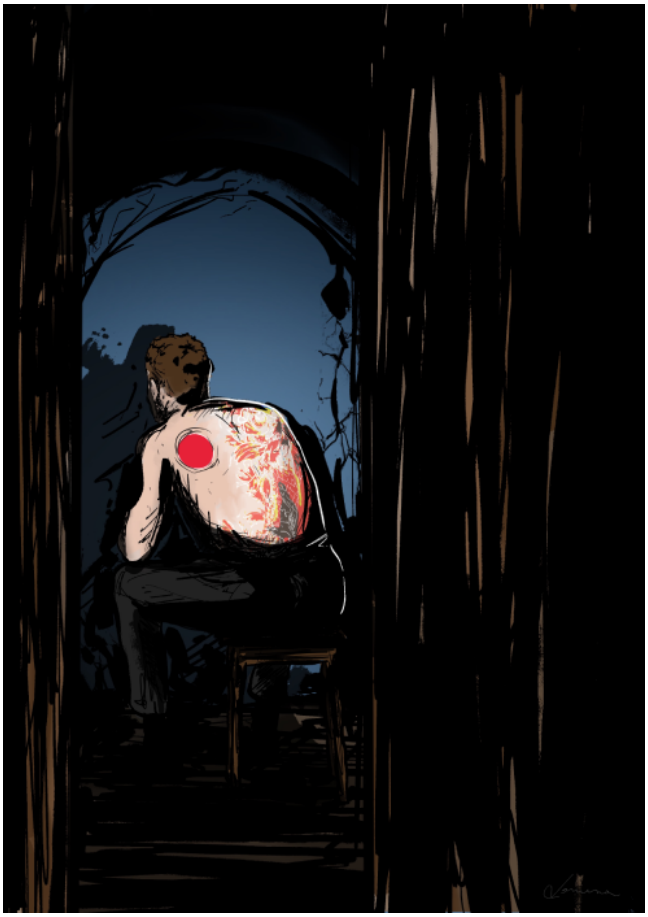
SHORT STORY

Room 1213

by Vincent Ternida



"The Successor" by Vanesa Erjavec

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2018

It’s been a long time since I actually stayed in Maynila for more than a layover. Some places try too hard to become something that they’re not. That’s probably why I prefer Old Manila or Cubao: everything still looks like how I remember it.

I wake up, staring at a completely different ceiling. Three days ago, I had to leave Tokyo permanently because of a deal that went sideways. I booked the fastest flight to a trusted safe haven, but Maynila has already been compromised. I had to shoot myself to throw the syndicate off — they probably think I’m dead. Laying low in this town for a while is probably a good idea.

The mouldy sweat stink wafts through the stale air. I push the windows open and light a cigarette. I finally understand why chain smokers go through a pack a day of these sticks — to escape the stink of the world for a little bit. It is like TV for the lungs: for a few moments you numb all the shit that you breathe in. I take a long drag.

I can hear the rattling of the jeepney and tricycle miles away, they sound like beasts making their entrance. Vagrants loiter about, singing their street karaoke. Somebody’s disrespecting Sinatra’s *My Way* and that somebody’s gonna be dead. The sky has fewer stars tonight; it must be that the city’s becoming brighter, but still not as bright as Tokyo. Tokyo’s lights outshine the stars, they’re so distracting.

A child passes by my apartment and stares at me, mouth agape. I reach into my pocket and hand him a piece of hard candy. Without a word, he grabs it and runs away. With that, I put out my cigarette and shut my blinds. The moment felt surreal, as a similar event happened during my last summer in Maynila.

1988

As soon as Nanay left this summer, the Yakuza Man moved into her apartment. The Yakuza Man was stocky, had thick slicked-back black hair, was clean shaven, dressed well, and always had his sunglasses on. Tito Mando said that my new neighbour was a Yakuza, which I understood was bad. Ray told me that Tito Mando believed that the Yakuza Man kidnapped beautiful women and sent them to Japan. He probably thought Mama knew him because Mama’s in Japan working for a restaurant. As usual, Papa was across the road fighting demons. Ray told me that if you look at Ginebra San Miguel’s gin bottle upside down, Satan was winning against Saint Michael.

