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Slaying Monsters

As a child growing up in Hawaii, on the small island of Molokai, I loved flipping through family photo albums. I especially enjoyed looking at pictures taken during my parents' honeymoon in Japan—a fairytale land that seemed exotic and magical, where clouds hugged snow-capped mountains and stone temples towered into a silver sky. Japan looked nothing like our home town of Kaunakakai, with its dirt roads, palm tree groves, and coral-strewn beaches.

But there was one particular picture that mesmerized me—the one of my father crouched beside a strange, alien creature. I could say the creature resembled a medieval dragon, but that wouldn't do it justice. It was worse—ugly and misshapen with beady eyes and the yellowed skin of a plucked chicken. It had a dragon's snout and an ogre's bulbous head. It bared decayed jagged teeth and dagger-like talons that hovered above my father's neck. Dad clutched a knife over the beast's belly, which protruded, pregnant-like. I couldn't get enough of the story behind it, begging my mother to tell it over and over.

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“Dad is fighting the horrible, man-eating monster,” she explained. “See Dad’s knife? He’s going to cut its belly open and pull me out!”

“You mean the monster *swallowed* you, Mom?!!”

“Yes, like I told you before, we were in a cave and it swallowed me up when your Dad wasn’t looking. He didn’t even know I was missing until he heard me screaming inside the monster’s stomach.”

“And tell me again, Mom,” I begged. “Where was I?”

“You, my dear, were inside *my* stomach.”

That usually elicited a gasp from me. “But you don’t look pregnant in the other pictures.”

“That’s because we didn’t know yet. You were still a teeny-tiny, baby seed growing inside my tummy.”

Mom went on, recounting how they were on their honeymoon in Tokyo visiting a mountain temple. They had stopped to admire the view as Dad rested against a cave’s entrance. Mom, meanwhile, had wandered into the cave looking for a place to sit. That was when the monster suddenly appeared and swallowed her. When Dad realized she was missing, he went in and found the monster licking its lips and patting its bulging stomach. Luckily, he had brought a pocketknife and wrestled the creature, eventually cutting her free. Mom popped out like Red Riding Hood’s grandmother, whole and unharmed.

Of course as I grew older, I realized that the picture was just Dad hamming it up for the camera, posed next to a marble sculpture. But to a child accustomed to hearing tales of wolves and witches gobbling innocent victims, her story seemed plausible—and terrifying.

I was almost five, and we had been living on Molokai for over a year. I still cried each night pining for my older siblings left behind in Manila. When I’d last seen them, they were sobbing, huddled against the front gate of our house as the taxi whisked Mom, Dad and me off to the airport. Mary Grace was then eight-years-old, Armando six and Arlene five. I was closest to Ate Grace (“Ate” is Tagalog for “older sister”). I missed most having her comb my hair each evening after

my bath. I'd climb onto her lap to enjoy the soothing tingles as she combed my hair and sang songs in Tagalog. Ate Arlene and Kuya ("older brother") Mando, who were a year apart, shared the same room, went to the same school and played more with each other than with me or Ate Grace. Mom and Dad called them "malikot" ("mischievous") and often scolded them. Still, I missed them all terribly—not only as playmates but mostly for the comfort and protection they gave, especially whenever Mom or Dad got angry. I couldn't understand why my parents still hadn't sent for them as they'd promised after we left the Philippines.

My parents did fulfill their promise of moving us into a spacious white house with a view of the Pacific Ocean. In Manila, my bedroom view had been an empty lot full of garbage and weeds. My new bedroom on Molokai overlooked plumeria trees with pink flowers that filled our house with their milky perfume. In Manila, we had lived in the Quezon City area, where homes were scattered among factories, family-run stores called *sari-saris*, and empty lots overrun by weeds. Mom worked as a doctor and Dad a professor at the University of the Philippines. When they got married, they chose to live in the home Mom had inherited from her mother after she'd died. It was two-stories, with five bedrooms and a large iron gate built around the compound. But, it was smack dab in the middle of a busy street, and the constant noise outside often woke us: horns blaring, police sirens wailing, neighbors' roosters crowing, men pushing food-carts and yelling, "*Taho!*" or "*Balut* for sale!"¹ Mom dreamed of one day moving to a house with a grassy yard in a quiet neighborhood—an impossibility in Manila.

So that was the prize dangled in front of me before we left Manila.

"Don't you want to live in a beautiful new house?" Dad had asked me. He went on, telling me about the fairytale land of America, with its wide open fields, groves of apple and orange trees, skyscrapers and amusement parks. "Plus, you get to ride a magical spaceship...an airplane!"

That was enough to sway any three-year-old. Still, I asked why Ate Grace, Ate Arlene and Kuya Mando weren't

¹ *Taho* and *Balut* are Filipino street food delicacies. *Taho* is made of soft tofu, brown sugar and tapioca. *Balut* are boiled, fertilized duck eggs.

coming with us.

