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The Skylab*

CYAN ABAD-JUGO

MARTY PUSHED past the school guards. He glanced at his wrist, felt shock, and then calmed down. He remembered that Ton-Ton would be wearing his Mickey Mouse watch for a week in exchange for reading Ton-Ton's *Casper* and *Spooky* comics. He did not realize it would be so hard to keep track of the time without a watch. "It's only 7:10," his father had said, just before Marty left the Toyota. His father had placed his huge hand on Marty's head. "Why don't you just enjoy your school days without worrying so much about time?"

But he was worried, because he never liked missing frog ceremony. It was the highlight of his and Ton-Ton's morning, watching the girls in grade four scream and leap out of the line whenever a frog's webbed foot got caught in the lace of Amy's socks. The sound of Amy's shrieks drowned out the scratchy sound of "Lupang Hinirang" issuing forth from the loudspeakers. She had screamed until the end of the morning prayer.

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As usual, there was already a roaring noise of high school students in the quadrangle, harder to group and force into lines. But as Marty cleared the crowd, he was surprised to see that the grade school students had not formed their own lines either. Most of them stood at random, in little clumps of three or five, all looking up at the sky. Marty stopped in his tracks and looked up too, but there was nothing there but the white July sky, and a few loose clouds. Wonderingly, he looked for Ton-Ton.

"They should just make today a holiday," Ton-Ton was declaring to Jamil, and to anybody else who would listen.

"Yeah," agreed Jamil. "They just want to torture us, even if it is the last day of the world."

Just as Jamil said that, the sky shadowed for a moment and put a chill in Marty's stomach. He suddenly felt like going to the bathroom. "Hey, what's up?" Marty asked, his voice squeaking a bit. He hoped nobody would think he was afraid, he did not even know what was going on yet.

"Oh, the world will probably end today," Ton-Ton answered, quite happily, like he was going to have a birthday party. "The Skylab is falling."

"The Skylab?"

"You know," Ton-Ton prompted, like Marty was the dumbest guy on Earth, "that satellite in the sky that lost its orbit. It's falling right this minute." Ton-Ton's left hand resembled a UFO falling from the sky, rushing to smack onto his other hand. The silver of Marty's watch, right at the tail end of the UFO, glinted in the daylight. "If it hits the Philippines," Ton-Ton added, "it will sink us all." His right hand lowered visibly.

"Oh, *that* Skylab," Marty nodded, imagining a big, round, and monstrous spaceship with metal tentacles.

"It's as big as the Earth," Jamil contributed. "It'll knock us all into the sun, and we'll burn like we're in hell."

"HOOO!" hooted Ton-Ton derisively. "They built it in the States, dummy, it can't be as big as Earth, too. It's really just as big as the Philippines, which is twenty times smaller than the USA."

Marty listened to Ton-Ton, half-skeptical and half-impressed. Ton-Ton loved to make up a lot of stuff, but when it came to geography and history, he was a whiz. All the social studies teachers liked him, even when sometimes he purposely wrote the wrong answers to test

questions or made up his own current events. Their present social studies teacher, Mr. Marquez, had even worked with Ton-Ton to provide silly answers to questions they already knew the answers to. Who is the national hero of the Philippines? —Uncle Sam. Who is the president of the Philippines? —Mekanda Robot. What is the national bird? —Batman and Robin. “You can be president after Mekanda, Ton-Ton,” Mr. Marquez would say. But if the Skylab killed them, Ton-Ton would not even get the chance to be president. Ton-Ton would not be able to declare watching Japanese robot cartoons as part of their subjects in school.

Marty frowned, getting into the spirit of rebellion. “They should cancel classes. We might as well have fun on our last day!”

Nearby, Ella was sobbing. “I want to go home. We shouldn’t be here.”

“School really wants to take all the fun away,” Cris complained.

“Don’t worry,” Amy crooned, trying to comfort one and appease the other. “At least, we’re all still together.”

“All right, section 2, form your lines for flag ceremony,” called Mrs. Perez, their homeroom teacher, waddling her way, to the left, and to the right, and around Marty’s classmates. “Stop that!” she scolded Ella, fishing out a tissue from one of the huge pockets of her dress. Marty was about to obey when he noticed Ton-Ton had not moved, and was again looking up at the sky.