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With Nanay in Canada, Mama in Japan, and Papa fighting demons, I only had Ray to play with for the summer. Ray was the son of Tito Mando's girlfriend, Tita Peachy. They lived on the top floor in the largest room in the apartments because Ray said that Tito Mando 'owns the place.' Ray's mom was pretty; I could understand why Tito Mando was afraid of the stout Yakuza Man. If the Yakuza Man kidnapped women and sent them to Japan like Mama, I'd be scared of him too. One day when I passed by Room 1213, the Yakuza Man was about to leave. He wore his sunglasses, a sleeveless sando, and shorts.

"Hey kid," the Yakuza Man said. His voice was rough but friendly.

"I'm not supposed to talk to you," I said and headed back home.

"What do the grown ups say about me?" he asked. The Yakuza Man spoke broken Tagalog, maybe he wasn't that bad. I heard Japanese men did not speak Tagalog and were mean to women.

"Tito Mando said you kidnap beautiful women."

The Yakuza Man scoffed then lit his cigarette. Unlike what the grown ups smoked, his cigarettes smelled like perfume. But after a while, all cigarettes smelled like ash.

"Did he, eh? I don't take anything out, I actually bring things in. I'm like Santa Claus, I bring gifts."

With that, the Yakuza Man produced a piece of candy and gave it to me. He chuckled, scruffed my curly hair and walked away, smoking his cigarette. He was not Santa Claus, he did not have a beard, and he wasn't fat. In his squat walk, I could see the body paintings on his arms and he was missing some fingers on his right hand.

I watched *Bioman* with Ray at his apartment. We had a TV but we only got three channels, and all of them showed boring shows like the news. Papa would watch a show with beautiful girls in swimsuits and the fat men would touch them funny. Papa would laugh really loud, but I never thought it was funny.

"The Yakuza Man is like Santa," I said.

"He's a bag man all right, but he steals girls," Ray said.

The red Bioman shot one of the robot soldiers with his laser gun.

"He told me he does not steal girls; he brings presents."

"Okay, I dare you to follow him to where he works. Bring something back and I'll believe you."

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“Not fair, you come with me.”

“I’m not the one who is friends with Yakuza Man.”

The Biomen called up their Bio-Robot because the Beast Warrior became the size of a building.

“Let’s watch something else.”

“There is nothing else.”

“You have seven channels!”

That night, Papa came home and sang Martin Nievera songs until the sun came up. I did not want to be at home. When he was not fighting demons, Papa was angry with me. He whipped me with his belt when I was too noisy. I stayed quiet these days to avoid getting spanked. Sometimes he told me I was a good boy. I thought about Ray’s dare. If I left really early in the morning, I would return before Papa came home. I would prove to Ray that the Yakuza Man was not that bad.

The moment Kuya Bodjie on *Batibot* told a story about *Malakas at Maganda,* I heard the door to Room 1213 close. I crawled towards the kitchen window and peeked. I saw the Yakuza Man exit his room, this time dressed in a polo shirt and brown pants. He did not have his sunglasses on, and I could see that his right eye had a scar across it. The eyeball was completely white. He put his shades on and began to smoke.

I kept myself at a distance while I followed the Yakuza Man. People on the street avoided him as he walked by. When a mother and a child passed him, the mother tightly held the child’s hand. Men who fought demons glared at him with anger, some of them shouted bad words. The moment I ended up at the edge of Matalino and into Anonas, I stared back at our apartment building and continued into the streets.

Nanay told me that the moment I crossed to Anonas, it was a different world. That was where men fought demons to the death and met with bad women. I wanted to believe that the Yakuza Man was not a bad person. The moment he crossed to Anonas, I was afraid that Ray and Tito Mando might be right. I turned back and returned to our apartments and found Ray watching *Transformers* on Channel Two.

“I think you’re right,” I said.

“I’m always right,” Ray beamed.

“Yakuza Man went to Anonas —”

“Shhhh!” Ray looked around. “We’re not supposed to talk about that place in this house.”

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“Tita Peachy isn’t even home…”

“Kahit na,” Ray exhaled. “Just don’t talk about that place.”

Nothing different happened on *Transformers* that episode, the Autobots and Decepticons traded laser blasts but everybody went home and the credits rolled. But Papa picked a fight with the Yakuza Man that night. A crowd gathered behind both of them. He danced in between Papa’s punches. The Yakuza Man could have hit Papa easily, but he didn’t.

“Putanginamo, if not for bastards like you, my wife would still be here!”

