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Dark Blue Suit

First there were the men, Filipino men. And though they came from different Philippine islands, when they got here, they called themselves *Pinoys*. Most were front-line immigrants, but not newcomers, not for years now. Some had come in the 1930s, many even earlier. As young men—little more than boys, really—they'd left their homes, pushed out by poverty and pulled to this land by adventure and the promise of a new start. And through the years they'd told a wanderer's unchanging lie—yes, we'll be back—to thousands of parents and lovers, sisters and brothers. Most never went back, and you can find their bones in every West Coast town from Juneau, Alaska, to El Centro, California.

Forty years ago, in the 1950s, they filled the Victory Bathhouse and other low-rent venues, their numbers spilling onto King Street, the heart of Seattle's Chinatown. At the Victory, a joint famous among Pinoys, a patron could clean himself in a private bath, or clean out his wallet at the green felt card tables in the rear.

They were *Alaskeros*, men who went each spring to the salmon canneries of Alaska and returned each fall. "Sal-mon season," they called it, sounding the "l."

Seattle was their assembly point, the headquarters of their Union, a militant and powerful one that dispatched its members to the canneries. Filipino immigrants, many just out of their teens, built the Union in the 1930s; it was a source of pride, not just for

them but for all Pinoys.

For more than twenty years, the Union had faced down racism and the hostility of the canning industry and had survived its own destructive cycles of criminal control and purgative reform. But in the 1950s, it took on a foe more dogged and dangerous than its own tendency to implode. The federal government, prodded by Senator Joe McCarthy, was taking dead aim at the Union, recently reformed by a dedicated core of left-wing labor leaders.

The government missed and the Union made it through the decade, dying years later but in its own time. That time came without drama or government interference, with the slow, quiet footfalls of seasons passing. The Alaskeros, who built the Union and founded a Community, are gone now, leaving King Street and the rest of Chinatown to the care of others. But forty years ago Chinatown was much different, particularly King Street, particularly in the spring. . . .

From places as different as San Francisco and Walla Walla they came to Seattle, just as they had for twenty or more earlier springs, laying down their dishrags and field knives—the tools of dead-end jobs—for a chance to go north and make Union scale. It also meant a chance to see old friends who, at season's end, vanished with pockets full of cash and mental lists of places to spend it. Or to see once more the pristine Alaskan landscape, a universe removed from hot-plate rooms in Frisco or the dust of Eastern Washington fields. Not everyone went—there were always more workers than work, greater supply than demand—but everyone hoped, at least every spring.

From a distance I can see them still . . . then closer, as my

father and I approached. Despite their poverty, most dressed well, wearing suits that Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan called “magnificent.” Their splendid clothes and, more impressively, the easy sense of elegance with which they wore them, stood out against the drab backdrop of cheap hotels, pool halls, card rooms, and the dull apparel of Chinatown's year-round residents.

That day, like most days, Dad was also wearing a suit. This one, though, was especially sharp—a somber, dark blue suit, pressed and perfect, fit for a mayor, a movie star, or an Alaskero. “Like Bogart,” I heard him mumble earlier as we left the house for Chinatown. “Got to look good,” he said. “Show the boys.”

At almost five years old, I didn't know much about my father. He didn't talk much, at least not to me. Maybe it was the language. Mine was native English—fluid, made in America. His was borrowed and broken, a chore just to speak; Dad preferred Cebuano. The English I did hear from him I imagined he saved, hoarding words that twisted his tongue. To me, they came mostly in the form of monosyllabic blasts, barked commands to “do dis, Buddy . . . now.” And of course, “dis” got done—now, never later.

A man of mystery, my dad. I did know that every summer he would leave us for three months to work in a salmon cannery, only to reappear every September, loaded with money and a level of generosity that would disappear by the end of the month. Other than that, I knew little about him. On the ride over, I decided to find out more.

“Dad, what are you?”

“Wha' you mean?” he replied without looking at me.

“What's your job in Alaska?”

“Foreman.”

“Dad, what's a . . .”

"Big shot," he said, and laughed.

"Dad . . ."

"We're here," he said, as he pulled the car into an empty space. "Come on. We got three blocks to go, and I'm gonna see my crew."

We walked briskly to our destination, lower King Street near the train depot, where hundreds of Filipino men, maybe more, were gathered. For two blocks they crowded both sides of the street like a holiday and leaned against women, mostly white. Well dressed and taller than their male companions, the women looked genuinely pleased that the Pinoys had picked this spot.

