

THE AUDACITY OF MY FATHER

The grinding sound coming from the garage door chains would always put me in a state of panic. My parents were not supposed to be coming home this early. I looked at the clock, 9:56 pm. Usually, they would be home by 10:30, but something must have happened that changed their schedule. I hid my progress report from school underneath all the mail we got today. I earned one B, three C's, and a D- in my report card. For someone who is Asian, those grades were enough to ship me back to my home country, the Philippines. Adding to my embarrassment, the fear of what my father would say and do after he sees this, was akin to being an emotional death. I can hear his screams of how he has such an unappreciative and corrupt son whose only purpose in coming to America was to eat chocolates and drink soda pop. This selective catastrophization, albeit my own choice, would only add to the mental torture that would eat at me for the rest of the night.

During the weekdays, my dad said I needed to be in bed by nine. In my opinion, it is an arbitrary rule made by someone who was never in his child's life until now. A rule created by a stranger than an authority figure, yet he holds many cards. Cards that I needed to have for me to escape this forced captivity. Too bad, I'm not a great example of a model prisoner, so the mad dash straight to my room before my parents opened the door to my house was always a roll of the dice. Did they hear me shut the door in my room? Did they hear my bed creaking as I jumped in and hid in the covers? It was a heart-stopping game of cat and mouse to see if my parents opened the door as I lay still, playing like a dead possum in the middle of the highway. I ran a quick checklist of the chores I've done today. Laundry? Check. Vacuum the house? Check. Did I erase the phone calls from the random women who would call for my father? Check. What about the lawn? Did I do the lawn?? Awwww shit....

A tense electrical spark ran up my spine as I prayed that my father was too tired to care about the lawn to do anything about it. I looked at the clock: 10:03 p.m., and the murmurs of my dad and my stepmom were too low for me to make out. I pulled the covers at my eyelids. My slanted eyes, at least this time, were an advantage as a tiny slit of light was enough to allow me to have an awareness of what was happening. I looked dead at the door, like a little Elian Gonzalez anticipating the FBI agents to bust through the door.

My heart is beating so fast I can hear it reverberate through my ears. I grabbed my nose and blew out as hard as I could, hoping to stop the motion of my ear drums from drowning out the internal noise of my body. I need to hear what's going on outside. I held my breath.

Nothing. I listen for the wooden boards of the stairs to make their signature creaking sound as my parents step on them on their way to their room—right on cue. My brain returns to the sounds of old whaling ships I watched on TV and how their wooden hulls would groan as they bobbed through the ocean. I saw one shadow pass my room, then another.

As I listen for my parents' door to open and close, I see a shadow come back towards my room. The sound of a heavy foot confirmed it. The hallway light was hidden from the space that occupied the front door. It stops in my room, and the wooden stairway groans again as the grinding sound of the garage door chains returns. I hear cursing and tools rattling against each other inside of a toolbox. I hear the grind of the bottom of the garbage bin as it's being dragged against the concrete sidewalk, making room for the lawnmower to maneuver its way out of the garage.

Then I hear it. The sound of two metal handles as they meet, one the frame of the mower, the other the emergency handle. Then, the smooth ripping sound of the starter cord is pulled. Once... twice. Then there it is. The coughing of the engine came to life as the blades cut through the warm summer night. The whirring of the lawnmower drowned out the yells and

complaints of our neighbors. Who the hell was mowing their lawn in the middle of the night? As absurd as this sounds, my father doesn't care. He puts on headphones and a headlamp and walks to our yard.

I look at the clock again. 10:17 pm. This is the beginning of what's going to be a long night. I watched him in between the blinds, going back and forth. I move slowly, trying not to make a sound that would give him the idea that I am still awake. I sure as hell don't want to get two beatings tonight. The sound of a lawnmower hitting grass is way different from it slicing through the air; the acoustics turn into more of a hum when the blades are hitting tough grass, and not the thud, thud, thud of it just hitting air. Something about that sound relaxed me, like sirens that teased Odysseus, but unlike the Greek hero, I went from a blink to two blinks, and then it somehow lulled me to sleep.

