

Foreign Body

On the western coast of Samar, tangled in the heart of the Philippines, you can look across the water and believe it's the beginning of an open ocean. What you cannot see, however, are the dozens of land masses, the broad detritus of archipelago, that lie between you and where the uncluttered water commences. Ipao was a place like this. A few miles south of Calbayog City on Samar's west edge, Ipao peered from its shore toward the dense interior of a jungle country.

Little Tigre was born there, 1939, just before the war came. Although, to him he might as well have been born during the war, since that's as far back as he can remember time beginning. No one calls him Tigre now; his name is Francisco or sometimes Frank. In his American life, Frank is only reminded of Tigre when he saves something from the water—like once with his family on a beach in Maryland, when he'd picked up a butterfly stuck in the wet sand and made his children happy by helping it to dry

its wings in the air and fly away. Tigre was his nickname for a short time when he was young—a flattering, ironically-intended moniker that captured his tiny, ferocious spirit. *Little Tiger*. It was always his favorite.

Tigre lived in Ipao until he was nine, when the family moved to Cebu, which was practically cosmopolitan compared to his whisp of a village. Ipao, itself, was also a nickname. Tigre liked it much better than the long version: San Policarpo. To him, San Policarpo sounded too adult, too pretend, and not enough like home. Ipao sounded like somewhere that had just one church and one marketplace and only three streets, connected like the letter H.

Ipao's simple, heavy-walled chapel sat next door to Tigre's home, a thatched hut above stilts that stood like a spider on the sand trying not to get its belly wet. Both structures were backed-up by the shore, which is essentially to say that they

were built in the water. In a place like Ipao, it's a mistake to believe that the shore is part of the land. It's part of the water. Any thin slice of earth that deceptively buttresses an edge of the oncoming sea belongs entirely to the water. Typhoons have proven this.

And it was typhoons that first brought Tigre into the service of his God. Before they were ever old enough to become altar boys, Tigre and his two brothers were assigned the crucial task of evacuating sacred icons from the local sanctuary in the event of typhoon. As neighbors of the church, it was their job to hurriedly carry Jesus on his cross, the statue of Virgin Mary, and other valuables to higher ground when winter storms flooded Ipao's streets in a mess of reclaiming ocean.

His first duty on behalf of Christ came at the age of five. Tigre's big brothers had already performed such evacuations twice before he was old enough to join them. But four days after his fifth birthday, when Sister Carla came to their door drenched from storm, she motioned for Tigre to join his brothers at her side.

"You can come with us now too, Little Tigre," she said, a wide smile spreading across her rain-splattered face. "Now God can see what you will do for Him. The Lord will bless those who help to do His work."

"Has God seen me?" asked Marco, one of Tigre's brothers. Marco, who had chubby brown

hands and a wide frame, was the biggest of the three, although not the oldest.

"God sees everything, stupid," said June, the oldest boy, thin and wiry strong.

The Sister pointed a stern look at June, "You should be glad your father doesn't hear you speak like that. God has been watching you, Marco, and I know He is grateful. And I am too." Her face warmed up again and she put a damp hand on Marco's black hair. "So, Tigre, it's time to hurry. Do you think you are big enough now?" She leaned back as if she needed more space to take in Tigre's full visage. "It seems to me that you're growing every day lately."

Tigre giggled at the Sister's flattery. All of the attention made him giddy. He turned to his mother behind him and caught her eye as she fastened a back door against the wind. She nodded to him.

"I am getting big now, don't you think?" Tigre asked the Sister.

"I think so. Should we go?" she asked.

June leaned over and whispered so that only Tigre could hear him, "It will help you with salvation. I can tell you later."

So he agreed. Although Tigre only carried two small things that day, he felt God would understand he wasn't big enough yet to do

much more. And when the typhoon had passed and the water receded, he took one end of the heavy cross and helped Marco bring it down the hillside, all the way to the altar. In between his two good deeds, while they waited out the flood, June explained salvation to him. But Tigre didn't really understand what it meant to be saved, except in the literal sense, and so he thought he'd earned a chance to be rescued by God—not in another life, but in this one, the one that he knew.

His misperception of salvation was only reinforced a few months after the performance of his first typhoon-duty. A skirmish between Japanese and American soldiers had spilled out from the nearby mountains, leading to a sudden and ferocious firefight just outside of Ipao. That same afternoon, Tigre and his brothers had joined a group of other boys, sneaking away after school to track down a broken jeep that one of them had located at the jungle's edge. The minor battle caught some of the boys in the crossfire and a few grenades had gone off near the massive, root-splaying tree where Tigre and his brothers had taken shelter in a panic.

