

BONE TALK

Also by Candy Gourlay

Tall Story

Shine

BONE TALK

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In loving memory of Dad
Orlando L. Quimpo

And also (with no disrespect to Dad)
remembering my beloved Chuka.
Good dog.

Bontok, 1899

Part One
How to Be a Boy

1

Little Luki and I were tossing pebbles into the eye socket of a water buffalo skull when Father came to fetch me.

He didn't scold or shoo us away. He just looked at me with an odd crumple in his mouth that was almost a smile.

'Samkad, the ancients want you,' he murmured.

Then he swung around and began marching back to the House for Men, so briskly that the axe at his waist slapped a little rhythm on his bare thigh.

'Do I have to?' I complained – although, of course, I didn't say it loud enough for Father to hear.

Little Luki spun gracefully on one toe and flicked another pebble at the skull fixed up high on the blackened tree fern that marked the entrance to our village. Her pebble rattled noisily inside the skull before dropping out of its long bony snout.

'Yah!' Little Luki cried. 'I win!'

‘No you don’t!’ I snapped.

‘You can’t win if you’re leaving!’ she retorted. Under its great curling horns, the skull stared at me with sad, empty eyes.

‘Samkad!’ Father called from several houses up the path.

‘Heh!’ Luki tossed another pebble, expertly kneeling on one scabby knee at just the right moment to catch it as it shot out of the snout. ‘Old Dugas probably needs someone to scratch the soles of his feet so he can sleep. Or maybe Salluyud needs you to pick up the dog droppings in the courtyard!’

I lunged and Luki dodged, but not before I managed to grab her arm and wrestle her down into the dirt, giggling hysterically.

But then she pushed me away, her face suddenly serious. ‘Wait, Samkad! What if it’s about the snake?’

I sat back on my heels. I had not thought of that.

The day before, Luki and I had found a dead snake between the toes of an old banyan tree. Who could resist? We tied the snake to the end of a string and lay it across the path to the rice valley, carefully covering it with leaves before hiding out of sight behind a large boulder.

Soon enough, along came one of the ancients: Old Pito, whose hair remained long and black despite his wizened little face.

Luki let out a loud *hisssssss* and I tugged the string so that the snake gave a realistic wiggle as it slid across Old Pito’s toes.

Pito’s long hair puffed up into a wild tangle as he screamed.

His lined forehead screwed into such a twist I thought it would splinter into many pieces. Everyone knows a snake crossing one's path is a warning from Lumawig that evil is about to happen.

'Ah! Ah! Ah!' he cried, whirling about and tottering back to the House for Men. We followed him into the courtyard, struggling to keep our faces serious and straight as we watched Pito and the other ancients pray loudly to our ancestors for help.

I stared at Luki. 'Do you think they found out?' I whispered, thinking of all the horrible punishments the ancients could order upon my head.

'Sam!' Father roared from up the path. 'The old ones are waiting!'

Chickens and dogs scattered as Father strode across the courtyard to the meeting circle where the ancients sat on their heels, each leaning his back against his own stone slab. All four old men were there: Salluyud, Dugas, Pito, Blind Maklan – who stared at me intently with his sightless white eyes bulging between his lids like boiled eggs.

In the rafters above their heads, the skulls of our enemies sneered as if they knew I was in trouble. My belly was aching so hard now that I was bent in the middle. I could already feel a stinging in one palm, as if someone had given it a good hard smack.

'You called me, old ones?' I croaked, forcing my lips to show my teeth.

'Young Samkad,' began Salluyud in a high querulous voice,

as if he was about to begin a long chant. ‘How many harvests has it been since you were born?’

‘Uh . . .’ I looked at Father.

‘It has been ten harvests since he was born, old one,’ Father said. I peered at him more closely. He looked peculiar; his lips were wobbling like worms.

‘Are you all right, Father?’

‘Of course I’m all right,’ he replied. Wobble.

‘Samkad,’ Salluyud said. ‘It is time.’

