

CHASING

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PACQUIAO



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CHASING PACQUIAO

Rod A. Pulido

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Rod A. Pulido grew up in Cerritos, California. As a child, he loved making toy spaceships out of cardboard and devouring ice cream straight from the carton—he still does both. He earned his bachelor of arts in film production from California State University, Long Beach, where he founded the first Pilipino graduation ceremony in Southern California. His movie *The Flip Side* became the first feature by a Filipino director to world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival. Rod strives to uplift and entertain with stories that highlight the Fil-Am experience. He enjoys collecting comic books and working out at the gym—stereotypes be damned! *Chasing Pacquiao* is his debut YA novel. Follow him on Instagram and on Twitter @RodAPulido.

Experience the extreme joys, sorrows, and triumphs of a queer Filipino American teenager struggling to prove himself in an unforgiving world. A poignant coming-of-age story, perfect for fans of *Patron Saints of Nothing*, *Darius the Great Is Not Okay*, and *Juliet Takes a Breath*.

Self preservation. That's Bobby's motto for surviving his notoriously violent high school unscathed. Being out and queer would put an unavoidable target on his back, especially in a Filipino community that frowns on homosexuality. It's best to keep his head down, get good grades, and stay out of trouble.

But when Bobby is unwillingly outed in a terrible way, he no longer has the luxury of being invisible. A vicious encounter has him scrambling for a new way to survive—by fighting back. Bobby is inspired by champion Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao to take up boxing and challenge his tormentor. Then Pacquiao publicly declares his stance against queer people, and Bobby's faith—in his hero and in himself—is shaken to the core.

A powerful and unflinching debut that will both shatter and uplift hearts with every read.

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For Alex.

Love who you are, because you are amazing.

—Dad

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CHASING PACQUIAO

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ROUND 1

Whenever I text Brandon from school, I almost feel like a superhero. Not that there's anything super heroic about texting my boyfriend, but it puts me in danger of exposing my secret identity.

I also get to flex my poetry powers. My thumbs hover over my phone like two asps about to strike. A flurry of tapping follows. I read the text over, and with a groan, delete it from existence. For the past few days, this has been my pattern: *write, groan, delete, repeat*. Bran deserves more—especially today—but I don't have a hell of a lot of options. Or time. A few more tries and the piece is more or less complete:

*Like the Bat-Signal at night
I'll come running when you call
You are my one and only
Just like Nick Fury's eyeball*

I count the number of syllables, making sure there are twenty-eight total. Four lines, seven syllables each. The structure of the Filipino poetry form *tanaga*.

"Aw, comic book fanboys in love. Happy anniversary, B!" Rosie, a strikingly pretty Latina and my best bud, plops onto

the seat beside me and brushes back her dyed-orange drapes of hair.

“Announce it over the loudspeaker, why don’t ya?” I whisper. With a sigh, I tap send, and the text flies out into the ether. At the surrounding lunch tables, the usual goes down: chatting, eating, littering. Thankfully, nobody seems to have noticed Rosie’s characteristic outburst.

“Sorry, mi amigo.” She lowers her voice to a near-acceptable level. “Hey, I made you something to mark the occasion. *Relax*. I didn’t use your names.”

She pulls a black picture frame from her bag and sets it on the table between us. My breath catches. It’s a painting of a dark purple heart set against a backdrop of blue and black swirls. Written across the heart in calligraphy are the initials B + B. It’s incredibly detailed, gorgeous, thoughtful. Before I can thank Rosie, someone else cuts in.

“Who’s B-plus-B”?

Shit. Right off I know the owner of the shrill voice: Charlotte Wilkes—the nosiest girl in school, possibly all of MacArthur Park. A one-teen TMZ.

She whips her platinum blond hair over her shoulder and takes a seat across from us without being invited. “What, your nerdy ass finally nab a girlfriend, Bobby?”

My stomach clenches, but I’m ready for her question. Been ready for months, practicing my answer out loud ad nauseam in front of the bathroom mirror, in the shower, probably even in my sleep. “I actually do have a girlfriend. She’s homeschooled, she’s a total geek, and she’s cute.”

The key to selling a good lie is to cloak it in layers of truth.

Charlotte leans in closer. “Uh-huh. So what’s the name of this cute geek of a girlfriend nobody’s ever seen or heard of?”

“Brandy.”

She squints, game for the challenge. “Where’d you meet?”

“Where else do geeks meet? The comic shop.” Also the truth.

“Right. Got a pic of her? Let’s see.” She grabs for my cell, but I slip it into my pocket. Okay, I wasn’t ready for that one. My phone has a few selfies of Brandon and me; no way can I let her see them.

“Um, we don’t—she doesn’t like taking pics.” My eyes dip slightly. “She’s kind of shy.”

Charlotte smirks. “Sure she is.”

“Hey, chica,” Rosie says, “back off with the interrogation.”

“Yeah,” I say, “don’t you have a Gossipers Anonymous meeting to get to?”

“Whatever.” Charlotte’s distracted by a gathering at the center of the quad, and she dashes toward the commotion.

Air shoots from my mouth. *Close one.* The knot in my stomach starts to loosen, but it quickly tightens again. In the middle of the crowd, a giant student repeatedly pummels a smaller boy with spiky blond hair. Freshman, from the looks of it.

“Fuck that little faggot up!” somebody yells.

I wince at the slur, even though hearing it at school has become a regular occurrence. There are some words I never want to get used to.

Onlookers cheer, while others barely take notice, numb to the routine. He floors the boy with a punch to his jaw, making him spit blood. Possibly a tooth. Before any teachers arrive, the

bell clangs off-key, and the larger boy disappears through the stream of bodies.

Rosie sighs. “Another peaceful day at Westlake High.”

As a few students help the battered boy to his feet, blood spills from his lips—a graphic reminder of why my secret identity can never get out.

I rise and shove the frame Rosie made into my backpack. The gift really is amazing; Rosie’s so thoughtful. Just wish she’d been thoughtful enough to give it to me anywhere but school.

At the end of the day, I hop on my bike—a baby-blue seven-speed—and tear off campus like I stole something. Back in 2008, when I was only nine years old, Dad gave me this bike right before he died. He’d used it every day to get to his job at the laundromat. Without this bike, our family would not have eaten. As he lay withering away in bed, the cancer shredding his stomach, he said he wished he could have given me more. That memory slips into my thoughts every time I go for a ride.

I pedal over cracked concrete, past brick walls decorated with various gang tags, then hang a right onto the obstacle course of chaos known as Alvarado Street. A red SUV swerves and nearly clips me. The driver blasts his horn—’cause it’s *my* fault he texts and drives. They say driving in L.A. will make even the most chill person freak out. I wouldn’t know, but somehow I doubt it’s as terrifying as biking through it. I wouldn’t risk the trip without a good reason.

Brandon Elpusan is better than a good reason.