In the moment, Tigre was overcome by terror and gave no thought to God or the salvation that he had earned. When he felt the flesh of his back begin to burn with the heat from a tiny piece of shrapnel, Tigre figured he was dying. But when he awoke in his bed later on—still drowsy from an injection of something that

he hadn't remembered receiving—and learned that only he and his brothers had survived their encounter with the war, Tigre believed that God had saved them. As far as he had known, none of the four boys who died had ever done any service in the name of the Lord. Tigre was sure that this is why he and his brothers had been saved.

He tried to explain this to Sister Carla, his mother and the two men who stood at his bedside when he awoke. One of the men was white with a dark beard, and Tigre wondered for a moment if he might be Jesus and if maybe only he could see him.

“God saw me, and He saved me. He did see us, June and me and Marco, and He knew. We got salvation,” Tigre said, directing his comments to the white man.

“That sounds good. Sounds good to me. So, how else do you feel?” The white man leaned over to Tigre as he asked the question. He had an American accent and Tigre realized that he wasn't Jesus, that he was a soldier, maybe a doctor.

“Sister,” Tigre started again, “Was this my only salvation? If I do more, will I have others?” He wondered when there might be another typhoon. He thought that if he'd never gone out to see the Jeep, he wouldn't have used this one already.

“God will always look over you, Tigre. And you will always do His work, as long as you choose,” she said.

“But you’ll have to help Him,” said the other man at Tigre’s bedside, who he now realized was his uncle. “You’ll have to stay away from dangerous places. And your brother will have to do a better job too.” He shook his head and looked back at June, who sat sorting through a bag of marbles in the corner of the room.

“I’m sorry about this, fellow.” It was the white man again, but this time he spoke with a different tone, a lower one that made the boy feel relaxed, like all this was behind him now. “I’m sorry about your friends. I wish we hadn’t been here at all.” He ran his hand over the gauze that wrapped around Tigre’s back and stomach. “You’re gonna feel a little stiff. So pretend like you’re new, don’t do things too fast, like you wanna stay new awhile. Okay? In a couple weeks, you’ll be just as good.”

“Did you do something to me?” Tigre asked.

“Just fixed you up some. A couple little pieces of metal were in your back, behind your tummy. We took most of it out and then fixed you up. There was one little piece we couldn’t reach, but it won’t do you any harm and you probably won’t even feel it. So you can pretend it isn’t even there. I only told you because I figured you might think it was interesting. Do you think it’s interesting?”

Tigre did think it was interesting, and the way the man said it had made him feel special.

“Sure. Do you?”

“I think so. I think you’re pretty brave. Although, don’t always feel like you have to be. Now, does anything hurt too much?”

“Not too much. But I must be okay. Sister, am I okay?”

The Sister smiled and nodded. His mother leaned down and held his hand while the white man stood and took his uncle aside.

“Please, Little Tigre, sleep. All you need now is rest,” said his mother.

Tigre closed his eyes, and when he opened them again it was morning already. He heard a rooster’s siren wail somewhere outside and saw that he was now alone in their home, except for Marco, who was still asleep in the bed that he shared with June. As soon as he tried to sit up, he realized that the white doctor was right; his body did feel new—stiff and unpracticed, as if it would take him a little time to learn how to use it again. But in a few days he felt better and in a few more days better still, until eventually he didn’t even think about the metal piece, except to wonder occasionally if it was really there at all.

There wasn’t another typhoon for a long time. At least it seemed like a long time to Tigre.

While he waited, he never bothered the Sister with questions about his salvation. He thought it was ungrateful to ask after he'd already been saved once. But in the evenings, before dinner and when no one would notice that he was gone, Tigre sneaked to the shore by himself and looked at the skies, hoping to see something dark and ominous looming on the horizon. Sometimes the clouds were so heavy in the distance that he thought a volcano had spewed on another island somewhere. And there were heavy storms, but an entire rainy season went by without a real, nasty, empty-the-church typhoon. He began to forget about worrying over salvation. The war had ended, his father had returned home, and for a while there was no danger at all in Tigre's life. Other children occasionally pointed to the scar on his back, reminding him of his debt, but he'd never seen the marks himself. By the time the next rainy season arrived, he had even stopped his vigil for bad weather.

But there is always another typhoon on Samar's west edge. When the next one came—again a few days after Tigre's birthday, this one his seventh—it arrived without much expectation. As the brunt of the storm hit, Tigre's father was pulling in his fishing boat south of Ipao, down the coast, and his mother was shuttered inside a chapel in Calbayog City, having walked there to bring pastries in the morning before any sign of real trouble.