“I thought I saw something,” Ton-Ton whispered, shielding his eyes from the sun. Again, the Mickey Mouse wristwatch flashed on Ton-Ton’s white wrist.

Mrs. Perez reached them. “Antonio de Leon, Martin Encarnacion, get to your places!”

But Ton-Ton still continued to scan the skies, and Marty followed suit. What if somewhere in Japan Voltes V, Mazinger Z, and Daimos did exist? What if they were top secret, but now was the time for them to fly into view, to stop the Skylab from falling?

He felt a sudden twisting pain in his upper arm where Mrs. Perez grabbed him. “Get to your places, I said!” she cried, dragging both Ton-Ton and him to the section 2 line.

“Ow, Mrs. Perez!” Ton-Ton protested, his dark eyes glaring. “Won’t you be kind to us now, this is your last chance to be good.”



The silence that filled the classroom ate at the edges of Marty's stomach. He wanted to raise his hand and ask to be excused, but he was sure that that would only make his classmates stiffen instead of laugh at his daring. So he clamped his mouth shut and waited for his execution. He only hoped it would come before he dropped his stinkbomb on all of them.

Mrs. Perez grabbed Ton-Ton's collar to hurry him to her desk, and waited for Marty to follow behind. At least Marty would be able to see what form his execution would take, because Ton-Ton was to go first. Mrs. Perez opened her table drawer. It was full of plastic rulers, the kind that one could buy at the canteen. They looked almost like red and green, orange and yellow jelly—even the blue one could have been jelly—but when they landed and broke on Ton-Ton's hand, they sounded too hard to be jelly. Three, four, five, Marty counted, trying to harden his stomach. Eight, nine, ten, but something sharp, the pointy part of his heart, maybe, was trying to puncture it.

"This will teach you to listen next time," Mrs. Perez roared. "Next time, clean your ears! Next time, listen and obey!"

Ton-Ton laughed. He was just as red as Mrs. Perez, and his cheeks were wet, although there were no tears in his eyes. The blue ruler descended upon Ton-Ton's hand three times before it broke. As soon as he caught his breath, he said, "But Mrs. Perez, there won't be a next time!"

Mrs. Perez simply pushed him aside and signed for Marty. If he could not have his holiday, Marty thought, extending his hand, it would not be so bad if the Skylab fell just about now. He waited. But everything crashed on his hand and not on his head. He tried not to look at the silent classmates around him, who were watching, he knew, with curiosity. None would blame him or Ton-Ton, but none would feel sympathy for them either. None would think Mrs. Perez was being unfair. He tried not to look at Amy as he took his seat between hers and the window. But then when he finally made a quick scan of the room, he saw that his classmates were all still looking forward, watching Mrs. Perez swipe the pile of broken rulers into the wastebasket.

Ton-Ton, who sat in front of Marty, was the only one not looking. He was looking up at the sky again. "Psst, Ton, do you see anything?"

"Before SHE interrupted us, I did. I thought it was the Skylab. It was something metallic."

"What if that were a robot from Japan?"

"Those aren't real!" Ton-Ton scoffed, then straightened up when he saw Mrs. Perez rise from behind her desk. He looked out the window again, ignoring her glare. Marty feared she would punish them again, so he looked down at the scratched wood of his desk and tried to look well behaved. With a finger, he traced the words carved into the desk—*Missing, VV, Sarah loves Lo-, Toyota vs Crispa*. He wanted to add his name to the wood, although he had never felt the temptation to before. And then he felt a tingle rise from the bottom of his spine. Tomorrow, would his desk be there at all?

"Well," Mrs. Perez finally called into the quiet. She gave a short nod and turned to go, not looking at either Ton-Ton or Marty. "See you in Math class. Sixth period." It took her forever to lumber to the door at the back and leave the room. The moment she took a step out, several of the boys ran to the wastebasket to peer at the rulers.

"Pssh," Ton-Ton told them from his seat. "It didn't hurt one bit, right Marty?"

"No way," Marty shook his head. To convince Ton-Ton, he started carving out both their names on his desk with a ball pen, using both his smarting hands. Ton-Ton and Marty. Someday their names would float out from the bottom of the sea.