The shadows of the 101 Freeway swallow me as I ride under

the overpass, through the shanty tent town. My body slumps at the sight of so many families living on the street, who are even poorer than Mom and me. A few blocks later, I cut into the hilly residential of Silver Lake, where the streets are cleaner, the homes larger, the graffiti nonexistent. Silver Lake sits barely three miles from MacArthur Park, but it's a whole other world. A richer, whiter one. More than just the 101 divides the two neighborhoods.

Five minutes later, I coast up to the Villain's Lair, my favorite comic book shop in L.A. Six months ago to the day, I met Brandon here. He'd just started working as a cashier after school, and we hit it off right away. We talked for nearly an hour that first day and had a highly informative discussion regarding the age-old question: *Why don't the Hulk's pants rip when he transforms?* We decided on gamma-irradiated stretchy pants.

I chain up my bike and open the glass door. Posters of iconic heroes dominate the walls—Wonder Woman, Teen Titans, the Avengers—along with lesser-known characters like Deena Pilgrim and Savage Dragon. I breathe in the familiar scent of lemon air freshener and new comic books, and the stress of the school day fades away.

Bran leans over the cashier counter, sporting a *Dawn of the Dead* tee, the sleeves tight against his lean arms. Like me, he's Filipino, but his brown complexion is a shade lighter—probably because he spends so much time indoors at the Lair. The boy could use more sun, but other than that, he's perfect.

He brushes back his dark bangs and greets me with a dimpled smile that makes my palms sweat. "Welcome to the Villain's Lair. May I help you?"

I grin back. “Hope so. I’m looking for a dope gift for that special geek in my life.”

He furrows his brow in that cute way he does. “Right. Well, we just got in some super cool hardcover editions: *All-Star Superman*, *Powers: Who Killed Retro Girl?*, *Civil War*.”

“Hmm, hardcovers?” I chuckle. “He’s not *that* special.”

“Really now? Okay, you know what makes the best gift? Poetry. Writing your own, I mean. It’s personal and shows you put real thought into it, instead of just being lazy and buying something off the shelf.”

“That’s what I keep saying!” I lean in closer. “So what’d you get me?”

“Bought you something off the shelf.” Bran gives me a grin that makes my earlobes warm and pulls a flat rectangular package from behind the counter. “Happy anniversary, B.”

It’s obviously a comic book, but which one? Out of all the millions of comics in the world, what single issue did he pick to mark our big day? My fingertips tingle. I tear off the wrapping paper to reveal *Alpha Flight*, issue #106.

I’ve read it before as a reprint, so I immediately recognize the issue. Alpha Flight is Marvel Comics’s designated Canadian superhero team—they’re basically the D-list Avengers with maple leaves across their chests. On the cover, in mid-scream, is the mutant speedster Northstar. Issue 106 deals with him saving an abandoned baby who has AIDS, and ends with Northstar coming out as Marvel’s first gay superhero. Landmark stuff.

I bite my lip, crossing my arms so I don’t fling myself into Brandon’s. The first out queer superhero—it’s perfect. Still, a nagging thought wiggles into the back of my brain: *Is he trying*

to tell me something? He's out to his family and friends—has been for a couple years. Me? Besides Brandon, exactly two people know: Rosie and my mom.

"Thanks, Bran. This is incredibly sweet."

"Of course," Brandon says. "And I really love the poem, B. It's a Marvel/DC epic crossover in four lines." He means it. And he doesn't seem to mind that I'm so dirt poor I can't afford a real gift. He tries to take my hand, but a stranger walks up to the counter with his purchases. I back away and let Bran ring up the customer.

Bran's boss, Larry, the owner and manager of the Lair, is pretty laid back and always lets me hang out—as long as I help out around the store. While Bran works, I stock shelves, chat with the regulars, and try to stay out of the way.

A few hours later, closing time arrives. Bran activates the store alarm and hits the lights, and I follow him to the front entrance.

I want to do something to mark the moment, to show Bran what I have yet to say in words. *What the hell, the store is empty.* Before he can open the door, I take his hand, lean in, and kiss him. Softly at first. He flinches in surprise because I'm never affectionate in public, but then he pulls me close. Adrenaline courses through me, and my chest heaves. Is that his pulse thumping or mine? Even in the dim light coming inside from the streetlamp, I see him blush. It's catching; my cheeks flush.

Bran's lips split into a grin. "Now that was a good present. So what did you think of mine?" I follow him out to the deserted sidewalk. The night is gorgeous, as smoggy, starless Los Angeles nights go.

Bran tries to take my hand, but I stuff it inside my pocket.

“You mean the comic book hinting that I should just announce my complete gayness to the world already? Not too subtle is what I think.”

“Dude, I should be able to hold my boyfriend’s hand when we go for a walk.”

“Easy for you to say in the queer haven of Silver Lake. Not gonna fly in my hood.”

“Come on. It’s not that different from here. People are just people.”

I stare at Bran. Sometimes I can’t believe he’s so naive about certain things. “Yeah, well, you don’t go to War Zone High where there’s a fight every other day. And what if someone from my school sees us? What’s my motto?”

He sighs. “Self-preservation.”

“And it’s a damn good one.” I climb onto my bike and almost ride off, but a tugging in my chest stops me. I can’t stand the thought of leaving on a bad note, especially today. “Give me time, all right?”

He breaks eye contact and sighs, but eventually nods. “You know, you said the same exact thing back on our three-month anniversary.”

His words make me wince. *How much more time will I need? And how much longer will he continue to wait for me?* The questions linger like the cold breeze on my neck as I pedal away.

Despite nearly dozing off during the ride, I make it home okay. To say our apartment is small would be charitable. It’s basically two bedrooms the size of walk-in closets, a tiny kitchen with a used restaurant table for two, and a living room fur-

nished with a dingy couch Mom found on the curb five years ago. It's sparse, but it's home. Right now, it's an empty home. As usual, Mom won't be back from waitressing until well after midnight.

I down a plate of leftover rice and chicken adobo for dinner while trying not to fall asleep. I accidentally bite into one of the tiny black peppers, and it gives me a much-needed jolt. After eating, I wade through twenty problems of algebra homework, then belly flop into bed beneath a poster of my childhood hero, boxing champ Manny "Pacman" Pacquiao. It's the only thing decorating my walls.

As sleep begins to overtake me, the final thoughts that sprinkle my mind are of Brandon. How his scent reminds me of comic books and long bike rides. How he brushes back his bangs like a curtain, revealing the shine and warmth in his eyes. How I would do almost anything for him—except, it would seem, come out.

My eyelids blink open to the wail of the alarm. The clock reads 7:24 a.m.

And I'm late.

I rush through my morning routine at triple speed, skipping breakfast and a shower. On my way out, I pass Mom, asleep on the couch, her uniform a map of condiment stains. Another late night of waiting tables for her. I'd love to actually speak to her, but she needs her rest. I peck her on the forehead and let her snooze.

