“

The Children Go”

Chapter One (excerpt)

San Quinez. Five hours south of Manila, population barely two hundred and shrinking. On a crude local map, the village is shaped like a question mark, the dot beneath a plot of land where sugarcane and cassava should grow but never does. Faustino Go—ex-boxer, failed farmer, still strong despite seventy-four-year-old knees—built a house on that land, a mix-mix of concrete, brick, and bamboo that grew room by room, year by year. Finally finished, it’s time for the house to be blessed.

He asks Father Ricardo first. “I’ve got Christmas then New Year’s then Easter,” he says. “Too much, too busy.” Father Gregorio turns him down, too—“I’m in Makati now. Don’t you know the price of gas these days?”—as does Father Dennis: “I’m retiring next month. I mean, next week. Sorry, sorry. Okay?”

Each time, Faustino says, “No problem, understood, that’s life,” and walks off thinking, *lying prick.*

But he tries again, this time with Father Eppy, whom he finds hunched in a lawn chair in the corner of Mama B’s Cantina-n-Karaoke, half-singing, half-mumbling his way through “My Heart Will Go On.” Faustino, dressed up in a newish polo shirt and Wrangler corduroys, pomade-slicked hair gathered in a neat and short ponytail, waits politely for him to finish, applauds earnestly then pulls up a chair, orders them each a San Miguel. They clink bottles and toast to Jesus Christ, then lament and gripe about the state of the world—the disrespectful youth of today, the plummet of the Philippines peso,

Duterte's war on everything. Faustino orders them another round and when it arrives, finally asks his question. "My house"—he leans forward, looks the priest in the eye—"can you bless it, Father?"

Bottle at his lips, Father Eppy shakes his head no. "You have too many rooms."

More judgment than assessment; at least this priest is honest.

"How many now? Five or six? Seven, eight, nine? For a house *here*?" He says "here" with a tipsy laugh, like no place on the planet is worse than San Quinez.

Nearly five pm, the sun feels like it's at its highest point, light beaming down through the cracks of the bamboo awning overhead, shining bright on Father Eppy's young and lineless face. He'd arrived a year ago, the hotshot priest who'd spent a summer at the Vatican, taking communion from the Pope himself. Rumor was that he'd angled for a post in Europe or America, or if sent back home, then a higher-end megachurch in Manila at *least*.

"Arrogance!" Eppy says. "Hubris! Those are sins, my friend. Who needs a house a that big?"

Faustino, a little tipsy too, feels the old urge to clench his fist and strike. He puts his hand in his pocket, answers the priest's question.

"My children," he says.

"Your children? Your children aren't children," Eppy says, patting Faustino's lap, "and your children aren't here."

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“Fuck Father Eppy,” Mama B says from behind the bar, fanning herself with a flattened Koko Krunch cereal box. “He’s a drunk with a lousy attitude. And nobody does a house blessing these days. That’s just old style, anyway.” She’s being kind but she’s lying, too: Father Eppy himself had blessed the cantina when it opened nine months before and nearly all of San Quinez showed up with food and drink to share. Faustino had to attend—Mama B was one of the few people he liked—but found it pointless for a priest to douse holy water on a makeshift bar, a smatter of lawn chairs, and a karaoke machine. Why bless a place for drunken singing fools? But after three paper cups of gin-no-ice, Faustino retreated to a corner and shut his eyes, and for nearly an hour listened to unlikeable neighbors sing their hearts out, caught off guard by how good they were.

“If it’s just me, then screw it, no blessing,” Faustino says. “But it’s what my Mrs. wants.”

“Of course,” Mama B says. “And for your kids too, always. What’s your oldest now, fifty? And your youngest? Thirty?”

“Twenty-eight.” As soon as he says it, Faustino realizes Josiah turned twenty-nine three months before. Another birthday missed.

“And where is he now? Australia? Africa? Albania?” She names more places that start with A, though in her mind, Faustino knows, they’re all one in the same, a blank space bordering more blank space. Mama B is forty-three and, by her own admission, has been nowhere; the farthest she’s traveled was four hundred kilometers away to Baguio City, a chance to be in cooler weather, the one vacation she ever took.