The door into my room slammed open like the sound of thunder. I felt someone violently grab my hair, feeling a spark of pain inside my mind's eye. I opened my eyes to see my father's teeth glowing in the dark room. The smell of dirt and freshly cut grass permeated the room, mixing with sweat and body odor. I felt a second tugging of my hair, more painful than the last. "What did I tell you that you had to do today!" he barked. In his thick Filipino accent.

"Mow the lawn," I said, wincing in pain.

"So what? Huh. You're ignoring me now!" He brings his face right next to mine.

'Look at me!" he snarled.

"You want to live back out there in the street, ha! You think living here is free?" he asked with another tug.

"No," I whispered, my hands blindly searching for the source of all the pain, my eyes closed.

"No, what!" he said angrily.

"No sir," I thundered.

"Open your fucking eyes!" he ordered.

I obeyed.

I felt him tugging my hair toward the door, and my body reacted by getting off the bed. A light shone from the closed cover of my eyelids. I opened them.

I saw my father standing in front of me. His 5'5 frame, though short, is bristling with muscles; even in his mid-30s, he had the body of a modern-day God. He was a powerlifter then, and his body became his ticket to America. He looked like a Filipino version of Burt Reynolds with his thick, curly hair and mustache. He was a man who demanded respect and perfection. Though he was out of the Army, military discipline was painfully enforced. However, tonight, all I could see were his calves, as big as a farm animal, the veins still pumping, and the remnants of cut grass stuck to his leg hairs.

“Look up!” he yelled once again.

As I lifted my head and opened my eyes, I felt a shower of warm earth and the sharp edges of green as he dumped a black plastic bag over my head, showering me with fresh-cut grass.

I choked on the dirt as it filled my nostrils and the back of my throat. My eyes became sticky as tears, dirt, and grass combined into a greenish-brown sludge.

“I want this room clean before you go to school in the morning,” he yelled once again and slammed the door again, turning off the hallway light.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yeee....ss... sir..” I said mid-cough.

I can hear a woman's voice in the background and a loud giggle as my ears have become sensitive to even the most minute sound. That giggle came from my stepmother, a woman who, if you combine all the evil stepmothers in all the Disney movies, what would come out would be her. A woman who was tricked into being a parent through my father's forgetfulness, I pitied her. Knowing she wasn't the prettiest girl in the ball, not by a long shot, she did have something my father could not resist. Her finances. This dynamic and her lust for

all of his attention made her the proverbial dragon to my knight. Unfortunately, at least in this iteration, I never had the training nor could I afford the armor. Suddenly, the last fifteen minutes of noise went from the continuous sound of a freight train to now dead silence. I feel the door being slammed shut from my parent's room.

The smell of dandelions, crabgrass, and the thick stems of a stinging nettle, made my nose itch and my fingers bleed, and the cycle of 'god damns' and 'fuck that hurt' went like an album on repeat for hours. The big pieces were easy enough to pick up, but what got on my nerves were the bugs, which I wondered felt the same way I did. One second, you're dead asleep; the second, you're mired in some foreign shit you didn't plan for.

The rest of the night was a blur as I grabbed handfuls of grass and returned them to the plastic bag. I was lucky enough to find two rolls of duct tape and a lint roller in the garage to pick up the dirt that had spread throughout the carpet. But as the morning sun came and illuminated my room, it, too, turned into sludge as the sweat from my body scarred the light gray carpet and turned it into a mud pit.

"Shit," I said to myself.

"This isn't going to get done today," I said to myself, adding to the list of chores I didn't complete on time and the punishments that would undoubtedly come. I feel like I'm drowning in debt, with more punishments to pay for, and my body doesn't have enough capital to pay for it all without going crazy. I turned around and saw a small brown ball in the corner of the room, away from the mess I created. I found a worm hiding within one of the apertures of this brown ball, and as I got closer, removing its body from the ball, I noticed something that took the remaining energy away from my body and dropped me to my knees. There it was, a red cross. The same red cross that signified the emblem of the school I was attending. I opened the brown ball and realized it was my report card and at the bottom of the page - my father's signature.

