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### **The Duwende**

The duwende in our house had started acting real baliw. Since forever we'd had it, the tiny fuck with its ugly gnomey face, skittering around in the walls at night, up to some low-key mischief like busting open the windows to let in the mould and damp, and eating our food while we slept. Mama said it had probably followed one of us home when we weren't being careful around the stream.

Our house was at the shittiest end of the Waiwhetū where all the factories and abandoned warehouses are. Me, my Ate Maya and my little brother Rome used to stay out late after school, sometimes hanging out on the playground until we got bored or cold, then walking real slow from one end of the stream down to where the old railway tracks started. Maybe one night, Maya was doing ligaw with some pogi under the bridge while Rome and I were kicking around the big flax bushes on the bank. We liked the way the leaves whispered when you hit them.

Rome maybe said, 'Kuya, bakit hindi pa kami umuwi?'

Because he still didn't get that he should be speaking English and because he was a fucking baby.

And probably, I said, 'Mama isn't home, so we have to wait for Maya.'

Tired and pissed off, I'll bet one of us stomped on the duwende's mound without asking tabi-tabi po. Pinoys know how territorial duwendes are. You have to ask them politely to move aside, and they don't like getting their plot of land stepped on let alone kicked. The way our duwende treated us, we must have left his place worse than how the Hapon left Manila.

Thursday, I was lying on the couch, watching the tape we'd borrowed of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. It was the episode where the characters, Misato and Kaji, fuck. I was only eight at the time, so I didn't know what was happening, was just fixated on the Japanese animation flipping between images of cartoon hands clasped together on some sheets and lipstick-stained cigarettes in an ashtray on the bedside table. Misato and Kaji going from talking about loneliness to moaning in their bad English dub. *Something* was happening that had

wala to do with robots or angels or “human instrumentality projects”. I’d watched the episode six times already.

Rome was on the floor taping together the cardboard Mama had brought him from the factory so he could make a robot like the one Shinji from the show operated. Beside his stubby thigh, he had purple and green felts ready to colour the robot’s body with. Maya was leant over the coffee table painting her nails with some glittery silver stuff from the \$2 Shop. The eczema on the inner crook of her elbow wasn’t so scabby. It was a good day. None of us had gone to school.

‘How many times are you going to watch this, Caesar?’ said Maya, giving me the side-eye.

I hopped off the couch to crawl over to the VCR. I rewound to the beginning of the scene so I could listen to my favourite part again where Kaji says *It’s human to indulge in carnal desire*. I thought he meant *caramel* desire. This made sense to me because I loved Caramello.

‘Do you even *know* what’s happening?’ asked Maya.

‘Do *you*?’

She didn’t answer that.

‘Why do you want to watch it so much?’

‘Basta-basta,’ I said. The picture of Misato and Kaju’s interlocked hands reappeared on the screen. Maya went outside – to smoke, I knew – and gave me one last side-eye. I went back to sit on the couch, putting my foot in Rome’s face on the way. I laughed at him, his *taba-ching-ching* face and nit infested bowl-cut. He frowned and punched my leg, but he was only five so it didn’t hurt. I lay back with my head on the armrest. I liked the dull red and blue colours of the animation, tiny CRT beams flashing like silent ambulances. The characters whispering with a secret I didn’t understand yet. Even though the characters were fake and it was a cartoon, the whole thing made the part of my brain that was always churning tahimik.

Maya ran back in just as Kaji was saying the part about carnal desire.

‘Punyeta,’ she said. ‘Turn it off, Mama’s home.’

I snatched the remote from the table and jammed my finger into the off button repeatedly like I was trying to catch a Mewtwo on my friend Siasoi’s Gameboy. It wasn’t working. Behind me, I heard plastic bags rustling, tsinelas slapping the floor and, as a last resort, I pressed the volume down button. But the duwende had fucked the remote to hell. I

was pushing volume down, but the volume went up, up, up. The lounge trembled with the sound of passionate cartoon moans.

‘Diosko, anak,’ Mama sighed. She settled the groceries on the floor and padded slowly over to the TV. She switched it off at the wall. When she turned around, her pale oval face gave me a feeling like the deserted things I’d seen behind the glass-pane storefront of a Salvos. ‘Bakit nandito kayo ng lahat, Maya? Why not at school?’ Mama looked at Maya who was watching warily from the doorway.

Maya scratched her elbow, said, ‘Pasentya, po. We woke up late. The clock is out of batteries.’

This was a lie. The alarm had gone off at 7:00am, but Maya had shoved it in the sock drawer and gone back to bed. Mama sighed and undid the crocodile clip holding her hair back. It fell around her face. She rubbed her eyes.