“He’s all over the place,” he says. “Wherever there’s work.”

"That's the way of things, right?" She takes out a bottle of gin, pours Faustino a shot, pours herself one, too. They raise their cups, toast to nothing. Suddenly there's a thumping nearby, and Mama B shouts, "Lazy butts! Why are you here?" Faustino turns and sees Royal and Benz, her teen-aged twins, heading toward the cantina, bouncing a basketball back and forth between them. "What about school?" Mama B says, swatting them with the flattened cereal box, but Royal just shrugs and Benz says school does nothing more than rot his brain. The boys nod a polite, *Hello sir*, to Faustino, then help themselves to RC Cola's from the cooler behind the bar. Then Royal punches in a selection on the karaoke machine and picks up a pair of microphones, hands one to his brother.

Music starts. The brothers sing. "*This one goes out to the one I love. This one goes out to the one I left behind*." In their matching Nike tank tops and baggy shorts, they're gangly but paunchy too, and against their microphones, Faustino can see that each boy has grown out a pinky nail, claw-like and white. It's meant to show status or a sign of wealth, neither of which, Faustino knows, is in their future, despite their good names.

Palms and bamboo flank the one-lane gravel road that cuts through San Quinez. Only at the end, when he veers off-path, can Faustino see the house, a humble three-room bamboo bungalow where he and Marivelle raised seven children over the span of twenty years, now connected to a hulking two-story rectangle of stucco and brick. They knew nothing of architecture or design—the budget-priced architect they'd met with twice didn't seem to either—but they did their best with the expansion, working alongside the

construction workers, fixing and patching up the things they'd screwed up or simply left undone.

Once the children left and began sending money home, it was Marivelle's idea ("my dream, my wish" she'd correct Faustino, whenever they argued about it) to add on to the house, with enough rooms so that they could one day live together, not again, but *finally*: by the time Josiah, the youngest, was born, Fidencia, the oldest, was twenty-two and long gone. "We'll build a home and they'll come back," Marivelle said to Faustino, "watch." But her dream, her wish, pissed off the rest of the village. Who the hell did that old Go couple think they were, expanding their house onto land that belonged to San Quinez? For years there'd been talk of building a basketball court or a playground, maybe an open space for holiday fiestas. But Marivelle (out of nowhere, it seemed) showed the mayor a deed claiming the land was her dead father's and therefore hers; that yellowing paper looked official enough for the mayor to shrug and say, "Whatever, sure," and nobody in San Quinez had the legal wherewithal to dispute it, or the cash on-hand to hire a lawyer. But on the morning workers broke ground, a group of young mothers approached, demanding the land be given back to San Quinez, so that their sons and daughters (who stood nearby, brandishing basketballs, hula hoops, and jump ropes like weapons) would have a place to play. "What about the children?" they asked.

"What about mine?" Marivelle said. She didn't shout but there was a kind of fury in her voice, her body trembling, and her long single braid—no longer gray, Faustino realized, just pure white—looked so heavy and thick against her back that it seemed to hunch her forward. Her sudden tears were inexplicable—even the young mothers backed

off, caught off guard—so Faustino scolded them away and pulled his wife close, promised her that their seven children would come home, one day, very soon, very soon.

The twelve-minute walk from Mama B's takes its toll; as Faustino climbs the porch steps, his knees throb from worn-down bones. Still, he gets to the speed bag hanging in the corner, which Marivelle had installed the day they moved in, nearly fifty years before. He does right hand single-fist punches for a fifty count, then again with his left. His pace, fast but steady, still surprises him, and for a flash of a moment tricks him into thinking he could enter the ring once more and knock out any opponent.