"My mommy got a call from Mindanao this morning," Cris said. "It was her auntie telling her not to leave the house and to put black cloth over all of the windows. She's crazy." She was talking to Amy, Marcia, and Ella, but she was looking at Ton-Ton. Marty watched as Ton-Ton ignored her, taking another big bite of his spam sandwich.

Ella shook her head. "What if the auntie is right? How do we know she is not?"

"What a worrier," Cris commented.

"But she could be right," Ella wailed, shivering. "My grandmother says we should not even open the door to anyone who knocks, because if we do, it would turn out to be the devil."

"So what are you doing in school?" Marcia asked pointedly.

Then Ton-Ton yelled. "It's coming! It's coming! Aaahhh!!!" he fell dramatically onto the floor as if he had just been hit from above.

The girls began screaming and crouching low, their hands on their heads. Marty, shocked at first, then catching on to Ton-Ton's game, burst into laughter.

Both Ton-Ton and Marty received a few punches and pinches from Amy and Marcia. Ella started crying in earnest. "You stupid!" cried Cris, genuinely furious, giving the most pain with her kicks. "You ought to be punished, shot, murdered in your seats!" Marty tried to ward her off, then was surprised to see Ton-Ton still on the floor, slapping at Cris's flying feet halfheartedly. He was looking out the window. He looked a bit pale, and his shirt was dirty. The watch glinted, blinding Marty momentarily.

Ton-Ton blinked. "We should not have classes. This is wrong. I'm going to tell Mr. Marquez." He stood up.

"Don't!" Marty cried, placing a hand on his arm. "Are you crazy? We're not supposed to go to the Faculty Room unless we're asked to."

"Pshh," Ton-Ton replied, snatching his arm away, "who cares about rules now?"

After hesitating a while, the girls followed Ton-Ton out of the classroom and down two flights of stairs. Jamil was at Ton-Ton's elbow, keeping up with Ton-Ton's strides at the same time he told every grade four student the plan. Marty brought up the rear, opening and closing his hands. They still smarted from the blows Mrs. Perez had given them. In the pit of his stomach, he knew this was the wrong idea, but he felt he had no other alternative. He did just want to go home and read at least one more *Spooky* comic, and watch one more robot cartoon.

At the door of the Faculty Room, Ton-Ton paused and turned to face his followers. Most of section 2 and some of sections 1 and 3 had joined them. Ton-Ton winked and banged boldly on the door. The door opened so quickly that some people in front staggered forward, while the ones behind ran away in fright. Marty forced his feet to stay where they were.

"Hello, Ton-Ton, what can I do for you?" Miss Fonacier's voice wafted sweetly around them, before Marty found the courage to look. Miss Fonacier had been their grade three social studies teacher. She had also been particularly impressed with Ton-Ton. Marty's heart slowed down and stopped jabbing into his stomach.

"Miss Fonacier," Ton-Ton began, "we all have to leave school now—"

"Leave school?" Miss Fonacier's voice rose an octave. She looked behind her, stepped out, and shut the door. She took Ton-Ton's elbow, and led him, and therefore the crowd, to one of the benches against the long wall of the Faculty Room. "Why?" she asked.

"We're not supposed to be here, because the Skylab is falling and we deserve a holiday," Ton-Ton explained.

Miss Fonacier laughed, and everybody smiled around her. Marty found himself smiling too. "Phew! Don't we all deserve a holiday. But—"

"Hey, what's up? Is this a rally or what?" It was Mr. Marquez, a chalkbox in one hand, and a folded map and roll of masking tape in the other. He was probably on his way to section 2. The bell was about to ring.

"They want a holiday because of the Skylab," Miss Fonacier informed him.

"It's the end of the world!" Ella fretted.

"Is it?" Miss Fonacier asked, still smiling.

Mr. Marquez groaned. "Are you a seventh-day Adventist by any chance, Ella?"

Miss Fonacier laughed. "Lito—"

Mr. Marquez fell on his knees and gestured to Miss Fonacier. "Had we but world enough and time, my lady—" Then the bell rang. Everyone groaned. Mr. Marquez rose just as quickly to his feet, dusting his knee. "So much for time! Let's go, my people, there is much to be discussed. Onward march!" Then he turned around to see if everyone followed. "Sections 1 and 3, please go back to your rooms. Wait for your social studies period, okay? We'll talk about the Skylab. Mr. President, if you would please not get yourself late."

