# Pesos

The teller at Banco de Oro called me Coco, even though my ID said Conrado. He never once looked down at the card. My father called me Conrado whenever he rang to ask for money.

I wired fifteen thousand pesos to the Dinagat slums on the first of every month for seventy-two months to keep him alive. All he left was forty-three loose coins in a Nescafé tin and a smell that had not worked out he was gone yet. The room measured nine feet by seven beneath a corrugated iron roof, trapping the midday heat. Other people pray in times like these. He taught me to count on the jeepney to the market, fish first, then the coins. The arithmetic was simple. Every year, there was less of him and more of them.

Paint sealed the window against the alley, and the door lacked a lock. A lone bulb hung from a stripped wire above a rice pot, black crust welded to the steel. His foam mattress was worn brown in the shape of a man, and above it hung two shirts on a nail and a wall fan that did not turn. By ten, the heat sat on my chest, and the sun was a creditor with all afternoon to wait. A thousand pesos was all that reached him. They took the rest, built a shrine on an island and called it heaven, and my father gave them fourteen thousand pesos a month for a photograph of the Master above his bed and a nickel ring.

Next door, a woman boiled pagpag, and the smell came through the plywood before her shadow did. Vinegar, stale frying oil, and meat gone sour in the heat, cooked down too many times to still behave like meat. It sold for eight pesos a plate. My father ate it on the days the thousand ran out before the month did.

The pot was boiling when I arrived, and it would still be boiling when I left. By noon, the smell had moved to the back of my throat and built itself a home there. The alley outside ran a meter wide and carried the street's water down its center in black runoff, and children played through it as a radio somewhere pushed out a PBMA hymn.

*The Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association calls the faithful to remember in His light.*

*Lord, keep the name within Your light*
*Let no forgetting reach him where he rests under Your care*
*Bless the offering carried each day, small but faithful in Your sight*
*Bless the hands that send, the hands that receive, the island that does not abandon*

I am not sure if the prayer is for him.

Money bought distance. I left as a boy with nothing but a suitcase and came back a woman with a salary. Each time I tapped confirm, the screen flashed its approval, and thousands of miles

away, he hovered over a cracked phone waiting for the balance to climb. He knew nothing of the hours that funded those digits. All he knew was that when the money landed, he ate.

The peso had found that island before. When my mother was sick, my aunt in Boston sent eighty thousand pesos, enough for the operation. My nanay had no account to put it in. The only one of us with papers was my father, four years gone from the house by then. It went to him, and he agreed to come to Manila and take her to the hospital. The surgeon set a date, and my father did not board a plane that day, or any day after. He stopped answering, and she never got the operation. At the funeral, he told us he had donated the money to the PBMA because an angel told him our mother's soul was past saving.

Afterwards, the household did not grieve so much as re-route. Six siblings still needed uniforms, medicine, rice, and somebody to sign the cheque when the landlord came. I was sixteen when I became that person. The ID still said, Conrado. I mothered them anyway. That is what mothers do in this country. They save up and send their children away. I learned that the day I turned nineteen and took a job keying invoices in a back office, where the glass towers run the air conditioning so hard the cold hits you at the door like a second city. Outside, the boys sell cigarettes one at a time, and sleep under the flyover at noon because the pavement holds the heat until midnight.

The exchange rate lived beside my pulse. I budgeted around the peso's moods and the country's weather and was never, not once, late. On the wall where another man hangs his children, my father had hung a PBMA calendar, the Master looking down in his white suit, every feast day inked in his careful hand and the first of each month circled twice. This was where it went. Forty pesos of metal, and he had worn it past the bone, a wedding band to a god I was not asked to share. I put it on my thumb, where it spun loose, and took it off.

Under the bed lay the rest of him. Strips torn from a school notebook, every line crammed with the same block capitals.

*THE EFFEMINATE SHALL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.*

Forty pages of it, pressed so hard the pen had gone through to the page beneath and the page beneath that. All written in a room I paid for, on a mattress I paid for, by a bulb I paid for, and he had kept it dry like something worth preserving. The notebook left my hand before I decided to let it go. It hit the floor, and the laminated prayer card came out from between the pages, the Master's face looking up at me from the concrete, a hotline on the back, and an account number. The PBMA collects by bank transfer, the same as any utility.

One million eighty thousand pesos. Nineteen thousand dollars, on a bad day for the peso. I put my phone away and picked up his shirts. I had a flight at nine. The estate was one room. I gave it an hour.