He enters the house and removes his shoes, goes to the kitchen. He takes out a foil-covered platter of leftovers from the refrigerator and sets it on the table, peels off the foil but instead of fried eggplant and boiled eggs he finds what is unmistakably a human ear, splotched with congealed blood. "Son of a whore!" he says, flinching back, then hears howling laughter behind him. He turns and finds Em-Em filming the moment with her phone. "I got you, grandpa," she says, "I got you good!" then turns the camera on herself. "And that's the 'Scare your Lolo Challenge Day Number One'" she says in English, "now it's your turn, ok? Have fun and, be true to yourself always, and stay cuuuute-cuuuute!" She makes a peace sign with her fingers, juts puckered lips and winks.

This girl's idiocy will be the death of me, Faustino thinks, flinging the rubber to the sink. "I've shat and flushed bigger things than that phone," he says, "so don't think I won't throw it in the toilet. Put it away."

She rolls her eyes, tucks the phone in her pocket. "It's like this, okay? If I make entertaining videos, I get followers. If I get followers, I get sponsors. If I get sponsors, I get money. I could be a teen millionaire, god knows. Or should I be a maid in Saudi instead?"

"That's enough mouth," he says. "It's dinnertime. Where's your brother?"

"He's here somewhere," she says. "Probably hiding, I don't know." And just like that her phone is out again, her thumbs tapping away.

Faustino leaves the kitchen and walks down the short hallway, through the threshold that leads from the old house to the new, a single-footstep that always feels like crossing over into the home of a stranger—the aqua linoleum floors always shining and slippery, the stucco walls with hooks and nails but still no pictures hang. He imagines Father Eppy walking through, flicking every surface with holy water as party guests shuffle behind, candle in their hands, muttering prayers while they think nasty thoughts about the house.

"Jojo!" Faustino calls out twice, his voice echoing faintly through the hallway downstairs and the one above. There was a time when his grandchildren—sometimes a few, sometimes all sixteen (or was it seventeen? Faustino loses track)—filled all seven bedrooms, lazing on the beds and floors like stray cats, forever on their iPads and phones, coming and going as they pleased. To him, the grandchildren were a sweaty horde of rowdy teens (he'd make them all wash and dry their feet on the porch before entering), brazen in a way his own children never were. Still, they were family; the house was theirs, too. But when he found the two oldest ones blitzed out of their brains from snorting shabu in the upstairs bathroom for a *second* time, while the rest of them were in

a downstairs bedroom doing vulgar dance routines and posting them online, Faustino told them enough was enough, that they should stay with their other grandparents instead. But Em-Em and Jojo had nowhere to go—they had no other grandparents, their father was in jail, and their father's sister was hooked on shabu too. So here they stay, for better or worse, under Faustino's watch.

Jojo is eight years old and likes to hide (weird boy) so Faustino searches every room, under every bed, closet, bathroom. He shouts his name again but gets no reply, decides the boy will eat when he's hungry, then returns to the old part of the house. He goes to his bedroom to change into house clothes and finds the boy standing in front of the world map hanging on the wall. Behind him, at the foot of the bed, Marivelle sits, still in her bathrobe and pajamas, hands flat against her lap.

"It's wrong." Jojo turns to Faustino, thick eyeglasses too low on his face. Faustino pushes them up, bends the temples tighter behind the boy's ears.

"What's wrong?" Faustino asks.

"My mom's there, not *there.* See?" He stands on tiptoes, taps the red thumbtack pressed into Thailand, then reaches higher toward the right, pointing at Japan.

"You're sure?" Faustino asks, and Jojo nods emphatically.

Joselyn, Faustino's third oldest, had been waitressing in a hotel restaurant in Bangkok for the past four years. When did she go to Japan? He considers calling her, but to ask, *Where are you now?* will make him seem neglectful and ignorant. And shouldn't a father know where his children are at all times?

There are seven tacks spread across the map, one for each of the Go children: the yellow tack for Fidencia, the oldest, a live-in maid in Australia; the green tack for Pietro,

who plays guitar for hotel bands in Brazil; the orange tack for Marvelyn, a math teacher in America; the blue tack for her twin brother Mack, a construction worker in South Africa; then the red tack for Joslyn (now in Japan, apparently); the pink tack for Cristeta, a nurse in Germany; finally, in a blank white mass at the bottom of the map, the white tack for Josiah, a custodian in a "research facility" (Josiah's words) in Antarctica. String connects each tack to one on the far right of the map, the gold tack, meant to represent Faustino and Marivelle, pinned to the Philippines.

