah?! No, what are you asking...' the old man shouted. 'You do know this is the Pilipins? We don't do that *Feng Shui* here, Jords.'

'Oh, I thought you would know... well... um, okay. And it's... I am Matty actually. Hi.'

'Haah?' the old man said.

'Matty,' the Foreigner continued, pointing to himself.

'*Maputi?*' The old man replied, pointing back to him.

'No, no, my name is Matty, MATT-EE,' he said, slowing his words down, emphasising both syllables very carefully.

'Okay, Jords.'

The old man laughed to himself, scratching the back of his head. 'Hoooy!' he said, in a sudden morning mid-stretch.

Yet another joker, the Foreigner thought, watching the old man rustle into a different bag hidden behind yet another bush. Clearly he wasn't getting anywhere with this man. Clearly it was time to perhaps move on once more.

'So? Thas it? Thas all for Jords?' the old man asked.

It was obvious that this Foreigner had had a long evening. Stuck in the middle of a main road flanked by as many rice-fields as to make anyone lose any sense of wonder about them. A distinct dejection had settled on his face, as though this were possibly his final destination. The old man read in those glazed-over brown eyes an immense frustration as the Foreigner's weary legs, who were only just now re-energised on sight of the first human being in what must have been 20 kilometres, slowly retracted back towards the lonely road. He picked up a canvas bag, his only possession as it creaked and rattled as if only charcoal were inside it.

'Hoy! Stay there, Jords. Mik sure your head is under the shade.'

The sun, almost on cue, shone its absolute brightest and the Foreigner felt it immediately. A huge reserve of energy seemed to drain from him in an instant. He shuffled his feet into the shade, making sure he could get the best shelter from the tree closest to him.

'Truthfully now, you do look like a familiar you know. Bery much

like I'b seen you be pore.'

The Foreigner turned silent, as though his mind had finally reached that zenith of fatigue as to make every strained thought absolutely unbearable.

'Hoy! Jords, let me tell you something ha, you listen to this one.'

Disinterested and pre-focussed on something else entirely, the Foreigner's eyes seemed to dart upwards towards the skies as if he wanted that perfectly grey crane to re-land on the same tree stump, sidle up close to him and take him away, far away.

'HOY!' the old man shouted.

The Foreigner turned and a sense of attention grabbed him finally.

'Where are you going today, Jords?'

'Nowhere, don't worry about it, sir.'

'You want to come to the *Piesta* later on?'

'I'm sorry?' the Foreigner replied, exasperated in his thinking.

'Sorry por what? What you are apologising por? The *Piesta*! You come later na.'

'I'm sorry. I can't. I'm looking for someone, I thought that person might have been you.'

'Sorry, sorry. All the time. HOY! You must think I'm a crazy, no?'

'No, I didn't say..'

'You listen to this, Jords. I'll tell you. I once saw a man, trabelling here, like you. I watched him muttering like a crazy, only to himself, exactly where you're standing now. Hoy!

He was trying to explain to me the Universe in his own way. He was unable to explain the depths he claimed to hab seen... whatever. Like you, he trabelled with only a light-load, but with his mind heabier than a dead star. Like you also.

He told me that he had become like a dead star and was fed up of trabersing across the Cosmos, like his dragging *tsinelas* was made prom a concrete. He walked ober to the opposite side of the road, just behind you now and stuck out his thumb to a passing tractor. He said the noise sounded like the fizzle of a comet.

The tractor rolled slowly past him as though he was not there at all.

He claimed that he had just seen an albino *kalabaw* and he tried to make sense of why it was white, like it was sign. He said that the creature was both beautiful and dangerous and that he tried to cut its throat with a blunt blade before the beast simply scared him away. He then tried to stab himself with the same blade over and over until he winded himself.

He claimed that dead stars cannot die again, not with the porce of a million exferiences nor with the will of the most desperate mind. Whateber it was he looked for was contained somewhere within those worlds and it was his duty to crack open space so he could see its contents.'