Someone knocked on the tin wall twice, the knock of a man who already owns the place. He filled the doorway, and the room went dark, which was the only kind thing it had done all day.

White short-sleeved shirt ironed to a blade, soaked through at the navel. His ring was the same as my father's, and he held a folder under his arm, gone soft at the corners.

"Ma'am. Good noon. I am from the Philippine Benevo—"

"I know who you are."

"I came for Tatang Conrado." He untucked his shirt and dragged it across his face. "A faithful man—"

"What do you want?"

He stopped wiping. He looked at me properly now. "Who are you, ma'am?"

"I'm his daughter."

"Tatang had no daughter." There was nothing unkind in the way he said it.

I kept my voice flat. "What does he owe. I'm his next of kin."

He took that in without a flicker, and the smile came back a degree warmer.

"No, ma'am. Tatang settled in full." He said it with pride, as if the achievement were partly his. "I’m only here to close the file. One last maintenance payment. Four thousand pesos, due today."

"Maintenance for what?"

"The plot. There's a maintenance fee." His hand opened toward the walls, as if the heat and the stain in the foam counted in his favour. "We settle the clearance, and we bring him home."

"This was his home. I paid for it." I held up the water bill. "Third notice. You took his money every year. Where were you when he was in the hospital, before they sent him home to die?"

"The body is temporary, ma'am. We do not insure the flesh."

"No. You insured the hole you put it in. How much did he pay you?"

"He purchased the Divine Master Shrine package, ma'am."

"On my money. While he ate pagpag off the woman next door."

"And he reached it, ma'am. That is what people remember. Not how a man gets there."

"The only thing he reached was a coffin. He starved himself for it."

"It was never about the box, ma'am." Patient, as if I'd misread a figure. "He chose all of it himself. The casket, the embroidered barong instead of the plain one. But the engraving, that's what he cared about."

"The engraving?"

"He was very specific, ma'am."

"What does it say?"

He looked at me like he'd only just wondered who I was. "If you're his next of kin, then you know. Tatang lost a boy." He set the folder down and squared it with both hands. "This is all for his son. The plot, the casket, all of it."

I picked up the folder.

*PHILIPPINE BENEVOLENT MISSIONARIES ASSOCIATION*

*PREMIUM TIER: DIVINE MASTER MEMORIAL SHRINE*

*POLICY NO. 6041-DGT* *STATUS: PAID IN FULL*

*TERM: 72 MONTHS* *CLOSED:*

*I read it the way I read any invoice. Down the column. Summing as I went.*

*Casket..... ₱22,000*
*Barong..... ₱9,500*
*Plot..... ₱60,000*
*Procession band..... ₱8,000*
*Marble plaque..... ₱40,500*
*TOTAL ..... ₱140,000*

The missionary took the barong from his bag and held it out to me, folded in tissue, already made. A slip of paper sat tucked in the fold.

I opened it.

Measurements, in a tailor's pencil. Chest, thirty-six inches. Shoulder, seventeen inches. I had stood on a stool in Cubao, a man's tape gathering my dimensions, my father outside with the rent money for the graduation gown. The body I had then.

I folded the slip back into the silk and turned to the last page of the file, in his handwriting, and under it a clean typed copy, so the carver could not get it wrong.

*CONRADO SARMIENTO, JR.*

*MY SON, AS GOD MADE HIM*

*LOST TO ME IN HIS NINETEENTH YEAR*

*NOW RESTORED, WHOLE, IN THE LIGHT*

"I'm not dead. I'm right here."

"Ma'am." He said it the way you settle a child. He had known from the doorway, and he had let me read the engraving myself.

He chose a dead son he could dress in silk and visit on feast days. Over a living daughter.

Seventy-two payments.

Never once late.

I checked the date the policy opened. The third of June, six years ago. The day of my surgery. He had remembered it to the hour.

He was still talking. "Money sent in love, ma'am, for a father to spend how he saw fit. A gift with a string on it was never a gift at all."

"Then I'll pay it and go."

"Four thousand for the clearance. But ma'am, the name. The registry allows a correction. A fee, the Master's review. It can be done, if the name is not the one you—"

"The name stays."

He stopped. His shirt had gone dark to the third button, and he turned the ring once around the loose bone of his finger.

"You wish to leave it."

"I wish to close the balance on the account." The card was already in my hand, and I laid it on the glass of his terminal. The machine woke, and thought, and chimed, and fed out its slip.