My favorite time to bike through the neighborhood is in the

early morning. The air is cool, and fewer cars are on the road. My mind wanders to Rosie and her gift, then to Brandon and that kiss. *Damn.*

Pretty sure I love him. I should've said it. It was the perfect time to say it.

I pop a mini wheelie up the curb and speed into the school lot. Without coming to a full stop, I hop off my bike and guide it into the rack.

At the west double-door entrance, the metal detector wand declares me weaponless, and I pass through with five minutes to spare. Enough time to unload my books at my locker.

Up ahead, a crowd clogs up traffic—probably another pointless fight. I break through the gathering and stop short. My heart booms like a bass drum in my chest. Scrawled across my locker door in bright red letters are the words: BOBBY AGBAYANI IS A FUCKING FAGGOT!

I read the slur again and again, my pulse clicking like a metronome on high speed. Sweat forms across my forehead as I try to process how this could have happened.

"This is bullshit," I say through clenched teeth.

Heads turn from the graffiti over to me. They're all wondering if it's true. Most have already made up their minds. Their expressions say, *Of course it is. Knew it the whole time.*

My skin burns. Wish I could crawl into my locker and slam the door behind me forever. I rack my brain. I have to do something, anything, to fix this—or I am dead.

"Who wrote this?" I say, struggling not to yell. The crowd stares without answering. Any one of them could be the perp.

Giggles come from the back: Charlotte and her clique of gossip mongers.

“You do this?” I snap.

She throws me major side-eye. “Oh, don’t be accusing me of shit, Bobby. You the one everyone’s wondering about.”

“So, you a gayboy or what?” someone yells from the back.

I scan the crowd of faces, some smug, a few sympathetic. All want an answer straight from my lips. I remember my rehearsed lie. It’s the only thing that can save me now.

Screw it.

“Yeah, I have a *boyfriend*. He’s homeschooled, he’s a total geek, and he’s *damn* hot.”

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ROUND 2

The crowd's in an uproar as I plod away. *What in the name of Thor, God of Thunder, did I just do?*

I'm actually out.

Like, completely.

This was not the plan. Not that there was a plan. But I was robbed of the decision, the choice of the how and the when.

"Told you," Charlotte says. "Boy's a total butt-pirate."

Some dude makes a crack—something about packing fudge. Hilarious. If you're going to be a homophobic douchebag, at least be original about it.

My eyelid flutters out of control like a strobe light. Some anonymous asshole just drew a huge target on my forehead—in a place where people love to take shots. On the plus side, Brandon will be happy. So there's that. Maybe I'd laugh if my jaw would stop chattering.

When I enter algebra class, Rosie rushes up to me. "Hey, you okay?" The first bell hasn't even rung, and she's already heard the news. Hooray for texting.

"Not here," I tell her.

I hurry to my seat and hide behind my propped-up binder until class starts. Unfortunately, Eric Ocampo, a Pinoy kid who sits directly behind me, doesn't catch my dire need for privacy.

When we were in third grade, we'd have playdates at the park, even a few sleepovers. That was before Eric turned into a meth head. Now he's just another screwed-up kid who peeks over my shoulder for the answers. Which is doubly annoying because his breath reeks like burnt plastic.

"Ay, pare, that was messed-up," Eric says, using the Filipino word for friend. He nudges my arm. "What they wrote on your locker?"

"Yep." I manage.

"Ay, I got your back, bruh." He holds out a fist over my shoulder.

A sigh slips through my lips, but I bump his fist with my own. "Good to know."

"I know you ain't bakla."

The Tagalog gay slur is another gut punch to my psyche. I shut my eyes and pretend I'm sipping an ube milkshake on a Hawaiian beach, far from the special hell that has become my life.

Eric leans over my shoulder, and his breath makes me gag. "Ay, you do the homework? What you get for the first page?"

I try to follow along with Mrs. Jennings's lesson, but instead of the numbers on the board, my mind dwells on the scarlet letters across my locker. By second period, the word will have spread over the entire school—but that doesn't mean I have to leave the damn announcement up.

After Jennings finishes her lesson, I raise my hand and ask to use the restroom. She usually frowns on bathroom breaks, but I'm part of the minority that actually does her assignments.

On my way out, Rosie raises her brow at me. I look past her.

The halls are empty, quieter than a morgue at midnight. Appropriate, since I feel like I'm a pallbearer at my own funeral. I hurry by my locker without looking at it and exit the building. The morning light splits the clouds and hits me in the eyes. I shield my face and hurry across the quad to Mr. Hopkins's office near the basketball gym.

The door is open and classical music filters out from a beat-up boombox. I peek my head in. Every kind of cleaning solution assaults my nostrils. Hopkins sits at his desk, filling out paperwork. He's a short, thin white man known for the raggedy Lakers cap perpetually attached to his noggin.

I knock. "Hello? Mr. Hopkins? Um, someone wrote all over my locker. Will you clean it up? Please?"

"Good morning." He rises, extends his hand. "I'd love to help you, um . . ."

"Bobby." We shake hands; his grip is firm, but not imposing.

"Bobby, I'd love to help, but I need to get down to the boys' restroom and clean up some graffiti. Write your locker number down, and I'll try to get to it tomorrow."

Tomorrow? Hell no, that is not going to fly. "You sure you can't get to it now? What they wrote is, um, pretty messed up."

"Sorry, son, but someone wrote, 'Principal Peterson, your lunch is served' right above the toilet. In huge block letters. So, you can imagine that kind of takes priority."

I try to stifle a laugh with my hand, but I'm not entirely successful.

Hopkins turns off the music, tips his hat to me. "You have yourself a good day."

Have yourself a good day? This guy has to be the most polite janitor ever. Does he hold open the toilet stall door for you too?

Hopkins pushes a cart full of cleaning supplies outside the Dutch door and shuts the bottom half.

Splinters line the top edge of the door, which would make a suitable deterrent to most trespassers. Unfortunately, I'm more desperate than most.

Hopkins continues down the path toward the gymnasium, humming the classical piece. I wait until he rounds the corner, then climb over the door, which earns me a lovely splinter in the tip of my right index finger. Perfect. I ignore the throbbing pain and grab an abrasive sponge and an all-purpose cleaner off the shelf.

Back at my locker, I picture the vandal in my firing sights and shoot the hateful words with the spray setting on wide. I scrub the message, putting my elbow and all my built-up hostility into it. Neither the ink nor my anger fade. *Damn it.* Whoever did this sure picked the right marker for the job.

I spray the door again. Rosie rounds the corner, clutching a bathroom pass.

"Figured you'd be here. Jennings was ready to call the office. Lucky for you she said I could wrangle you in." She puts her hand on my shoulder. "You okay?"