I recognized two of them—a tall, pretty blonde and a tiny redhead—from other trips to Chinatown with my folks. One day Mom, Dad, and I were walking in one direction while the redhead was going the other way. Just as we passed, she glanced at my father and smiled a quick little upturned twitch. Mom didn't notice, but Dad did. And just as he did with me, he looked straight ahead. At the time I wondered how a person so small could smell like a garden.

But it was the men who mattered, at least to me. From a block away I heard their voices, and as we approached, the noise grew louder. Through the din, I could make out some words, English words, and I heard songs and long peals of laughter to stories or jokes spoken in languages we didn't speak at home.

I'd been to Chinatown many times before, but I'd never seen it this way. Chinatown had somehow shed its drabness to become an outdoor cabaret, with samba the music of choice even without a band.

We paused at the edge of the crowd while Dad carefully straightened his hat, a flawless Borsalino of finely woven white

straw. He turned to look at me and must have sensed my apprehension.

"Don' be scared," he said, and grabbed my hand. "I'll tell you who's good and who's not."

His strong grip erased my fear. It said I was Vince's boy, which, even then, I knew wasn't a bad thing to be.

"Psst!" someone hissed nearby as we cut through the crowd. My father didn't turn to look, but I did.

"Psst!" There it was again. I traced it to the old hotel two doors up from the Victory. A stylishly dressed Filipino—I didn't know him—was standing in the doorway. He started walking toward us, fast.

My father turned to see who it was. Dad's face showed faint recognition but no sign of warmth. Then, as the man kept coming, Dad shot him the Look. I knew the Look, having had it recently applied to me at the dinner table when I balked at having to eat my mother's latest fare, boiled chicken over rice with a side of pork and beans. I ate it, but only after my mother's pleas had failed and she'd invoked my father to employ the Look.

As I stood there, I was pleased at having my father's stern gaze directed elsewhere. I knew it worked on me but I wanted to find out if it had universal application. I didn't have to wait long.

"Hello, Johnny," Dad said. His tone was flat, almost lifeless, and his greeting, if it could be called that, came from between clenched teeth and lips that didn't move. As he spoke, he released my hand, folded his arms across his chest, and created a barrier that said *stay back*.

Johnny pretended not to notice. "Vince! Vince!" he said enthusiastically. Real or feigned, I couldn't tell. "Jus' got in. Long time no see."

"Yeah," my father replied. "Long time."

"Me and you," Johnny said. "I go with you this year."

Dad said nothing.

Johnny, sensing a wall and hoping to avoid it, swerved sharply and turned his attention to me. "Good-lookin' boy," he said, with a smile that I knew took great effort to maintain. "Wasn' here las' time I was up. Big for four."

"Almost five," I corrected him.

Johnny bent low toward me. He was so close I could see small beads of sweat on the round tip of his nose. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of one-dollar bills.

"For candy, Sonny," he said as he pushed the loot toward me.

I didn't like this man much—he was pushing too hard—and I knew Dad didn't like him at all. I'd never before taken money from someone I knew I disliked. Nonetheless, my judgment was blinded by the vision of scores of Hershey Bars, purchased by the box; I wasn't sure how many, but I knew it would be more than I was then able to count. The candy was as good as mine—I could already see several boxes stashed safely under my bed—but only if I moved before caution stayed my hand.

"Thank you," I said as I shot my right out, quicker than a jab, palm extended, fingers curled like talons about to close.

For Filipino children of my age and generation, it was almost an instinctive reaction. Bachelor "uncles," friends of my parents, old Pinoys with no wives or kids, doted on us like we were their own, and for a few days each spring and fall, we were. But of course, we weren't, which meant that we, the recipients, were always on our best behavior, as were they, our transient benefactors.

"Ah, Vince, you really dunnit," they'd say after visiting our too-humble frame house. Their wistful tone said they could have

"dunnit" too, given a break here or there, and that maybe they still would. But then again, after twenty years in the new land, maybe not.

Filipino American kids and our legion of bachelor uncles—a case of old gold-toothed smiles meeting young gap-toothed ones. They gave us gifts and small wads of greenbacks plus stacked columns of coins, and, like public television, we accepted donations gladly.

But I knew that this welcome tradition might not be honored because of my father's ill-concealed dislike for Johnny, my newest potential donor. I figured I'd just close my eyes, grit my teeth, and grab the cash, all in a smooth, circular motion that would end with the money in my pocket—a deal hopefully done before Dad could say *Don't take money from jerks like Johnny*. Speed was the key, but this time I didn't have enough.

