

NATHAN CAYANAN

ALL WE REALLY DO

“Sorry,” Andy said. “We had to go back to get dad’s meds. The Uber guy kinda gave us the business.”

It was winter, and I had been waiting in line in front of the comedy club for an hour, shivering, plotting ways to exact my revenge. Dad followed behind Andy, propped up by an aluminum cane, holding with his free hand a fedora he wore, convinced he resembled Bruce Willis.

“You’d think he’d put the lifesaving pills in his pocket before putting that thing on his head,” I said.

Andy, my little brother, still a young twenty-something who wore Urban Outfitters and Converse, smiled politely as he’d do when he’d catch me being hilarious.

“Are we going to go inside soon?” Dad said, his Filipino accent thick. “

Soon,” I said.

“I need to eat before I take my medication,” dad said angrily. “I can’t make the line move, dad.”

It wasn’t just age that made him impatient. He’d always resented the world for being lazy.

Once, when Andy and I were kids, we had been waiting for a table for a half hour at a Vietnamese restaurant we frequented, and Dad started ordering a busboy to clean the tables faster. The manager didn’t like that. Words turned into demands. Demands turned into insults. Then insults turned into bloody noses. We never ate there again.

“Let me see if I can get somethin’ from that bakery,” Andy said, backing up toward a trendy pastry place across the way. Andy was a conflict-phobe and, despite all that had happened between them, felt the need to constantly appease Dad. Me? I jumped on every opportunity to remind him that he was not the center of the world.

So there we were, my dad and I. Alone. Silent. On the wall next to me was a poster for the comedian we were there to see: Ty Maldonado. Filipino comedian extraordinaire—exaggerated Filipino accent, jokes about mothers pointing with their lips and stories about being a dark

skinned flip. Andy and I grew up on his jokes, downloading every single audio file we could find back when using the internet made the phone deadweight.

“You remember Ty, Dad?” I said.

“A little bit,” Dad responded.

Silence.

The Ferris wheel lit up gold against the deep blue sky. Yuppie parents and their little five-year-old legacies wandered up and down the promenade of the Irvine Spectrum. One blonde kid collided with Dad, who squinted his eyes, irritated.

“Watch where you’re walking, Blake,” the kid’s mom said before pulling him away.

“Children nowadays,” Dad said. “Spoiled rotten by their Nintendos and iPhones.”

“Parents like to give their children freedom,” I said. “Gives them confidence. They call it good parenting. You should read up on it, sometime.”

“Tttt.”

I don’t know why I said that. Honestly, I don’t think highly of children nowadays myself. Maybe I was embarrassed by his crankiness, as I noticed a group next to us giggling and whispering to each other, and I felt anxious at the idea that they saw him in me.

Plus, sure, I never thought much about Dad’s parenting. It was Mom Andy and I went to for anything. Lunch money? Go to Mom. Ride back home from Ashton’s on the opposite end of town? Mom. Advice? For sure, not Dad. One time, a kid accidentally bumped into me with his boogie board at the beach, and my dad saw it from afar, and when I returned to him he angrily demanded that I go back and punch that kid right in the face. Thank God Mom was there to remind him that things were different here, that you can’t just punch someone like you would in the Philippines—though, I’m not sure if you could do that there either.

Dad was old-school Filipino. A proclaimed Catholic who quoted verses, even though he skipped mass often and had a mistress before Andy and I were born. Discipline was his form of parenting, and on occasion he’d hit us. Not hard enough to count as abuse or anything. Just hard enough to leave a mark, like the one on the back of my head years ago

when I found his pornography collection underneath his nightstand. A reminder of consequences.

After Mom died, I'd only call home once in a while. Like checking in with a parole officer. Two minute calls. Two months in between. It was not that we hated each other or anything. It was just that I didn't have a real reason to call. Like, what do you say to a man who's taught you to be afraid of him?

Andy finally returned from the pastry place with a cookie the size of his face. "How much was this?" Dad asked.

"Like, three bucks," Andy said.

It was a lie. I'd had that cookie before, and it was more like six.

