

The Final Bullet

Her father called it a six-gun. A revolver. It no longer boasted any paint or markings from its original make. Instead, the weapon bore on its surface the colorful history of local gang warfare. Its dry texture echoed the shape of polished bone. And despite the cold nature of the metal, it felt very much alive.

Miriam watched her father bend the pistol forward, exposing the gun's cylinder to the open air. Nestled in its chambers, sparkling like jewels in an otherwise unremarkable metal container, were four gleaming copper bullets. Two chambers did not sport ammunition. One of which had been scratched and warped to complete deformation. No slug would be able to fit its opening. The only thing this chamber held now was a half-burnt stick of cigarette. Her father's handiwork, no doubt.

"One chamber empty. For safety, one always empty" said Miriam's father as he took the cigarette out of the gun. "You set the empty chamber next to the firing pin. This way, no accidental discharge. If you want to use it properly, twist the cylinder until a live round aligns with the barrel. Old guns, see? No safety."

Miriam, only nine years of age, was unsure what to do with this information. Only that it meant the world to her father that she and her brother listen. Teodoro, on the other hand, was completely enraptured. His wide eyes caught the glow of the candlelight and his breathing slowed.

"Only four?" Teodoro asked. His voice betrayed a hint of disappointment.

Their father, a gimpy young man, scratched the stubble from his long face. His ratty hair shook with every move.

“Had five before,” he laughed. “Accident. No one hurt, of course. Just excited, you know? That’s when you both were born. Tried to make many noises. For celebration.”

“Like today?” Teodoro beamed.

Their father nodded. “Today better. Today, your turn.”

The outside noises of the street became louder and the sound of sheet metal slamming on concrete punctuated the din. Tondo had always been unkind to its servants and on this particular day, their mother was its plaything. The skin around her face was pockmarked with dirt from the town. But it was the grime and dust of the day that truly emphasized the lack of color on her face. Exhausted, she let the roasted chicken in her hands topple onto the makeshift table. The smile on her lips felt forced.

“Happy birthday,” she said to Miriam and Teodoro. The twins leapt from their father’s side and encircled their mother.

Their mother’s eyes finally fell on their father. And then to the gun in his hands. She scowled.

“Not in the house!” cried their mother.

Sensing the oncoming argument, Miriam dove for her mother’s patchwork skirt and pulled twice. Already, she could hear their father’s jovial yet defensive timbre rising behind her. And as their mother protested, Miriam spoke again. Her voice barely registered.

“I’ll be back later,” she whispered.

The two parents continued to argue as Miriam slipped past them, towards the entrance. Teodoro said nothing, frowning instead at her sudden departure. The door

slammed behind her and she emerged into an empty street, its surface caked in dried mud. The weeds that had managed to break through the concrete sidewalk held pieces of plastic and moldy paper. Bottles of beer, long since broken into unhealthy shards of glass, dotted the ground, earmarking whatever recent festivity managed to make its way through the town. This was Tondo, Miriam figured. Not the best place to be out at night.

She then pulled a newspaper clipping from her pocket and unfolded it. The newspaper itself was two days old and the article Miriam found was buried underneath pages of local news; of mob arrests surrounding the local gangs; of indecent exposures and drug-fueled crime. But if the article was correct, then the object she was waiting for would reveal itself right around dusk and no later. Scribbled onto the paper was a set of calculations she had made with the assistance of her science teacher—an arcane collection of mathematics that plotted movement quite precisely. Now was the time to prove if they were right.

Miriam strained her neck upwards, her eyes skipping past the webbing of electric wires that snaked their way to each ramshackle home in their street. The skies were bright pink as light, reflected from distant clouds, revealed tomorrow's weather forecast. A storm was coming. But for the most part, the heavens were clear.

The first star winked into view. No, a planet. Venus, no doubt. But moving across the horizon, barely skirting the limits of perception, was a bright object darting from one edge of the sky to the other. Not a star or a planet, Miriam knew. An object made by mortal hands. An artificial satellite. The first of its kind.

When Miriam told her father of this news earlier this morning, he was visibly unsettled. *The communists again*, her father grumbled. She couldn't understand why he appeared so disturbed by it. Maybe even afraid.