"No," said the voice, stopping my hawklike swoop just short of its target. I didn't have to look to know I was too slow, or to know that Dad's audio had a visual that could clot my blood. Defeated, my hand fluttered then fell, a useless, guilty appendage that hid in my front pants pocket. I wished my pocket could hide the rest of me.

I summoned the nerve to look at Dad, not directly—I wasn't that brave and kept my view to the ground—but rather through a darting series of eye movements, from the centers of both sockets to their peripheries and back. These visual contortions provided safety but also produced a headache, forcing my return to center focus—I'd seen, though, that the Look was focused not on me, but on Johnny, my discouraged patron.

"Ah, Vince," I heard Johnny say in a whiney voice that could have been mine. "It's jus' money." I knew then that Dad's gaze frightened everyone, not just me.

"No money," my father said. There was no whine in his voice. "At least not from you."

"Ah, Vince," Johnny pleaded. "I . . ." he said, and paused. "Never mind," he said softly. "Never mind."

I knew without looking that Johnny was moving away, retreating beyond the range of Dad's evil stare. I felt a tug on my arm and instinctively followed my father.

"Come on," he said.

We continued our walk along King Street. I looked back and saw Johnny. He'd resumed his post in front of the old hotel, staring after us dejectedly. To my quick look, he shrugged a reply. Neither of us knew what he'd done to earn my father's wrath.

"Dad," I asked meekly, "how come you don't like him?"

"Thief," he said, then paused, as if "thief" were just the first of a full deck of bad names. This confused me; my father had friends, close ones, who were hard men. Some were thieves; others, even worse.

"Thief!" he said again, in lieu of an explanation. I didn't expect further elaboration and was surprised when it came. "Card shark," he added. Confusion again. Uncle Pete was a card shark and also my father's good friend. There had to be more.

"Johnny work with Leo five years ago," my father explained after we'd walked a few more steps. "Not my cannery, I wasn't there. He take advantage on Leo. Almost three months' hard work, Leo come back. Broke. No, worse than broke. He borrow money from the hoys but can't pay back. Of course they're mad. I give him money when he get to Seattle. Tell him to pay them and go home."

My father then looked at me. He stared until I turned toward him. "If you not here," he said evenly, "I make that Johnny bleed." I was amazed that his dull monotone could carry

violent, angry words so far, so powerfully. Dad could've been at a service station, using the same voice to order "four bucks regular, check the oil."

"Just remember, Buddy," he continued. "You got family, you got friends—back home in Cebu, but 'specially here, where you got nothin'."

My uncle Leo was my father's youngest cousin. I recognized the name and remembered the face, but mostly from photos. He lived in Stockton, and the last time he was in Seattle was the year after I was born. My father felt close to Leo, like a protective older brother. "Leo's good," he said. "Family. Nothin' better."

By listening to snips of conversation when my parents and their friends talked, I was able to paint a picture of this man who, by blood, had earned a drop from my father's small pool of affection. I liked to think about Uncle Leo, and I longed to meet him. He seemed so childlike, so unthreatening and, unlike my father, so wholly incapable of paralyzing me with the Look. And, despite his age—only four years younger than Dad—he seemed more a childhood comrade than an uncle. A fan of Hershey Bars? I could imagine that, just as I could imagine offering him a bar from my private reserve.

Family legend said that my father and Leo had sailed together from the Philippines, but only after Dad had promised Leo's mom—Leo was only sixteen then—that he'd take care of him. Dad was the strong one, and he'd tried his best, but there were some events even he couldn't control.

"We come this land," Dad's favorite Leo story began, "an' he's sick mos' the way. We get off the boat—Leo's white like a white man—and I says, 'Leo, don' be sick.' He says, 'Can' help

it, brod.' We pass two cops on King Street, and he suka, you know, mess all over the street. They take him away. Public drunk. I try to explain, but they don' listen. 'Welcome to America,' they say."

We continued to walk slowly along King Street, Dad pausing every few steps to greet old friends and others he knew and to tell everyone who could hear him that he had his crew.

"Got a slot, Vince?" an older man asked. He shifted from side to side, nervous. I felt sorry for him.

"Sorry," Dad said in his usual monotone. We didn't even break stride.

Another, a slender young boy, approached my father. "*Manong*, sir," he said politely. "Can I . . ."

