

**EXCERPT FROM 'ILUSTRADO'**

"There was this time, when I was a young boy, when my father was consumed by jealousy." I poured Crispin a glass of sherry; he looked up at me, nodded, but continued speaking. "My father, see, he coveted the zoo my uncle had on his farm. He decided to get an animal of his own, but for Manila, since that was where he spent all his time." Crispin paused, stared at the typewriter in front of him. I had on my jacket and backpack. I cradled the bundle of outgoing mail in my other arm. But Crispin seemed eager to speak about things of which he rarely spoke. "I suspect Papa wanted to impress my mother, as well as coax her into spending more time with him there than in Bacolod. Of course, my father didn't know anything about animals. He just liked having them. He must have thought he could hire people. As you do. He wanted a tiger. Somehow he got one. I don't know how, I was too young. I remember he kept it in a cage by the swimming pool, near the lanay where we had our meals when we ate outdoors. Actually, I think the tiger was there in Forbes because it was being transported to our farm. I'm not sure anymore."

Crispin sipped his sherry. I leaned against the doorjamb, looked at my watch. Madison would be waiting at home with dinner. This morning, to my dismay, she'd told me about finding a recipe for tofu Peking duck, and I still had to somehow find some gluten-free hoisin sauce. It had somehow come to feel like our relationship counted on the successful fulfilment of such errands. I undid my scarf and unzipped my parka.

"Anyhow. At that time it was a big tiger to me. Huge. I think it must have been an adolescent, because the space by the swimming pool and the lanay wasn't that big. Doesn't everything look bigger when looking back? Just like every love is real when viewed in retrospect? Well, I can only imagine what the neighbours thought. What arrogance, to have a tiger in your garden. Haha! Truly. Thing is, the damn thing wouldn't eat. It was traumatised by the flight or truck or however it had been transported. It was a mess. I'm not sure if it was a he or a she, or what became of it. It lay against whichever corner of the cage didn't have sun. The cage was barely large enough for it to pace and turn."

Crispin suddenly looked at me, as if surprised at something. Then he looked at his typewriter again, at the sheet empty. "I remember one breakfast my father had come to table. He had us eating outside, to appreciate the tiger. I remember this very well. We didn't want to because it smelled bad. Sour and musky. My father was in a good mood and he picked up a few bacon strips and approached the animal. How macho, he wanted to feed it by hand. But the poor animal was afraid of him. It cowered in the corner. Papa got angry and started

shouting at it. I'll never forget what he said. He yelled: what kind of king of the jungle are you?!"

Crispin laughed heartily, then sighed, then smiled and nodded. "Yes, it's funny now. But at the time my brother and sister and I were frightened by the whole thing. The sadness was only felt later. You know how it is. My father threw the bacon at the tiger and hit it in the face. This puddle of piss formed under the frightened thing. Like some fluorescent toxic spill. I remember it really well; now. The tiger cowering in its urine. Papa standing over it screaming. We children averting our eyes, watching flies land on sliced mango on the fine china in front of us. Mama reading her pocketbook mystery."

Crispin absent-mindedly rearranged his ashtray and meerschaum pipe. He moved the Bohemian crystal decanter to the left, placed the matching glass beside it. He stared at what his hands were doing, watching with absolutely no interest in their tasks. "I remember telling this story, years later, to my girlfriend, Gigi. It was odd, I hadn't remembered it for twenty years until I recounted it to her. I cried afterwards. The first time since childhood. I think. After, she told me our country needs a revolution. Of course she'd say that, she was French. Westerners can never understand that in our country revolution isn't just parricide. It's deicide. Anyhow. Where was I? Oh, yes. I always wanted to use my memory of that tiger. As a short story, or a scene in a novel. But I never could. I remember how – when I cried, crying like a man broken – how I felt after. Better. Like I'd been set on my feet after years of flailing them above me in the air."

Then Crispin looked at me. I'll never forget how he looked at me.

Then he said: "There it is. So long. Take care of yourself."

I went home to Madison, the screaming of the living room smoke alarm, windows wide open, and an apartment as cold as the winter outside.

That was the last conversation Crispin and I had before he died.