The Foreigner stopped and added this story to his own thoughts as the old man rustled into his bag.

'That advice is por free, Jords,' the old man said, as he walked across the same main road he had just mentioned.

'Advice? I don't quite get it...'

The old man walked directly into the sun and towards an awkward looking hunk of metal parts and wheels. The Foreigner had paused by this contraption earlier but had dismissed it as some broken-down and rotting mechanism he could barely make sense of. The old man jumped on top of it and the puzzle decrypted itself as he nestled into what now became a driver's seat. The ring of keys later and its engine started.

Chug, chug, chug, chug...

A thick smoke of diesel coughed straight out of a thick pipe and into Earth's atmosphere as the old man covered his face for a second. He wafted away at the smog with a strong swipe that made the Foreigner straighten out his back somewhat. The old man sat in the bumpy driver's cabin of this loud vehicle as though he were in deep meditation.

Chug, chug, chug, chug...

Amidst the old man's stillness, the Foreigner thought about the Universe and looked around for another white buffalo. There was nothing, not within many kilometres each side of this fairly straight and desolate main road did he see a single one. The only things around on either side of him were short-steeped terraces and random ponds of water.

Looking down at his hands, he reached for his stomach. The size of this road suddenly became infinitely long once more.

'Hey, sir, wait!'

'What's it you want, Jords?'

The Foreigner weighed up everything in his mind, filtered through desperation and an unusual despondency.

'Are you the Grandmaster?' he asked.

Chug, chug, chug, chug...

The moving elements to this- contraption- moved as if each Frankenstein part functioned independently from each other, on their own mechanisms of suspension.

'You hab to spik louder, Jords,' the old man replied, rustling into yet another bag and throwing down to the Foreigner a smaller bag full of warm bread.

The smell alone revitalised him and he quickly opened its contents and without any sense of pride, scoffed on at least three rolls in quick succession, turning his head upwards into the glaring sun with a relief he had been yearning for all this time.

The old man sat in the vehicle holding a yellow jar of spreadable cheese, shrugging that the Foreigner liked his breakfast incredibly plain.

'Hoy! I said stay away from the sun. Come to this side na, otherwise you'll dry up.'

The Foreigner obeyed, making his way into the shade on the same side of the road as the chugging vehicle. Looking up into the new silhouette of the old man, the Foreigner asked.

‘What happened to that guy in the end?’

‘Who?’

‘The man in the story you just told me. What happened to him in the end?’

‘*Patay?*’ the old man said, with his thumb drawing an imaginary line across his neck. ‘IN THE END?’

‘No, no, no. In the end of your story!’

‘Oh, him.

I just took him to where he wanted to go. Hop in,’ the old man continued, ‘I’ll do the same for you, Jords.’

‘Matty, sir.’

The old man smiled. He liked this kid already.

‘JO-EL,’ the old man said, pointing to himself, emphasising both syllables incredibly slowly.

ONCE UFON A TIME IN THE WEST

CHUG, CHUG, CHUG, CHUG...

Slowly- very slowly- both men trudged along the solitary highway in the intense heat of the Province. *Kubo* huts made from well-aged bamboo stood alone, few and far between, their roughed concrete porches had on them carpets of drying rice crop, offering welcome change from the everlasting green of angular trees and tall bushes, both failing to stand out from one another on this slope of the all-seeing Mountains.

Not a single soul had tended to the crops scattered on their floor and a hidden fleet of birds, of which their squawks screamed hunger, held their discipline well and chose not to go in for these easy pickings.

Framing the bright sky, the Mountain-tops at their uppermost apex were a balded grey and loomed like a giant overlooking. They separated both Man and Woman from infinity, containing all within their unseen borders, allowing her residents time to marinade in the magic that made the Province's heart always beat gently.

Chug, chug, chug, chug....