Time? Time to punish me for being naughty? I stared hard at my feet as if a grain of rice had suddenly sprouted between my toes.

‘Son,’ I heard Father say. ‘I congratulate you.’

My head snapped up.

All the ancients were grinning so widely, I could see the gums at the backs of their jaws.

‘Young Samkad,’ Salluyud declared. ‘The time has come for you to become a man!’

From somewhere behind me, I heard Little Luki gasp aloud.

I opened my mouth to reply, but no sound came out. I shook my head, which suddenly felt like it was full of air.

‘Samkad.’ It was Dugas speaking now. ‘Are you ready to become a man?’

Pito glared at me solemnly. ‘And are you ready for the Cut?’

The Cut. I swallowed.

‘Don’t be afraid.’ I felt Father’s elbow nudge me gently on the shoulder.

‘Why should I be afraid?’ I tried to sound scornful, but then my belly groaned so loudly it startled a small bird nearby into flight.

‘The Cut will hurt,’ Father said. ‘But only for a day or two. Don’t worry, Salluyud will give you chew leaves to relieve the pain.’

When, years ago, my friend Tambul was given the Cut, we could all hear him howling so that Father had to go behind the House for Men and hold him down. When Tambul waddled out at last with his legs wide apart, I had called: ‘What’s it like, Tambul? What’s it like to get the Cut?’

Tambul didn’t answer, making his way to the House for Men where he hid for the rest of the day, as well as the day after that. And the day after that.

Now you are ready to become a man, Sam, I told myself. And if you’re ready to become a man, you are ready to have the Cut.

‘I am ready,’ I said aloud, squaring my shoulders and puffing out my chest. ‘Lumawig be praised.’

‘Lumawig be praised,’ Salluyud replied. ‘That is good! Tomorrow morning, you and your father will offer a chicken at the Tree of Bones. When you return, I shall take my bamboo knife and—’ He clenched his bony fist and gave it a quick flick as if he had the knife in his hand.

I flinched. But I was dying to turn around and look at the expression on Luki’s face. How many times had Luki said the ancients would not be calling me to become a man soon? She was so wrong! But I had to force myself to stand still and

thank the ancients leaning towards me, their old bones snapping like dried twigs, and say, yes, I am ready for the honour and thank you, thank you, thank you a thousand times.

When the ancients turned away at last to mutter about some other thing, I spun round. Luki was scowling so hard her face looked like a wrinkled old mango.

She began to scold. ‘What were the ancients thinking? You’re too young! You’re too short to carry a shield. You’re smaller even than a wild boar – how are you supposed to spear one? And look at your arms! They’re like twigs. How are you going to chop off the heads of our blood enemy, the Mangili?’

‘Don’t be an idiot. I will grow. I am growing right now,’ I said. ‘And once I’m a man, I will grow faster and become stronger. I’m already stronger than you.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘Yes I am.’

‘And you will be allowed to marry. What woman will have you?’

‘I will become more handsome, like Tambul,’ I said.

Luki’s sceptical eyes roamed my face as if she was making a survey of all my unattractive qualities. My cheeks warmed.

‘Even if I don’t become handsome, someone will want me eventually,’ I continued. ‘Look at all the husbands in the village. Bagta has smelly armpits. Pulo is half the size of his wife. Ginubo is triple the width of his! And none of them are much to look at.’

‘Hah!’ Luki’s nose curled into a little knot. ‘Bet you’re going to squeal like a baby when you get the Cut.’

‘You’re just jealous.’ Fury was swelling up inside me now, filling my belly and puffing out of my nostrils. ‘Because you’re never going to be a warrior. You will always be a girl!’

Luki’s mango face twisted hard and her fist connected painfully with my shoulder.

As we wrestled in the dirt, I thought regretfully that this was the very last time I could allow myself to enjoy a good brawl with Luki. Tomorrow I was going to become a man . . . and no self-respecting man in Bontok would fight a girl – even a girl like Little Luki.