“I don’t know your wife,” the Yakuza Man said.

He lit a cigarette while dodging another punch thrown by Papa. Papa winded up like Popeye and rushed him. The Yakuza Man danced out of the way and Papa slipped. The crowd laughed at my Papa who lay on the ground. Crying, I stood between him and the Yakuza Man.

“Don’t hurt my Papa, Yakuza Man!” I cried. “Can’t you see he’s tired of fighting demons?”

The crowd continued to laugh, while the Yakuza Man took a puff and walked away. I tried to touch Papa, but he swatted my hand away. Tito Mando came down and shook him awake, but Papa did not budge. Lifting him up, Tito Mando carried Papa back to the apartment and laid Papa in the living room.

“Malaya, why did you leave me?” Papa talked in his sleep.

“Stay with us tonight,” Tito Mando said. “You don’t need to see this.”

“No, I’ll sleep in here tonight.”

I lay on my bed, awake, because Papa’s coughing was loud and he sounded like he was choking. I thought about the Yakuza Man and why he did not fight back. Most people also avoided him and he did not have any friends. I had Ray, Tito Mando, and Papa. I wanted to know more about the Yakuza Man.

The door opened next door and the Yakuza Man left. I followed him to the street that separated Anonas and Matalino and entered the complex nearby. The complex was an area full of beer houses and go-go bars. Papa said that Mama worked in one of these places but in Japan. I was sure that the Yakuza Man went to these places because Nanay told me before that all Japanese men went there. Nanay said that Mama went to Japan because Japanese men were rich and would give Mama money if Mama would give service. I was sure service meant a good thing, because Mama brought back many toys and gifts that made Papa happy.

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“Hey kid,” a familiar voice said. I turned to find the Yakuza Man observing me underneath an Acacia Tree. He did not look scary, only a little worried.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at home by now?”

“Why didn’t you hit Papa?”

“Why should I?”

He lit his cigarette and I sat on a bench.

“Because you’re the Yakuza Man”

He laughed and said, “I was a Yakuza but not anymore.”

The Yakuza Man took off his shirt and showed me a body painting of a big fish.

“This is koi,” he said. “Once it crosses the river to a gate, it becomes a dragon.”

I gasped. The body painting was beautiful, nothing like the cartoons I watched. The colours were sharp and the fish looked real, like it was popping out of his skin. He put his shirt back on and sat on the bench.

“Mama’s in Japan,” I said. “Papa said she will never come back. Nanay told me that all you Japanese men are bad men who take away our women but give them a lot of money.”

“She’s not completely wrong,” he said, then puffed on his cigarette. “Wait, you have two mothers?”

“Nanay is Papa’s sister. Mama is Mama.”

“I’m Hiroki,” the Yakuza Man grunted.

“I’m Angelo,” I said.

“Hajimemashite,” he said and bowed.

As I bowed back, a pretty girl appeared from the beer house and approached the Yakuza Man.

“I’m Ligaya,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Angelo, you’re pretty.”

“Thank you!” she giggled. “Your son is a charmer.”

“Not my son, he lives in my apartment building. Tanduay-Coke please.”

“Coming!”

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Ligaya left us. She had a short skirt on. Did Mama dress like this when she worked in Japan? I looked up to him as he lit another cigarette. The Yakuza man was quiet. Ligaya returned with two glasses of Coca Cola.

“One for Hiroki,” she said.

“Arigato.”

“And this is for you.”

I received a glass of cola. The sweet black liquid was refreshing. When I swallowed fast, it felt like I swallowed rocks. I had to sip it slowly. The Yakuza Man drank while he observed me.

“They said you’re a bad man, but you don’t seem bad.”

He smirked and said, “Maraming Salamat Angelo-san.”

“What’s Maraming Salamat in Japanese?”
“Arigato.”

“Ah-ree-gah-toh.”

“Short *ri*,” he said. “A-ri-gato.”

“Arigato.”

“Good.”

“Japanese is a hard language.”

I did not know when it happened, but I fell asleep. When I woke up, I was outside my apartment door. I entered and found Papa on the bed. He was not breathing. I shook him, but he did not wake up.

I went to Tito Mando’s apartment and called him. Tito Mando ran to our room and checked on Papa. He shook his head. Ray looked at me and placed his hand on my shoulder. I didn’t know what was going on.

“Stay with us for a while,” Tito Mando said.