"*Ai nako*," Dad said. "Why did you spend that much on a cookie ah?"

"No returns, Pops."

"You're just going to live with me for the rest of your life?"

"Just the rest of yours," I said. Andy socked me in the arm. "It's a joke. Joking."

Dad said nothing and continued to eat his cookie.



Back in high school, there was this neighbor kid who was in my Calculus class, who gave off this aura of having a superior intellect, using big words people pretended to understand, regaling us with random facts, as if his hobby was to read encyclopedias. His name was Howie. We didn't talk much at school, but occasionally he would come over and ask for help with the homework before mom demanded he stay and eat her infamous chicken adobo. He was nice enough, bouncing from one topic to another with Mom who would laugh hysterically, even though she did not understand what he was saying.

Then, there was this rumor at school. The rumor? Howie liked boys. That fact did not bother me much. I don't know. I just didn't really care. It's not like I was going to hook up with him. But, in high school, your value was based on your street cred. So, I hid the fact that Howie was my neighbor and that he'd come to my house, sit next to me and chat with Andy, while eating my mother's food.

And Dad. I mean, he had his failings, but he had excellent gaydar. He didn't really say that he thought Howie was gay, but you could tell he felt uncomfortable around Howie, saying stuff like, "That boy's voice is too high," or "Do you see how he stands? So delicate." Once, I even overheard him say to Mom, "You don't let that boy stay over too long, ah."

A few months later, Howie would start coming to class late, often looking like he'd just gotten out of bed, falling asleep during lectures, and even occasionally snapping back at teachers for no real reason. More rumors would spread, and my friends would claim that Howie was taking drugs or sleeping with a male teacher they didn't like or that "that faggot" had even made a pass at them, to which I would just smile and nod. In my defense, I did feel guilty and would murmur, "Howie's okay." But, you know.

One morning, as I was jogging down our street, I heard Howie and his father shouting at each other. I stood in front of their house, listening, everything sounding like people wailing with mouths covered with their hands.

"I thought his dad was cool," I said to Andy back home. "But, man. I mean. He's not even religious. Not like Dad. I can see Dad being like that."

"Maybe Howie did something." Even though he was a freshman, Andy had heard about Howie and the rumors.

"Maybe—" I went on to explain everything that was going on at school. Howie showing up late, falling asleep, arguing with teachers. I thought maybe his dad was starting to resent him. At first, I thought I was just gossiping, as Andy listened carefully, grasping at every detail.

"Is it true, then?" Andy asked. "That Howie—ya know."

"I don't know. Maybe people are just getting it wrong." I started to laugh. "Or maybe he's fuckin' with everyone."

"Yeah, why not," Andy said laughing.

The club started to let people in. Andy rounded up a table up front, stage right. Dad flagged a waitress and asked for a cup of water. "Ice halfway. Two lemons. And hurry," he said, jiggling his bottle of pills.

Andy picked up a menu before dad could see the prices and started listing out all the appetizers. "Cheddar Bacon Fries. Sounds great, right Dad? Delicious fries. Haven't had that in a while," he said.

It was excruciating hearing Andy talk like Dad was some fragile child. Sympathy was foreign to Dad. He even downright detested it. There's this story that our *titas* would tell about when Andy was four, and he fell, scraped his knee, and started crying, and Dad just poked Andy on the forehead saying, "You stop your crying. There's no reason to cry."

At a table stage left, there was a group of guys wearing designer shirts, unbuttoned at the chest, gold chains around their necks, and stainless steel watches two sizes too big for their wrists. One of them had a round, chubby head, with a small face in the middle, looking like a stingray placed on top of a fat body. His friend was skinny, tall, with long, spiked up hair, and a laugh that was high, like rusty brakes. The third guy just smiled with bright teeth, and they all howled at the empty stage and hollered at the attractive waitresses.

"What is this nonsense?" Dad said. "Andy. What do you call those boys?" "

Douchebags, Dad," Andy said. "We call them douchebags."

Dad smirked, and cleared the phlegm from his throat. "What's that about?" I said.