A crash. The sound of glass shattering. And before that, the muted bark of metal. Miriam then became noticeably aware of a sharp pain in her leg. She winced and her eyes filled with hot tears as she crumpled onto the concrete. People were screaming all around her; the panicked cries of her mother, the angry tone of her father. And little Teodoro, stunned beyond anything she could recognize, watching her struggle on the ground as blood pooled by her feet. In the ensuing chaos, no one thought to take the gun from her brother's grip.

The police would later explain that the bullet had arched in the air and was thankfully not aimed directly at her. By sheer luck, it had fallen where she stood, striking her left shin. This lessened the damage and ultimately saved Miriam's life.

And while this knowledge did little to lessen the sufferings of a young child, Miriam could not stop thinking about *Sputnik* and all its implications. Some of her father's fears returned to her and finally made sense.

Out there, for the first time in history, was a bullet that simply refused to fall down.

* * *

Students from different dormitories all over the university's campus gathered around *Ilang-Ilang* Residence Hall's common area where a medium-sized television set had been

put up. Most of them were crowding around the screen to catch glimpses of Gloria Diaz amongst the other international contenders and pixelated artifacts. Despite the women-only restriction in the dorm, Miriam was surprised to find Teodoro's face among the male seniors that had gathered there.

"Miss Philippines," Bob Barker asked. The famous celebrity host's voice remained silky despite an ocean of separation. "In the next day or so, a man will land on the moon. If a man from the moon landed in your home town, what would you do to entertain him?"

Many in the living room gasped, puzzling at the borderline absurdity of the question. Miss Universe and the Man on the Moon. In any other time, this would have been a ridiculous pairing between two cosmopolitan figures. But as she stared at the moonlit lawn outside, she felt a sense of historical inevitability surrounding these circumstances.

If Teodoro shared this incredulity, Miriam could not find it in his face. Rather, the young man was sweating, his eyes shifting every which way. It was at that moment that Miriam knew she would not finish the pageant's question and answer portion. She stood up, offered her space to the nearest senior and began walking out of the hall.

Ilang-ilang's shape was unique among the other dormitories on campus. The four different wings of the building encircled a manicured lawn filled with *Caimito* trees. The scents of nectar and moss brought about years of nostalgia. Teodoro, with little effort, broke this illusion with his shadowy presence. His gangly form was an aberration within an otherwise calm lawnscape. Hunched over his shoulder was a large trash bag nearly

bursting at the seams. The students who saw him crossing immediately afforded him a wide berth.

“You promised you’d have them finished by June,” Teodoro scowled.

Miriam was more than annoyed. “I only said that I knew how to do it. Helping you was different.”

“June!” he spat. “That was a month ago.”

Teodoro was barely recognizable these days. The young impressionable child had grown glass eyes and dark layers of skin underneath them. He did carry himself more confidently, however; his childhood meekness replaced by a grin charismatic enough to gain him followers. But most glaring in his ensemble was a triangular tattoo by his neck. Inside the triangle, a lopsided letter ‘H’ resided. Miriam knew the symbol well as did many students on campus. The Alibata equivalent of the letter “K.” The symbol of the *Katipunan*; now reincorporated into the new student movement: *Kabataang Makabayan*.

Miriam’s mind lingered on these thoughts as she and Teodoro slowly made their way up the dorms. They skirted around the prying eyes of residence assistants, hoping to remain unnoticed for as long as possible. She then motioned Teodoro into silence as they entered her room.

“You’re not listening, Miri,” Teodoro persisted. “Aren’t you angry? Don’t you want things to change for all of us?”

“I don’t want to hurt people,” snapped Miriam. But her eyes never left the trash bag dangling on her brother’s shoulders. She could already smell the lingering scent of black powder and it called to her like fresh coffee.

“Non-violent protests,” Teodoro corrected. “But we need ways to defend ourselves. Marcos’ cronies have always been armed to the teeth anyways.”

Miriam scoffed, her tone bitter. “Non-violent? The other students tell me things about you, Teo. Even people inside your circle are afraid of you. They say you’re dangerous. Often acting alone. Always willing to start a fight.”

Her brother laughed, the smile never quite reaching the eyes. “Don’t deny the fact that you were the one who begged me—begged—to get you all of this.” The plastic bag was then dropped onto the dorm room floor. A small bundle of fireworks peeked right through the bag. “All for you and your own weird group. Your own useless ends.”

