

## The Low-Flying Dove (Novel Excerpt)

*April 1986, Sagada, Mountain Province (Island of Luzon), the Philippines*

Jojo was six when his father died, too young to appreciate the way that his absence would hollow him out, but old enough to know that he was losing something important. There had been other deaths in the town, but Jojo had been only vaguely aware of them the way he was aware of the stench of a dead animal in the road or the changing of the months.

When he came into the central room where the family shared meals, slept, and hosted guests, Jojo was startled to see the corpse in the wooden chair, staring at him and looking nothing like the man who, two days before, had pushed the hair off his forehead and kissed him. His mother was in the process of tying his father's legs and chest to the chair to prevent him from falling over, and she looked up expectantly as Jojo entered the house, disappointment crossing her features when she saw her oldest son.

"Mama?" he cried, wanting to go to her, but afraid to get any closer to the corpse.

"Help me, Jojo," she said, her voice older and sadder than yesterday. "He's starting to stiffen."

"Mama," he said, frozen to the place where he'd stopped near the doorway. He was breathless from fear. "I can't."

His mother sighed heavily, and nodded as if she'd expected this. "*Ate*," she hollered, and then turned when Jojo's older sister came from the dirty kitchen behind the house where she had been washing clothes. Ana-Lyn was only nine, but knew at once what was required of her, and placed her hands squarely on her father's shoulders, carefully avoiding his spiritless gaze. Jojo's mother worked quickly, and soon the dead man was strapped to the chair three times over from shoulders to ankles.

“Where did he go, Mama?” Jojo whispered, but the house was quiet, and so his words could be heard plainly.

“He’s still there,” she said roughly, her voice unfeeling and harsh. “We give his spirit ten days to leave his body. Then we carry him to his coffin.”

Jojo nodded, but didn’t understand. He wanted to run away from the cold gaze that still held him, but now he was more afraid than ever.

“Mama,” he said, hoping to fool his father’s spirit into thinking that he wasn’t terrified, “can I go . . .”

He didn’t know how to finish the question, didn’t know what to ask for. It didn’t matter. His mother nodded anyway, not looking at him, staring at her dead husband as if she might will him back to existence.

For the next ten days, the house became a graveyard. Everything ceased. Meals were eaten at relatives’ houses, baths were taken in the river. A table and several chairs guarded the entrance to the house, and old men who had been Jojo’s father’s companions played cards, gambling to earn money for the expenses of the deceased. The cool weather was a welcome omen, they said, proof that this elder of the town would be blessed by the spirits. It also helped with the smell, which became pungent after two days. He deserved a hanging coffin, they said, and he would get the spot they knew he’d wanted, high enough up to look over the valley and keep watch over his family up on the ridge.

On the tenth day, the weather turned suddenly warm. The stench became unbearable, and the men who came into the house to wrap Jojo’s father in his burial cloth wore handkerchiefs over their faces. Jojo hadn’t entered the house since that first day, and although he was afraid, he understood now that he must accompany the other men to his father’s burial. His whole life depended on this moment, this chance to be blessed.

“Mama,” he whispered as he held her hand and peered into the doorway of his own home where the men had cut the ropes, covered his father in a yellowed burlap cloth, and pried him off his chair.

“Go on, *anak*,” she answered, pushing him forward.

“Come with me?”

“You know I can’t,” she said, and he thought he saw a flash of resentment in her eyes, but then it was gone.

Carrying the body was a job for the men. The women, who were too clumsy and might drop the body, would wait up above, watching the procession and praying that the dead man’s spirit would touch them and leave behind only blessings.

Jojo wasn’t tall enough to touch the body as it was carried by six of the town’s elders, but he walked beneath, the knife his mother had given him concealed in the folds of his shirt. As they walked down the small dirt path, slowly so that no one would risk stumbling and dropping the body, he heard all around him the hum of shadowed prayers.

“Bless me, brother.”

“Watch over me now, Miguel.”

“Thank you for this blessing, for the juices of your life.”

The last one smiled and held up his hand, wet from the expired life that was flowing out of Jojo’s father.

The trail descended sharply, and then came to a flat spot at the bottom of the valley. The sky had grown dark without Jojo noticing, and the lanterns that had seemed merely decorative at the start now cast long shadows on the brush around them. Jojo was sure that the moving shadows were unfriendly *dumende* slipping in and out of the brush, waiting to reach out and grab him. Up ahead Jojo glimpsed a rock wall with dozens of coffins bolted onto its face. If he didn’t act now, it would

be too late.