‘Ilang beses ko nang sinabi, *go to school*. What if someone come and see you here, they already say two times that we are in trouble because walang babysitter tayo.’

Mama never hired a babysitter anymore. In the past, she’d had this guy Campbell, the son of her boss at the factory, watch over us whenever she went to her second job or did weekends. He looked like a plump, middle-aged toddler. He was generous though, each week bringing gifts, especially nice shit for Maya, and then going to our room for a nap. He’d call one of us in alone sometimes to bring him a juice box or the stale licorice not even the duwende liked, and he’d always be lying on our bed with his shoes off, even his shirt in summer. Say, *shut the door mate*. Would make tsismis then send us back out to the lounge. After a year, Mama fired him for something no one ever explained to me. Only Maya knew what went down. When I pestered her to tell, she wouldn’t even acknowledge me, kept scratching her elbow, but when I asked, ‘Was it the duwende that messed things up?’ she turned to me with this haunted expression, her black eyes like the soft underbelly of pāua, like I’d said something that could undo a terrible curse. She said, ‘Yeah, that’s right toto. It was the duwende. The duwende really messed things up.’

Now Mama refused to let anyone take care of us. She expected Maya to be the boss, even though she was only twelve.

I helped Mama unpack the groceries. I rummaged through the bags, the white bread, pasta sauce, powdered milk, and instant noodles, searching.

‘Where are the Roll-Ups?’

‘Ay!’ Mama said. She hit the base of her palm against her forehead. ‘Pasentya, anak. I forgot.’

She never got me Roll-Ups. I was pissy about it, but knew better than to annoy her straight after work.

‘Can I invite Siaosi on Saturday?’

It was Mama’s birthday on Saturday. Her birthday was the most important event of the year for us, bigger than Christmas or New Year or any of our own birthdays. It was the only day she was guaranteed to be at home and not at the mall with a bucket of bleach or at the factory packing biscuits. I gnawed hard at the inside of my mouth, trying not to think about Mama scrubbing a toilet. I always got baliw whenever I actually imagined it. Her hands clammy inside pink rubber gloves, the smell of chlorine and Easy-Off soaking into her. It made me furious the way people get bat-shit when you burn their flag. See, Mama wasn’t normal. I’ve never seen anyone with better cheekbones, blacker eyes, silkier hair. Not even in Pantene ads. Talagang-talaga she was a *princess* or close to it. The hard proof for me was that she owned an antique pure gold necklace. She said it was an heirloom, over two centuries old. She kept it hidden in the pocket of a ratty coat in her wardrobe. It was made up of delicate filigree beads and it had an oval pendant at the end. There was pane of glass that let you see a shred of sky-blue cloth inside the pendant. That cloth was from the coat of St. Pedro Calungsod himself. How could she own something like that if she wasn’t royalty?

‘Ay, shete.’ Mama fiddled with the tap. ‘How long has the water been off?’ she asked. It hadn’t been on all day.

‘The duwende,’ I said.

She sighed. ‘The duwende.’

Friday, we were late to school because the duwende had turned the water back on while we were sleeping. The kitchen tap had gushed with water, flooding then warping the lino and making the cheap underfloor soggy. We were awake from 4:00am trying to soak it all up with towels and old T-shirts. Mama just about cried, saying how much it was going to cost to replace the lino and underfloor. I felt like it was my fault. I should’ve checked the taps before we went to bed. That was the sort of absent-mindedness our duwende thrived on.

At school, I was yawning through equations, comma usage, photosynthesis, and couldn’t stay focused. Miss Birch slapped my desk every few minutes like she was angry, but whenever I opened my eyes, she was smiling down at me sadly. Siaosi had to nudge me awake when the bell went off for morning tea.

In the cubby hole, he showed me his new bling. He stuck out his chest, proud. It was a gold chain with a cross where the vertical line sliced through an S. S for Siaso or \$\$\$.

‘It’s 14 carrots,’ he said.

He was eating ready-salted chips and letting the crumbs fall generously all over his lap and sweater. I was eating the crumbs.

‘I’ve seen one worth 50,000 carrots,’ I said, chewing slowly.

‘Nah, where?’

‘Come to my house on Saturday,’ I told him. ‘My mum has the biggest bling.’

When we got home, there were men in the kitchen fixing the floor. Mama wasn’t back yet. She’d left the key on the dining table next to a bowl of plain rice, a faded receipt with blue biro saying B.GOOD on it. Maya approached the kitchen and one of the guys stood, dusting off his hairy knees. Rome was hanging onto the back of her skirt and itching violently at his scalp.