“Will Papa be alright?”

Tito Mando did not answer.

Papa had his funeral at a nearby church. Everyone from the barangay attended, most of them were from the apartment. I stood with Ray, Tito Mando, and Tita Peachy. I turned at the

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door and hoped that Mama would arrive. Papa was inside a box and holy water was thrown on him. I called out to him, but they said he could not hear me anymore. Tita Peachy said that he was in heaven with God and Saint Michael. Tito Mando said that he would fight demons until he was content in heaven.

“Are you my new family?” I asked Tita Peachy. Tita Peachy glanced at Tito Mando, he tried to smile. I didn’t mind having them as my family, Ray could be my brother, and we could watch TV all day. It will be fun. I still wanted Mama to come back, at least for today. The men started fighting demons outside and also played cards. I spotted the Yakuza Man next to the fishball stand smoking his cigarette. I ran towards him.

“I did not know him, but your father seemed strong.”

“He’s really strong, he can lift me with one hand.”

“Would you like fish balls?”

“Yes!”

The Yakuza Man bought two sticks of fishballs. He gave me a skewer and we started to pick at the deep fried treats. Once I had a complete stick, I dipped it in sweet sauce. The sauce dripped down my neck as I bit into the piping hot and chewy morsel. He finished his stick just the same. He bought me malamig nearby and I chose coconut juice inside a plastic bag. He bought one for himself. We stared at the stars that night.

“I grew up outside Sapporo,” he said. “There were many stars in the sky. The bright lights of the city did not outshine them. When I moved to Tokyo, I could not see many stars. There are still many stars here; your city is not bright yet.”

“I would like to go to Tokyo one day,” I said.

“No, it’s a bad city for a good boy like you,” he said.
“Mama is in Tokyo, one day I’ll find her.”

The funeral lasted three days, and Mama did not show up. I lived with Ray’s family for a few weeks. I slept in the room where his household helper stayed. Ray shared a room with his brother and sister. The helper was nice, she let me have the bed while she slept on a mat on the floor.

Ray and I watched *G. I. Joe* that day. I hated how Ray kept watching violent cartoons; it’s not very real. Cobra and the Joes shot each other, but they all survived. In the news, when people were shot, they would be dead, like Papa.

“This is stupid,” I said.

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“It’s *G.I. Joe*!”

“We could probably watch something else. I think there’s something interesting on Channel 13.”

I switched the channel to find *El Shaddai*, a religious program that worshipped God. Ray grumbled and switched it back to *G.I. Joe*. Ever since I moved in, it felt that Ray and I were not as good friends as before.

“You don’t live here, we just took you in because you don’t have a family.”

“I thought we’re family now.”

“No, you just have a drunk dad and a hooker mom, and nobody loves you!”

I sat there and kept quiet. I went back to watching the show and tried to forget what Ray said.

“Sorry,” Ray mumbled. I shrugged and went back to watching TV. It didn’t matter, the Yakuza Man is my friend.

I snuck back into the Anonas beer house that night. This time, it felt different. There were many men there, fighting demons, and touching the bar girls funny. I found a well dressed man with a gold chain around his neck, with his hand inside a bar girl’s shirt. One skinny man drank beer while a bar girl had her head on his lap. I searched for the Yakuza Man, and a mean-looking man grabbed me by the arm.

“You’re not supposed to be here!” he roared. I tried to get away, but his grip was strong. It was stronger than my dad’s grip ever was.

“Help! Yakuza Man! Ligaya!”

Ligaya appeared from the bar and approached us. She smiled and held the mean-looking man’s arm.

“Gardo, it’s okay, I know this child.”

“He’s your responsibility!”

I cried. Ligaya took a face towel and wiped my eyes dry.

“It’s okay, anak,” she said.

“Where’s Yakuza Man?”

“Yakuza Man?” Ligaya giggled. “You mean, Hiroki?”

I nodded and she said, “Hiroki’s not here, he’s at work.”

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“Oh, he’s bringing presents to people?”

Ligaya’s face looked surprised. “Y-yes, he’s delivering presents. Where do you live?’

“The apartments in Matalino.”

“Okay, let me call your parents, do you have their number?”

“Papa is dead and Mama’s in Japan.”

Ligaya paused. Sighing, she turned to the bar and cocked her head. Suddenly, the Yakuza Man appeared and approached us.