He tore it off and read it, and his mouth moved before the sound did, because the slip printed the name on the card, and the name was not Conrado.

It read *COCO SARMIENTO.*

"Put him in the silk," I said. "Bury him. Cut the stone the way he wrote it." I drew the slip from his fingers. "He paid for a son. Give him his son."

Outside, the sun stood at the top of the sky, and the tin threw it back white. I walked back up the alley. The woman was still bent over her pot, and I put a thousand pesos in her hand. It was the going rate for a month of my father's life.

The Grab was waiting at the kerb. The air conditioning came down on my chest where the heat had been.

"To the airport," I said.

Behind the glass, the city ran bright and loud, already turning into the past, and I opened my banking app and cancelled the standing order, the one that had gone out on the first of every month for the last six years.

In the graveyard on Dinagat Island, my name waited in marble for a tenant, and my father was the one moving in.

Rent paid in full.

THE END

# Fully Dimensional

## One Second

A rod of rain stands suspended in the air.

It runs from above the streetlight down to the tarmac, thicker at the bottom than at the top. It has already landed, and it is still up there.

Danny Rook closes a hand round it. His fingers meet his palm with the rain inside. The rod keeps its place.

He does it again with the other hand.

He has a word for this.

The Long Room.

It's the title of his book. It's also on the lanyards and on the shirts they sell at the back of the hall after he comes off stage. He put the Attendants on a mug, six of them round the side, and they are still in his garage on a pallet with the shrink-wrap on.

The Long Room has trestle tables down both sides under black stretch covers, and laid out on them are school shoes and house keys and dead phones, hundreds of each, sorted by size, with the chairs stacked against the wall.

The walk starts at the door and runs the length of the tables, and an Attendant comes down the aisle alongside, close enough to take an arm.

A woman in Wigan answers Danny's emails and sends refunds out with an apology under his signature. She has never met him. Two moderators sit on the forum overnight because a man from the retreat keeps posting the photograph of Danny's gate. They take it down before he is awake.

He does the edit himself. Kitchen island, Premiere open, the razor on the waveform at the peak. The thumbnail is his face, mouth open, and he makes a new one every time.

Danny is standing on Halden Road.

The shutter on the Costa is down to knee height, and the light is on behind it. Rain hangs in the gutter without settling. Across the road, a wheelie bin has a traffic cone on top. It casts no shadow because there is nothing above the lamps to cast one from.

The light over the crossing is red, and the filament inside it is lit from every side at once. The wiring runs down the pole, into the concrete at the foot and on into the clay.

The wheelie bin has no far side. A tear runs down one seam of the liner, and both edges of the tear are turned toward him.

A cup with coffee left in it. A carrier bag knotted twice, and the nappy inside the knots.

Behind the shutter, a woman lifts a tray of pastry. Danny is looking at the palms of her hands and the backs of them at once. The wall behind her is no thicker to him than a sheet of paper, and the stockroom is on the other side.

Sacks of beans stacked head high. A mop in a bucket, and the water in it is grey to the bottom.

He sets off for the corner. Twenty strides, thirty, the effort in his thighs and the gap under the shutter is the same width when he stops as it was when he set off.

The coat moves against his knees, and the corner keeps its distance. Every shopfront does. He turns on the spot and pushes off in a direction that has no name, and something takes him under the arms and sets him down further along.

A Range Rover is stopped at his left shoulder, an arm's length off.

A second one behind it with its nose against the boot. A third behind that, and the row running the length of Halden Road to the give-way.

A man at every wheel with his hands at ten and two. The same coat. The same face.

A white Micra sits across the mouth of the road. The nearest Range Rover has gone into the driver's door as far as the wing mirror.

The launderette is at the head of the road, and the Micra is at his knee. The same car fills every yard between them. He puts his palm flat on the bonnet, and the metal under it is warm from an engine that has been running for no time at all.

The rain will not reach the gutter. The cone will not come off the bin. Under the Costa shutter, a tray of pastry is on its way to a counter, and it will not get there.

Danny Rook is the only thing on Halden Road that moves.

Someone hit him.

Which makes this the other side. The other side is a road with double yellow lines and a drain at the kerb, a crisp packet caught over the grate.

No tables. No aisle. No one at his arm.

He wrote the script for the Long Room video in one night. His heart had stopped for ninety seconds, and he has been selling that ever since. No living person has been in a position to check. He can write another one tonight.

He heads for the launderette, past his own car, and his own car, and his own car.