I shrug, continue scrubbing. "Yeah, I planned to post a coming-out notice on the school website anyway. Something short, tasteful. This just saves me the hassle."

She leans against the lockers. "What happened? How'd it get out?"

“*What happened?* You gave me that frame at school, and Charlotte figured it all out and shifted her mouth into over-drive.”

“Hold up. You’re blaming this on me?”

“You got a better explanation?”

“Yeah, maybe you aren’t as slick as you think you are. Maybe somebody realized you don’t talk about girls’ asses like other dudes, or when we’re talking you actually look at my eyes, not my boobs.”

Rosie might have a point, but no way am I going to admit it. Not when she’s acting salty.

“Or maybe nobody’s noticed I don’t stare at your boobs ’cause your boobs aren’t as great as you think.”

Her mouth drops open. “Not cool, Agbayani.” Rosie storms off down the hall.

Okay, she didn’t deserve that, and I probably shouldn’t have pissed off my only real friend right about now. Sometimes I can be such a d-hole.

Yep, *best day ever*.

I scrub harder and wish I could erase “faggot” not only from my locker but from the vocabulary of the entire world. Not that it would do any good. Somebody somewhere would come up with another evil word to replace it.

The bell rings and students filter out into the halls. The graffiti has slightly faded, but the words still linger, ghostlike. The stares and murmurs begin again. I open my locker, toss the cleaner and sponge inside, and dash back to class.

When I get back to algebra, the room’s filling up with the

next period. Mrs. Jennings arches her brow at me but says nothing. I probably just used up all my good student cred with her. Can't worry about that now. I jot down tonight's homework from the board, grab my backpack, and rush to my next class.

At lunch, I hide out at a back table in the library, secluded near the stacks. The library, like most of the school's facilities, is barely functional. It boasts two archaic computers that take the better part of an hour to load, plus three stacks of bookshelves lined with outdated reference materials and moldy textbooks. The library is less a place of research and study and more a lunchtime refuge for the outcasts of Westlake High—of which I'm apparently now a member.

My name floats through the room in not-so-guarded whispers. The shade is palpable. At a table of lowly freshmen, one kid stares at me, says something to a couple of his friends, and the whole lot cracks up. Yes, even here among the Westlake High pariahs, I'm the object of scrutiny and ridicule.

Tonight's homework has piled up after four periods. But instead of tackling quadratic equations, I work on a tanaga for Rosie. Hopefully it'll get her to forgive me. After a false start in which I fail to find a word that rhymes with "douche nozzle," the four lines are complete.

*I'm sorry I was evil
Like Loki and Magneto
If you would please forgive me
I'll buy you a burrito*

Okay, so I'm no Lin-Manuel Miranda, but it'll do. I rhymed a Mexican fast-food staple with a megalomaniac mutant. That has to count for something. I punch send and break out my Algebra II textbook.

Fifteen minutes later, Rosie hasn't replied. Guess she's making me sweat it out. Ugh. Can't say I blame her.

"What kind of a burrito? And don't say no pinche Taco Bell." Rosie looms in front of me, arms folded.

"El Charro's veggie burrito with bell peppers, rice, and guac?"

"Extra guac."

"Of course."

"And my boobs?"

I can't withhold a smirk. "Oh, *so* spectacular. I can feel the gay slipping away just looking at them."

"Okay then." She grabs a seat beside me and pulls out her algebra book.

For the remainder of lunch, we go through the homework. Rosie isn't the best at math, so I explain a few problems to her. I've been her unofficial math tutor since we first started hanging out in junior high. I've always felt safer with Rosie, so it's more than a fair trade-off. Hanging with her is probably why people didn't mess with me before. The prettiest girl in school won't date you if you punk her best friend.

As I explain a problem, Rosie's attention wanes and she drops her pencil in between the pages of her textbook.

"What's up?" I ask.

She averts her eyes before answering. "Sorry for being my

usual loudmouth self. Do you really think it was Charlotte who outed you?”

“I don’t know. Forget about it. Shouldn’t have blamed you.” I scan the room. A couple of students eye me; their smirks make my face flush. “Anyway, knowing this school, it could’ve been anyone.”

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ROUND 3

During sixth period English, Mrs. Cisneros talks about the theme of religion in *Animal Farm*. She says Sugarcandy Mountain represents the afterlife and is used to pacify the farm animals so they'll continue to toil away and not revolt. Seems fairly obvious to me, especially since the raven who spouts the Sugarcandy Mountain gospel is named Moses. My stomach grumbles throughout the lecture. I wouldn't mind gobbling up a mountain of candy.

When school lets out, I hang back and talk to Mrs. C so I don't have to deal with any drama in the overcrowded halls. I ask if the pig Old Major represents Vladimir Lenin, and she lights up like Thor's hammer. Teachers are so predictable, always starved for an interested student.

I glance at the clock. Nearly twenty minutes have passed since the bell rang. Should be plenty. I say bye and escape into the deserted halls. I'd picked up all my books during lunch, so I don't need to stop by my locker. The less I see of it, the better.

I exit the building and make my way over to the main bike rack. The school grounds are quiet, peaceful. Maybe from now on I'll stay late every day. I unlock my seven-speed and guide it toward the parking lot. A group of rowdy upperclassmen are

hanging out by the exit, so I make a detour and head to the soccer field instead.

The field's grass is unkempt—green and thriving in the middle, yellow and dead near the goals. The open expanse is peaceful and gives me a sliver of hope that I can get through this unwanted turn in my life.

I stop suddenly. My first thought when I see them is that Rosie was right: I'm not as slick as I think I am. I should have left with everyone else.

When there were witnesses.

On the bleachers sits one of the more notorious crews at Westlake High, led by Rex “T-Rex” Banta, a Filipino, five-foot-ten mass of muscle with an immaculately combed pompadour. He's totally aping Bruno Mars's signature hair and might even pass for his evil twin—if Bruno had bad acne like Rex does from injecting too many steroids. With him is his younger and much smaller brother, Eddie, along with Jorge, a skinny Mexican kid with a shaved head.

The brothers play Pusoy Dos, a Filipino card game, while Jorge sits off to the side, flipping a balisong knife. Even yards away, I can tell the blade is real, not a trainer. My skin chills. Jorge has a few decent moves, but it doesn't sit well with me that he's using a Pinoy weapon. Especially when there's a strong possibility he could use it on me.

“Pusoy!” Eddie slams down his last card and cackles. “That's three in a row, bruh.”

Rex shakes his head, gathering the stray cards. “You keep getting all the twos. Shuffle that shit right this time.”

I almost turn around and head back toward the school, but

Eddie sees me and jumps down to the grass, deck of cards in hand.

“Check it out,” Eddie says, strolling over to me. “The little faggot himself. All by his little faggot self.” He flicks the card edges. “Sup, faggot.”