The Foreigner studied the metallic clanks and bangs created from Joel's makeshift vehicle and soon enough everything seemed

to cooperate with each other. Every noise fit neatly into a specific movement and every jump corresponded to either a rubber ribbon or an exposed gear chain propelling the arcane machinery into a forward motion. The Foreigner clung onto the sharp edge of his red-leather seat as tight as he could.

Joel, every now and then rubbed on the vehicle's sides as if to keep his baby honest, travelling at a speed that in all honesty, both men could walk at faster.

'What do you call one of these things?' the Foreigner asked.

'Wits one?' Joel replied. 'They're all called Mountains, Jords. You hab that where you're from?'

'No, no. I know that. I mean this vehicle, what is it called?'

'Oh! Shis a *Josephine*,' Joel said, proudly.

'I beg your pardon?' the Foreigner asked, somewhat confused.

Joel turned to his passenger with a slight swivel of his head.

'I said... shis a JO-SE-PHINE,' Joel declared. Again, he stroked on the vehicle's side, cautious not to burn his hand on a rusted metal side panel.

'Oh okay. But what is it, some kind of tractor or something?'

'HOY! Jords...' Joel sighed.

The Foreigner noticed a small black eight-ball fixed on top of Josephine's main lever, which he supposed was the gear stick. His eyes veered across the dashboard with so many objects vying for his attention; a bundle of receipts, some spare change, a few rattly wooden boxes and a rosary with metallic beads. His eyes studied the mini landscape until he saw taped on the driver's side a faded dog-eared photograph of a blurry young woman. He immediately looked over to Joel, the driver seemed to be lost in a familiar thought.

'I've never seen one of these before, much less ridden on one,' the Foreigner said, breaking up the silence and purposely choosing not to pry into who was in the photo. Slowly, the Foreigner felt that he was finally getting used to the rhythm of Josephine's stride.

'Hoy! So you like her?' Joel asked. 'She is what most people would call unique,' Joel said, with a big smile on his face.

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‘A very unique one, yes...’ he continued, gently tapping onto the leather steering wheel, gleaming in a fresh 70’s textured gloss.

Chug, chug, chug, chug...

The Foreigner watched as Joel gave way a desolate sigh and a deep smile into the Mountains. The heaviness in that one motion spoke a language that the Foreigner could only read in-part. There was a familiarity in that sigh that he could understand only if pressed, but it was the depth of Joel’s breath that rendered him lost. Learning the complexities of this, fully-tilt version of an emotion he could identify with was certainly something new. Something refreshing. Something almost comforting.

‘We are thinking alike, I can tell,’ Joel announced. ‘You can always tell it in silence.’

So, Jords! Say something *naman*. You enlighten me with your wisdom ha.’

The Foreigner sat thinking, relieved that his mind was being put to work again. But despite Joel’s friendly prompt, nothing would come out of his mouth. It was as though either a sudden respect had dawned, not allowing him to speak to someone his senior, or that his opinion, regardless of how profound would matter not an iota.

Joel broke the silence confidently. ‘Did I say to you that you remind me of someone? Not only Jords, Jords.’ Joel said, straightening out his spine.

‘But you remind me of someone, yes... I’m thinking.’

Chug, chug, chug, chug...

Josephine crawled over a shallow pothole that made her entire carriage rattle. The Foreigner immediately grasped onto his bag that rattled and scraped inside.

‘Oh! I think I know now...’ Joel said.

*

‘MAYBE 10 YEARS AGO Jords, I worked as a superbisor in a construction.

That’s why my hands are like a cabbage- that’s what they said back then. My prends used to tell me that I should try to be a wrestler, just like my cousin. He did the Greek-Roman wrestling in the Olympics in ‘84, representing our country.’

The Foreigner looked impressed as his gaze lay fixed onto Joel’s strong grip of the steering wheel.