Ninety seconds. Nobody alive has more.

## Four Hundred Milliseconds

The rain over Halden Road is standing up. Glass rods run from the lamps to the pavement, packed close enough that Danny turns his shoulders to get between.

They all lean east, and the wind that put them there is not going to change again. The rods pass through his coat and out the far side. The wool stays dry.

Under the bus shelter there is no rain. A block of dry air stands in its place, flat on top and leaning at the sides, its edges cut clean where the glass starts. Danny walks in at one end and out at the far one.

The shelter has no inside. Each rivet in the frame stands open along its own shaft, and the gum under the bench shows through the plastic, the older pieces pressed closest to the wall.

Every pigeon that crossed here is still crossing, from one end of the flight to the other at the same time. They come off the Costa roof in grey curves, tail at the parapet, head out over the road at the height of his chest. Every feather points the same way along the curve. A chip travels the whole curve in one of the beaks.

The road has no inside either. Tarmac, then hardcore, then clay. A brick sewer runs through it with the arch complete and the flow going nowhere. The roots of a tree are down there too, with the tarmac poured over the top.

He crosses the side road. The arch is under his boots and at his eyeline together, and there is only the one.

At the kerb, the crisp packet lies over the grate, and the shaft drops past leaf mulch and standing water. Somebody's keys are on the silt at the bottom, the fob still readable.

The rods end level with the lamp heads, all of them on one line, forming a flat ceiling of cut-off water.

Above that ceiling there is no cloud, no colour, and no more rain waiting to fall.

Nothing here makes a sound. The only noise on the road is the noise he brings. His boots, his breath and the wool moving against his knees.

He says his own name aloud. It drops at his feet and stays there.

He says it again on the way down the road, and again, and it stays where he leaves it every time.

The rain stops dead at the roofs of the cars. Every rod is cut through at that height, the bottom gone and the top half left hanging where it was.

The Micra sits at the give-way with the rods at its flank, whole from top to bottom, tight to the door.

L plates front and back.

The girl at the wheel is nineteen. Both her arms are out straight, and both wrists are broken at the same point. The instructor beside her has her foot down on a second set of pedals bolted into the floor, and hers is down on the first.

Danny goes through the car. Sandwiches. Jackets. Two handbags with the linings turned toward him, a nail file and a fifty-pence piece.

A lesson plan on a clipboard between the seats. Third lesson, junctions.

Out past the Micra, a rider on a bike has a bag on his back and a box inside it, rice and a sauce under a clipped lid. His phone is on the handlebars with a route on the screen, running to an address that is not on this road.

The pram is halfway over the crossing.

Danny walks the line of cars from the launderette end, each a pace on from the last. They show him the engine and the block it sits in, the fuel line and the fuel.

He is in the driver's seat down the whole row. In every one of them, his teeth show through the cheek. He gives himself less than he gave the chewing gum.

Copies of The Long Room are stacked face up in the boot, the black covers catching what light there is. Beside them, a packet of magnesium has split open, the tablets loose in the corner.

A parking ticket is folded into the door pocket. His lanyard hangs over the passenger headrest, the badge turned against the seat. A charger lies coiled beside a receipt curled at the edges. A blister pack in the tray by the gearstick, half of it punched through and half whole.

Level with the bus shelter, the cars cross the broken white line down the centre and stay over it as far as the Micra.

Danny stands over the paint. He crossed the line to get clear of the car coming at him, and his own tyres wrote it down. It runs under every car in the row, all the way to the Micra, and there is nobody here who can take it down.

The phones sit in their cradles all the way down the row. He walks the outside of the cars and does not put his head through a windscreen.

What he does not have is the other car, the plate, the face at the wheel.

Danny walks out into the rain to find the man who tried to kill him.

## Ninety Milliseconds

A garage at the top of the side road, oil pooled at the foot of the door and no vehicle standing over it. Nothing with an engine in it. Nobody at a wheel.

The road runs past the shelter and the launderette to where the shopfronts stop at a low brick wall.

At the wall the rain ends corner to corner in one flat face. Past it the air is empty, and the brick carries on, losing its joints as it goes.

He puts his arm through. The sleeve goes past the edge, and the hand comes back.

He is inside it. So is everything that hit him.

He paces it out. Two hundred and eleven, wall to Micra. He does it again and gets a smaller number. Then smaller again the time after. He is not measuring the road. He is counting it away.

The road has started to close.