Rex rises. He looks ten feet tall standing on the lowest bleacher seat. He hops off, and the metal creaks as if sighing. “Ay, bruh, don’t you know you can’t say ‘faggot’ no more? That shit’s politically incorrect.”

“Aw, for real? My bad.”

“Yeah, they wanna be called ‘queer’ now. Ain’t that right, queer boy?”

Sweat trickles down my neck and forms a puddle at the small of my back. I climb on my bike and try to pedal away, but Eddie grabs the handlebars and blocks my path. No avoiding a confrontation now, and nobody is coming to help me. We’re too far out from the main building.

“Where you going, queer boy?” Eddie flings a playing card at my face, grazing my cheek.

My pulse pounds at my temple. My legs quiver. “Hey, guys, I just wanna get home, okay?”

“Ay, lemme ask you something on the real, pare.” Rex wanders over to a spot a few feet behind his brother. “You’re Pinoy. Catholic, yeah?”

I shrug. “I guess.”

“You know what the Bible says about homosexuality, right? *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination.* So what you gotta say about that?”

“I dunno. Not all that into the Bible.”

“Well, you should be, pare. It’s the straight-up word of God. Shit’ll save your soul.” Great, another homophobe who uses religion to justify bigotry. He studies me for a moment like I’m some alien species then turns to his brother. “All right, let him go, Eddie.”

“Got a sweet bike there, pare,” Eddie says to me, ignoring his brother. “I could use a nice ride. Help a Pinoy brother out.” He flashes a yellow overbite. I want to put my fist through each of his stained teeth. If it were just him, I probably would.

My arms tremble. My grip tightens around the handlebars, and I think of Dad. He didn’t give in to the pain; I sure as hell am not giving in to these assholes. “You’re never getting my bike.”

Rex studies me. “You got a big sack on you, dude. I respect that.” He chews his lip. “Leave the bike, and you can walk away.”

“You heard him,” Eddie says. “Off, bitch.”

In one motion, I jerk the handlebars up and slam the front tire into Eddie’s stomach. He topples to the ground, and the deck of cards scatters.

“Eddie!” Rex runs up and drives a punch into my gut. I cry out and crumple to the grass, taking the bike with me. The pedal stabs my thigh, sending a shooting pain through my leg.

“Damn bakla,” Rex says. “Let’s kick his ass. Jorge! What you waiting for, gago? Get over here!”

“No,” I mumble, bracing for the knife strike. It doesn’t come. Instead, a flurry of kicks connect with my side and face; each feels like a hammer blow. One bursts my lip, and my mouth fills with hot blood. My gag reflex kicks in, and I cough it up. I cover my head with my arms and roll up like a pill bug.

“Okay,” Rex says, “little dude’s had enough.”

Eddie gets in one more kick. “Don’t ever touch me, you fucking fag!”

Rex stoops down so our noses are barely a foot apart. His breath feels like a hand dryer on my face. “Remember this, bakla boy. I was gonna let you walk, but nobody messes with my little bro—especially not no stupid-ass faggot don’t know where to stick his titi.”

I try to grab Rex’s arm, but my muscles won’t cooperate. “Don’t take my bike . . . please.”

“Hey, what are you doing?” a woman’s voice calls from far off. “Get away from him!”

“Shit,” Rex says. “Teacher lady coming.”

Through the blur, I make out Eddie and Jorge sprinting away. Ahead of them, Rex tears away on my bike—my last connection to Dad. My head falls to the grass. I clamp my eyes shut to block the tears welling up, but they break through. The thrashing of grass alerts me to a newcomer.

“Easy, Bobby,” Mrs. Cisneros says. She puts a hand on my shoulder, and I flinch at the contact. “Can you move?”

I blink at her and nod. She helps me take off my backpack and lifts me up. If it didn’t hurt too much to speak, I’d thank her for chasing them off.

Mrs. C helps me over to the bleachers and takes out a tissue, puts it to my mouth. “Hold here,” she says. The muscles in my arm flare with pain, but I follow her instructions.

“Was it Rex and his gang?”

The image of Rex, Eddie, and Jorge taunting me, humiliat-

ing me, plays in my head. Before I can think it through, I nod—and immediately regret it.

Mrs. Cisneros turns a shade redder. “So sick of all these punks getting away with shit like this.”

Wow, she actually cursed. She’s seriously pissed. Not good. If Mrs. C reports Rex and his crew, maybe they’ll get suspended for a few days, possibly a week. But that would only encourage them to kick my ass again.

I groan and manage to say, “Can we just forget this ever happened?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s not a big deal. Really, I’m okay.”

She regards me for a moment. “It’s my responsibility to report this, Bobby. I can’t just let this go.”

Great. She’s not going to budge on this. I rise to my feet slowly. “Whatever.”

I just want to get home.

ROUND 4

Mrs. Cisneros offers to take me to the hospital. If she weren't a teacher, I'd probably reply, *Thanks. On the way, can we stop by my mansion and pick up my gold-plated flip-flops?* Instead, I ask her to just take me home. We don't have insurance. There's no way Mom could afford a trip to the ER, plus they'd definitely notify her about what happened.

Mrs. C drives me home in her clunky pickup truck, and every time she hits a bump or a pothole—which is often—it feels like my brain is doing backflips. Thankfully, the ride isn't too long.

I climb the stairs to our apartment and discover a new kind of agony. With each step, my arms and thighs shiver. My whole body feels like it's about to vibrate apart. Instead of carrying my backpack, I drag it behind me.

I manage to stumble through the living room and into the kitchen, where I grab a bag of frozen broccoli from the freezer. My jaw clenches when I place the bag against my cheek, and I let out a moan. I search the pantry for painkillers, but we're out. Mom must be getting her migraines again.

The bathroom is only a few yards away, but the walk feels like a hundred. The stranger staring back at me in the mirror looks vaguely familiar. My lip has puffed up, and my left eye is

a grotesque shade of purple—not unlike a rotted eggplant. No way can I let Mom see me like this. What I wouldn't give for Deadpool's healing factor.

I mentally cross my fingers and turn on the bathtub faucet. More often than not, only cold water pours out. This time I get lucky. Guess I was bound to sometime today. Never have I been more thankful for lukewarm water.

While I sit and soak, I try to clear my mind, but my thoughts can't outrun the day's events. My chest heaves, and I succumb to the turmoil that racks my body and spirit. Tears stream down my face and sting my cracked lips.

With a splash, I jolt awake. Must've dozed off. Darkness slips through the window blinds, and the water is frigid. I grab a towel and flee from the tub, shivering.

I have every intention of doing my homework, but I fall into bed without even brushing my teeth. I probably couldn't even hold the pencil or the toothbrush anyway.

Before I nod off, I remember to pull the covers up close to my head and cover my bruises. Usually Mom won't disturb me if I'm already asleep when she gets home. Hopefully she'll stick to the routine.