‘That one was never for me, I wasn’t interested in it. But back then, I was strong and worked around the many towns around here with their property developments. What they call *The Quarter* now, they called it the *West Beach* back then. They changed the name to make it more attractive por the tourists, ha. They already knew back then that the beach waters were clean and transarent enough for divers.’

‘There’s a beach?’ the Foreigner asked. ‘Is it nearby?’

‘Hoy, Jords! There sa plenty beaches on this whole stretch. They are kilometres long! You didn’t see it yet?’

‘No, I must have missed it,’ the Foreigner said, looking back as though the ocean waves could be seen from their current vantage if focussed on fully.

‘You really did went the wrong way, Jords,’ Joel laughed.

The Foreigner slung himself front-faced again and peered into the seemingly-infinite provincial road.

‘Who was it with me on that job again?’ Joel uttered to himself.

‘There was that boy with us, he’s a young man actually, working there only for that one job. Who else, who else...?’

‘...Oh! Si Manong Will was there, Pare Rudy RIP, Nasir, si Roy, Godbert...’

‘The story, Joel?’ the Foreigner insisted.

‘Hoy! Yes ah. So on the first day, Pare Rudy and Nasir were sitting

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outside for their break, under the shade. I came to check on them both because I was superbising two locations at the time. Pare Rudy saw me coming and said to me:

“Hey you! What’s this one I’m hearing ha, Pare?” Rudy was annoyed. “Is it true that those the guys on the other site are getting paid more. Why? Where’s Manong Will?”

You know Jords, I’m not even fully there yet and he’s already angry with me and Manong Will. Manong was our boss for that job and he never, ever came to the site in the early morning when we all were due to start.

“We need to talk, Joel. Just you and I.”

“Hoy! Who are you talking to like that? Like I’m just a nobody to you. Who is your superbisor here, Rudy?”

The sun was hot and the tempers were already boiling. Pare Rudy stepped back a little bit, but I don’t blame his outburst. The work here is always long and difficult and we were all under extra fressure to finish before the Piesta later on in the month. Pare Rudy was a prend of mine for a very long time, actually, his wife was my second, no third cousin on my father’s side. Pare Rudy was from a different Province in the north of the Pilipins, sometimes people would say behind his back that he was a sell-out because with the old traditions the elders expect newly-weds to go and settle in the place where the husband is prom. But I never judged him like that, si Rudy was a good guy and a very good colleague.

Anyway, also on the bench was my other Pare, Pare Nasir, just sitting there quietly. He was listening to us argue but paying more attention to the young man standing inside the building site, still working.

“Joel, sorry, look you’re my friend ha?” Rudy said, “and I hab supported you when you needed it, *siempre*. But do you think this is fair? I have to pay bills and provide too. So why are me and Nasir being paid less than the others?”

“Pare. Look. You know I don’t look apter the budget, I can’t change it, so you’ll have to take it up with Manong Will.”

“Him? He’s a crook! You know I won’t be able to convince him to change it. You have to say something.”

I gave him a strict look, it’s a friendly one, but it’s also like, you have to be realistic, you know?

“I’m sorry, Pare,” he said, tapping my shoulder. “I’m mad because we only heard about the rumour just now *lang*. Both of us here are very stressed because of it, isn’t it, Nasir?”

Nasir was fully focussed on the young man and eventually he gave Pare Rudy a kind of nod, which was not really a yes or a no.

Manong Will, our boss, his full name is Williamore, his family was the one who had invested in both of those developments, half-half with his uncle, if I remember. He asked me to source the workers and to supervise both of the sites. He trusted me with the work because both of us grew up close to each other and we always had a good relationship. He’s really a good one to have around.

The two developments being worked were split into two projects. The first was a large complex built to house maybe 50 people across three floors. The bigger building was originally an old storehouse that wasn’t used for a few years. The other site, the one that Rudy, Nasir and the young man were working was, a long time ago, an old community hall. This was also to be made into housing, but for less people than the first.