Andy smiled. "We were over at a McDonald's, and I called a bunch of dumbass kids 'douchebags,' and Dad was all confused. It was hilarious."

The waitress dropped off the water, and Dad slowly laid two round tablets onto his dry tongue.

"Thank you," I said in Dad's place.

The waitress walked toward stage left. Stingray tried to chat with her and I overheard him say, "Don't be a lesbian!" All three of them cackled wildly. "I'm just playin,' girl. This's a comedy club right? I got jokes!"

"Hey!" I yelled. "Calm the hell down!"

"Am I hurtin' your ears, fairy?" Stingray said. "Fuck you say?"

"Mark," Andy interrupted.

"You can't let people get away with talking like that!"

"They're just a bunch of assholes. Don't give them the satisfaction." Stingray and crew laughed and nodded at me as I tamed myself.

"That's right. Eat shit and die!" Stingray said, before bursting into laughter. "See! I got jokes!"

—

It was summer break, and my parents decided to vacation in the Philippines. I had college prep classes and Andy had summer school, so we stayed home. We weren't really that interested in going to the motherland anyways. We were born in California and couldn't even speak Tagalog anyways.

"Too American. No longer Pinoy," Dad said, as if it were our fault.

We spent our nights leaving trash all over the kitchen counter, stacking dishes in the sink to a point where we started to use paper plates, and watching movies until the sun rose.

One night, close to 12, there was a knock at the door. I felt the urge to play protector and commanded Andy to stay in his room. I opened the door, my fist clenched, and found Howie there, scrunched up, nervous.

"Hey, Mark. Were you asleep?" Howie said. "I was just watching TV."

Andy rushed down the stairs.

"Listen," Howie said. "I got into a thing with my dad. Can I crash here? I can ask your mom—"

"Our parents aren't here," Andy interjected. "Oh. Then—"

"We have an extra room."

"Yeah, we do—but—"

"It's no problem."

"Hold up, Howie." I pulled Andy to the side, and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"Helping someone in need."

"But, Dad wouldn't—"

"Dad's not here." Andy smiled.

"Fine." I turned to Howie. "We don't have a bed, but we can do something."

Howie took a shower, and I lent him a T-shirt and shorts. No underwear though. "That's gross," I joked. We laid out some old cushions, pillows and blankets, and offered Howie some pizza we had ordered earlier.

"I'm just really tired," Howie said, and we left him alone.

The rest of the night was supposed to be spent binge watching anime, but a good hour or two after midnight, I heard the sound of a door open in the hallway. Then muffled footsteps. Then another door gently opening and closing. The image of Andy smiling flashed in my head, compelling me to double-check, so I stepped into the hallway and found the bathroom door was open, but the inside dark. Andy's room was the same. I tiptoed over to the guest room and laid my ear on the door, hearing, at first, nothing but silence, but then, the sounds of rustling sheets and laughing.

I rushed to my room, shut off the lights and jumped into bed.

Andy being in there with Howie wasn't surprising. I mean, there was one time, years ago, when, late at night, we stumbled on a scrambled pornography channel, and Andy said "That's pretty hot." It just didn't sound right, like an obligation. Another time, we were kids and mom took us Halloween costume shopping at Target, and Andy gravitated toward the light blue outfit of Princess Jasmine. Mom scolded him and shoved him toward the "correct" section of the aisle. Even Dad probably sensed it. That's why he didn't want Howie around. There are things you just know to be true.

Two hours later I heard the door knob turn again. I peeked through the door crack, down the hallway, where I found Andy exiting the guestroom, giggling, whispering something to Howie.

The day before our parents returned, I discovered Andy in the kitchen, cleaning everything. I tore off some paper towels and started to help, but then I froze.

"Look," I said, avoiding meeting Andy's eyes. "I don't want to get in your business, so—what I'm going to say, I'm just going to say it, and we'll leave it at that."

"What are you talking about?" Andy said.

"So. Whatever you got going on with Howie. Just. Be careful. A'ight?"

It was hard to tell if he stared at me confused or afraid I had found him out. "I don't know what you're talking about, man."

"I said my piece. Okay. So, just—"

"I don't know what you think is going on."