My father shook his head no, cutting off the boy. "Crew's full; got the last one yesterday." Same brush-off, same monotone. The boy silently stepped aside, but Dad, for a moment, studied him, and his face, always so stern, seemed to soften. "Don' give up," he told the boy. "Somethin' breaks; guys don' show. Stick around; still early."

He then turned to me. "Come on," he said.

His reaction to the boy surprised me. "Dad," I said. "Why'd you do that?"

"What?"

"Be nice to that boy."

"You mean I'm not nice?"

"No, I don't mean . . ."

"What you mean?"

That sudden hard edge. I heard it. Real or fake? Like always, I couldn't tell. Although my father spoke English badly, he did

it well enough to make me stammer. "That boy," I said weakly. "That boy . . ."

"Oh," he laughed. "That boy." He paused a moment, then spoke. "Tha's Leo and me," he said quietly. "We come this land and need work. We look like him, full of hope, and tha's all. Lose that after while, too." He stopped walking, turned to me, and gently took my shoulders in both hands. "Tha's all," he said, looking into my upturned face. "Mebbe you understand sometime, but not now. Too young." Then he steered me sharply forward again, tugging my left hand. "Come on," he said, in his brusque monotone. "Gotta go."

"Where?"

"Find Leo. Called yesterday. Goin' with me to Alaska. He's here."

"Where?"

"There." Dad pointed to the Publix Lunch, an old restaurant across the street. The news thrilled me. The Leo of legend, a beacon of kindness and generosity! Family, I thought. Nothin' better.

I walked quickly, matching each of my father's steps with two or three of my own. My right hand, ingloriously felled by my father's aversion to Johnny, had remained in my pocket, afraid to come out. But inside its warm cotton cave, I could feel a rustling.

The hawk, I knew, would soon fly again.

The Publix Lunch was a loud, smoky place on the edge of Chinatown where Pinoys ate burgers on white bread. We entered through the front door, or tried to, at the same time that a burly young white man, a sailor, was trying to leave. "Watch

y'self," the sailor snarled as he bumped Dad.

"Go to hell," Dad snarled back without even looking.

The sailor spun around in the doorway—no small feat given his girth—and turned toward my father. Dad shooed me to the counter, then turned toward his foe.

"What choo say?" The sailor's slur came from too much whiskey. I knew. Some of my uncles were drunks.

"I says go to hell."

The place was jammed with Filipinos waiting for dispatch to the canneries. I sat between two of them at the bar—I didn't know either one—most likely from California. They looked at the sailor, now the sole object of attention from all the Pinoys. The man on my left—a dark, pock-marked Ilocano—put his right hand in his jacket pocket. He didn't move. The one on my right also held still, except to breathe deep and long.

Sailor's move. He studied Dad, then scanned the room searching for allies he'd never find, at least not there, not during dispatch.

I'd seen Dad fight, knew his temper and skill, the signs of coming violence, like the slight tilt of his stocky body toward his target (the better to strike first). His short, powerful punches never stopped until his target was on the floor. His leaning stance said there were split seconds till launch, maybe less. Dad would win; he was too quick, too mean. And winning, he always said, was better than losing; especially here, he said, in this land that gave losers no breaks. He and his friends were like that, as were the two men on my flanks, who silently waited, coiled and still, for the party to start.

I couldn't figure it. Dad was a good man, gentle (for the most part), and generous to Mom, my baby brother, and me. But I'd

also seen his anger, vented sometimes at other Pinoys, sometimes at offending strangers like this soon-to-be-sad sailor. His aptitude for violence frightened me. I didn't want to see this, its latest manifestation. Fortunately I wasn't alone.

The sailor fidgeted before taking one small step back, the first move toward a full retreat. Popeye he wasn't. But even if he was, he was smart enough to guess that Dad was even money in a fistfight. My father watched him go, then he turned toward me. "Come on," he said. "Leo's down there."

At last!

"There" was a booth at the far end of the aisle. I could barely see its outline in the dim light, my vision fogged by smoke from the grill and from long Cuban cigars and short American cigarettes, no filters. As we neared our destination, I immediately recognized Uncle Leo from the pictures at home of him and Dad. He was younger than my father, but traces of gray touched his hair, while Dad's was still black-coffee black.

He didn't see us approach. He was busy, buried in the chest of a white woman, the tiny redhead who smelled like flowers. I wondered why he didn't sneeze. She was holding his hand. Uncle Leo raised his head to stick his tongue into her right ear. I didn't understand his goal or purpose. The redhead, however, started to giggle, her laughter building quickly.