The alarm screams like a hungry, neglected baby. I blink, rub the gunk from my eyes out of reflex, and flinch when I brush the swelling. I bang the alarm off. Apparently it's been ringing for hours because the clock reads 10:16 a.m. I'm over *two hours* late

for school. Looks like Mom didn't notice my bruises, since she went to work without waking me.

I should get up.

Have to get up.

God, it hurts just breathing.

Screw it. Today's Friday, and I'm a straight-A student. Yeah, not getting up.

I let the temporary refuge of sleep reclaim me.

"Are you sick, anak?" Mom asks, calling me the Filipino word for son. "The attendance office called and said you weren't at school."

Moonlight outlines her image. It's nighttime. I turn my back to her and grunt, "Yeah, yeah. Bad cold."

"You need anything? Food? Juice?"

"No." I fake a cough, which sends a shock of pain through my core. "Just need to rest."

She squeezes my shoulder, and it feels like she's tearing it off. I bite back a scream, force it down with a shot of bile.

Finally she says, "Okay, dear. Drink a lot of water, okay? I'll be working late again tomorrow. Text if you need anything."

I nod from under the covers. Even that slight movement hurts. "Thanks, Mom."

"Oh. And happy anniversary to you and Brandon."

She's a couple days late, but she remembered. The thought that she might remember never occurred to me, which makes me even more grateful that she did. A smile starts to form on my lips, but a jolt of pain stops all movement. I don't attempt to

turn my head to watch her go. The light from the hallway shrinks to a sliver as Mom leaves the door open a smidge.

My phone buzzes somewhere like the incessant chirp of a cricket. I blink the sleep away and search for my cell on my night table and desk. Finally, I find it in my pants on the floor. According to the screen, it's Saturday afternoon. I've been in bed over thirty-six hours.

Brandon has sent me texts—a dozen of them. Same with Rosie. Both are wondering what's going on and where I am. They're worried. And neither even knows about my epic ass-kicking.

They both ask if I'm still going tonight. Tonight? Crap, tonight is Brandon's dad's birthday, and they're having a big family party at their house. How can I go like this?

I might not have a choice. Bran's mom likes me, some might even say *adores*. His dad? Yeah, not so much. Mr. Elpusan isn't necessarily homophobic—at least, according to Brandon. Rosie's theory is he just doesn't want his son dating someone from the “other side of the tracks.” Or, in my case, the other side of the freeway. Every misstep is a point against me.

I shoot a text to Bran and Rosie telling them I'm fine and to pick me up for the party at six. Might as well update them together. It'll save me the trouble of repeating myself.

“What the hell?” Brandon says. “Say that again?”

He hovers over me in my living room, arms folded, Rosie

beside him. I sit up on the couch, hugging my knees, feeling like a seven-year-old being scolded by overprotective parents.

"I said someone outed me at school, I got jumped, and my bike was jacked."

"And you didn't tell me any of this?"

"Why didn't you call us, Bobby?" Rosie chimes in.

"Well, I thought about it, but talking's a little hard when your lip's the size of a beach ball. And telling your friends that you got beaten to a bloody pulp? Not something you spill over text. But please, continue making me feel shittier than I already do."

Damn, get out of the water—snark attack. The words are barely out, and I already regret them. Sometimes I can't help myself.

With a sigh, Bran's shoulders slump, and he plops down next to me. "Sorry. I just . . . I want to know what's happening with you. I want to be there for you."

Rosie sits on the other side of me. "What he said, minus the lovesick goo-goo eyes."

"Shut up, please." Bran squeezes my still-tender shoulder. "You were right, B. I . . . I don't know what it's like for you at school. I shouldn't have pushed."

"Not your fault what happened." I take Bran's hand. He may be a little overprotective, but I'll take that over the opposite extreme. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. None of this is okay." Bran grinds his teeth; the sound grates in my ears. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm gonna take my bike back, that's what."

"Seriously?" Rosie grimaces. "That's a good way to earn another beatdown."

"It's just a bike, B," Brandon says.

I drop his hand, stand up, and pace. "No, it's not."

"Why? What's so special about it?"

"That was my dad's bike. He rode it to work every morning. It was the last thing he gave me—right before he died."

They absorb my words in silence.

"Okay, we get it," Bran says. "It's important to you. But it's not more important than staying safe."

"You don't understand! Every day my memories of my dad get blurrier. Sometimes I have trouble just picturing his face. That bike is all I have left of him, Bran!"

Rosie rises and wraps me in a hug. "Don't stress, okay? We'll figure this out."

I really don't see how, but I take a full breath and try to calm myself. "Yeah, okay."

"All right," she continues. "Let's call operation bike retrieval problem number two. Problem one is protecting yourself. Eventually Rex or some other Neanderthal homophobe is gonna come at you again. When they do, use this." She pulls out a small canister from her bag.

I groan. "Pepper spray? Come on, really?"

"Hey, this right here? This stuff works. One spray, and I guarantee you T-Rex will be crying like the first day of kindergarten."

"I am not using pepper spray, Rosie. That is beyond weak."

Rosie shakes her head and turns to Bran. "Will you talk to your man, please?"

"Come on, B," Brandon says. "Keep it on you just in case. You have to protect yourself."

This is not going well. I take a desperate stab. “You know, carrying that would just play into the stereotype that gay guys can’t fight.”

“But you *can’t* fight,” Rosie says. She grins and makes a half-assed attempt to cover it with a trio of fingers.

My face flushes hot. “Yeah? Well . . . what about that time I kicked Toby Jenkins’s ass?”

Rosie frowns. “That was in second grade, and all you did was push him down and make him scrape his knee.”

“Little weasel had it coming. He knew there were no tag-backs.”

“I don’t like the idea of you trying to trade punches with a whole crew,” Brandon says. “Take the pepper spray, B. For me, okay?”

I grab the can out of Rosie’s hand. “God, I feel like a grade-A wuss.”

She pats me on the shoulder. “Well, Robert, better to feel like a wuss than feel another beatdown.”

She means well, and she’s kind of right. Ugh. I hate it when Rosie’s right. It usually means things are about to get worse. I pocket the spray with no intention of ever using it.

I scowl, which shoots a wave of pain from my lips to my eye. “Maybe I shouldn’t go to the party looking like this. Not the best impression for your parents.”

“What?” Bran blinks at me. “You said you’d come. We haven’t hung out in a while.”

“B, I look like I took an adamantium claw to the face.”

“Am I going to have to bust out the Guilt-a-Tron?”

“Come on, Bran.”

His eyebrows shoot up and his lips curl inward in a reverse pucker. In a robotic voice, he says, “Do not. Disappoint. Guilt-a-Tron. Guilt-a-Tron. Will make you feel. Guilt.”

Rosie shudders. “God . . . *nerds*. Make it stop.”