“Hey kid,” he said. “Don’t you ever sleep?”

“Take me to Japan, Yakuza Man,” I said. “Take me to where Mama is. You said you’re Santa Claus, and you deliver gifts, deliver me to Mama.”

He sighed, and looked at Ligaya who shrugged.

“I’ll take you home,” he said. The Yakuza Man’s breath stank like Papa’s when he was fighting demons. I edged back. Grown-ups were all the same. They didn’t know what to say, they didn’t know what to do, it was always to tell us to shut up or spank us to make us go away. They think we’re stupid. I ran away.

I kept running. If I ever leave Anonas, I would probably find the airport where Mama took a plane to Japan. Then I would ride that plane. There I would ask where Mama was. I was like the Yakuza Man’s fish painting, Japan was my gate, and when I crossed it, I would be a dragon. Mama would find me, and she would take me back. Headlights. I stopped.

When I woke up, I was on a bed inside the beer house. It had that deep red lighting and a sour smell. A Mama Mary and Santo Nino statue was on the wall. The Yakuza Man and Ligaya watched over me, both of them looked worried.

“You shouldn’t do that, kid!” the Yakuza man shouted, his voice full of anger. “What would your Tito Mando say if he found out you died!”

“Maybe it is better that way,” I said. “Papa is gone. Nanay is far away. And Mama… Mama’s not coming back.” I curled into a ball.

The Yakuza Man lit a cigarette to calm down. He whispered something to Ligaya and she left. He sat by the end of the bed.

“I don’t even know my parents, they died in the war. My grandparents raised me, but they were too busy and I fell into a bad crowd. I ended up joining a gang, because what would a

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stupid kid like me know? Maybe you'll understand it when you grow up. Life's hard, kid," he said and took a long puff. "I don't even know where I'll be at the end of this summer. Promise me that you won't become like me. Go home to your Tito and hopefully they can provide for you until your Mama or your Nanay or whoever comes to pick you up. There's nothing for you if you stay with me. I'm just a broken man, bringing in shabu to keep these junkies high. The only thing I can do is bring snow."

"I want to see snow one day."

The Yakuza Man smirked as he put out his cigarette, "Let's go home, okay?"

I didn't argue, I took his hand and left.

The rest of the summer was quiet and long. Ray and I watched a lot of TV. We completed the whole series and reruns of our favourite shows and we even tried some of the grown up shows. They weren't all bad and I started to enjoy the news a bit more. They were a lot more entertaining than the cartoons we watched.

Nanay came by at the end of summer to pick me up. According to Tito Mando, she wanted to get me as soon as she found out that Mama was not coming back. Mama still didn't let us know where she was.

I will be moving to a place called Maple Ridge. Nanay said there were bears there. I asked her if we could visit Japan. She said she only had enough money to bring both of us back to Canada. I asked if there was koi in Canada. She said Canada had a lot of salmon. I asked if salmon crossed the dragon gate, would they become dragons? Nanay scoffed and asked me where I learned that.

Before I left I knocked on Room 1213 to say goodbye to the Yakuza Man, but there was no answer. Hiroki, the Yakuza Man, vanished from my life. A part of me was sad because he did not even say goodbye.

2018

The bullet wound on my side healed after weeks of resting and laying low. I check under the bandage, and the wound is starting to scar. Shirtless, I exit my apartment. I have forgotten how the heat bites into your skin even at night. The humid air is another layer of gravity that grinds you down, keeps you in place — it's sticky, uncomfortable. The same child from weeks back emerges from his hiding place.

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“Hi kid,” I say in Tagalog. “Musta?”

“What’s that?”

He points at my back, most likely at my tattoo. I’m not part of the family but Nagoshi-san made an exception when I requested for a koi painting on my back. The ink’s been dry for a few years now but I still feel the needle some days.

“It’s koi, it means I must overcome adversity.”

“Why do you want to be something that gets eaten?”

“Because I’m a special fish. If I cross the dragon gate, I become a dragon.”

“Have you become a dragon?”

I finish my cigarette and put it out with my boot. “What do you think?”

“My mom says you’re a bad man.”

“Then I’m still the same fish swimming upstream.”

I ruffle the boy’s hair.

“See ya around, kid.”

I return to my apartment, don a shirt and leave. There’s money to be made, and I’ve sat on my ass long enough. Time to bring snow back to Maynila once again.

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