To me, it looked like an advanced, adult form of torture, like a tickle that goes on a bit too long. I'd have to try it out on Allan, my harmless and chubby next-door neighbor, the next time we wrestled and I pinned him to the ground.

I reached the table first; Dad was a few booths back, chatting with friends. Uncle Leo sat next to the aisle, just inches from where I stood. He didn't notice me, so focused was he on

the redhead's ear. I shifted my weight from one foot to another, uncertain whether to interrupt him. Fortunately, I'd inhaled enough smoke by then; it made me sneeze.

The redhead smiled at me. "Honey," she said to Leo. "We've got company." Leo, tongue still extended, didn't stir.

"Scuse me," I said.

"It's Vince's boy," she said.

Bingo! Password "Vince." Uncle Leo turned quickly to look at me.

"Sonamabits!" he said excitedly, tongue now withdrawn. "Buddy? Your Dad and me . . . I'm Uncle Leo!"

He reached to grab me, laughing and hugging so hard I was immobile, vulnerable, scared. I thought of his tongue. Having conquered one ear, would it soon nail another? "Uncle Leo," I croaked. "No licking, okay?"

"Oh Buddy, don't worry," the redhead laughed. "He was just saying hello to me. It's something adults do, isn't it, sweetheart."

"Oh," Uncle Leo said, and released me. He seemed embarrassed that I'd seen something adults do.

"Leo." I recognized Dad's voice and felt him brush by me. Uncle Leo rose to greet him.

"Still lookin' good, Manong," Uncle Leo said with a smile. Although Leo was only a bit younger than Dad, he used the deferential term of address usually reserved for men much older.

"Too long, Leo," Dad said softly. Gently, he touched his cousin's shoulder with his right hand, allowing it to linger for a second before letting it fall.

"Good to see you, Vince," the redhead said.

"Hello, Mildred," he replied. Dad gazed at her for a second before turning his attention to Uncle Leo. I was surprised; his look said he knew her, maybe even well.

Dad moved into the booth, choosing a spot on the bench opposite Uncle Leo. "Guess you met Buddy," he said casually. Both smiled. I just nodded.

"Buddy's got company, too," Mildred added. "Here comes my Stephie." She pointed to a young girl who was walking toward us from the bathroom. "Stephie," Mildred said when she reached our table. "This is your uncle Vince, and this is Buddy."

Mildred proudly informed us that Stephie had a recital later that afternoon. "Her teacher says she has real talent."

Stephie was a *mestiza*—even then I could tell—white features and light brown skin. She was older, by maybe two years or so. I was surprised I'd never seen her before. Seattle's Filipino community was small; my folks knew all the adults, and I knew, or thought I did, all their kids.

"Sit next to Buddy," Mildred told her. "He won't bite." She smiled. "At least not like his daddy."

To me, at almost five, the thought of biting Stephie seemed silly (although much less so years later). I giggled, then glanced at my father, who was glaring at Mildred. Typical Vince. No sense of humor.

Dad looked at Uncle Leo, who just shrugged. Then Dad gave a sign—right hand close to his breast followed by a quick flick of his index finger, at himself, then at Uncle Leo, then back again. When he did that at home with my mother, it meant "just between us," a Cebuano conversation, with me excluded.

On those occasions, I'd fake preoccupation with something, maybe the family pet or a new toy, and just listen. I figured my folks thought I couldn't understand, but by coupling familiar words with different inflections, I was able to follow most of what was said. Since neither pet nor toy was available here, I improvised.

"Uh, Stephie . . ."

"It's Stephanie," she interrupted primly.

"Huh?"

"Stephanie," she repeated. "That's my name."

"Uh, okay," I said with a shrug and pointed to a large black case under the table. "What's that?"

"It's my accordion," she said. "I take lessons."

Oh, no. Another one. At every community gathering, after the speeches and before the dance, scores of Filipino kids would gather on a stage, formal or makeshift, and pull and push these boxes of musical terror, coaxing forth variations on "Lady of Spain."

For young Pinoys of the 1950s, accordions were the instrument of their parents' choice. I first became aware of this match (Pinoys and accordions) on a muggy summer night at one of those overlong community functions. The young musicians were pulling and pushing away, oblivious to time, heat, or the pain inflicted.