Jojo gets jumpy. "Fix it, fix it, fix it."

"No whining," Faustino says. He plucks the red tack from Thailand and moves it toward Japan. But the short string connecting it to the Philippines won't reach; he unloops it from the red tack and lets it dangle from the gold.

"Now it's right," he says, the runs out of the room.

Marivelle unclasps her hands, looks up at Faustino. "Who's that boy?" she whispers.

"That boy is Jojo."

She leans in. "Who does he belong to?"

"He's Joselyn's boy. Our grandson."

She nods like she suddenly remembers that fact, though of course she doesn't. "Joselyn is away," she says.

"That's right," he says, taking her hand. "In Japan."

She blinks several times, like she's considering the plausibility of his statement. "Is that Japan?" she asks, pointing out the window, at the bare, cropless field beyond. Faustino had been to Japan once, thirty years before, for a match in Okinawa, and there

were stretches of countryside which, if he's remembering correctly, weren't so different from the view Marivelle looks at now. So why not tell her yes, that Japan really is just outside their window, that at least one of their children is close by?

"No," he decides, then points to the map. "Japan is there."

Faustino takes his wife's long braid, brushes its loose, scraggly ends. He reties the sash of her robe and puts slippers on her feet, then kisses her forehead and calls for Em-Em, who walks with her to the kitchen. Faustino shuts the door to change into house clothes then spots the red tack has fallen to the floor, picks it up and pushes it into Japan, straight through the "k" in "Tokyo." Marivelle hung the map after the two oldest children left, a way to track wherever in the world they went. At the start and end of each day, she'd take a moment to scan the map, as if making sure the children and the world itself were still in place.

Seven children, seven continents. Sometimes she'd say this to herself, like it was an undeniably wondrous thing.

But three years ago, not long after Marivelle turned seventy, Faustino noticed her occasional slips of memory—one day she'd see a guava but couldn't remember what it was called, the next day light the stove and walk out of the house, flame burning high. Then she'd forget some of the grandchildren's names—Jojo's was the first to go—but Faustino told himself this was understandable. All those kids coming and going into the house; who could keep track? But there came a point where Marivelle became obsessed with the map, her morning and nighttime scans turning into hours of unbreakable focus, like it was a TV show or movie that never reached its end. Faustino would try to coax her from her spot on the foot of the bed, and if he tried to gently pull her up, she'd slap

his arm away, then collapse into a childlike fit. One evening he found her on the bed, lying on her side and facing the wall, quietly weeping, then noticed that there were tacks, a hundred or more, all over the map, an endless crisscross of string connecting them all together. Marivelle stayed in bed for so long Faustino finally took her to a doctor the following week, an initial visit followed by CT scans, MRIs, evaluations of this, diagnostics of that, every procedure so full of machinery and technology that when his children called to find out what exactly was happening to their mother, Faustino could summarize nothing. The best he could do was repeat what the doctors told him—that his wife's brain no longer worked as it should, and that a time would come where what she forgot was so much more than what she remembered.

And what she can remember is the children, where they are and what they do. Sometimes, Faustino quizzes her. "Who cleans the house in Australia?" he asks and right away she answers, "Fidencia." Or, "What does Pietro do in Brazil?" and she says, "Guitar, of course," like Faustino is the forgetful one. Sometimes they walk together through the new part of the house and Marivelle assigns each of their children a room particular to their personality, then cheerfully makes plans celebrating their collective return—a village-wide party with a whole roast pig, a priest to bless the house—and the next day she forgets them, then makes those same plans all over again. But someday the children—maybe one, maybe all—will dissolve from her mind completely, Faustino along with them, so he takes out his phone and types a group text to Fidencia, Pietro, Marvelyn, Mack, Joselyn, Cristeta, and Josiah that says, *House blessing soon. Everybody come home*. He hits send, wondering who of them will get the message, who of them will reply.