“Because you are the baby,” Mom said. “You need to travel with us. Ate Grace, Ate Arlene and Kuya Mando are older and need to go to school. They’ll travel together and join us later.”

“But when?” I asked.

“Very soon,” she promised, looking at Dad for reassurance. “As soon as we settle into our new home.” Dad remained quiet and looked away.

Despite my collection of new dolls and shiny swing set in the backyard, I longed for playmates. Back in Manila, there was always one of my siblings to play with. On Molokai, the neighborhood kids were mostly teenagers, so I spent most of the time at home listening to Disney records and watching television.

I hated my pre-school, run by a plump woman named Mrs. Otsuka, whose billowy *muu-muus* and wild, uncombed hair made kids cringe in terror. She used to glare at us, wielding a ping-pong paddle to keep us in line. Every kid eventually experienced the dreaded “paddle of education.” For me, it was the time I accidentally knocked over Alice Shin’s Holly Hobby thermos and spilled soup on the floor. When I refused to apologize and clean it up, Mrs. Otsuka marched me to the front of the room. All the kids kept quiet, their eyes glued to the paddle as she made me hold open both palms. With a snap of her wrist, she gave each hand a smack, the humiliating “whapping” sound more painful than my stinging palms.

More than Mrs. Otsuka, I dreaded wearing one of Mom’s elaborate outfits: frilly dress, pigtails tied with matching ribbons, legs sweating in tights and feet squirming in patent Mary-Janes. Mom called me the most stylish girl in class. All the other kids, clad in shorts and slippers, looked at me like I was from another planet. For most four-year-olds, the faraway country I’d come from, the Philippines, *was* another planet. No one outright called me an alien monster, but their stares and whispers made me feel like I was one. I was homesick for my old home in Manila. I spent hours staring at old photographs, scribbling letters to my siblings, telling them how much I missed them. I drew pictures of Hawaii

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and our new house next to a sparkling blue sea. In all my pictures, the three stick figures—me, Mom and Dad—wore frowns and tears.

We had ended up on Molokai by chance.

“It was a blessing in disguise,” Mom concluded, using her favorite expression to explain life’s unpredictability. Their original plan had been to settle in Cornwall, New York, where Dad’s brother Leo had lined up a job interview for Dad at a health insurance company. Uncle Leo was a doctor who had moved to New York in the late sixties to complete his medical training. Many professional Filipinos in the early seventies had migrated to the Northeast, where health-care jobs were in demand. When President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972, taking control of the media, the universities and threatening future restrictions on travel, many Filipinos who had toyed with the idea of leaving for America decided to leave. Under the Marcos regime, Mom’s uncle, a senator from Ilo-Ilo Province, and Dad’s dean at the University where he’d been teaching, were imprisoned because of their anti-Marcos views. Mom and Dad realized then it was time to leave.

It wasn’t until I was older that my parents revealed to me the complicated reasons behind their decision to split our family apart. During her medical training, Mom had adopted Mary Grace, Arlene and Armando while working in some of the poorest Philippine provinces. After they married, Dad never really had the chance to bond with—or legally adopt—them because I was born shortly after. As a baby, there was no distinction for me: they were my natural sisters and brother. When they chose to take only me to the States, leaving my siblings behind, I was confused. All I knew was that it made me feel bad, like I was some kind of wretched monster. When I was much older, I realized that horrible feeling inside me was guilt. But any guilt my parents felt was rationalized in practical terms.

“We had to do what was best for all of us,” Dad recalled. “Marcos was a dictator...a monster! He killed many people who spoke against him! Our priority was to get out of the Philippines, move to America, and of course, send for the other kids as soon as possible.” He pointed out the difficulties

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of travelling with four children, as well as the immigration and adoption issues involved. He reasoned that Mary Grace, Arlene and Armando needed to complete their school year and would live with Mom's brother Pabling and cousin Nelia in the Quezon City house.

We left the Philippines in December of '72 bound for New York. Earlier, Mom and Dad agreed to first make a stop-over in Hawaii. They planned to visit Zeny, a friend from Manila who had moved to Molokai a few years earlier. After a few weeks enjoying the Hawaiian weather and getting to know the Kaunakakai locals, my parents considered postponing their trip to New York. Blizzards were blowing through Cornwall on the T.V. news, while they watched me running half-naked under the yard sprinklers. Dad had attended business school in New York and Mom had visited the East Coast during a medical fellowship, so both were familiar with Northeastern winters—the bulky coats and boots, the cars buried in snow, the slick icy pavements that landed people in leg casts. Place a four-year-old into the picture, and they quickly saw the merits of staying in Hawaii for the duration of the winter.

