

PEOPLE
ARE
STRANGE
STORIES ERIC
GAMALINDA



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FORMERLY KNOWN AS BIONIC BOY

His timing couldn't have been better. Uri Geller was bending spoons in Russia. NASA was sending Beethoven symphonies to outer space. In Manila, the GNP was plummeting like the wreck of a space station. People were letting hunger into their households like an unavoidable guest. It was the time of comets, prophets, and paranoia. Just when everything was bad news, he burst into the scene like a twist in the story. The tabloids all but shrieked the headlines:

BIONIC BOY IS REAL!!!

In one of many TV interviews that followed, he dismissed all the hype and remarked, "Bending spoons is for kids." He was only thirteen years old. Buck-toothed, chubby, wearing a size XL t-shirt and short-cropped hair ("I don't have the patience to deal with grooming"), his brown eyes hidden behind the blurred lens of Clark Kent glasses, he was indifferent to attention, bored with journalists, and impatient with social pretensions. He walked out of an intimate dinner once because he felt the conversation made the service too slow.

Bionic Boy: at first he didn't like the nickname and then he just found it amusing. It made him sound extra-human, electronic, and unreal. Nobody bothered to ask his real name. Wives of generals and mistresses of this coconut czar or that banana baron hosted brunches for him in palatial mansions in Forbes Park. He entertained them with what he called parlor games—writing long-distance messages on a sheet of paper locked in a file cabinet, for instance. Whenever he did that, they heard metallic sounds clicking out of his cranium. He couldn't tell them what did it. One inquisitive matron suggested that they do a brain scan. He replied, "I suggest you invite a lab monkey to your next brunch."

He wasn't as indelicate with the rest. He interpreted their dreams and told them some of his own. Not grand, apocalyptic visions in Cinemascope, but simple things with profound meanings: a bush whose bone-white blossoms all faced downward; a bright red room. They even asked him to perform some faith healing, but on that matter he was adamant: he thought faith healers were carnival performers, and that disease and its remedy should be left to science. He was, in other words, no threat to the hundreds of charlatans who proliferated around the archipelago.

Inevitably his talent reached the Palace, which was always on the lookout for divine affirmation. Imelda Marcos invited him for an audience. But she had seen everything and wasn't easily impressed, so he put on a real show. The palace collection of Douglas MacArthur's books flew from the shelves, their pages fluttering open in mid-air. Teacups rattled and teaspoons tinkled in perfect harmony. The shutters of the Malacañang Guest House whipped open, and capiz chandeliers swayed like galleons on an open sea.

Imelda was so dazzled that she arranged for him to meet the President. He knew the President wasn't interested in pyrotechnics. Instead, he offered to interpret Marcos' dreams. His interpretations were accurate and pertinent. He told the President where to keep his money, the condition of his bladder for the following week,

the precise number of military casualties in the next communist ambush. He predicted the aphelion of the regime within the next three years, marked by lavish parties, state visitors (including the Pope), and foreign aid. And when Marcos told him he had dreamt of a young eagle diving into the South China Sea, he advised the President to yank the President's son off a plane that was flying in two hours. That plane, sans the presidential son, crashed soon after take-off. No one survived.

Immediately after that, Marcos gave him something even he could not have predicted: the documents for his adoption into the presidential family. From then on he would have a room next to the palace gardens and would go by the name of Marcos. He accepted his fate gratefully, and also sadly, because he knew all this was temporary. The sooner he told them, the better. He was convinced they could all prepare for the end as one family.

And so, one evening, when he thought the time was right, he told the family that, incredible as it may seem, the House of Marcos would fall one day.

The family would not hear of it. They closed his room down and sent him away, and Imelda gave him money to keep quiet and travel as far away as possible. She also gave him a threat: speak, and you die.

Nothing was heard of him thereafter. Upon orders from the Palace, the press stopped mentioning his name. He came out of nowhere, and vanished just as quickly. Some say too much luxury killed his powers, and he became a sad, faceless citizen. Others say he found a job in Houston, where he helped NASA coordinate the trajectories of rockets in space. Still others insist there were several Bionic Boys, all claiming to be the authentic one.

But the most plausible rumor of all was this: that he never existed at all, that the Palace invented him just as it had invented a lot of stories during its unhappy reign.

Look at one another short of breath, walking proudly in our winter coats.

Efren X looks out the window and remembers the song, but he can't recall how the next lines go. Things like this drive him crazy. Two stories below, people are braving the cold, rushing from nowhere to nowhere. Lispenard is one long muddy puddle under their boots. Trucks rumble on Canal Street. His apartment shudders like a barrio in the rim of fire. Marjetica, the super of the building, is paddling about the room and saying, "Is too cold here. I send someone to check the heat." She is a stooped gray apparition, moving ever so slowly as though she has a hard time maneuvering her way in the physical world.

"It has to be cold, Marjetica," Efren says. "The goddamn computers need the cold. Like mayonnaise. Like ice cream."

"Computer will live, but you will die," Marjetica says. "One day I come here and find you frozen like ice cream, how you like that?"

"Be sure to save before turning the computers off."

"Get sun on your skin. Is spring."