I straighten my back, lift my chin. “Guilt-a-Tron’s not gonna work, B. Nope, not this time.” A mechanical-like whimper escapes Bran’s pouting lips. “All right, all right.” I punctuate my defeat with a sigh. “Let’s go.”

Bran springs up from the couch. “Yay!”

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ROUND 5

Brandon drives us to the party in his Dragon Fire Red BMW 320i—the kind of ride that screams tourist to the hardened MacArthur Park locals. It's a gorgeous machine with a sun-roof and twenty-inch chrome rims. Not your stereotypical rice rocket. A boyfriend with a luxury car is a definite plus, but sometimes all of Bran's swanky stuff reminds me how little Mom and I have.

"Hey," Rosie says from the back seat, "when are you gonna let me get behind the wheel of this sweet ride?"

"What?" Brandon frowns. "No way are you qualified to drive this ultimate synthesis of luxury and machinery."

"Why, because I'm a girl? Dude, don't be sexist."

"Tell her, B."

"He won't let me drive, either," I say.

Bran shifts gears. "Not until you learn to drive stick, he said without sexual innuendo."

"Ew," Rosie says. "Please put on some music now so I can forget the image you just put in my brain."

The best part of Bran's ride is his dope sound system and even dooper playlist. He punches up one of our favorite tracks, "Fallin' Down" by the fierce Filipina rapper Ruby Ibarra.

"Aw, that's my jam," Rosie says, and we bob our heads and

rap along to Ruby's sick flow. I flub a line, but Rosie nails every syllable with the swag of a battle-tested emcee.

The hook hits, and I check my features in the visor mirror. After I woke up, I applied another cold compress—this time a bag of frozen carrots—to my bruises. The marks are a bright shade of purple, but they look better than they did yesterday. Still, not a great look for dinner with your boyfriend's family.

When we walk in, the place is quiet, which isn't surprising. Brandon's extended family is always on Filipino time, so they probably won't arrive for another hour.

Compared to my tiny apartment, Bran's house looks like a mansion. Whenever I step through the front door, I enter a world I've only seen in movies or television.

The rooms are spacious and filled with furnishings straight out of a Pier 1 catalog. Their living room alone is larger than our entire apartment, and it's centered around an ornate marble fireplace that dwarfs our lone bathroom. Above the mantel hangs a framed family portrait of Brandon and his parents in Filipino formal wear; Bran looks dapper in an embroidered long-sleeved barong tagalog. The photograph is beautiful, but it only makes me wish Dad, Mom, and I could have taken our own family portrait before he passed.

A beautiful capiz shell chandelier hangs in the far corner like a cascading waterfall. All of this luxury is paid for by Mr. Elpusan's dentistry practice, which is one of the most successful in Silver Lake. Whenever I catch Bran's father giving me a disapproving glance, I wonder whether he's judging not only my personal character, but the condition of my teeth. I've never been to a dentist—it's an expense Mom has never been able to

afford—but I relate when people say that they dread going to see one. For completely different reasons.

The scent of rich peanut butter filters out from the kitchen. Mrs. Elpusan is cooking my favorite Pinoy entrée, kare-kare, a dish of oxtail, crisp string beans, and a thick peanut butter sauce. Oh my God, it smells like peanut-buttery heaven.

She's busily frying lumpia at the stove but stops everything when we stroll into the kitchen.

"Bobby! Rosie! How are you?" She's all warmth and positive energy until she sees my bruises. "What happened? Are you okay? Do you need some ice?"

My cheeks go warm, and I dip my chin. "No, Tita, I'm fine. Thank you. Just got into a little, uh, disagreement at school is all."

"A disagreement?" Mr. Elpusan enters from the living room, wearing a USC sweater over a collared shirt, his gait slow and measured like his voice. "That's not what we called it back in my day." He throws a smirk that does little to mask his dislike of me. "Bobby, I hope you're not getting into too much trouble over there in the hood."

Bran winces. "Really, Dad? 'The hood?'"

"Hi, Mr. Elpusan. Happy birthday, sir. No, it was nothing, really."

He eyes me like I'm a cockroach invading his home. "If you say so." As he turns from me to Rosie, his expression makes a complete one-eighty, from disapproval to delight. "Hello again, Rosie. Glad you could make it."

Rosie shows off her parent-winning charm. "Thanks, Mr. Elpusan. You know I wouldn't miss me some Filipino home cooking. Happy thirtieth birthday!"

Mr. Elpusan laughs and gives Rosie a hug.

Happy thirtieth birthday? Really? Bran's dad is turning forty-six, and his salt-and-pepper hair is more salt than pepper. And since when does she love Filipino food? She's a vegetarian! Ugh. I love Rosie, but sometimes she's so extra, not to mention disgustingly lovable. Obviously Mr. Elpusan would much rather have her dating Bran than me—whether he's a homophobe or not.

"We're going to hang out upstairs until everyone gets here," Bran tells his parents and leads us upstairs.

Bran's room is practically overflowing with geek memorabilia. Some freebies from the shop, but most are bought and paid for. Teen Titans maquettes crowd his desk, bobbleheads of every Avenger populate his bookshelf, and a Wilce Portacio-drawn X-Men poster hangs above his bed. While I'm completely envious, I can't hate. I'd cover my room with geek merchandise, too, if I had cash to burn.

Most of the room, though, is covered with his main genre obsession: *zombies*. Movie posters of *28 Days Later* and *Shawn of the Dead* dominate the walls, and *The Walking Dead* trade paperbacks crowd his bookshelf, propped up by a zombie Wolverine bust. It's as if George Romero vomited all over his room.

Rosie sits at Bran's desk while he hovers over her shoulder. They're working on a joint comic book project, *Zombie Slayer Squad*, for an amateur creator contest at the Villain's Lair. Bran is writing the story, while Rosie handles the artwork.

I kick back on the bed and read a *New Mutants* back issue—or at least try to read while my friends struggle through a bout of creative differences.

“No, no, no, the splash page needs more red,” Bran says. “We need entrails. Long, slimy, dangly entrails. Ooh, and maybe an undigested cheeseburger spilling out.”

Rosie drops her pencil. “Dude, that’s disgusting and not at all kid-friendly.”

“Kid-friendly? It’s a zombie book! With undead kid zombies!”

“Yeah, not with me drawing it.”

I groan. “Enough with the zombie talk, *please*. I don’t need to be reminded that I totally look like one right now.”

“All right, all right.” Bran pulls a DVD case from a shelf. “Hey, check it out.” He holds up a bootleg copy of *Captain America: Civil War*.

“Dude,” I say. “How’d you get a hold of a copy of *Civil War*? It’s not even out until May.”

“Hey, you know I have my ways.” He pops the DVD into his flat-screen.

We sit down on the floor in front of the screen and settle back against Bran’s bed with Rosie in the middle.