“We would've had to stay at Leo's and Didi's house until we found our own place,” Dad explained. Living with Uncle Leo, Auntie Didi and my four cousins would've been a tight fit. Also, since Mom and Didi never really got along, Mom was in no rush to move. So, they accepted Zeny's offer to stay a few weeks longer in the furnished, in-law apartment behind her garage.

As luck would have it, the position for administrator of Molokai General Hospital opened up that winter. Dad had been teaching a graduate course in hospital administration at the University of the Philippines before we had left. A devout Catholic and big fan of miracles, Mom said the job practically fell into Dad's lap and urged him to apply. My parents “left it up to God”: if they offered Dad the job, then we would remain on Molokai, where they had already befriended the Filipino community. He indeed got the job, and shortly after, Mom got pregnant with my brother Jojo.

Their month-long stopover on Molokai turned into a four-year stay.

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At least at first, Mom seemed to enjoy playing the role of sweet, smiling housewife. She traded in her white, starched doctor's coat and trademark high-heels for casual mini-skirts and sandals. She styled her long hair into loose pony-tails and wore less make-up. She appeared to have fun learning how to cook Filipino dishes and making friends with the other moms during Tupperware and Avon parties. She even hummed as she vacuumed and cleaned the house.

But as with all initially-touted miracles and blessings-in-disguise, doubt eventually crept back as reality set in. She soon found herself stuck in rural Kaunakakai, where the only chain eatery was a dusty Dairy Queen parked alongside a gasoline station and cornfield. She was caring for two small children and still mourning the loss of her mother, who had died suddenly the year before I was born. She missed having a high-profile job as a physician and public health inspector appointed by the Philippine Board of Health. She missed Mary Grace, Arlene and Armando.

Nowadays, new moms blame post-partum depression, but back then, all we knew was that after Jojo's birth, Mom's uncontrolled rages began. Frustration over little things like not being able to buy tailored clothes at the local shops that only sold T-shirts and beach wear grew into attacks against Dad and me.

"I hate this place! Damn you from bringing us here!" she screamed. She was sweeping the kitchen floor with the *walis*, a broom from the Philippines made from wispy *tambo* grass. I heard her slam the dustpan onto the floor. "There is nothing here—no department stores, no universities, no theatres, NOTHING! I had a life in Manila! I was somebody there!"

"You know we both agreed that we needed to move to the States," Dad pointed out matter-of-factly. "It was for the sake of our family. You saw what happened to your uncle. It was too dangerous to live in Manila any longer. Did you want Gemma and Jojo growing up in that kind of environment?"

At the mention of my name, I'd usually duck into my bedroom and sit in the closet, shoving my stuffed animals against my ears. But it didn't help. Mom's voice boomed against the walls, reverberating throughout the house. I

pictured her mouth foaming, her anger seething in fiery breaths.

“But not *here*, dammit, we were supposed to move to New York! I wanted to apply for my medical license!”

“I told you—you can study for your Board exams now and after we move to the Mainland, you can open up your own practice.” My parents still were intent on following through with the original plan to move to New York after spending a few years on Molokai.

“And when do you think I’ll find time to study, at night when you come home? When I’m too tired?” Mom’s daily juggling act meant cooking breakfast, prepared Jojo’s formula bottles, packing my lunch, getting me dressed for school, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, cooking dinner—all the while caring for my infant brother, Jojo. All these mundane tasks were new to Mom, who had grown up with maids, drivers and *ya-yas* (nannies) in Manila.

“At least in New York, we would’ve had relatives to help,” she went on. “Leo would’ve introduced me to his doctor friends and I could’ve studied at the medical library. People there are more like us, educated people who speak real English, not this crazy Pidgin!”

She was referring to the local slang that everyone in Hawaii spoke. Pidgin was a sing-song mish-mash of broken English, Hawaiian and Asian words that plantation workers from Asia invented after their migration to Hawaii during the early 1900’s. In my effort to fit in and erase my Tagalog accent, I copied how the other kids spoke. Soon, I was shocking my mother with phrases like, “I no like eat...I *pau*,” which meant “I don’t want to eat anymore...I’m done” and “Jenny no like play wit me, she wen give me da stink eye,” which meant “Jenny won’t play with me, she gave me a dirty look.” Mom refused to speak with me whenever I spoke to her in Pidgin. She pretended I was invisible until I said the same phrases in corrected, proper English. Given the “melting-pot” culture of Hawaii with its many immigrants coming together, Pidgin was a shortcut to learning English. It gave people an easy, though choppy, version of communicating with each other. It made people feel connected, as if to say, “You and I come from different countries but we speak the same way.” Mom never

understood this. She just thought it sounded crass and illiterate.