“And who is that kid inside?” Rudy asked. “You put him in there and he is doing nothing at all, just standing. Look Pare, what kind of job is that? How can you pay him to do nothing, when we can earn more if he wasn’t here?”

“Rudy, he is part of the team and don’t lie to me, you know why. We’re helping him okay? He needs this as much as you do, so don’t start blaming that one.”

We knew the young man’s family for years and years already and they had a recent trauma in their lives. The young man needed our help with money and *ano..* with his mind. You know, when there’s a stress from inside the body that carries long after the first shock, it accumulates. We both thought, Manong Will and I, that this would help him get better.

Rudy adjusted his glasses to look inside at the young man, not fully agreeing with the decision. His own frustrations were very clear on his face. He was calculating his wages in his head, becoming more annoyed the more he thought about it.

“Pare Joel, if the boy was doing something useful then I wouldn’t complain so much.”

“Hoy, he can hear you.”

“Oh really? I thought he couldn’t hear anything because he’s so quiet...”

“Pare, come on. I told you he needs this job as much as you do.”

“BUT WHAT KIND OF JOB IS THAT ONE, JOEL?”

“Hoy! Come on, let’s not make a trouble. How do you think this makes him feel?”

“Well, at least it gives him something to do. What is that work, just standing there, doing nothing?”

Pare Nasir finally stood up, cutting off Rudy mid-rant and looking directly at him, shutting him up straight away.

“Break is over, Rudy,” he said. “We need to get back to work.”

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INSIDE, NASIR CONTINUED WORKING on the long, communal tabletop he had been gently smoothing out, taking out the blemishes before he would apply a deep gloss to it. He stroked the top of the tabletop slowly, reading the grain for any slight imperfection or splinters that would catch on his fingertips.

The young man, temporarily distracted from his loneliness, looked up to Nasir, who gave him a quick nod of the head. A simple gesture that rewarded both a quiet appreciation.

The main room of that building had already been gutted to only an empty core. In its heyday, it was a community hall where the locals would hold workshops for school leavers, primarily needing to brush up on their English. It was also the place where the Townsfolk

would post up new jobs on the big boards. It was an important place where the community could go and have meetings, a vital building for everybody who lived there.

But over time, those important events were moved to the newly-built Town Hall, actually, that was also a refurbished one- it had been destroyed by a freak fire years before. The community hall became vacant and swapped ownership over the years. Its last business there, was a short-lived bar and billiards hall. It didn't last very long at all, but this was something that the locals always predicted would happen.

But there's a reason why they predicted that, ha. It was a superstition about the community hall that the elders always believed. On the far end of the building, on the furthest wall, there was always a locked shutter gate. It had become a permanent one because the lock had already been rusted into the metal. The old women said that the shutter used to link to a separate chapel that used to be on the other side, before it was demolished. The people believed that the shutter was haunted and always placed a small bottle of holy water on the side, just in case.

The legends say that the chapel was originally built just after the Spanish came and in fact, that chapel was really built before the actual main community centre came to be. They say that a Grandmaster used it to train a handful of pupils there on the weekdays, but on the weekends that's when it would be used for the prayers. In that colonial era, the religion was *halo-halo*, a mix-mix of the catholic values brought in by the Spaniards, this to make them happy- and a more local belief of the Earth and of the natures that came from the Province.

But there came a time when the owner of the rice fields behind the chapel returned and he argued that the borders of that part of the hall had belonged to them. He said that the old chapel was built illegally and was granted permission to have it demolished. They say it was easy to get the go-ahead because the chapel was there only to appease the Spanish here and not the locals.

But when it was toppled to the ground- so they say- a weird vibration lingered into the main hall. The energy was so strange that the actual landowner left very soon after and he sold the remaining

land to a wealthier development company, who left it alone for a long time. Those guys didn't want to touch it either, because of the weird vibe that was left behind.

