

In 1904, more than a thousand people from the Philippines travelled to the United States to take part in the World's Fair in the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, also known as the Saint Louis World's Fair. Among them were indigenous people called Igorots.

Part One

1

Hunting

The tree was singing.

No it's not, Samkad would have said. But he wasn't here yet and anyway, what did he know about anything?

I pressed my cheek against the bark to feel the tree's voice rumble in my blood, rough and low and shapeless, unlike American music with its pom pom pom. *I like your song*, I whispered to the tree. *It calls my spirit*.

Which was a good thing, Mother, because I'd been sitting on that branch for hours, and I could barely keep my eyes open. The boar I'd been hunting for days was nowhere to be seen.

My right leg had gone to sleep and, when I straightened it, my knee made a cracking noise, sudden and deafening as an American gunshot. Which was unnerving in the moss-muffled silence of the forest.

Eheh, you've been dead a whole year, Mother, but I still glanced down nervously, half-expecting to see you in the clearing below, fists planted in your waist, ordering me down from the tree like you'd done countless times before, bombarding me with questions. How had I acquired that breechcloth I was wearing? What had I done to my skirt? What if the Americans had caught me? Didn't they forbid hunting in the dark?

The stillness was suddenly split by a violent screeching of monkeys in the next tree. What had set them off? I searched the gloom carefully. But there was nothing there.

During the war, a lowland soldier had tried to hide in the mossy forest, but the Americans were not far behind and he was soon captured. When the war was over, American patrols trawled through the forest, making a mess, hacking trees and shooting everything in sight. But now the patrols were gone and the forest was quiet again. The Americans had finished their warring and turned their attention to ruling us. So many new laws! *Ancients must listen. Women must wear blouses. Children must go to American school.*

But no, Mother, as far as I was aware, hunting in the dark was still allowed. And nobody, not the Americans, nor the ancients, needed to know whether I did so wearing a skirt or a breechcloth.

Up the sun rose. The sky bloomed pink. The tops of the trees turned gold. A thick, white mist boiled up on the forest floor. And the boar came.

It was a great black lump, gliding through the mist. Squealing softly, it began to root between the tree's toes, tail flicking its great, meaty flanks. Mother, it was even bigger than the last one I killed.

Crunch.

The boar's head jerked up, ears pricked.

Was that a human-shaped shadow, Mother? There, by that bush? The boar turned and stared.

Then, from the opposite direction, running feet. And barking.

'Little Luki?' Samkad, the idiot, burst into the clearing. His dog, Chuka, yapped from somewhere behind him.

The boar spun to face Samkad. It lowered its head to attack.

I leaped, landing between the boar and my friend so hard my teeth rattled in my skull.

The boar launched itself, and I found myself on my back, its weight pinning me down, its head turning right and left, its tusks within gouging distance of my eyes, the hot, stinky breath washing over my face, its hairy hide coarse and wiry against my skin, the hooves scrabbling painfully on my waist.

My spear was buried deep in its throat. The boar glared at me, its eyes sparking with anger and fear. I pushed the spear deeper. It grunted. The eyes began to glaze, and the hot, hairy body slumped against me. I wrenched myself from under it, backing away as the creature fell onto its side. Its feet began to run, as if it was racing from its own death. I watched the hooves kick and kick and kick, and then stop as its

spirit drained from its body. The boar's soul was running in the invisible world of the dead now. And its flesh had become meat.

I turned to check on Samkad, and Chuka the dog promptly stopped her yapping to throw herself in front of him, in case I tried to kiss him or something. Mother, I swear it's embarrassing to have a dog for a love rival.

Samkad was fine, of course, gazing at me with wide-eyed admiration as Chuka danced about as if to say, 'Me! Me! It's me you should look at!'

'Do you need me to finish it off?' Samkad asked.

But I hushed him. That rustling again. 'Who's there?' I yelled, scooping up a rock and throwing it into the bushes.

'What is it?' I could feel the heat of Samkad at my back.

'Shh! Just before I jumped down, I saw someone.' If it was someone from the village, they would be rushing to report me to the ancients, I thought.

'Where?'

'Over there,' I said. But there was nothing there; no foot-steps, no trampled grass, no broken twigs. Had I imagined it?

'Maybe it was not a someone, but a *something*?' Samkad said.

Yes. Maybe it was just a monkey, casting a large shadow.

Mother, don't you dead people see everything? Was it a person? Shake a tree branch for yes, toss a pebble for no!

Samkad turned to the boar. He'd already forgotten about it. Kneeling, he laid a hand on its head. 'Thank you, beast,' he whispered. 'May you live contentedly in the invisible world.'

Then he got back to his feet and wrapped his arms around me. He smelled of damp soil and wet fern. His mouth, pressed against my forehead, was soft, like fruit. 'It looks like I got here just in time.'

I snorted. 'Just in time. You were lucky it didn't gore you!'

'It was not luck, it was you! You were magnificent.' Samkad nuzzled my hair. 'That boar – it's twice the size of the other two. You did well.'

'That's not what *they're* going to say.'

'No,' Sam said. 'There will be no thanks from all the hungry folk who are going to share this boar.'

He pressed his lips against mine and all the ungrateful people of Bontok melted away in a rush of sudden heat, as if we'd both tumbled from the cold outdoors into a warm, dry hut.

Mother, it must amuse you to see us like this when just five years ago, we were scrawny best friends with scabbed knees, brawling in the dirt when we weren't traipsing up and down the hills, pushing each other into rice paddies. But now we were both sixteen and everything had changed.

Later, when I had washed in a nearby stream and swapped my hunting breechcloth for a fresh skirt and blouse, Samkad tied the boar to a strong bamboo pole. We each shouldered one end, Samkad in front, me at the back. The boar swung easily between us as we walked out of the forest and up the steep, green slope towards the village.

Samkad grinned over his shoulder. 'What shall we tell the ancients this time?'

‘All the excruciating details.’ I laughed. ‘How you waited in the tree. How you leaped in front of the boar. How you speared the boar, just so.’

Sam hooted with laughter.

And when we got there, that was exactly what we told them. How Samkad had waited in the tree. How he leaped in front of the boar. How he speared the boar, just so. And the ancients – gazing up at Sam’s amiable smile, those honest brown eyes, those broad shoulders, that deep chest etched with tattoos that marked him out as a brave man – believed everything he said.