“Oh, come on, Gemma is just a little girl learning a new language!” Dad said, trying not to raise his voice. “They teach kids proper English at school. Anyway, don’t blame me. You were the one who wanted me to apply for the hospital job.”

“It was a dare, idiot! Who the hell knew they’d give it to you, someone who was here on vacation for God’s sake!” She made it sound like he had entered a contest and won by chance. In her anger, she glossed over how many rosaries and novenas she’d prayed hoping for him to get the job.

At this point, Mom started crying, shifting the subject to the inevitable. “And what about our kids in Manila? I cannot forgive you for that! You are a cruel man to leave those children behind!”

“Oh, no, don’t blame it all on me! You knew there was no way we could bring them with us! We can barely scrape money to support our two children here and you want to send for the three of them? No way, not now!” Dad’s hospital salary was decent, but with Mom not working and a new baby, he made a good point. I heard him get up to leave the dining room, with Mom’s sharp voice following close behind. They continued to argue in their bedroom, which was on the other side of the closet I sat in.

“So what, then--Gemma and Jojo are now more important to you? You’ve forgotten that those kids need us, too?” She still felt that he had never accepted them as his children and feared that he was more focused on starting a family without them.

“And what about all the danger you’re always telling us about?” she went on. I pictured the evil Marcos firing guns into crowds, stealing from the poor, burning down houses and throwing innocent people in jail.

“Look, they’re fine—Pabling and Nelia are taking good care of them.” He tried to sound positive, but his voice shook, as if he too was recalling the monstrous acts we’d read about in *Philippine News*.

“How the hell do you know? Do you even read their letters?”

“Stop nagging me, dammit! I told you already, we *will* send for them, but not now!”

Mom was a fan of hurling things, usually books, or one of Jojo’s formula bottles. I heard them slam against the wall, wondering how far she had missed hitting Dad. She directed her rage at Dad, but her high-pitched screams rang through the house, making it seem like she was screaming at me, too.

The insults began. “I must’ve been crazy to marry you! My mom had just died and I was all alone. I guess I must have been desperate.”

As she often told it, her mother had died suddenly from a heart attack two months before their wedding. Mom had gone to the drugstore to pick up her mother’s heart pills. When she came home, she found my grandmother unconscious from a sudden stroke. She still blames herself today for her mother’s death. Still, despite her grief, she had managed to go through not only with the wedding and honeymoon, which was her mother’s wedding gift to them, but also--lucky for me--go through with the pregnancy.

“The last thing I wanted was to get pregnant during our honeymoon!” Mom yelled. “I was still in mourning for God’s sakes! I wasn’t prepared to have a child! I’d just lost my own mother!”

Dad knew better than to respond to this. Once Mom started talking about her mother, she began sobbing uncontrollably. Although I could tell he was still angry with her, he wound up swallowing it. I heard him walk over to her, embrace her and say, almost in a whisper, “I’m sorry.” Lying against the closet floor, I unburied my head from under the piles of clothes and finally sighed with relief.

When I grew older, I stared at the monster picture and thought about the trauma Mom was undergoing when that picture was snapped: the grief over losing her mother, her unplanned pregnancy with me, her terror over raising a baby without her mother, the morning sickness she suffered, the nausea caused by what felt like a mutant growing inside her.

I stared at Dad in the picture, mostly in amazement, trying to reconcile the quiet, bookish man reading me bedtime stories, with the brave, powerful man wielding a knife aimed at the monster's belly. Dad looked suave, 70's-cool, wearing a long-sleeved shirt with suede elbow-patches, black pants and leather boots. The intent look in his eyes displayed such extreme resolve to save his new wife and unborn child. In that story, Dad was a hero.

When I look at that picture now as an adult, I miss that young, fearless father in the picture. It was that father who used to take Jojo and me fishing near Kaunakakai Pier, who'd wake me at the crack of dawn to pick buckets of seaweed along the beach, and whom I once watched shoot deer while hunting with him in Ka'awa Valley. He looked and acted nothing like the father that dodged Tagalog curse words spewing from my mother's mouth, shielding himself from objects being hurled at him, before finally cowering in defeat during my mother's frequent tirades.

I suppose I also stared at that picture so much because I recognized that monster so clearly. It was the monster dictator who took over the Philippines, forcing us to flee and splitting our family apart. It was the monster at school wielding her "paddle of education." It was the monster I heard screaming at my father in the bedroom.

Finally, it was the monster I saw everyday in the mirror as I got dressed for school. I eventually outgrew those Sears-catalog outfits, lost my Tagalog accent and made friends on Molokai. But the hateful monster still lurked deep within me, filling me with guilt, haunting me everyday throughout my childhood. It was the monster that spared me but swallowed up my sisters and brothers. And I was much too young and powerless to slay it and set them free.

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