The locals used to say that the energy came from the old, ghost-chapel being jealous that it had to be demolished. Locals would regularly describe that the lights would flicker badly from time to time and no matter how much they rewired and pixed it, they would always be quarter-a-brightness level below what is comfortable. They say that the ghosts of the former hall were controlling the light to avoid it hitting the ceiling, so that people couldn't see them sitting on the steel beams. The superstition grew stronger and they eventually began to keep someone guarding that empty shutter at all times. This was to make sure that the ghosts were happy. They took those beliefs very, very seriously. Everybody in town knew about that hall and that shutter.

That superstition became our problem. The locals, by the time we were doing the rebuild, were still certain that the hall was actually haunted and they were very loud about that one. In fact, I had to convince the young man that it was safe to come and work there. I told him that the job was only scheduled to be for three days anyway and it was a chance that he would be stupid to let go.

So he reluctantly took the work and I positioned him at that shutter and the young man stood there in place. I trusted that he would be fine whilst I checked the other site, Pare Nasir would certainly look after him.

But still, every now and then, out of pure frustration, Pare Rudy would come in and make ghost sounds to torment the boy.

"Woooo," Pare would say when his work got boring and because of that, the young man fell back into his shell.

He would for the most part stay static against that unused door. Who knows what he would be thinking, stood there during those first few days, knowing very well the superstitions. They used to talk about it even when I was in school and you can guess how that would have been exaggerated since. The weight bears down much heavier when you feel the eyes of extinct ghosts looking over you while you work.

The locals said to me that the people who did that job before would

always complain about hearing the whispering of these ghosts. They would talk about whether it was the correct choice to demolish their world and not this one. They would softly speak fond stories of their old world, like a drudging noise and that the energies would echo in a quiet hum of static. The ghost of the former chapel still lived on and buildings as old as these have a power to store memory.

“Oh, who is that *White Lady* behind you?” Rudy joked to the young man.

“Pare, stop it already,” I said, tired of the bullying. “Pare, answer me this one. Do you have kids?”

“You know that already Joel, both me and Nasir have,” Rudy said smiling. “Oh! Less money for our families and what I’m not allowed to joke about it Joel? Look. He’s not even faying attention!”

“Okay, okay, but you have to leave him too. Anyway, Manong Will is coming later to check how the work is coming along so you can take it up with him then yourself. Just leave the boy alone.”

Guilty, but short of apologising to the young man, Rudy continued his work on the newly-constructed stairway and the second floor of those to-be apartments.

Meanwhile on his newly sanded-down desk, in pencil Nasir had been writing something.

“Remind yourself:

- 1. Not to gloss yet*
- 2. Buy chillis for dinner*
- 3. Teach humility to Nasir Junior*
- 4. All very important”*

The bullying concerned Nasir and he had already planned that when he got home tonight, he would sit his son down on his knee so they both could read a stimulating book together. It would undoubtedly do Junior good. Nasir knew how dippicult it was for his own father to get through to him when he was younger, so this would be a useful experience for the little one. He had been thinking of signing Junior up to an anger management class, something Pare Rudy would absolutely

benefit from.

Rudy got louder, he was far more comfortable expressing his disgust upstairs in the individual rooms. He bantered to himself loudly as he chiselled away at the door locks.

Lady in whii-iiite... Rudy began to sing.

“Hoy!” I shouted back.

Is dancing with me....

“Rudy! *Aye jus ko!*”

Chik to chik!!!

Rudy stomped down the stairs looking like he was ready for a fight.

“I respect you Joel, but this is ridiculous now, who is this kid like he’s robbing me of my wage, just by standing still!”

“Like I said, take it up with the boss, when he arrives.”

“Oh Pare Joel, the big superbisor... Telling his workers to be quiet and shut up now...”

“*Pare Rudy,*” Nasir finally said, shutting him up completely. “Have patience, it is not the young man’s fault.”

Nasir then went quietly back to his duties.