I laid my hands on the counter. "You know how Dad is. If he found out—a'ight? Just not at home."

"Whatever."

"I'm serious."

"You got a problem with Howie?"

"I don't have a problem with anything. Don't twist my words. It's just that—*Dad*." I was listening to myself, and realized how much of a coward I was.

"Whatever." Andy quickly rinsed his hands and rushed upstairs.

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The lights dimmed and the curtains were pulled open, and the warm-up comedian hopped up on stage. He was short and soft and wore a checkered sweater and tight brown pants that would've afforded him an ass kicking if they weren't meant to be funny.

After his introduction, he puckered his lips, pulled back his shoulders and said, "You know, some people look at me, and ask." He leaned forward and squinted his eyes and said, "What kind of Asian are you?" His voice was light, feminine, and I turned to dad, curious to see his reaction. He just looked on, as if staring at static on the television.

"Well," the comedian continued. "As a matter of fact, I am half and half. Half Pinoy, half *Pinaaaaay!*"

Laughter echoed throughout the club.

The comedian told jokes about men ghosting him, getting licked on his private parts, and gas station bathrooms. I laughed. But, honestly, it wasn't because he was funny. Too coarse for me. I sort of just felt the need to be the Sam to his Frodo. The laughter was inconsistent. Boisterous, at times. Awkward, afterwards. I noticed that the three men stage left sat stone-faced, quiet, staring at their menus, unamused, maybe even offended. Stingray fingered his cell phone, the bright LCD blaring against the darkness, and shook his head with every punchline. The room was soon with them, scowling, arms folded, eyes glaring at the comedian. I saw a sort of courageousness in him, standing up there, saying what he

wanted. And the progressive part of me wanted to yell at the audience, to tell them all to stop attacking him, to remind him that he had an ally.

“Don’t tense up, assholes,” the comedian said. “They’re just jokes!”

I turned to Andy who whispered into Dad’s ear what looked like, “You okay?” Dad seemed spaced out, continuing to just stare on with dead eyes, waving Andy away. That sort of just triggered me, the idea that Andy would coddle him like that, worried about how he would feel about watching a gay man on stage. If anything, Andy should’ve been with me. Battling against the masses. Announcing to the world that they were wrong, and we were right. So, I laughed loud at every single punchline the comedian made, even if it wasn’t funny, even if it was unnecessarily dirty. To me, to laugh was to win.

Then, Stingray started to boo.

“Oh great, nice, thank you sir,” the comedian said.

“Put Ty on the stage!”

“Hey, shut up!” I yelled. “Show some respect!”

“No one’s talking to you, fucktard!”

The audience began to laugh at the absurdity of us shouting at each other.

“If you don’t like it, just leave,” I yelled.

“Mark,” Andy said. “Leave it alone.”

“You can’t let people say that sort of crap. You can’t do nothing.”

“All right, guys. As I said, ‘Don’t tense up, assholes,’” the comedian said. The audience chuckled uncomfortably.

“I paid good money,” Stingray said. “I don’t wanna hear no queer jokes!”

Boos and hisses emerged from the crowd. His friends even started to squirm, bowing their heads and hiding their faces with their hands.

“All right, can we just—” the comedian said, signaling a security guard who approached Stingray and his friends and pointed to the door. Stingray shouted something and finally, one of his friends stood and urged them all to just exit, to the applause of the crowd.

“It’s okay guys,” the comedian said. “Chill out a little, get a coffee. Can I finish my set?”

Guys? What kind of joke you want? Clean or dirty?"

"Dirty!" we yelled.

"I knew it. You dirty fucks. I just knew it," the comedian slurped his words.

Stingray had to pass my table on his way to the exit, and I was just grinning at him, shaking my head, taking my victory lap.

Stingray mumbled, "Eat my dick, fairy."

"What the hell did you say?" I stood and puffed up my chest.

Stingray shoved me, and I almost tripped over my chair.

"Hold up!" Andy said, leaping between us. The security guard was behind Stingray's two other friends and struggled to intervene. Stingray rammed into Andy, who fell back, bumping hard against the corner of the table, then landing on the floor.