Dad, all frown and perspiration, had a theory for our suffering. He turned to a neighbor, another victim. "Goddam Welk," I heard him say. The neighbor seemed to understand, nodding at the reference to the accordion-playing band leader. Television was then in its infancy, and "accordioncy" (Dad's term) was in its undeserved prime. I don't know about other cities, but Seattle must have been the accordion center of America, at least for Filipinos.

Welk's popularity spawned a host of imitators among the sons and daughters of poor immigrants and triggered dreams of success (and maybe a national show) for their American-born kids. Besides, accordions were cheaper than pianos. Dad understood

this but wasn't sympathetic. "Monkey see," he snorted, "monkey do." His hatred of the music spared me from lessons.

Now you, poor Stephanie. That old devil Welk had claimed another soul.

Stephanie was still talking, but I didn't hear much—something about auditioning for the Mouseketeers, and that Mildred claimed Annette was really an adult with two kids. I was concentrating on the conversation between Dad and Uncle Leo as Stephanie rambled on. Still, she seemed nice enough and more than eager to talk. I just followed her lips. When they stopped, I jump-started the words.

"Um," I said, and beat back a sneeze. That was enough to start another round. She had a bottomless sack of informational gems, mostly about herself.

"My mom says I'm gonna be on TV," she said smartly. "But even if I'm not, I've got a future. I'm half white, you know."

"Oh," I said pleasantly. Your mom's white, I thought. So what? She makes me sneeze. Besides, most of my Pinoy friends are half-breeds of some sort. No big deal. As Stephanie droned on, I nodded to be polite, but I didn't hear another word.

Besides, Dad and Uncle Leo raised more interesting topics, like Mildred's telling Leo that Stephie was really his and that, at the least, he should start paying support (including accordion lessons). Dad just laughed. He said that given Mildred's, ahem, record with Pinoys, Stephie could be anybody's, including his. Heh, heh.

Stephanie my sister? Hot gossip, but I kept my cover by looking at Stephanie and nodding. Dad's comment didn't shock me. I knew that my line of siblings didn't end with my younger brother. There were others—older half-breed stepshadows in faded

photographs—whom my parents took great pains not to discuss, at least not with me. (There would be one I'd be allowed to know—only one, and only for a while.) It was a mystery, but not especially pressing. Whatever Dad's past, I was happy at home. And at almost five, that was all that mattered.

Cebuano, unlike some languages, has a nice melodious tone. A harsh message delivered by men—like *puta*, used in reference to Mildred—could be tonally disguised and made to sound so sweet. Fuck the puta, my father said sweetly.

Poor Mildred. So old, so dumb. Years and years with Pinoys, and she still hadn't a clue to Cebuano, not even the frequently uttered puta. Even I knew that one, gleaned from my mother, who said it often enough. She told me on one occasion that it meant Dad's old girlfriends, all of whom had smelly boxes.

Being shut out of the conversation inspired in Mildred a series of facial expressions. At first she was indifferent, then studious, checking her manicure for signs of imperfection. Finally, when the language of exclusion showed no signs of change, she pouted. She rested her sad face atop her palms and extended her elbows toward the middle of the table.

Dad picked up the hint. "Pardon, Mildred," he said in English. "Sometimes we forget. It's just that Leo and me get so comfortable talkin' of, you know, back home in Cebu. Plus, we talk about goin' to Alaska—it's been a while since Leo's been there—tha's all."

"Tha's right, honey," said Uncle Leo, building the lie. He duplicated Dad's smooth, sincere tone. Their story seemed to placate Mildred, as did a promise to conduct the rest of their conversation in English. I was disappointed. The best stuff passed

in Cebuano; I felt the door to my father's world—his real one—closing.

"So, what about Alaska?" Mildred asked. "I hear there's problems."

Dad rocked back and stared at the ceiling before leaning forward; he stared at Mildred. Another sign. This one said: Important. Listen close.

"Like I was sayin' to Leo . . ."

A lie, once started, has its own life. Dad and Uncle Leo hadn't discussed Alaska, but my father was good, persuasive. We all turned toward him.

"There's problems," he said. "Not for me—got my citizenship years ago—but for guys like Leo. Government's mad at us."

I was confused. "Uh, Dad, who's 'us'?"

"The Union," he explained with a touch of irritation. He glared at me to make sure I understood.

"Oh."

Satisfied, he continued. "The government says the Union's Communist. But that's a lie."

Communist. What did it mean? My only clue—whenever I'd heard the word spoken, even by my father, it was in quiet, almost timid tones. All Filipinos, all Communists, all part of the Union, or so the government said. I'd even met a Communist (my mom had told me so) at the Union's last Christmas party. (The irony of a Commie Christmas party had, of course, escaped me.) After the kids sang carols, accompanied by accordions (naturally), Dad had introduced me to Santa.