Tigre was playing marbles and thinking about tossing a firecracker on the other side of town—the mountain side—with some other boys. The wind had been getting bad and the sky dark and his friend's mother shooed him away, telling him to go home, but Tigre dawdled on the far side of town. He didn't expect the gales to start howling like they did, before he'd even made his way up the street to the cross in the H. The rain fell in a heavy noise from the sky.

When Tigre turned the corner and faced in the direction of the shore, the wind struck him first. While he tried to gain his balance, a loose palm branch rushed over his head and he ducked, then slipped—landing his stomach on the muddy road. He paused on the ground, under the wind, and thought about the church. Through the fast-falling rain he could see the water already crashing hard and deep onto the shore. The ocean could be in the streets any minute and Tigre knew it. He imagined Sister Carla alone at the altar as the water rushed in, her hands grasping at the icons while they floated by.

Tigre pushed himself up from the mud and started, head down, into the wind, angling across the street, trying to cut the corner toward the church. A few people ran under the rain, some chasing animals—pigs and chickens and one goat. Everything was mud and puddles, and everything splashed. There had already been days of heavy rain; the ground was full of it.

At the next corner, he faced north, turning up the street toward the church. He saw someone, maybe the Sister, running out its front doors and heading toward the hill. He called out, but felt his meek voice die in the wind only a few feet from his mouth. With the ocean crashing in his ear, Tigre put down his head again and ran to the front of the church, ambling up its steps to the entrance.

He took a moment getting a grip with his small hands around the brass handle, opened the door open with a shove and stepped into the dim church. Fuzzy light glowed through the tall windows, casting a bare illumination on the space. Tigre could hear the sound of waves crashing hard on the shore-side wall and water squeezed underneath the back doors, soaking the floor. After lingering inside the entrance for a few extra moments, he darted to the altar in a burst, outrunning the ghosts.

From the altar he could see that the cross had already been taken down, but many of the other icons remained in place. Even the Virgin Mary statue still sat unmoved. The statue was heavy, and the last time June had barely been able to carry it alone, but Tigre didn't think it would be right to leave Mary behind. He wanted to wait for someone else, but it scared him to be alone in the dark chapel. Tigre listened to the waves crash for a few more seconds and then reached up over the edge of the tall pedestal, wrapping his arms around her legs, gripping his triceps where the statue tapered above her feet.

The weight of it pressed against his chest as he backed away from the pedestal with the statue firmly in his arms, her head rising above his.

The door was tricky, but he used his foot to prop it open and carried the statue out into the blustering, flooding street. He headed slowly north, angling inland toward the hillside. The wind pushed hard from all directions and the waves were now washing up beyond the shore and into the town. Tigre struggled to keep his bare feet even and steady on the muddy ground. With each crash more water swelled past his ankles, sometimes beyond his calves.

He took a step to avoid a big rock he hadn't seen and then lost his balance. The statue splashed into a swell of water and drew away from the hillside. Tigre scampered on his hands and knees and watched another flush of ocean pull Mary further from him, toward the edge of a gulch. From where he was, he could see water splashing up from the gulch and knew it must be flooded. It was something he'd seen happen more than once before, looking down from the hill.

He could find no one else around him, so he rose to his feet again and dashed for the icon, hoping to gather it before the water snatched it away. The boy slowed down near the gulch's edge—careful not to slip in—and crept close to the statue. But through the wind he heard something other than the rain and the water, a noise that stood out as familiar, but wrong for right now. He swiveled his head and shielded

his eyes from the rain, looking for the noise in the storm. Then he saw it. A small pig, a young one, clawing at the edge of the gulch, further up toward the hill. The creature was making a fierce sound as its legs struggled in the mud below the edge, above the percolating water.

The pig was in the opposite direction of Mary, and Tigre turned his attention back to her, reaching down to gather the statue. It slipped from his forearms on his first try, but he gathered it again and managed to carry it along the gulch's edge as he approached the pig. When he arrived beside it, the animal seemed to squeal not just desperately into the air, but to him. It seemed to turn its head in his direction, to notice him, and to be calling out to him. He could not ignore it. He carefully bent his knees and rested the statue in the puddling mud behind him. A wave shoved water across the face of the icon as Tigre turned back to the pig.

