HOW PRECIOUS THE COST OF MILK

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Each time he stole milk from the commissary Private Marteen prepared for his execution. Such an outcome had seemed unlikely only a month ago. But standing in the dank and fetid recesses of the alley between the commissary and his barracks, it struck him how, as the Japanese tightened their grip on the Philippines, so too the Commandant tightened his on the dwindling supplies meant to sustain the troops.

But to no avail. The commissary at the Manila Garrison leaked like Private Marteen's impoverished fishing boat, the sinking of which had hastened his joining the armed struggle. In reality, at 38 he was nearly rejected for military service. But the war, having drunk the blood of younger men, still thirsted even if it meant consuming those less vital.

Of this noble cause he was certain. But the defense of Manila did not go well. And regardless of how many lives were cut short, a victorious outcome seemed as unlikely as his acquiring a seaworthy boat. Spared from combat because of his advanced years, Private Marteen had earned an appointment to the logistics unit.

The pre-monsoon humidity piqued the perspiration on his face. He wiped his brow with the palm of his hand. The act of touching his forehead brought to mind the rumors he would ponder while sitting on the edge of his bunk before rising to steal the milk. Rumors, it seemed, were the lifeblood of the other clerks. The most prevalent was that they too would soon be called to the battle lines. It seemed plausible. After all, there was little inventory to count and too many clerks to count it. Besides that, yesterday's rumor surged throughout the barracks that the Japanese had effected simultaneous landings on the northern and southern ends of Luzon. Absent some miracle of God, it was said, they would likely spend Christmas Day, now three days hence, in Manila.

Rumors abounded, but none was more disturbing than the rumor that his lady friend, Benita, was dead, the boat she'd taken two weeks ago sunk by a Japanese submarine. In fact though,

the boat had never reached Babaduyan Island where her parents were in hiding. And also in fact was the position of Babaduyan, nearly northernmost among the 7,000 islands and in a direct path from Japan to Luzon where the Japanese landing occurred yesterday. All such rumors grew with the addition of a small fact or a new twist until they were beyond believability but also more certain with each telling. The camp was in disarray over this dichotomy. Private Marteen had decided they were mere distractions, and distractions annoyed him as much as the heat on his face that seeped from the stucco wall along which he leaned his cheek. He peeked from the shadows of the alleyway into the paddock around the commissary. A small breeze crusted the perspiration on his face and filled his nose with the scent of rotted bananas and mangos, pungent and strong and yet somehow enticing and almost as intoxicating as Benita's scent, the memory of which gave him hope.

Each time he stole milk from the commissary Private Marteen considered how the cause of his crimes lay with his mother. Unknown to him she had made him godfather to six month old Xavier de Belen al Castilla, a boy known simply as Bong. The oath, she had told the priest, was with Private Marteen's blessing (and also with Father Franco's apparent blessing,) a thing that should not have been done without the Private's direct consent and a thing he had thought to investigate by questioning the Father himself; but then had thought the better of it as such an act had no good outcomes since, 1. He could bear the personal damnation that comes of questioning the judgment of a priest, or 2. He could bear the guilt of exposing his mother as a liar and thereby condemning her to hell.

But this was no time for the distractions of human deceit. The fact was that his mother had sworn him to guard and defend that helpless life which included the provisioning of milk from the commissary. Besides, such boldness, his mother had said, to liberate milk from men who dealt only in death and to use it instead to sustain the innocence found in a child yet untainted by the evils of this world would solidify his goodness in the eyes of God. He had wondered how such a good thing extended to the sacrifice of his mother's only son. The church bell clanged once on the half hour before three bells.

For all this, and the baby's need of milk, Private Marteen lived with his mother's deceit, pre-condemned to a firing squad every fortnight when

he ventured out of the shadows into the dark recesses of the compound and then, quite nakedly and on three bells slip his thin frame across the grey dawn on the paddock, up onto the roof and remove the same tiles everyone in his platoon removed in equipping themselves from the commissary; then to descend into the warehouse and fill his burlap bag until he questioned his ability to pull the heavy cans back up through the roof, lower them to the ground, and escape in that awkward half-trot he could barely manage, milk slugging noisily about in the cans borne on his back.

Sometimes he imagined being shot as he crossed the paddock.

Sometimes he imagined being shot as he stood on the roof lifting the cans through the opening.

But most often he imagined being shot *at* as he escaped, the bullets stopped by the cans of milk on his back and the milk arching out behind him through the bullet holes, the white equivalent of a schoolboy relieving himself on the side of the road; a perfect trail from which he would be tracked, captured, tried by the night duty officer without delay, and marched to the wall where the Japanese spies were shot and there also to be shot in shame, like a traitor.

His mother had pledged her prayers if such were the case, prayers that would lift him heavenward, certain, she'd often said, that God saw his courage and defined righteousness as she did and would reward him an everlasting life the nature of which he never could fully grasp.

Private Marteen studied a small lizard that descended the wall opposite him in the alley, its tongue flitting from its mouth as it absorbed the scent of Manila steaming in the soup of its heat. The lizard's tongue seemed a natural extension of the sinister minds of humans. Except that the lizard was transparent in its purpose, searching the scent of its prey while humans seldom showed their tongue and yet displayed lizard-like behavior.

But this was not the time for eternal considerations or the nature of humankind, or even for earthly fear. He directed his mind to the last visage of Benita as she stole onto the boat, her smile still fresh in his imagination as it pulled away from the shore into the dark night. And there it was, something of the scent of her skin in the air around him, that spote where the neck and shoulder met and the place he buried his head as she let go of him on the deck. He made the sign of the cross.