Ton-Ton had remained standing beside Miss Fonacier. After waving at Mr. Marquez, he knelt in mock imitation. "Miss Fonacier, you are the greatest, prettiest teacher. Thank you!"

Yet again, Miss Fonacier laughed. "You really would make a great politician, Mr. de Leon. Thank you for the compliment. Now go to class and behave yourself so that the history books will give you a sparkling review."

Ton-Ton and Marty watched Miss Fonacier disappear into the Faculty Room before they walked back to the stairs. On the landing, Ton-Ton paused once to look up at the sky, sighing.



Mr. Marquez was waiting for them. "Everyone stand to attention, the president is here." He never tired playing his game, but the others groaned and mumbled in their seats. "I heard about your trial by fire, Ton-Ton, and Marty too. Mrs. Perez told all the faculty herself ten thousand times." Marty clutched at his hands to check if the smarting was still there. It was not. "You know it does not pay to talk back to a teacher."

Ton-Ton simply grinned back at him. "It's never good to talk back to the future president either."

"Will you decree the Skylab to fall on her head?"

Ton-Ton frowned. "When will it land?" he asked Mr. Marquez.

Mr. Marquez looked around his class and then smiled at Marty. "Don't look so worried, Mart. Everyone, listen. The Skylab will probably land in Australia." He pointed to a large pink spot toward the bottom of the map already taped to the board. Marty heard sighs of relief all around him.

"And what will happen to the Australians?" Ella asked, raising her hand but not waiting to be called. "Will they all drown?"

Mr. Marquez smiled at her. "You sure have a doomsday view of the world, Ella." He looked around him. "It's not yet the end of the world today, I assure you. Now don't be too disappointed. In space, the Skylab will break into thousands of pieces, and those pieces will hit the ground. Some will be as huge as cars and trucks, but nothing so big as to sink a whole country."

"Why is it falling?" Amy asked.

"Something went wrong with the satellite. Those American products go wrong, too, you know. Your Mickey Mouse watch will get broken, too, someday, Ton-Ton."

Ton-Ton smiled at Marty, not correcting Mr. Marquez.

"So," Mr. Marquez said, hand poised with chalk upon the blackboard, "back to the voting, like the last time. Who would still like the Philippines to be a colony—remember that word, 'colony'?—a province of the United States?"

Marty did not raise his hand with half the class. He wanted to be Japanese, so he could watch a lot of their robot cartoons. He

remembered telling Ton-Ton this, and Ton-Ton had teased him about it, saying it was because Marty looked Japanese.

"Ton-Ton, why are you raising your hand? Have you given up your ambition, or are you planning to be president of the U.S. as well?"

"I just want to have snow," Ton-Ton answered readily, making everyone laugh, because they had just learned about the equator and the tropics in Science. But then he continued, in a voice full of wishes, "I want to feel the cold, roll in the ground, hide out in the snow."



When Mrs. Perez entered the classroom, there was a waiting hush. But Ton-Ton beamed diplomatically and extended his left hand to Mrs. Perez. "Sorry about my behavior, Mrs. Perez. I thought it was the end of the world."

Mrs. Perez looked at the hand, then at the watch. "You'll have to prove your sincerity with good manners, Antonio," Mrs. Perez said solemnly, but she took his hand.

"Mr. Marquez said not to worry, the Skylab will just fall into Australia, where they'll be able to handle the situation better. Thank God it won't happen here."

"Pssh, run along now back to your chair. You just parrot whatever your hero Mr. Marquez says."

Marty sat among his classmates, unable to move. Mrs. Perez did not look at him, but he felt that she was waiting, and the class was waiting. Marty looked at the watch on Ton-Ton's hand, the watch that was beginning to look more and more like Ton-Ton owned it. If Marty had been wearing the watch, then he would have been just as brave as Ton-Ton. It was the watch.

"Now, Ton-Ton, Jamil, please pick up the new Math workbooks at the Faculty Room." Both Ton-Ton and Jamil left quickly. Marty sat, stunned. Everybody knew that he and Ton-Ton were partners, and that they always did things together. Could Mrs. Perez be so cruel? Was she punishing him for not apologizing? Were not the rulers enough?