‘Can I go through?’ she said. ‘My little brother wants some water.’

‘You must be the lady of the house.’ The guy was grinning, being friendly. Then he turned, saw me. ‘And you must be the lord.’

‘I’m not the lord,’ I said. ‘I’m Caesar.’

When Papa was around, he didn’t like other men being in his house, not even vacuum salesmen or Jehovah’s Witnesses. Or at least that’s what Mama told us after she fired Campbell. Papa left when I was four or five. At school or church, whenever I had to tell adults about it, they’d stiffen up, their voices retreating into their throats. They were “sorry” to hear about it, and where is he now? But I didn’t know. Honestly, I still don’t remember much about him. I have just this one memory. I’m sitting on a skateboard, maybe a scooter, in the school park. The day is waning into the hills, a shaft of yellow light dancing past the fencing and into my eyes so I can’t see his face properly, just a smudge of features, the shadow under the brows, the wide nose, the unhappy mouth. He’s holding my leg and strapping on a knee-pad. And that’s everything I recall about Papa. One time Mama asked me if I remember much about him and I told her about the knee-pads. She started crying, and I thought I’d fucked up, but then she said, ‘Anak, I’m just so happy. God is good, he only put that memory in your head.’ It made me so glad that my cabbage brain could do that for her.

On Saturday, I woke up and beside me Maya was singing in her sleep. She was just loud enough that I could hear her over the rain pattering on the window. I’ll never forget her

singing, because she sounded so panicked that it frightened me. I got up to get dressed, then noticed that the electric heater was on. None of us usually used it, because Mama would fret about the power bill if we did. I unplugged it, feeling conflicted. The thing about our duwende was, sometimes he did things that showed he cared.

Because I was up first, I went with Mama to pick up the food from KFC. When we got back, Siasosi was already slouched in the old armchair in the lounge, watching infomercials, his huge bling hanging over Tupac's face emblazoned on his shirt. Maya and Rome were dressed like they were going to mass. Maya, weirdly, in a white dress with a long tulle skirt, and Rome in a cardigan and a button-up. I propped the bucket of chicken on the table and ran back to the room to change out of my socks that had soaked through in the rain, yelling at Siasosi to stay where he was. When I came back, he was helping Maya and Rome set the table.

'Hey, I like your shirt,' he said.

It was a Scarface shirt. I was in love with Al Pacino.

'When can I see your mum's bling?'

'Soon,' I said. 'She's getting ready now.'

A few minutes later, Mama entered the dining room. She was in her velvet dress, the one I'd seen her wear in a photo from when she was a teenager. She'd brushed her damp hair slick across her head and down her back, the slight natural red of it bringing out the blueish colour in the black velvet of the dress. Her lipstick was like a stain of raspberry juice. Her neck was bare.

'Mama, where's your bling?' I asked.

'Ano?'

'Your necklace. Can you go put it on?' I said.

Behind her, I saw Siasosi squinting at the corner of the room where a cluster of black mould was climbing the wallpaper.

'It's fine, Caesar. Come on, get the cups.'

I took her arm, said, 'Put it on.' She jerked away, her face red suddenly.

'Stop,' she said, raising her voice. 'Diosko.'

Siasosi had turned to watch us, his whole demeanour tensing, confused, then backing off, aloof like the women at the church or Miss Birch at school. I couldn't understand why Mama wasn't doing what I asked. I felt like I might scream or hit her or cry. She put her hands on my shoulders and said, 'The duwende took it, okay. Pasentya, anak.'

I slapped her hand away and started to get the hiccups. Maya came and rubbed my back. 'We can look for it toto. Come on, it's fine, don't cry.'

Maya, Siasoi, Rome and I searched Mama's room while the rest of the guests arrived. After a while, Rome got bored of taking all the soles out of the shoes and asked if we could stop. He wanted to eat before all the good chicken was gone. Everyone was getting inis about it, turning the pockets of coats inside out, unballing all the socks, desperate to see just a glint of gold filigree. It was gone. So, we went out and I sat in the corner where the mould was and didn't talk to anyone for the rest of the afternoon, not even Siasoi. Maya ended up hanging out with him and the rest of the kids in front of the TV. As the food disappeared, Mama kept gazing over at me guiltily. But I wasn't angry at her, even if I wouldn't talk to her. I was angry at myself for letting the duwende get away with so much. For getting all soft on it even just that morning when the heater was on. I couldn't forgive it now, not after it had stolen the last evidence of where Mama was really from. Now she would be like Anastasia from the Dreamworks movie *Anastasia* – her own family wouldn't believe she was one of them. There was something else in me too, a feeling that, up until then, I'd only noticed in glimpses between dreams, whenever I went biking around on the field on my own. It was starting to crystallise, grow cold and heavy in me. When they served the cake, everyone had a piece except me and Mama. After the pieces were taken and there was just one slice left, we stared at each other across the table, knowing neither of us would eat it.