All he ever wanted to be was a fisherman like his now deceased

father – the very thing his mother disdained. His mother was a woman small in stature, and one who continued to shrink as she aged while simultaneously becoming more assertive, as if she replaced the physical space relinquished to the world with a force of will, perhaps the eternal symbiosis of energy and matter that Sister Selma had begun to explore the year he dropped out of school. And that, he had concluded, was also the reason Benita, his lady friend of nearly one full year and a record in the history of Private Marteen's relationships with women, had left him physically while yet fully there in the center of his heart while his mind conjured the visceral sensation of her skin and that scent, a hint of perspiration and yes, maybe somewhat unwashed: perspiration mixed with the yeast of a woman aware of the war pressing around her.

Benita had left to search for her parents who had not been heard from for months and whom everyone assumed were dead having died in unknown ways in places to be recorded only in the anonymous book of collateral damage. Private Marteen's heart took comfort in the fact that rumors of her death were only that. As random as any rumor was, there was still hope of her survival. And yet his head believed otherwise, although he fought that logic with the conviction that man's emotions held higher truth and as long as her death had never been spoken aloud, it could not be so.

All these complications. They would be reason enough to stop his stealing were it not for the reality that the baby needed milk. Bong's mother had dried up when her husband's skiff was lost at sea. How such things could happen baffled Private Marteen. He had after all been a student of nature and had seen how the course of nature was unrelenting and paid no heed to the trials of humans and because of that Bong's mother should still be with milk. And yet it was not so. His mother had sworn it. And for all the deception in pledging his fidelity to the child, her swearing exposed her to damnation were she to have lied about its need. And damnation was a thing she'd sought to avoid throughout her life. For that reason alone it must be true, or at least truth enough so that one could take it on faith that there was no milk for the baby.

He stole milk regularly and delivered it to an old man who would meet him in back of the market located near the old Intramura with its thick and blackened and moss-covered walls left from the Spanish garrison abandoned before the turn of the century when the Americans

had defeated Spain in Cuba which for some reason meant that nearly all of Manila had come to learn English.

So, with the Intramura and its walled defenses from another century on one side and the streets of prostitution on the other, Private Marteen would steel himself and walk the bricked plaza between them fearing all the while some soldier's question would reveal his cargo and once again he'd find himself before some sweating duty officer who'd issue his death warrant.

And yet, paradoxically, he'd found this open plaza to be the safest place to meet. The soldiers on one side were preoccupied with the card games required of guard duty and paid no attention to yet another soldier passing through. On the other side there were yet more soldiers but all were busy in the selection of whores as if one were different from another. And those walking between the two, the very place where Private Marteen would pass with the burlap bag weighing heavy on his back, were too drunk to care. None noticed two men placing a bag in a cart drawn by a water buffalo which, though increasingly odd in post-colonial Manila was coming back into vogue as diesel fuel grew more scarce each day. And tonight the certainty of Japanese advances would add to their distraction as the soldiers seized on old habits more fiercely, fearing they would soon be ripped from them.

The old man never told him where Bong and his mother were kept. It was better that way so if captured, he would not be conflicted with knowledge for the duty officer to beat out of him, if in fact, the duty officer took the bother to interrogate him before his execution.

Private Marteen searched the sky for signs that night would relinquish itself once again. That daylight may never come seemed plausible in the madness of war. And yet he sensed the haze of predawn, lifting the moisture to the sky in building toward the monsoon now only weeks away. Surely three bells would soon ring.

The anticipation of a deed is more momentous than its doing. At least this had been his recent revelation. His mother, however, had dismissed it as foolishness when he'd mentioned it. A pragmatic woman in earthly affairs she'd said the precious cost of milk was the physical manifestation of an eternal act, as certain as the turning of mere wine and bread into blood and flesh in the holy sacrament.

The sound of dogs in the distance interrupted this thoughts, the familiar snarling and yelping as was their habit throughout night a

battle, he imagined, of good and evil which no one could tell apart, one that transcended bombs and bullets as long as more than one dog remained alive. And yet he lived not among the dogs, but instead among the bombs and the bullets. The thought of tearing flesh, of a bullet ripping through his heart rendered all existential considerations moot.

He waited for the three bells with stifled breath as a breeze swept past him from nowhere. He tested with his nose but the air withheld its secrets.

The sweat and salt on his skin slipped over his lips and onto his tongue, a reminder of a fisherman's fate where poverty and the taste of the sea mingled with the eternal bobbing of the boat and the nets in need of constant repair. The simple matters of a fishing boat, and Benita in it beside him, now seemed a fortune beyond his reach.

Perhaps it had all been a dream.

The church struck three bells. Private Marteen considered the empty paddock, a place without a soul into which he would venture as his mother's unseen presence urged him onward. He closed his eyes and said the Our Father in the middle of which he thought of Benita. He could see her still, with her eyes closed as she waved and disappeared into the darkness. He reached for her scent but that too had fled as if sensing the nearness of the Japanese.

Benita truly was dead.

And then, with his eyes still closed he saw, as if in a vision, Father Franco and his mother standing over a grave that was not hers and was not his but belonged to Xavier de Belen al Castilla, the boy known simply as Bong, who had died from the privation of milk because he, Private Marteen had not honored the pledge of a godfather taken on his behalf. He licked at the corners of his mouth. The bitter taste of the salt of his sweat on his tongue somehow bolstered him to the sacred deed he would now undertake yet one more time – perhaps for the last time. He opened his eyes and took a deep breath of the moist morning air. There was, of course, great risk. But only if one considered one's *own* life precious, a thing he had now settled in his mind. In contemplation all this, and for the precious cost of milk, he stepped quickly into the paddock.