Mrs. Perez turned back to the class. "You know, Mr. Marquez doesn't know everything. And not everything he says might be true. Did he ever say our president loves children a lot? He has given many schools new textbooks. If you watch channel 4, you will see him and the first

lady surrounded by children.” Marty could hardly listen. By the time Ton-Ton and Jamil came back, he was staring at the blackboard, at the page numbers that Mrs. Perez had written there. Ton-Ton handed him a workbook. Marty flipped to one of the pages absently. “What are we supposed to do?” he whispered.

“Look at your page. What else is there? Answer the exercises. Sheesh!” Ton-Ton rolled his eyes, then went back to writing his answers on the workbook. With his left hand, the hand that seemed so big with the watch, he covered his own page.

Stung, Marty retreated to his page too. Once he got his watch back, he vowed, he would never make deals with Ton-Ton again.

“Martin Encarnacion, Antonio de Leon!!!” shrieked Mrs. Perez, right in Marty’s ear. “I said DO NOT WRITE ON THOSE BOOKS! Why don’t you ever listen?”

“But, but—” Marty stammered, gesturing towards Ton-Ton. Ton-Ton was winking at him.

“You give your excuses to the principal,” yelled Mrs. Perez. “Go ahead, get out! Go to the principal’s office right now.”

In a daze, and through the utter silence in class, Marty followed Ton-Ton outside. Ton-Ton was skipping. “We’re free, partner, free from the enemy!”

Marty struggled with the angry knots forming in his throat. “You planned this? You knew we weren’t supposed to write on the books?” He already knew the answer.

Ton-Ton looked at him and laughed. “Don’t look so worried, Mart,” he said. “We’ll get through this like we always do.” He slapped at Marty’s arm. “Together!”

The secretary informed them that the principal was at a meeting, so they had to wait on one of the sofas outside his door. She gave each of them a form to fill up. Name, grade, section. Sent by (teacher’s name). Offense (if known). Marty’s heart grew heavier and heavier, so that it once again perched on the top of his stomach. Ton-Ton, his hands and chin in the air, made a show of collecting their forms and giving them back to the secretary, trying to win her with a smile. She simply glanced at the forms before putting them aside and resuming her typing.

“You’ll be my secretary, Marty,” Ton-Ton said in an undertone. Marty looked at his friend, not sure how to react. He did want to be with Ton-Ton when he became president, but he was not sure he would

enjoy typing. He also was not sure he liked the idea of Ton-Ton planning everything for him.

"Is that all I could be?" Marty asked him, rather angrily, as it came out.

"Dummy, you could be anything you want."

He did not like being called a dummy as well, but he saw that Ton-Ton had meant it, that he could be anything he wanted, that Ton-Ton would not mind so much if he did not want to be secretary. The fluorescent directly above shone a light down on Ton-Ton's fair face, and formed a halo round his head. Marty felt the watch rest on his palm. "Here, Marty, you can have it back today, but you can still hang on to my comics."

"No," Marty said, handing it back. "A deal is a deal." He felt rather like a hero, saying that.

The bell rang, making them jump. It sounded like a fire alarm, here in the principal's office. The secretary stood up, about to go out with her folder, when she noticed the two of them. "I almost forgot about you. You can see the principal tomorrow. Here, take these slips and show them to your teacher, so that you can come here during Homeroom period."

"Thank you," Ton-Ton said, taking the two slips and sticking them in his back pocket. He grinned at Marty. No Mrs. Perez until sixth period tomorrow.



Seated next to his father, in the front seat of the car, Marty looked at the darkening sky, a strange red and violet. He kept forgetting what Mr. Marquez had told them that day, that there would still be life, that there would still be school tomorrow. It seemed easier somehow to believe that it was doomsday. And he found he still did not want to see the principal the next day.

"I wish I didn't have to go to school tomorrow," Ton-Ton said, as if he had listened to Marty's thoughts. Ton-Ton usually rode at the back, with Marty and his father. They dropped Ton-Ton off in Cubao where the market was.

"Thank you, Dr. Encarnacion," Ton-Ton said, before slamming the door and waving at Marty.