The wall comes in at his back, and the Micra comes nearer from the far end. Rain goes out where the two of them reach it, a handful of rods at a time.

The launderette drops out while Danny is out in the road, the whole building at once, and there is rain standing where the shopfront was.

He keeps a hand on the roof of the nearest Range Rover and the road closes around it.

The pigeons are shorter than they were. Where each one ends there is a grey circle of meat and bone.

Something is in the rain by the wheelie bin.

A hand. Blue, fingers half closed, and nothing above the forearm. The fingers close a little, open, and close again.

Another is at the driver's door of the Micra, white powder settled in the creases of the knuckles.

Debris. Torn off something in the impact and thrown clear.

A clear tube comes down beside the second hand and trails along the kerb, its end cut clean.

The bus shelter empties, and the block of dry air inside it empties too. The Micra is where it was.

He goes in the back, through the parcel shelf and the seat, and stops in the middle of the car. Both women are open around him.

He puts his hands on the girl's shoulder and pushes. They go through the coat, the arm and the seat behind her.

The wheel does not turn. The handbrake does not move. He braces a boot on the sill and puts his whole weight behind the door, and it stays shut.

Nothing here gives under his hands.

He gets out through the windscreen.

The wheelie bin follows. The cone holds a moment with nothing under it, then drops out of the world.

The Costa after it, with the light on under the shutter.

The Micra is at the centre of what remains. The furrow in the rain behind it, the give-way line under it, the crossing past its wing.

He goes back along the cars. The phones are lit, and he has walked their whole length without looking in.

One thing in the junction he has not opened.

His own face.

## Eleven Milliseconds

The road runs from his heels to the white Micra.

He gets into the car at that end, the one with its nose in her door.

In through the tailgate, past the stacks and the magnesium, over the back seat and into the footwell behind his own body, both hands on the headrest.

The body has its hands at ten and two. The jaw is open.

The phone sits in the cradle high on the windscreen, the screen lit.

His own face fills it, lit from below, the mouth open on a word. A red dot glows in the corner. The clock beside it reads fourteen minutes and nine seconds.

He gets his head down level with the cradle and reads the mouth off the screen.

The tongue comes off the roof of his mouth behind his top teeth. The lips draw back. It is a d, and after the d the jaw is already dropping.

Dead.

They want me dead. He said it to a full hall in Leeds. He said it to the kitchen island at four in the morning with the ring light on his face and the house asleep upstairs. He was saying it here.

His eyes in the recording are down on the phone. So are the eyes of the body in front of him.

He puts his face where the body's face has been holding all the way down the road, and from there the phone fills everything below the glass.

In the windscreen is Halden Road.

The give-way at the side road. The white Micra at the line with the rain unbroken down its flank. The rider out on the crossing. The pram.

Every one of them has been in the glass since the bus shelter, and his eyes have not left the phone.

Shame comes up through his scalp.

He gets out through the windscreen and stands at the bonnet, facing down the furrow.

Straight the whole way, with no swerve anywhere along it.

The centre line crossed level with the bus shelter and never came back over.

The rods at the Micra's flank unbroken, top to bottom. Both sets of brake pedals flat to their stops.

Her wrists broken at the same point on each arm.

The rider on the crossing with the light in his favour.

One vehicle moved on Halden Road. His.

## Nine Hundred Microseconds

The blue hands are at the driver's door of the Micra.

One has the girl's forearm. Another holds the clear tube where it enters below her elbow. A third closes round the cannula and tapes it down, and they start on her other arm.

They are the one thing on Halden Road besides him that moves.

He waits his turn.

They are not for him.

The road is down to the width of a car. The white line under it, the girl at the wheel with her wrists out, the crossing past her shoulder.

He came for a name.

He puts his foot out, and there is nowhere to put it. The road is gone from both ends. He tries the one that has no name in it, and that has shut too.

His breath goes up once and does not come again.

Then he is flat with everything else. A seam opens him from head to heel, and there is no part of him turned away from her.

Coat, sternum, jaw, watch, the crowns at the back of the teeth. A man saying they want me dead into a phone under the glass.

His own book face up in stacks in the boot. The blister pack with the foil torn off on one side. Six Attendants in grey, still shrink-wrapped in the garage. A woman in Wigan putting his name at the bottom of an apology. A script written in one night with the blinds down.

Trestle tables under black stretch covers, and somebody close enough to take your arm.

All of it out at once, held up for anybody.

The pram is halfway over the crossing.