Santa was the Union president, Chris Mensalvas, a brown little man who smelled like wine and walked slowly with a limp.

As Santa, he was unconvincing; he was out of uniform, choosing to wear just a red stocking cap. Still, I liked him. He was comfortable with kids, maybe even had some of his own. We chatted about television shows and other topics I can no longer recall. What remains is the interest he showed—genuine, I felt sure—and the absence of an adult instinct to ban chatty me to the company of other children.

Even the adults, especially the men, regarded Chris fondly and with obvious admiration. They approached him to shake his hand, conveying best and heartfelt holiday wishes to him (his health) and their Union (its survival).

Later that evening, after the party's end, my parents, my brother, and I were walking to our car. I was curious about Chris and had a list of questions for my father.

"Dad, is Manong Chris a Communist?"

"Jus' never mind," he said.

"Leo," Dad said slowly, "I don't know wha' to say. Thank God, I'm a citizen, but I know you're not. Here's the catch. Lotsa boys in the Union aren't citizens even though they been here long time. Government say when they leave for Alaska and try to return, they'll keep 'em out."

Uncle Leo was puzzled. "Why, Vince? We done notbin' this country. We don't hurt it . . ."

"It's Chris and the other officers. Government say they're Communist. We get rid of 'em, they get off our back."

"So, let's get . . ."

"Don't say that!" Dad said sharply. "They're good men, strong for the Union. Besides, who's nex' we do that? You? Me?" He pounded the table for emphasis, then scanned our small booth for signs of dissent. None. We were all cowed by my father's

outburst—even Stephanie, who finally stopped talking.

"Next time, Vince," Mildred said nervously, "just ignore me. Just keep talking in Cebuano, okay?"

But it was Uncle Leo who had provoked the tirade, and upon his own blood my dad fixed his coldest, fiercest glare. Uncle Leo wilted, staring at the table and conceding the point. "You're right, Manong," he mumbled in a tone full of deference.

Point won, Dad switched again, choosing soft, soothing words to rebuild their bond. "Ah, Leo," Dad began. "Not your fault. You been away." Uncle Leo smiled, glad for readmission to his cousin's good graces.

Balance restored, Dad paused. "I don't know how to say this," he began slowly, "but this season'll be hard. Maybe the government keep you out. Maybe not. You wanna go, I take you. The contract's real good this year, make plenty money."

Dad smiled, then added in Cebuano: "Enough to pay for accordion lessons."

Uncle Leo started giggling, but stopped when Mildred stared at him. "Joke only from back home," he said. "Don't never sound right in English."

Mildred, forever clueless, accepted the explanation.

He then turned to Dad. "Yeah, I go," he said. "We worry about gettin' home later, when it comes. If it comes. Jus' like always, you find a way." Dad sat silently. He was touched by his cousin's pledge of faith, but he also felt its burden. It was clear the weight made him uneasy. He slowly shook his head. "Not like the ol' days, Leo," he said. "Now, the government's on us, tough as Joe Louis. I can't guarantee that . . ."

This time Uncle Leo shook his head. "Don't say that," he said, and leaned toward my father. He spoke in a loud whisper intended for Dad, but heard by all. "I been this land too long," he

said, "and I don' believe much. But I believe you." He paused, staring at Dad. "Besides," he added, and he flashed a grin, "you a foreman. Big shot. You find a way."

Uncle Leo then sat back and reached into his jacket pocket to bring out a ragged wallet, which he opened and placed on the table. "Got maybe two hundred thirty bucks," he said. "That includes four fifties."

He pulled out four fifty-dollar bills and dealt one to each of us. "Take 'em," he said simply. Mildred and Stephanie pounced; their shares of the bounty quickly vanished. That left two. Mine just sat there. Dad had first to approve this large a transaction and, from the scowl on his face, it wouldn't pass.

"Leo!" Dad barked, "Wha' the hell . . ."

"Never mind, Manong," Uncle Leo said sharply. His tone surprised me. Before, he'd seemed so timid, so much like me whenever I had to face my father.

I realized something. Dad's ferocity was tied to his powerful and protective image. And Uncle Leo had a right to insist that Vince behave as he always did. Maybe Dad did, too. I filed that moment away, taking hope in the possibility that the meek weren't entirely powerless.