Marty watched his friend walking away, skillfully dodging pedestrians, but looking small with his big black bag slung on one of his shoulders. It looked as if the bag had eaten half of his back. Ton-Ton's UFO hand glinted as it gripped the bag in place.

"You better get your watch back before your mommy finds out," his father spoke up, surprising Marty. He had hoped that no one in his family would notice, until he got it back the next week. His father's hand rested on Marty's head a moment, before he took it back to turn the steering wheel. "Ton-Ton is brave, isn't he? He's not scared of going home alone."

"I could do that too," Marty told him, knowing full well that his mother did not like the idea.

His father smiled, keeping his eyes on the road. "Maybe next year," he replied. "It's an exciting but dangerous world out there."

Marty wanted to speak up, to tell him that it was also exciting and dangerous in school. He wanted to tell him of the Skylab—did he know about it?—of Mrs. Perez's cruelty, of Ton-Ton's deviousness. But then he thought his father would get angry about disobeying the rules. And, his father would learn about his trips to the principal all too soon.

When they got home, Marty changed his clothes without having to be told, and got a smile from his father before his father disappeared into his clinic adjoining the house. In the dining room, he made himself a spam sandwich and settled down to watch Daimos. After the cartoon, he waited awhile to see if this would be one of the days when Ton-Ton would call to talk about an episode, but he did not. He decided not to call Ton-Ton either. Marty finally spread out his notebook on the dining table to face the Math problems they had missed doing in class. He and Ton-Ton had been made to copy them from the workbooks. That Mrs. Perez really thought of everything.

One more day, he told himself. One more day until the weekend. Five more days until he got his watch back. Three more weeks until his birthday. Five more months until Christmas vacation. It was in the midst of counting the days when the telephone rang. Marty raced to the living room before his father could answer the call from the extension in his clinic. "Hello?"

"Mart."

"Ton! Wasn't that a great episode of Daimos, huh? That new weapon of the enemy's was so powerful, I thought—but then Richard always wins, right?"

There was a silence at the other end that startled Marty. "Ton-Ton?"

"Hey," whispered Ton-Ton, then there was long intake of breath. "I'm not going to school tomorrow—"

"You're letting me go to the principal alone! You traitor!" The silence checked him again. Marty's stomach grew heavy. "It'll be okay, Ton-Ton, you said we'd go together," he pleaded.

"I—I have to leave school. My mom says we have to go far away. Maybe the States, that would be fun. Except—my father isn't coming. He has to stay behind. He had to go with these two men who were waiting for him when I came home. They drove off in an army jeep. It was really old-looking and dusty, and made a snorting sound. Mom says he'll be staying with them in camp before he comes to join us. He'll follow."

"Camp," Marty repeated, but only because he did not know what else to say to this person who did not much sound like Ton-Ton.

"Mom has to use the phone now. She says goodbye to you. So—bye."

Marty stood. He did not understand. And he almost did not hear the click at the other end. He suddenly felt the world turn. His father found him lying face down on the floor in tears, sobbing into the receiver, "You'll have snow! You'll have Mickey Mouse!" He let himself be carried to his room.

His father stayed with him until he fell asleep, clinging to his father's huge hand.



In the middle of the night, Marty woke, remembering everything Mr. Marquez had told them in class. About how people suddenly disappeared from their homes and no one ever found them again. He had to do something, maybe warn Ton-Ton. He crept out of his room and down the stairs. He picked up the phone and dialed Ton-Ton's number in the dark. Ton-Ton's phone rang at once, loudly, in Marty's ear. Marty listened to the ringing, until the busy signal sounded. He dialed again, and a third time, but there was no answer.

Tomorrow, he decided, he would have to ask Mr. Marquez's help. Then he thought of Mr. Marquez kneeling and reciting poems, cracking jokes and saying, "Don't worry, Mart." He sighed. There was no hope.

He went back to his room. As he squeezed past his door, he knocked some things off the bedside table, things that scattered and made a shuffling sound. He switched on the lamp and looked down at the *Casper* and *Spooky* comics, all that he had left of Ton-Ton. Then he thought of their names on his desk, of frog ceremony, of robot cartoons—such lifeless, joyless, unappealing things all of a sudden—then of his own watch. It was Ton-Ton's now, for sure, and he was surprised that he did not care. What use was a watch if the world was coming to an end, after all?