Miriam’s cheeks burned. She dug up a large conical rod from within the trash bag. She recognized it as the leftover pyrotechnics from last month’s Independence Day. Slowly, she tore off one end of the firework and poured its dark entrails on a sheet of aluminum. “Keep the contents dry, always,” Miriam instructed. “Never hot either. Or you’ll lose a finger. Wrap the foil around the powder and seal with adhesive. Electrical tape should be okay. If you use a fuse, you can get a few seconds before it ignites.”

Teodoro stared intently but scratched his face. “I need it to do more than lose a finger. Need it to hurt more people.”

The request came in two ways to Miriam: one side of her brain was appalled, ready to wrestle the cocktail of explosives away from her brother. The other saw it as a mathematical problem, knowing full well the energies involved in a blast of this scale. “Most military-grade grenades have higher explosive yields. You would have to buy kilograms of black powder just to rival the kind of plastique the army uses.”

Teodoro responded with his bare hands. “No money. Have to make do with what we can get. But it has to be stronger.”

Miriam scratched her chin. It was an interesting conundrum. “Most of the damage grenades make come from the shockwave,” she mused. “But if we can’t make the explosion bigger, we can try something else. We could load the explosive with dangerous shrapnel, instead. It should multiply the damage. The perimeter fences around some of the buildings here are studded with broken glass. You can chip them off and apply them to the explosive. It won’t kill anyone, I think. But fast-moving glass should be terrible against bare skin.”

The smile on Teodoro’s face was full of teeth.

“But they will lose more than fingers, right?”

After a heartbeat, Miriam made a grab for the contents on the table. Teodoro was faster, however. And stronger. And when he pulled out the gun from his pocket, she knew he was far more prepared than she was for this encounter. The weapon itself was a piece of their personal history. The mere sight of it made her left leg twitch.

“You’re going to make more,” Teodoro demanded. “I will make sure you get your share. But you have to make more.”

Miriam stared past Teodoro’s shoulder, out the window, beyond the tree line, and at the pale face of the moon. She wished she were there now, where people were making history. *Perhaps*, a dark thought announced as it welcomed itself into her mind, *this will too*.

* * *

The Battle at Mendiola was, thankfully, just a bloodbath. Not a massacre. Miriam consoled herself with this fact every few minutes. Just four dead. Just a lot of blood. It was the lack of deaths that seemed to assuage her conscience best. Still, being in the confines of a police penitentiary was enough to keep her on edge. When the door opened, she nearly jumped.

Standing in the doorway was her brother. His face was split open, held together by bandages and staples. He walked with a limp as there was now a large puncture wound on his right foot. A fresh trail of pus and ichor ended where he now sat. The smell nearly made her gag. Worst of all was that the police could not be bothered to lend the crippled man a pair of crutches. The only courtesy the authorities did provide was the sense to give them their privacy.

When Teodoro smiled at her, his face crumpled into an even worse pastiche of flesh. “We did it,” he said.

News of the student protest quickly devolving into violence was still making its rounds weeks after the event. The Marcos regime responded with impunity, cracking hard on the young revolutionaries. Other activists had reportedly gone missing—most likely dead. But the *Kabataang Makabayan* saw this all as a success. And little of it would have been so effective if they were not so adequately supplied with a cache of pillbox bombs and Molotov cocktails.

It was only a matter of time until the authorities knew who gave them the idea.

“We got them scared,” laughed Teodoro. “Made us look serious. Tried to make that fascist pig put it down in writing, too. So close.”

Miriam made a frantic grab for the collar of Teodoro's tank top. "You didn't tell them about me, Teo, did you? This was your fault, do you understand? Only you!"

"We did it," Teodoro muttered. Miriam didn't know what bothered her more: his utter obliviousness to the current situation or the satisfied smile on his blood-smeared lips. The man would continue mumbling, "We did it" for hours.

"You stupid man!" Miriam cried. "Because of your actions, the government will do their best to control the supply of black powder now. It was already hard enough to get it without a license before. But now, my group needs more of it! More!" And she throttled Teodoro until drool settled on his chin.

