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Luis Cabalquinto

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Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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Gunshot

(Excerpt from "Sun on Ice," a novel in progress)

LUIS CABALQUINTO

AFTER HIS CUSTOMARY MORNING RUN around the oval park of his residential community, the jogger headed off to the post office a couple of blocks away to pick up his mail. From his rented mailbox he pulled out three letters, a subscription magazine, and the usual mail order solicitations. He tossed the junk mail into a trash can and went quick-stepping towards home to read the letters.

He did not hear the gunshot, but at the corner of 14th Street and Avenue A, as he waited for the light to change, he saw across the street a man at first running, then staggering on the sidewalk. Suddenly, he stopped and slumped against the concrete wall, his right hand clutching his chest. The momentum brought his body reeling several yards toward the door of the convenience store at the corner where he collapsed in a heap. Soon after, the body stopped moving.

The crowd of pedestrians who, like the jogger, had stood paralyzed watching, now came alive, swarming around the fallen body like army ants, blocking the body from the jogger's view. Someone ran to a public telephone.

The traffic lights had changed many times but the jogger stayed rooted to the same spot. The ten o'clock sun, at a forward slant from his body, warmed his head and shoulders.

Presently, the street corner was pierced by the braying sirens of police cars and two ambulance vans that came and converged in the area. The vans were marked, "Beth Israel Medical Center," the name of the Jewish hospital where the jogger's wife worked as a registered nurse, only four blocks away.

The cops cleared the immediate vicinity around the fallen man and put up a barrier of vivid orange tapes around his still motionless

body. The crowd of pedestrians scattered to form small satellite groups, discussing animatedly what had happened. Once more the jogger had a full view of the body. He could see its features clearly as he stood on the opposite side of the narrow street. The body was a hulk over six feet long. The man was no more than thirty. He had dark coffee-hued skin that looked stretched over an excess of fat, obviously, the jogger surmised, of an overindulgent life. He wore untorn blue jeans and a flower-embroidered denim shirt that was completely unbuttoned, exposing a shiny, hairless torso. There was a red prick mark on his chest but no visible trace of blood. Covering his sockless feet was a pair of expensive white sneakers.

The EMS people from the hospital vans, efficient-looking in their smart beige uniforms, tried at first to revive the man through mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. That didn't work and they now placed an oxygen device over his face. The black man still did not stir. The body was placed on a stretcher and rushed into one of the emergency vans. Several of the EMS people jumped in and the van sped away, its sirens screaming viciously.

The cops began talking to some of the witnesses. The jogger crossed the street to listen in on their conversation and get details of what had happened. But he could not get close enough to the cops for him to hear what they were saying. There was very little blood on the spot where the body had fallen.

Halfway down the block, on the same sidewalk, four men were huddled together, casting furtive glances at some of the cops now heading towards the card and stationery shop across the street. Unhurriedly, the jogger walked towards the huddled men, whose faces he recognized. They were Hispanics who lived in the same apartment building in that block. He saw them often playing dominoes in front of their building whenever he passed by on his way to the copy shop on 10th Street where he had his manuscripts duplicated. The men would be drinking beer as they played, their beer cans wrapped in small brown paper bags. One time one of them, the most outgoing whom they called "German," offered him a beer which he accepted. He sat with them watching one game. After the game, German invited him for a turn at the dominoes, but he had to go and declined the offer, thanking them for the beer and promising to try the dominoes another time.

German was now gesturing towards the jogger in cheerful recognition. The jogger extended an open palm of the "gimme-a-five" street greeting.

"Como esta, hermano," German said, grinning widely, showing beautiful even white teeth. His ruddy face was due partly to the hot summer sun. But he also had been drinking. The jogger could tell because German was standing so close to him that he could catch whiffs of his breath. The jogger sometimes wondered if German and his friends dealt in drugs, a familiar activity among people who hung out on the sidewalks below 14th Street. But German and his friends never offered to sell him anything. At another time, on Labor Day, the jogger came across German and two of his friends attired in drag at the annual transvestite festival at Tompkins Square Park where the jogger had gone to take photographs of the famous tourist event and to watch its outrageously funny "talent" show. He did not see German perform on stage.

"We seen the whole thing," German was saying, in that excited raspy voice of his. Black guy tried to hit the Pakistani shop owner across the street for money. Black guy had a knife. But Pakistani guy had a gun and blasted him right off."

"That Pakistani was ripped off two weeks ago. A thousand bucks they took from him. Hold-up dude was also black, so this time Mr. Pakistani was ready with his gun," German's friend, Gomez, added.

German's other two friends, Juan and Felipe, were nodding their heads. Felipe said, "I wudda done exact same thing if I wuz in that Pakistani's shoes."

"Me, too," seconded Juan.

"Where's the Pakistani now?" the jogger asked.

"Inside the shop. He came out and tried to go after the black guy, but his wife pulled him back inside. She called the cops," Gomez said.

"We seen it happen, but we ain't telling no cops even if they came over and asked us. We ain't no fans of them," said German, casting another wary eye across the street. "Uh-uh, look, they're taking him out."

Four men in blue uniforms were escorting a tall, stoop-shouldered, light-skinned Asian into a marked police sedan. His wife was with him, crying softly. Two other officers closed the door to the shop and secured it with a heavy padlock. The space in front of the store was cordoned off with more orange tapes.

"Uh-uh, we gotta have the Press, too!" German said, gesturing his head towards a gray-colored car that had arrived and parked right in front of them. The car bore the masthead of an afternoon daily. "We'd better split, man. I'm outta here."

The group broke up, German and his friends vanishing quickly into their apartment building. The jogger turned to walk back towards the street corner. One of the newsmen called after him, "Excuse me, Sir!"

The jogger did not stop walking, but he slowed down and turned to look at the caller. His look was non-committal. "I didn't see anything. I just got here," he said.

"How about the guys who run inside—did they tell you if they had seen what happened?"

The jogger felt an odd sense of power with the knowledge he possessed. He decided he did not like this man. So he said, "no, they didn't see anything either. Sorry, I can't help you. You'd be better off speaking to the police officers. I got to go, sorry."

He quickened his pace, leaving the newspaperman behind. The jogger knew that the other man knew he had lied.

Back in his apartment, the jogger placed the magazine on a reading rack and opened the letters. One letter came from the editor of a literary journal informing him of their decision to publish a story he had mailed to them a month ago. The second was a letter from a nephew in the Philippines thanking him for the tuition money he had sent. The last letter was an invitation from a university for him to join the teaching panel at next year's annual writer's conference. The honorarium offered was generous. He made a quick mental note to accept the offer.

Later that evening, when his wife came home from the hospital, she told him that a man had been brought to the emergency admission ward early that day. The man, reportedly, was shot in the neighborhood. She wondered if he might have witnessed the incident. The jogger, busy at his computer with a manuscript, didn't feel like talking about the incident, so he simply said: "No."

Then asked, "Did he survive?"

"Dead on arrival. But they arrested his killer, a Pakistani named Masood. He runs that stationery store on Avenue A near 14th. The cops say the man—he's black—was shot after a violent argument over drug money. It turns out the shop was operating as a front for drug dealing. They also arrested some of the Pakistani's street vendors. They live in that building across the street from his shop—mostly Latinos. They say the leader is a transvestite—someone named German Avila. Doesn't this sound to you like good material for a story?"