He kneeled at the edge of the gulch, close enough to the pig to reach down for it sideways, but not directly above its flailing front legs. Its small pink face twitched wildly with every squeaking wail, and its snout pattered up and down in quick, reflexive breaths. Tigre stretched his arms toward the pig, but was afraid to get his hands battered by the kicking feet. He turned back to check on Mary. She was gone. He swung his head around and peered toward the water. Nothing he saw looked anything like the statue. The pig's cries continued uninterrupted. Tigre shuffled his

knees along the edge of the gulch, closer to the animal's struggling limbs, then leaned down toward the pig again. This time he grabbed cleanly its front legs, one in each of his hands. He tightened his grip and felt the pig's flesh squeeze beneath his palms. With one backward thrust, he pulled the pig up over the gulch's edge. The creature was small—almost half the boy's size—and as soon as it got on its feet a rushing swell flopped it on its side, shoving the pig away from him. Tigre's legs were tight from the crouch and he staggered through the wind, approaching the animal as it flailed fishlike on a muddy deck. He picked up the pig, which was lighter than the statue and easier to grip, but which also squirmed enough that it forced him to struggle.

With the animal in his arms, he started back toward the center of town. He was too tired to carry the pig very far and the water in the street was now up to his knees. Soon it would easily reach his waist. He wanted to stop at the first place that seemed safe for both of them. By the time he reached the corner again, the boy was walking with slow, weak legs. He didn't see anywhere to set the pig down.

So Tigre carried the pig all the way through the rising water to the other side of town and found the lowest patch of ground that wasn't knee-deep in swells, which was a shallow rise at the base of a tall concave ledge of earth. Tigre wedged his feet into a thick snare of large roots that jutted from the dirt and secured

the creature on his lap. After some time, the pig even calmed down and rested its chin for a while on Tigre's knee.

It wasn't long before he heard his uncle calling him through the storm. He yelled back, but later his uncle said that it was actually the pig he'd heard squealing first. After the typhoon passed, the pig's owner thanked Tigre and told him that two other piglets had been lost in the flood. But as he listened, all he could think of was Sister Carla and what he would tell her about the statue of Mary.

At first he thought it was best that no one had seen what happened. But then he thought that God must've been watching, and that He would be watching now, to see if he would tell. So he went to the church to explain to Sister Carla what he had tried to do, how the statue had disappeared into the ocean. But when he arrived and looked up at the altar, he saw that Mary stood silently on her pedestal, half covered in shadow.

He told the Sister his whole story: how he hadn't listened to his friend's mother, how no one had been at the church, how the pig cried to him. And she told him that someone had found Mary on the shore a mile away.

"Does this mean I have earned another salvation? Or does the salvation go to the person who found it? Did God see me save the pig?" Tigre asked.

"Everyone knows what you did for the pig. You're a hero!" She rested her hand on his shoulder. "But I think you misunderstand salvation. This world is our journey toward it, everything we do."

"But wasn't I saved already? Can it happen again?"

"It was God who chose to keep you here, and now you've saved the pig. So you're on the right track. Do you think that's enough for you?"

He heard the front door open behind him and Sister Carla looked up. She waved over Tigre's shoulder, in the direction of a heavy man who entered slowly.

"Did Marco help with the cross? I forgot to ask him," Tigre said, trying to draw her attention back to him.

"Then you should ask him. I'm sure he'd like to tell his own stories." She looked up again at the man and spoke to him. "You didn't think you'd be back so soon, did you?"

"Of course," said the man and he huffed a short laugh.

"Okay, Tigre," she said and looked down. "I'm happy you are such a diligent boy. And if you don't know, you should find what that means. Diligent." The Sister smiled.

Tigre repeated the word to himself and nodded. Then he spun and tore toward the entrance, scooting past the man's outstretched hand.

When he reached the doors, he heard the man huff again and then heard some words that he couldn't make out as he bolted into the street.

He wasn't sure if he'd earned another salvation or not, but he thought his chances were good or at least things were in his favor. He didn't ask the Sister about it again, and he wasn't in the village during the only other typhoon that hit before his family moved. There was, in fact, just one other time that he thought about going to the Sister to ask about the rules of salvation.

A few months after he saved the pig, Tigre saw its owner walking the animal on a rope out of town toward Calbayog. The man trailed a mule-drawn cart that shook in the road, rattling the chicken cages stacked on its wood bed. Tigre was standing near the steps of the church. He knew it was the pig he had saved and he knew that bad things were destined for it in Calbayog. He almost ran inside to ask if he could use his salvation for the animal, if the Sister knew about such things. But instead he chased after the man and tried to explain how he had done service for God and that this earned him a chance to be saved.

"You already saved this pig," said the man, not stopping his march north while he spoke.

Tigre followed along, and pleaded. "Yes, but that's why."

The man did not look back; he shook his head. The cart hit a bump and the birds cackled.

"Can I walk with you, at least? I walk here all the time."

"It is not my job to watch you, Tigre. Go home."

"I won't even talk."

But the man kept walking, trailing the cart along the ruts in the road, and Tigre did not think he should follow him. He wanted the pig to turn back and look, but didn't see its face again.