"Crazy girl..." Teodoro whispered. "Can't you see that the future of this country is bigger than your little games? Black powder and bullets. Knives and guns. Your imagination is spread far too thin, Miri. A gun is a weapon. Simple as that. And all guns kill."

She had heard this spiel from her brother before. This was a world of conflict, he once recited. Where the seat of power belonged to those with the biggest sticks. And at the tip of every spear, at the point of every arrow, at the edge of every blade, and at the end of every barrel, only one thing waited for the poor souls who cared little for power. And that was death. That was true for the extinct Mammoth, for the fallen Spaniards, and for the former residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But he was wrong about one thing, Miriam thought. Guns were not dangerous. It was the bullets they hold. And not even all of them were meant to kill.

"Teo," she began. The tone of her voice sliced through the reverie and brought Teodoro back to the present. "Do you still have dad's gun?"

They stared at each other for what seemed like minutes. Teodoro appeared uncertain as he pondered the question. Although laughing was surely the most inappropriate response.

“I was able to hide it in my dorm right after I came back from Mendiola,” Teodoro said. “Made sure the *pulis* couldn’t find it there either. But you should find it easily.”

Miriam nodded. And after another brief pause, she asked, “Aren’t you wondering why I want it?”

Teodoro laughed. But this time, Miriam found that the smile finally reached his eyes. “First time I pulled the trigger on that thing, I shot myself on the foot. Estupido. And after the second shot missed a guard completely, I knew it wasn’t for me. So you know what? I don’t care what you want it for. Your science experiments or your bombs, I don’t care. But it should stay in the family.”

All the violence and blood, Miriam could hear internally, it should stay in the family.

Miriam stood up and nodded, taking this as her cue to leave. But before she could walk away, Teodoro grabbed her hand. She was faintly aware of the dried blood that was now being smeared on her skin. Whether her brother was doing this intentionally or by accident, she wasn’t sure.

“There’s still one bullet left in the gun, Miri,” said Teodoro. For a moment, Miriam thought he was threatening her. But then, the crippled young man began to sob. “One bullet. Be careful.”

* * *

“I still don’t understand why I’m here.”

The air above Lake Caliraya carried Teo’s voice over the long stretch of water. And because there wasn’t a single cloud anywhere, visibility was clear for miles. There was also the faint sensation that the lake was much higher than sea level. A shortness of breath, maybe. Or an overabundance of sky. It was the perfect place to watch the New Year’s festivities. People were already gathering around a nearby sandbar, extending telescopes and tiny rockets into the sky.

Miriam pointed at a heavysset old man surrounded by other people who seemed just as bewildered to be here. “You see that guy? Mister Vergara was committed for arson. The young woman behind him has charges of manslaughter held against her. Shot up her boyfriend. The one with the neckerchief fought in the Vietnam war. Shell-shocked.”

Miriam watched as Teodoro dragged his wheelchair into the mud. The marsh surrounding them did not take kindly to the rubber wheels. At some point, Miriam knew, Teo was going to have to walk.

“So this is what your group does?” Teodoro asked. There was a little more bite in his words than Miriam would have liked. “Therapy? Rehabilitation? In college, you made it sound like you were on some grand mission.”

The wheelchair came to a stop at last and Miriam pulled out a cane for her brother to latch on to. Eight years of prison made her brother slow, lethargic, and averse to be

around wide-open spaces. Convincing her brother to come was herculean enough.

Thankfully, Teodoro did not complain when offered the cane this time around.

“The social work is secondary to the science,” Miriam explained. “But it’s what lets us get away with what we have already. And it’s good PR. Anything to get Ombudsman whatshisname and the other senators to agree is a good thing. Not to mention allowing us use of this private land.”

“And the military?” Teodoro asked. “I heard they’ve been trying to reach you too.”

Miriam marveled at her own propensity to shrug off another verbal jab. “They can beg all they want. They’re never taking this from me. Ever.”

Teodoro, however, did not appear convinced.

That was when a loud hiss erupted from the shoreline. The air cracked and then split in two. Startled, Teodoro dropped the cane and collapsed into the sand. A little part of Miriam secretly enjoyed the shock to her brother.