"Still feels like winter to me. Never can tell when one season ends and another begins. Never learned to."

"Eat something. You never eat. Just cookies. Look at you, skin and skeleton. You talk to machine all the time."

"You know me inside out, Marjetica."

"Go out and meet people."

"It's too cold and the cold makes me socially inept."

"Don't understand your English."

"It's freezing out there."

"Not different here."

"Besides, I can't go anywhere. My doctor said so."

"Said what?"

"This new strain. This *disease*. It's some kind of pulmonary thing. My lungs, Marjetica. There's no fucking cure for it."

“You see what I mean,” Marjetica says, edging towards the door.

“It gets worse and worse, but my doctor says most people actually do survive, but they need to stay indoors. It’s very contagious.”

“I call my sister in Slovenia. She know all about lung sickness.”

“No, Marjetica. Not even Slovenia...” He coughs into his fist for effect, fogging the lens of his glasses.

As soon as she leaves he picks up a microcassette recorder and presses the record button. “Brief but welcome intrusion from the lady who looks after this dump. I don’t recall if I’ve talked about her before. Lives with a hundred cats, all strays. Claims they bring her good luck. Certainly brings to this building an overwhelming odor of urine. No one else in her life. Arthritic, simple-minded, believes anything I tell her.”

The phone rings. It’s Christina again. He listens as she speaks to the machine, her voice a hundred light years away. “Wednesday morning at nine. They’re taking her to court. Turn the goddamn TV on. It’s gonna be televised. Pick up the phone, goddamit. Hello hello hello. Call you again soon.”

“Well,” he says aloud. “The problem is I don’t have a TV anymore. I blew the thing up. Would darling Christina ever believe how I did it, I wonder?” The recorder clicks off. “Shit.” He pulls the cassette out and slips it in its case and tapes a label on it—#742—and places it on a shelf with several other tapes lining a wall of the apartment. “Acoustic padding,” he says to himself. “Wall of sound.” He slips in a new cassette and records: “Experiment number 743. Will need to look passably decent for this one. Shit.”

At exactly half past nine that evening, after a hot bath and a shave, he puts on a fresh shirt and clean jeans, makes his bed, dims the lights and puts on some music—early Frank Sinatra. At five past ten, Poison rings his apartment, and he lets her in. She has hair the color of mercurochrome and a freckled face that belies her twenty-eight

years, a slight discrepancy with the nineteen years she claims in her ad in the *Village Voice*.

Efren shows her a clip of the ad as soon as she steps in. “You look exactly like your photograph,” he says. She doesn’t smile, but heads straight to the sofa, where, slumping, she suddenly seems smaller than she is. “I can’t offer you a drink,” Efren says. “Too cold to go out and get anything. Do you like the cold?”

“Two words,” Poison says. “Take-out.”

“No, I don’t think so. I mean, it’d be such an imposition to ask people to deliver anything in this weather. I never really understood people who did that, order take-out in foul weather, that is. It just seems so inconsiderate.”

“Yeah, but it’s their job. Plus they get tips.”

“Anyway, what I meant to say was, I apologize for not having anything to drink.”

“I don’t drink,” Poison says. She has a voice that sounds like a whine, as though she never learned to speak properly until, say, age six. It’s jarring and artificial. He likes that.

“Is Poison your real name?”

Poison laughs. “Of course it is.”

“Who’d name their kid Poison?”

“It’s my name, okay? I chose it myself. Cause that’s what I am.” When she talks she has a way of jerking her upper body forward, as though the slightest intake of air makes her ample bosom too heavy to bear.

“Are those real?”

“What?”

“Those breasts. Are they real?”

“Of course they’re real. What the fuck do you think they are, plastic?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything like that. I mean they’re just so lovely, that’s all. Under the light of that lamp.”

“Yeah, right. I need a drink.”

“You said you don’t drink.”

“Gotta start sometime.”

“You want some chocolate milk?”

“Jesus.”

The doorbell rings again. Efren presses the buzzer and says, “Come on up.”

“You expecting company?” Poison asks.

“Yes.”

“You never said you were expecting company.”

“I am.”

Efren opens the door for Taylor. Taylor is a big black guy with a pretty face and close-shaved head.

“I was hoping you’d like Taylor,” Efren tells Poison. “Just you and him.”

“You pay extra,” Poison says. “If you watch.”

“It’s a blind date,” Efren says. “If I watch. Interesting contradiction in terms. I wanted you to meet someone nice.”

“The fuck you did,” Poison says. “You gonna pay double.”

Taylor sits across from her and throws a small plastic packet on the table. “What’s the matter,” he says. “You got a problem with black guys or something?”

“Yeah, I got a problem when it’s not in the fucking agreement.”

“Taylor never asks me to pay double. Taylor never asks me to pay anything.”

“Well, tough. I’m not here to meet people, you know? What the fuck you trying to do?”

“Hey,” Taylor says, spreading his arms out and hanging them on the back of the seat. “It’s your business. I’m just a guest here.”

“Well, why don’t you two have a go at it,” Poison says. “Maybe you’ll like it.”

“You shouldn’t be so inflexible,” Efren says. “You never answered my question.”

“What?”