He took the knife and thrust upward, its sharp tip poking through the burial cloth and into his father's body more easily than he expected. He inhaled sharply, and wondered if anyone had felt the stab, but the men were still murmuring their thanks and requests, and seemed to have forgotten about Jojo. At first he thought that he'd been unsuccessful, that he'd have to stab again. But then he felt the wetness on his forehead, and smelled the ripeness of decay as it snaked down his face and dripped inside the collar of his shirt. He was overcome by the need to vomit, but plugged his nose until it passed.

This was his blessing. To be disgusted by what his father was giving to him now would be the denial of his father's hopes for him, the casting off of his birthright. As he watched the men break his father's legs and arms to fit him into a small coffin, his body curled up in the same fetal position that brought him into this world, Jojo shuddered. The burial cloth slipped a little, and he saw his father's sunken cheeks and drawn skin. In the orange lantern light, his father looked small, like a wrinkled child. If Jojo had wanted to, he could've curled up his own body in the coffin, and it would not have been much smaller than his father's now, he thought.

It took twelve men to get the coffin up on the rock face where two large, metal bolts already waited for it. Jojo wanted to help, but knew that he was too small to be of use. The coffin was far up the wall, higher than most of the rest of them, a place of honor because he had been an important town elder. His high position would allow his spirit to easily soar through the valley, up to the family he left behind, to check on his wife, sons, and daughter. He would come whenever they spoke his name to invite him—to parties, to family gatherings, to celebrate life. Throughout the generations, as long as his name was remembered and spoken, he would come.

It was a thought that chilled Jojo even though it was supposed to be a comfort. As he watched the men bolt first the coffin and then the wooden chair to the rock, he knew at once what

his father's blessing had meant. These men had no need for him, the son of a younger generation. He was of little use to his mother and sister, who were more capable than he at harvesting rice and washing clothes. His brother was still a baby who would grow up without any memory of the father who had given him life. Jojo's blessing was not here, he seemed to hear his father's spirit say. His blessing was in another place, a place where he would become more than any of these old men would ever be. His birthright would be to leave, and to bring back the things that his father could never have provided.

The juice from his father's body had dried, leaving his face sticky. Now completely forgotten by the men who, exhausted, had finally completed their task, Jojo walked up the dark trail, no longer afraid.



*December 2003, Near Catbalogan (Island of Samar), the Philippines*

Maryelle was going to be a runner. She had seen the Olympics only once, when she accompanied her mother to Catbalogan to ask an aunt for money, her gaze fixed to the small black box with tiny people moving inside while her mother sat in the nearby kitchen and wept. The details of the memory had fogged, but she still remembered the dark-skinned woman gliding around the track, the frenzied crowd roaring as she passed one runner after another. It only took one glimpse of that fearless power to make Maryelle realize that she had seen her destiny. She imagined herself outrunning not just people, but hunger and fear and heat as she sprinted barefoot down dirt roads, past rice paddies reflecting the sky.

Her family lived in a nipa hut on the coast of Samar a few miles from Catbalogan, where the roads were still rough and the sky opened up to the ocean like a smile. The days were too hot to think about moving more than what was required to get to and from school. But in the evenings, when the sun took a breath, Maryelle liked to see what her legs could do.

When she was ten, Maryelle met her match in the form of a white woman, the first Maryelle had seen who wasn't on television. When Maryelle spotted her, the woman was running down the only street that led into their tiny *barangay*, dodging pedicabs and street vendors. Maryelle was with some of the girls in her *barkada*, walking from school in her starched white uniform, trying to beat the daylight home and losing.

The other girls giggled as the woman ran past, but Maryelle wasn't content to watch. When a few boys called out, "hey, Joe," and "hello," and then started running with the woman, Maryelle joined them.

"What's your name?"

"Where are you going?"

"Where did you come from?"

The kids called out in Waray Waray or Tagalog as they ran, and the woman gave one-word responses, mostly in English that they could only occasionally understand.

The woman said her name, but it wasn't one they'd heard before, and so they pushed it around their tongues, and then gave up when the syllables didn't come out right.

The woman laughed, and when they reached a dirt path that turned off from the main road, paused long enough to consider her next move.

"Here," Maryelle shouted, and then ran up the small footpath and motioned for the woman to follow.

"*Takbo tayó!* Let's run!" the woman said in stilted Tagalog, and the kids, who had now doubled in number, made no attempt to suppress their amazed laughter.