Overhead, trailed by a thread-thin pillar of smoke, a rocket flew. It lasted seconds. And then the sound dissipated. Wind coming in from the east spread the trail of smoke so that its ghostly features haunted the rest of the lake. Those who were not bothered by Teodoro’s shouting began to clap at the spectacle. The few that were alarmed by the crippled man collapsing warily made their way to assist him.

“Ma’am Dealca?” called a moon-faced young girl. Miriam remembered her from one of her classes. “Is he okay?” the child persisted.

Miriam lowered herself against her brother, positioning the latter's legs so he could sit upright on the sand. Teodoro seemed to be elsewhere. He shivered with no obvious reason as to why. Still, the man's eyes were transfixed skyward.

"It's all right," Miriam said to the growing crowd. "Just keep to the schedule."

The moon-faced girl nodded and ushered everyone else away.

"Wow," said Teodoro. "They actually listen to you."

Miriam laughed. "Within reason. I keep them busy and that keeps them in line. Plus, the work's demanding. Really demanding. That's how I get the rehabilitees to focus."

After five minutes, the two siblings managed to get back on their feet. But Teodoro set his eyes to the sky again, steeling himself against the possibility of another eruption of noise.

"I still don't see how putting explosives into the hands of dangerous people can be a good idea. I wouldn't call missiles 'therapeutic' under any context."

Miriam dragged her brother towards one of the encircled groups and told them to move away. This was her project now. And as the crowd receded, Teodoro gasped as he spotted the object they had gathered around: a black obelisk that stood one meter tall. Even her hardened brother could not deny that there was something potent about the simplicity of a rocket. It reminded her of the unmarred features of a scalpel. And scribbled on the rocket's spine were the painted letters of their hobbyist society: The Fifth Bullet. Their logo was that of a row of bullets; only, the one in the center had jumped ahead of the others and taken off to parts unknown.

“It’s clear,” said Miriam, ending her last round of visual inspections. “Let’s join the others before we become part of a new crater.”

But Teodoro did not move. He still seemed fixated on the rocket, his fingers lightly brushing against the insignia painted on its skin.

“This name... Miri... Dad’s handgun. What did you do with the last bullet?”

Miriam made sure nothing distracted them as they made quick work crossing the final stretch of the sandbar. At the edge of the lake was a designated viewing area the younger ones jokingly called ‘Mission Control.’ This version, however, was the shoestring, budget of its professional counterpart. And it was glorious. Here, sand mixed terribly with all the cabling and metal switches. Miriam noted that they should have set up some tarpaulins on the ground to protect the delicate electronics.

Then began the terminal count. Someone started counting backwards and that was all anyone could do before their voices mixed into one cohesive whole. Miriam thought of it as the most unifying exercise their group ever performed. It was mathematics in song. It was her life’s work coming to a crescendo.

“The bullet, Miri” Teodoro whispered again. Her brother’s mumblings were distinct amidst the growing noise. “What did you do with the rest of it?”

A dozen alibis came to Miriam’s mind.

She could have explained that the first bullet was fired long before they were born. It was made of stone and was only as strong as the person who tossed it. These bows, slingshots, and spears brought people their food and protected their families from would-be predators.

The second bullet would probably be a more familiar sight. It carried gunpowder so it no longer relied on muscle alone. These were not clumsy rounds. Instead, they granted the complete certainty of the kill.

The third bullet was filled with black powder and was even larger. It was never enough to end one life so these shells were designed to take away entire communities. It advertised the wholesale destruction of buildings, neighborhoods, and towns.

Never to be outdone, the fourth bullet assured utter annihilation. It was meant to be the bullet to end all wars. These warheads fired with little warning and needed no gun. At its heart, it bore the power of the atom and unleashed hellfire that burned long after the bullet itself was scrap.

“Where is the last bullet?” Teodoro demanded.

At zero, the rocket on the launchpad leaped. There was an eagerness to the device that Miriam and everyone there completely respected. This blunt force was what people like Teodoro chased after. But in reality, there was power here that could do more than just maim.

The homemade missile continued to rise until the last of its fuel reserves were depleted. Then it crested its highest point and spiraled into a dive.

This, Miriam believed, was what Teodoro could not understand. Because if he could be convinced that bullets were more than just weapons, then he would have known that the last bullet was something else.

The fifth bullet could carry people. And take them to the moon.