I was enraged. That was my little brother, and this asshat shoved him to the ground. I was about to pounce on him, take a swing, drain all the blood from his fat body. I pictured my fist crashing into his jaw, him flying in the air and his head slamming into the hardwood floor.

But then, an aluminum cane swung hard from behind me, making contact with Stingray's ear, a high pitched *ping* echoing throughout the club. Stingray tumbled backward and scrunched up into a sort of standing fetal position, as he gripped the side of his head, a tornado of profanity flying out of his mouth.

When I turned around, I found dad standing there, taking deep, labored breaths, holding up his cane in the air. "*Putangina*. You little *shet*," he said. "You *doosshhbog*! You show my boys respect!"

The club exploded with belly laughs, some even applauding Dad. Andy got back up and helped Dad back into the booth, while I just stood there, like a moron, turning back and forth between Dad and the man he had defeated with one swing of his cane.

"Jesus, guys," the comedian said. "Filipino Dads are crazy."



Summer had already ended, and we were back in school. Andy and Howie managed to take the same math class together, and the two started spending more time together.

One day, Howie and Andy were playing HORSE. My parents had just come home from work. While Mom was setting the table, Dad looked out the window and watched Andy and Howie.

“Why is he here so much?” Dad said.

“He’s very nice,” Mom said.

“You see it, right?”

“My eyes see nothing.”

“Tttt.”

I was hovering over the table, sneaking pieces of *lechón* into my mouth, trying to tune out their conversation.

“He’s your friend,” Dad said to me. “What do you know about that boy? Is he—*baklâ*?” Gay.

They were both staring at me, Dad leaning forward as if interrogating me, mom’s eyes telling me to be careful with my words.

“I really don’t know, Dad.”

“If he’s *baklâ*, I don’t want him around Andy.”

“Shhhhhht. Stop that,” Mom said.

“You know how Andy is,” Dad said. “Always playing with the girly things when he was little. I don’t want him turning out that way.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, Dad,” I heard myself say.

“*Ai nako*, don’t tell me that they’re teaching you that in school.”

“Seriously. Dad.”

“It’s disgusting. Do you know what God did to the gays? They are to be put to death. Their blood is on their own hands.”

“That’s so stupid. You don’t even go to church.”

“I go to church.”

“Like, once a year. And even then—”

“You young people. Only looking at what’s in front of you.”

“Shut up.”

Dad was shocked. I’d never talked back to him before. In our house, it was always easier to just nod your head and go about your day. But, even though he was talking about Howie, to me, he was talking about Andy, calling him disgusting, saying God wanted to kill him.

“How can you talk to your father this way?” Dad said.

“Why not? You’re over here talking all dumb. You’re the disgusting one.”

“Ai. Mark,” Mom said. “Just leave it alone.”

“You show me respect,” Dad said.

“Respect?” I said. “When you say all these ugly old people things. People like Howie aren’t bad. You’re just—”

“What do you mean?”

“What?”

“People like Howie.’ What did you mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Just—ya know, gay people. I was talking about them in general. I just used Howie ‘cuz you—you were talking about him. I—I didn’t mean anything. I actually don’t know anything.”

“I knew it.”

Dad stormed out to the driveway and pointed at Howie. “Hey. Hey. You!”

Andy was smiling at first, but realized Dad was approaching.

“Mr. C!” Howie said.

“You go home now,” Dad said.

“What?”

“Go home now. Andy. Inside.”

“What are you doing?” Andy said.

Dad pointed again at Howie. “You. Go!”

"Dad, this is my friend," Andy said.

I ran outside. "Dad, stop."

"Stay out of this!" Dad said.

"Mr. C," Howie said. "What's—"

"Don't Mr. C me! Go. Now. Or I'll tell your father."

Furious, Howie threw the basketball against the driveway, the ball then bouncing against the garage door and flying into the air, as he bolted down the street.

"Waitwaitwaitwait," Andy said.

"Inside. Now," Dad said.

"Why?"

"Your brother told me everything."