Once Mama, Rome and Maya fell asleep, I packed Papa's old gym bag with stuff I knew the duwende liked, shit he was always stealing. Socks, old pjs, sweaters, coins and stale Super Wines. I left the bag open on the coffee table where I knew he'd see it. Then I waited. I sat huddled behind the couch in the lounge, trying to stay focused, but zoning in and out as the rain fell hard on the asphalt and on the windows and on the roof. I occupied myself by daydreaming about Shinji, from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, getting into his robot and beating the shit out of the duwende. Actually, I didn't like him that much as a character. He was weak. Shinji's father Gendo abandoned him when he was young. He seemed severely traumatised by this and would cry constantly in the show. It really annoyed me. He needed to take control of his life. I shifted my leg, my foot going tingly beneath me. Also, Shinji's mother was dead and there was an apocalypse happening. Cosmic beings the size of skyscrapers kept descending from the heavens and destroying cities. Whenever they appeared, they would stand in the distance and sway dahan-dahan like ancient trees. There was a rustling sound near the bag and I held my breath, staring hard into the gap between the

couches where I could see the table from. As I sat there, imagining Shinji, the pathetic weakling alone at the train station where his father abandoned him or hyperventilating in a robot with the fate of the world on his shoulders, my eyes adjusted to the dark. I saw the bag on the table move.

I'd been walking for two hours down the main road when a car finally picked me up. Its cherry-red veneer radiated unnaturally in the blue night. I got in the back, dumping the bag in before me and dripping rain onto the beige leather of the chairs. A white couple sat in the front. I used to think there were two kinds of white people in the world: the ones like my neighbours, with their badly trained Labradors, who had short lives and children that swore at them, and the ones that were in magazines. The white people in the car were Magazine Whites.

'Good evening,' said the man.

He was grossly handsome, like a super Saiyan. He had one supple-looking hand hung loose on the steering wheel and a silver pinkie ring. I was shivering. I hugged the bag close to me, making sure it was zipped up tight so the duwende wouldn't escape. It struggled slightly as I adjusted the seatbelt over us.

'Are you lost?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'Where are you headed?' asked the woman. She wore a cream-coloured turtleneck that gave me the powerful impression that the two of them had just come back from the snow.

'As far as you can take me,' I said. 'Please.'

They shared a look, and I could tell that neither of them had ever been abandoned by their fathers. They started the car and the radio clicked on. First came static, then the voice of an elderly man buzzed into the air. Yammering about traffic conditions, an accident on State Highway Ano. Flooding risk down ano-ano. It was warm in the car, and I was getting drowsy.

'Where are your parents?' asked the woman.

I shrugged.

'Where do you live? Where's your house?'

I shrugged again and they shared another look.

The main thing was to get as far away from my home as possible and then to dump the duwende there so that it could never find its way back. As the car drifted past houses and

streetlamps, the sea sloshing mucky grey on the other side of the road, I got the hiccups. I tried to suppress them by focusing on other things. I read the billboard signs about drunk driving and peered at the other people in their cars. There was a family of five in a Mitsubishi. The parents seemed like they were arguing, their faces flushed and contorted. I thought about Mama, Maya and Rome lying peacefully in their beds. I pictured Rome getting up in the morning and him finding the bread still in the pantry, none of it missing or mouldy, and fresh milk in the fridge. Mama, already up hours before, would be ironing clothes in the living room while *Days of Our Lives* played on the TV. She would say, 'Rome, bilisan mo, take a shower. I'm driving you to school.'

Maya would get up late, no nightmares around her eyes, and she would sit at the table while Rome showered. She would eat slices of orange or mandarin. Her eczema would be gone. Rome would come out of the shower and his nits would all be combed out. Mama would lotion her hands. Some days, I can feel all of them near me exactly where I left them, like I'm in a pitch-dark but familiar room. As I walk around, I keep encountering them everywhere, run into them without realising, run into them on purpose, get a black eye from the whiplash from just how hard they hit. I think that most of the time, I'm too deep in the dark to learn anything or to become a real person. I keep touching the walls, feeling for the switch.

'Hey, mate,' said the man.

My hiccups had stopped, but I was still shivering.

'What's in the bag?'

It lay motionless in my lap.

'Nothing.'