They took the footpath up the hill and beyond, to the places where most of them lived in nipa huts, or for the luckier ones, cement structures with corrugated metal rooftops. This time of night the sky was electric with sunset, and even the most ordinary scenes looked larger and more

beautiful in its pink glow. Two men shared a cigarette while leaning against the wall, staring at the woman's pale, muscular legs with open curiosity. A mother hung out the window of her tiny *sari-sari* store, waving as the woman and a cloud of thirty or so children flew by. Two little girls held hands, barely visible through the haze of smoke from chicken and fish and pork being roasted over cook fires everywhere. The twilight sky lit them up, casting bright shades of crimson and lavender on their faces and clothes, while impossibly blue clouds swirled above them. Maryelle cherished the thought that perhaps it wasn't merely the setting of the sun, but that the woman had brought magic that transformed the world into a beautiful hue of glittering rose.

As the woman continued, more children ran with her, most of them boys. Maryelle had been one of the first to join, and as they climbed up another hill, her tiny lungs felt ready to burst. Two by two, the other kids dropped off, clinging to the hope that they'd catch the woman on the way back down. Maryelle had never run like this before, but it was impossible to give up now.

They climbed higher, and as houses gave way to trees, Maryelle felt her first pang of fear. When she looked over her shoulder, she saw that only two boys remained, barely trailing her. When she looked ahead, she saw the woman's yellow T-shirt, wet with sweat, but still moving. Ahead of her the path continued, but with sunset fading, the light was seeping out of whatever was ahead. Maryelle had never been this far before.

The path climbed steeply again, and Maryelle said a prayer that the *duwende* would not mind her trespassing, crossed herself, and charged on, this time scampering ahead of the woman. There was dim light ahead, somewhere up above, and Maryelle determined to find it before she turned around and went home. Her legs ached and her breathing was tight and painful, but she continued on.

"Very good," the woman cried in breathless Tagalog. "You're so fast!"

Another steep incline brought them out above the trees, and when at last the woman

stopped and Maryelle dared to look behind her, she saw that she was alone. All of the other boys had dropped off somewhere back in their known world, near their mothers and fathers and the familiar comforts of home. If there had been anyone to scold her, Maryelle would be in trouble now, but her mother had been gone for more than a year, and her father would be drinking by now, hardly aware of her. It was only her fear of the unknown that kept her too nervous to speak.

But then she turned and saw what the woman had stopped for.

“Beautiful,” Maryelle breathed. The wind was suddenly all around them and seemed to pull the words from her mouth.

They had reached the ridge above the town, and from where they stood they could not only see the town in its entirety, but a few tiny islands off the coast, and beyond that an ocean of other islands and worlds that Maryelle had not yet dreamed of, but would forever after this day. The water held a faint memory of what the sky had been, glowing with ever-cooling shades of the sun. They could see cook fires all throughout the *barangay*, little smoky flames that seemed to proclaim, *I am alive!* Endless miles of rice paddies and palm trees framed the *barangay* on either side, dissected only by the one road that led to bigger cities, to places people never returned from.

The noises of roosters crowing and children laughing and the church bells ringing had been all around them below, but now they were whispering echoes underneath the whoosh of the wind. A storm was brewing, and the warm evening clouds that had moments before been so full of light that they seemed to glow more brightly than the sun, were now furious shades of blue and purple, threatening to take over the sky.

The woman stood with her hands on her lower back, leaning back as if her posture helped her take in a little more of the big sky.

“You like to run?” she said in Tagalog, glancing over at Maryelle, who nodded eagerly.

The woman smiled to herself. “Me too.”

“Why you are you here, *Ate?*” Maryelle said in Tagalog since the women hadn’t seemed to understand anything she’d said in Waray Waray.

The woman looked at Maryelle and seemed puzzled at first, but then nodded as if the words had shifted inside her head so that she could understand them.

“School,” she replied in choppy Tagalog. “Education is the world.”

Maryelle understood that this was not exactly what the woman meant to say, and yet the words made sense to her when she looked at the horizon and imagined all of the places she might go. If school could bring this woman here, perhaps it could bring Maryelle to the places out there.

They waited in silence, watching the wind whip up the clouds while the tall grass at their feet trembled and swayed in awe. There was something terrifying and wonderful about standing up there, sharing a moment with a foreigner, feeling for once like she had something to be proud of. It was a feeling she would try to recall for many years to come, trying to pin down each detail so she could recreate the scene. It was the feeling, she finally decided, of being free.

“Come on,” the woman grinned as the rain began. “Let’s run.”