While we watch, Bran indulges in one of his favorite pastimes: breaking down the gay subtext. “It’s not even really subtext!” he says. “It’s totally blatant! Every dude in Captain America’s life is competing for his love, and they’re all mad jealous of each other. I mean, you can just feel the seething jealousy festering between Falcon and Bucky. And every time Falcon spreads his wings, he’s saying, *‘I’m ready to take flight with you, Cap. I’m ready to embrace our love.’*”

“Preach,” I say, raising a fist. When Bran shifts into queer analyst geek mode—all passionate, his hands animated—he’s

pretty damn adorable. If Rosie weren't here and I weren't so beat up, I'd probably be all over him.

"Queer love triangle." Rosie gives a thumbs up. "I like it."

"No, no, no!" Bran says. "There's also Iron Man, who shows up at the end to declare his love for Cap. Him opening his armor represents him coming out of his shell into a larger queer world. It's not a triangle but a beautiful gay square!"

"Damn, I love it when you talk queer and geeky," I say. I lean over Rosie and plant a kiss on Bran's cheek; the contact makes me wince. He pulls me closer, sending a shock of pain through my shoulder.

"Okay, this is a triangle I really don't need to be a part of." She frees herself from the pile and rises.

"Kids!" Bran's mom calls from the stairs. "Come down now! We're going to eat soon!"

Bran's face lights up, and we all bolt for the door.

The spread Mrs. Elpusan has laid out is drool-inducing: pancit palabok, pork adobo, sinigang, and of course, kare-kare. I pile my plate with more than my fair share and with barely a twinge of guilt. Rarely do I ever get to enjoy such a feast, so you can be damn sure I am going to take advantage of it.

"You Pinoys are such meat-eaters," Rosie says, frowning. Fortunately for her, the menu includes fresh lumpia stuffed with lettuce, carrots, and tofu.

At the dessert table, a plate of ube-filled sweet buns entices me. "Yes! Ube! Your mom knows me so well." I can't resist. I grab an extra plate and stack it high.

"Hey, that's not just for you, you know." Bran grabs a bun off

my plate and bites into it. Besides comic books, the other passion Bran and I share is anything and everything ube-related. “We’re such purple yam stans.”

“I prefer ‘ube groupies.’”

We eat out on the patio with Bran’s younger cousins, all elementary and junior high age. The conversation is fun, easy. They’re all so close-knit. Makes me wonder what growing up with a large family would have been like.

In the corner there’s an elaborate karaoke setup complete with video screen and dual microphones, because of course there is. Bran’s Tita Betsy holds court with her rendition of the Tagalog love ballad “Nandito Ako,” emoting hard like she’s singing to the one that got away.

I feel the longing in every line, but not for a lost love the words supposedly convey. Well, not for a person, at least. My folks never taught me to speak Tagalog, mainly because their parents barely taught any to them. Like many American-born Pinoys, I know some words, but not enough to fully understand. Whenever I hear the melodic flow of the mother tongue, it feels like I’m missing a part of me that I may never recover.

Bran is so moved by the performance that he takes my hand. I let him. He’s out to his extended family, which means I am too, I guess. But that doesn’t mean all of his relatives approve. At the table beside us, another of his aunts scowls at us and makes the sign of the cross. I wonder if she’s praying for our souls or condemning us to hell. Either way, I don’t need to put up with her bad vibe.

I squeeze Bran’s hand. “Hey, can we go inside? Getting a little chilly out here,” I say, staring back at the judgmental tita.

Bran nods, and we head inside. Cheers burst from the living room. A group of adults are crowded around the huge flat-screen watching a boxing match. I immediately recognize the fight because it was the first one I'd ever watched back when I was a little kid: Manny "Pacman" Pacquiao vs. "The Golden Boy" Oscar De La Hoya. Leave it to a gathering of Filipinos to cheer for a Pacquiao fight that's eight years old as if it were broadcasting live.

Brandon takes my hand. "Yeah, I don't want to watch this. Let's head back upstairs."

He's never been a boxing fan, and after my recent ass-beating, it's probably the last thing he wants to watch. But seeing my childhood hero feels too much like fate—even though I'm not sure I believe in fate.

"Can we check it out?" I make my way to an empty seat on the couch. Rosie and Bran follow but have to settle for a pair of chairs against the wall.

The fight is only in the second round, but Pacquiao is already controlling the pace. He's much too fast for the bigger, slower De La Hoya. Manny continuously circles Oscar, making him look like a statue. Over and over, his straight left splits Oscar's defense and pummels the Golden Boy's handsome features. But Oscar can't touch Manny. When he lunges with his jab, Pacman has already floated away.

Despite the sting, my mouth curls into a smile. After what that hulking menace Rex did to me, watching a smaller man best a larger one is exactly what I need. Living vicariously through Manny isn't much, but it'll do for now.

In the fifth round, a flurry of combinations from Pacman

rocks De La Hoya. Manny presses the advantage, dancing on the balls of his feet and forcing Oscar back. At times, Oscar looks like an inert punching bag. A tilting tree caught in the hurricane that is Manny Pacquiao. The party guests cheer at the spectacle, but I start to sympathize with De La Hoya. I know what it feels like to be helpless against a punishing onslaught.

At the same time, I'm swept up in the excitement of a Pinoy warrior showcasing his unparalleled skills. Manny is the man. The GOAT. It can't be denied.

By the seventh round, Oscar's face is one big red welt. I wince and look away from the carnage. One commentator calls it "death by a thousand left hands." I wish the referee would put an end to the lopsided spectacle. After the eighth, Oscar confers with his corner and decides to stop it himself. Thankfully. He rises from his stool and embraces Manny in the center of the ring, congratulating him.

Pacquiao, gracious in victory, tells the legendary De La Hoya, "You're still my idol." I mouth the words along with him.

Someone switches the channel to a *New Girl* rerun and the crowd filters out for more food and bathroom breaks. I cut a path toward the front door and step outside into the night chill.

My mind replays images of Pacquiao dominating the bigger De La Hoya, humbling him. Oscar and Manny morph into Rex and me. If Manny can take the fight to a larger opponent, why can't I?

The memory of Rosie's words slams me back to reality: *But you can't fight.*

I shrug and look at the crescent moon as it knifes through the smoggy sky. "Who says I can't learn how?"

“Learn what?” Bran asks from behind me.

I turn to face him, this boy I care about more than any other, who makes me feel things inside that I decided long ago were right and true.

“Nothing. Just wondering what comes next.” I take his hand, squeeze it. “Listen, I gotta head out.”

“What? Right now?”

I release his hand. “Tell Rosie I’ll see her at school.”

“Hold up a minute, B. I’ll drive you.”

“No, thanks. I want to run.”

Bran’s eyes go wide like I just sat on his copy of *The Walking Dead* #1. “What, all the way to MacArthur Park?”

With a shake of my head, I say, “Uh-uh. Farther.”

My plan is still forming, so I don’t tell him anything more. For now, I whirl around and dash down the street.