"Peanuts," Uncle Leo said. "Kept enough to cover room and board till we go. Like I said, I go with you."

He put his right index finger on the bill in front of Dad and pushed it toward him. "Take it, Manong," he said.

"No," Dad said. "I take you, not your money."

Uncle Leo smiled. "Tha's all I want," he said. He then pushed Dad's bill toward me—that made two! "For the boy."

Although unsure of the total, I knew the amount was huge. I fondly studied the stranger etched in green, whose acquaintance I soon hoped to make. It wasn't George Washington, who was

worth twenty Hershey Bars. But I still needed Dad's okay before I could reach to gather in the loot. From him, no words—just a sigh and a roll of the eyes skyward—but it was enough. "Thanks Uncle Leo!" I said, as my right hand swept the table.

Uncle Leo suddenly turned toward Mildred and whispered something I couldn't hear, which she acknowledged with a nod.

"Buddy," she smiled, "your uncle Leo just reminded me that Stephie's got a recital about a mile from here, at her music teacher's, and wouldn't it be nice if you could go."

The thought appalled me—more time with Stephanie, her manicured mother, and her accordion music! I preferred the company of my father and uncle, even here in this nicotine haze. Yet, ~~for~~ the sake of propriety, I couldn't object. I just pretended not to hear, a veneer soon pierced by Dad's voice.

"Sure, he'll go," he said. "Why not?"

Traitor. But all wasn't lost. Uncle Leo had turned the tables on my father. Maybe I could, too, though not verbally, as Leo had done; that took an adult's confidence, something I lacked. Instead, I shot him a look: my best sad-face, deepened (I hoped) with shadows of betrayal.

I missed.

"I'll jus' pick 'im up later," Dad said. "I know the place."

The look having failed me, I rose, resigned to an afternoon of boring women and bad music. Stephanie and her mother were already near the door, while I still dawdled by the booth, hoping for a reprieve.

Dad grabbed my arm. "Sorry, Buddy," he said, "but it's been a long time for your uncle and me. We got things to catch up on, men only, and it jus' don' sound right in English."

"Ah, Dad," I said, trying hard not to whine. "I won't bother you, I promise. And besides, I don't understand Cebuano."

That little lie triggered in my father an odd smile. "Listen, Buddy," he said. "Maybe you don't understand. But you're my boy, and that means you listen real good and you're smart." He then pulled me close and whispered: "And what you maybe heard, you didn't—okay?"

Standing near the door were Mildred and Stephanie, subjects of a discussion in Cebuano that now had never happened. Dad laughed and pushed me in their direction.

Case closed. I paused before starting down the path to a dull and musically discordant afternoon, wondering how I could best feign interest. One solution, partial at best: I'd imitate my father, his demeanor, his arrogant gait, the latter complete with puffed-out chest and eyes focused straight ahead. I took one careful, choreographed step, then a second, but a third was halted by familiar voices and the sounds of laughter. I stopped.

Spoken Cebuano, its tones soft and melodious even from the tongues of men. I turned in time to see a stream of white smoke start to form a small cloud over their booth, a telltale sign marking the boundaries of a world I didn't want to leave.

Rico

When I was growing up in Seattle, Rico Divina was the baddest Filipino I ever knew, and I knew them all. Vietnam killed him. Not there, but it killed him nevertheless.

The last time I really saw him was August 1967, just before the start of my senior year in high school. I never thought those days would seem as distant and foreign as Burma, or Myanmar as some now call it, or even Vietnam. I was almost seventeen then, and Rico was a little more than a year older. We were both just starting to peer beyond the boundaries of the poor neighborhood that tied us down but also protected us and made us strong. It was home to Rico and me, and in my view, he ruled it.

Like many Filipinos, Rico was short and wiry, but he made up for it by being strong, fast, and clever—traits that earned respect even from the bloods, and they were always the hardest to impress.

White girls were a lot easier. He made them his specialty, particularly the long-legged blondes with ratted hair and heavy makeup. There were always a few at the weekly dances at the community center on Empire Way, hiding in the shadows of the dimly lit halls, their pale skin and high bouffants shining like beacons in the dark.

Rico would always show up at dances alone, resplendent in his tight black slacks, matching black jacket, and felt hat with a narrow—the bloods called it "stingy"—brim. He also wore


DARK BLUE SUIT

and Other Stories

PETER BACHO

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To Vince, Rico, and Vic
who, seventy years ago,
sailed from Cebu to Seattle,
the new home they would never leave.