"What?" Andy turned to me. "You told him what happened?"

"What are you talking about?" Dad said.

"Nothing," I said. "Go inside, Andy."

"Don't tell me what to do," Andy said.

"What's going on here?" Dad said.

"Nothing," I said. "Seriously."

"Is there something going on between you and that boy?" Dad said to Andy.

"No," I said. "Andy tell him."

Andy was silent and stared back defiantly. It was the first time I saw him be brave.

That's when Dad struck Andy in the face, and the world went quiet. Blood slowly dripped down Andy's nose. Andy glared at Dad, his eyes saturated in a glaze of angry tears. Then he turned toward me. This is the moment I think about the most. The way he stared at me. As if I had pulled a gun on him. I stood there, frozen, as everything crumbled in front of me. Andy started to back away and sprinted down the block. Dad didn't say a word.

The sun set. For the rest of that night, I drove around the neighborhood, searching for Andy, and eventually found him sitting at a table at the park about three miles from home. I parked, but stayed in the car for a while, eventually stepping out and sitting across from him. He wouldn't acknowledge me. I wanted to tell him that I knew it was my fault. That I didn't mean to do it. That I was sorry and trying to be brave. But, instead, we sat there, until the sun sank below the horizon, trying to see the future.

After the night was over, and Ty Maldonado told his jokes and filled the club with laughter, I drove Andy and Dad back home because Dad didn't want to spend a dime on another Uber.

My mind was stuck at the club, at that moment when I'd almost taken a swing at Stingray, feeling ashamed while Ty told his jokes. I didn't even notice, until Andy told me after, the fireworks lighting up the sky above Disneyland as we made our way up the 5.

Once we were at the house, I stepped out to help Dad out of the car.

"I got it," Andy said.

Andy propped up Dad, who was tired from the night of whacking rude fat men. In the living room, I found the shrine Dad had made for Mom. A framed photo of her when she still had large, bright eyes and glowing cheeks, long before the cancer came and sucked it all away, was placed in front of a row of candles whose wicks were burned and bloated.

There was another photo of all of us, when I was 13, and we drove to Vegas and stood underneath a statue of some Greek goddess. Dad hit a thousand dollar jackpot that night, and we ate fancy steak, and the hotel upgraded us to a suite with a jacuzzi. That was a good trip.

"You all right?" Andy said from the hallway.

"Yeah. I'm just tired I think."

"It is late. Plus, you know." Andy posed like a martial artist and chopped the air. "You want to stay over? There's still a bed in your room."

The carpet was still the same. Faded and dirty at the edges. Dad had wrestled with us on that carpet when we were still children, me laughing so hard that my lungs hurt. Most everything was the same. Same decor. Same furniture. Just worn. Tired. Resigned.

"It's okay," I said. "I should go. Got an hour on the road."

"Sure?"

“Yeah.”

I walked out the door and saw the basketball hoop still on the driveway, the net gone. Since the last time anyone had used it, I'd finished senior year, while Andy had moved in with our cousin. I went to college, while Andy took a year after high school, lived in Texas with some friends, didn't see dad for years. Mom would sneak him money every so often, though, I think Dad knew. My mother would die, and Dad would finally hold my brother in the hospital room and ask him to come back home. I'd ask Andy why he said yes, and he'd say, “He's our Dad.”

It shouldn't be long now, I thought. Dad will die. His shrine will stand next to Mom's. I stared down the street.

“What ever happened to Howie?” I said.

“Last I heard, he was up in Frisco. Think he's a bartender.”

“His parents don't live there anymore, do they?”

“Moved out around two years ago? I think they went north too.”

“To be with him?”

“Dunno, man.”

It's not fair, I thought. Do we have to wait until mothers die, and we have no other choice but to swing our canes and risk collapsing because of old, feeble knees to preserve what is left? All we really do is clench our fists and strike out at the world until we find ourselves positioned like babies shouting a tornado of profanity into empty space.

“Hey!” Andy said.

“What?”

Andy was smiling, his head held high, and our eyes met in the lonely, winter mist. “Don't tense up, asshole. They're just jokes.”