When my father was a boy, his mother hung him.

Enter Tondo, a Manila slum, and stand in the kitchen of his childhood home. Look up. The crusty knot is still there, tied around the light fixture.

I imagine my father, Totoy, at ten. He hasn’t graduated yet to long pants and shoes; his shorts and T-shirt are faded and soft from the wear of three older brothers.

Totoy has done something to make his mother angrier than she's ever been. And now, Totoy balances on a stack of vegetable crates, his neck connected to the ceiling. He's wearing one rubber slipper, and after slapping him on the ears, his mother has tucked the other slipper under the bowtie of her apron. If Totoy becomes dizzy and loses balance, or if Inang kicks the crates away, he might save himself by curling his fingers around the rope and pulling against the noose as if it were the mouth on a drawstring bag.

But his mother plants his palms to his hips and she looks up at him. She doesn’t say a word, but Totoy hears, “Don’t try to save yourself. Don’t you dare.”

He moves only his eyes and from this height, he notices his mother is balding. Her gray hair is loosely bunned and there are triangles of white flesh between the comb tracks. Her body is thick and intimidating, fleshy roll layered onto fat, souvenirs from eleven pregnancies. Totoy is number seven.

When she’s angry, she makes noise and breaks things and stares until you look away. One by one, Totoy’s siblings return from school and work, take a step into the kitchen, and right back out without a word.

With a pestle, she pounds garlic in the mortar bowl. She raises the butcher knife to her shoulder and chops heads from fish. She’ll fry the bodies for dinner and save the heads and tails for soup the next day.

What does Totoy think as he stands there watching his mother prepare dinner? Does he believe he will taste that dinner? Perhaps his mother will remove the crates and watch him suffocate and kick until the knot is as tight as it will go; allow his siblings to play tetherball with his body; or keep him tied there, hanging from the kitchen.

His siblings are hiding, staying far away from the kitchen. Even if his father could be found—perhaps he is playing pool in a neighborhood bar or perhaps he is earning money by taking a passenger from the market to their home on the sidecar of his tricycle—Totoy’s father wouldn’t save him. Mother knows best, and she tells him, “I’m doing this because you’re my son. You need to learn right from wrong.”

Totoy doesn’t know this yet: he will survive. Fifteen years later, he will have me, a daughter. But he will never forgive his mother, and half a century later, he won’t attend her funeral. Totoy will try his best not to abuse his children. But he’s his mother’s son. He will.

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