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THE BOLO MAN

A FAMILY WAR STORY

Domingo Sipin moves through war with a blade, a promise, and a future he cannot yet imagine.

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I. Fear Is Constant

My grandfather never asked to be called a hero. He was just Domingo P. Sipin: Daddy, Dom, Chief, Grandpa—names he answered to. I remember sitting on his porch as a child, hearing the gentle crash of waves, and listening to the stories that slipped out in whispers. He rarely spoke of those days, and even then, only in fragments. When he finally did speak, he did it quietly, as if confessing a secret, his hands folded and face searching for the right words.

I remember one time he looked me straight in the eye and said, “Fear is constant, boy. What changes is what you fear most.” He sounded calm and certain. At fourteen, I didn’t understand it fully. Now I do.

He stood at the edge of his family’s rice paddies at dawn, watching light stretch over the Cordillera mountains. He was in Santiago, Ilocos Sur, where dawn usually smelled of wet rice and mango blossoms. He was only fourteen—his father had died in a skirmish years ago, and Domingo had already become the man of the house. But this morning the wind carried the acrid sting of smoke and the taste of ashes. The earth shook under his bare feet as planes roared overhead like angry thunder. Domingo’s heart pounded in his chest. He squinted toward the east and saw thick columns of black smoke rising from his village. That place he had known so well—homes, friends, everything—was burning now. The thuds of heavy artillery rolled through the valleys. His palms grew slick with sweat. He realized, before anyone told him, that the Japanese invasion had arrived in full fury.

In a heartbeat, screams and the crack of gunfire lit the morning. Neighbors bolted from their nipa huts, grabbing crying children and tying bundles of bedding. Even the water buffalo let out a terrified bellow as they fled. Families poured into the hills behind the town, stumbling through sugarcane and coconut palms. The rifle fire came in staccato bursts above the shouts of women and children. They abandoned homes, fields, even plowing oxen—leaving everything behind for the jungle. Domingo did not hesitate. He looked over his shoulder as he ran. He could not see his mother or his little brothers in the chaos; surely, they were running somewhere, too. He could not call out to them. Domingo sprinted forward, bare feet kicking up red earth. Everyone he knew was running, and he ran too, toward the mountains that promised safety.

But there was one person he could not see among the fleeing crowd: Paulina. She was the girl he had promised to wait for. The weight of her silver locket rested against his chest, warm from her touch hours ago, but it could not speak in her place. He remembered the night before, under the guava tree, how she had grinned when she gave it to him. “Meet me by the old bamboo grove at the river at midnight,” she’d whispered. Domingo had nodded, heart pounding, certain she would keep her word. Now, dodging through leaning coconut

fronds and tall cogon grass, he scanned each terrified face. She should have been with them, but she was nowhere to be found. He whispered her name, but the jungle only echoed back silence. He missed the sound of her laugh and the way she sang old Ilocano songs to him in the moonlight. Panic and guilt knotted in his stomach. Paulina had promised. And now she was gone.

He needed to find Paulina—until he realized she might never be there. Instead, the young man scrambled up the nearest ridge to look out over the smoke-wreathed hillside. Thorny vines tore at his clothes, and slick stone cut his palms as he climbed. When he reached the summit, the village lay sprawled below under thick columns of gray smoke. Families crept among the palms and sugarcane, blending with the shadows of the tall cogon grass. He peered into the distance and saw a bay horse whinnying near a grove of pine trees. And there, on the narrow dirt road sliding out of town, was Paulina. She raced headlong through the grass with the neighbor's little boy, Carlos, clinging to her skirts. Her face was set with fierce determination, as pale as the dawn sky behind her. Paulina glanced back, her dark eyes searching. For a moment, she smiled and waved. Domingo lifted a muddy hand to wave back, heart soaring. Then the world went red: a burst of rifle fire erupted from the village, scattering birds and panic in all directions. Paulina's smile vanished, replaced by sheer terror. Domingo's hand froze in midair.

He had no time to think. If he ran down, he would draw their fire—and die. So instead, he watched. Japanese infantry poured into the clearing below, marching with terrifying precision. They wore green tunics that swallowed light, faces stern and set for battle. He heard them shout in a harsh foreign tongue as steel blades glinted at their hips. He felt bile rise in his throat. In the chaos below, Paulina released Carlos's hand and dove behind a jagged limestone outcrop. From this height, he could barely make out their small shapes, but he knew: she had made it to cover. She was alive.

He wished he could shout out that he'd be there soon. But words were a risk. He had to trust his eyes and ears. He reached down and drew his bolo knife. His father had taught him to swing it with steady aim—smooth and precise. Domingo had never imagined its blade would taste blood. Now it would. He adjusted the straps of his rucksack. One was filled with rice hidden under ashes to fool searchers; the other was nearly empty, holding only a canteen of water and resolve. Bullets whistled overhead as he slid down the ridge through thick cogon grass, moving like a ghost. The air was heavy with the smell of wet earth, sweat, smoke, and ripening bananas. His skin stung from scratches on the trek. He leaned on his knees for a second, heart hammering. He dared not make a sound. Every breath echoed in his ears.

II. The Bamboo Grove

In the hours before dawn, Domingo stumbled into the old bamboo grove by the creek. The tall stalks arched overhead in a pale gold light. Paulina had told him this would be her hiding spot. He recognized the crooked trunk of the first bamboo where they carved their initials long ago. There, at a small campfire, Paulina crouched whispering to Carlos. Domingo stepped into the clearing. Paulina spun toward him, eyes wide with disbelief and joy. “Domingo!” she breathed. Carlos dropped his blanket and ran into Domingo’s arms. He held the boy tight and looked up at Paulina. She dabbed her eyes with a corner of her shawl. “You scared us,” she whispered.

It was the first time he had seen her in weeks. She looked like a different girl. Her dress was torn and mud-streaked; yet she glowed in the firelight as if made of hope. Domingo stepped fully into the groves. Paulina stood, wrapping Carlos close in her shawl. She saw his bruises and scratches, and fear turned to relief. “Domingo...” she whispered, voice shaking. He gently wiped a tear from her cheek. “I promised,” he said simply. Carlos looked up at him and smiled with tears on his cheeks. Domingo finally managed a weak smile. Paulina’s tears turned to joy, and she embraced him tightly as the first light of dawn filtered through the bamboo above.

He should have been overjoyed, but the taste of victory was bitter. The horrors of the night had settled into his bones. He had killed. Domingo glanced down at the small basket of tubers and rice he had collected. “I gathered these from the fields,” he said softly to Paulina. “Enough to feed us for days,” she whispered, but he barely heard her. Suddenly, a shot ripped through the morning air. Domingo jerked his head up. Through the bamboo, he saw Japanese soldiers appear, rifles aimed. He threw himself in front of Paulina. “Stay back!” he warned in a low voice. Paulina held tight to Carlos as the soldiers advanced. A knot of dread twisted in Domingo’s stomach.

One of the soldiers saw who stood before him. In panic, he raised a pistol and shouted, “Drop your weapon, or she dies!” Domingo shouted for Paulina to move behind him. In that instant, Carlos threw himself between Domingo and the soldier. The gun cracked. Paulina screamed. Domingo clutched Carlos as the boy slumped to the ground. The child’s eyes fluttered and closed. The soldier stared in horror at what he had done, his gun shaking in his hand. Bullets still whistled overhead, but for Domingo, everything went silent. Carlos was gone.

He sat on the wet ground, cradling Carlos in his arms as the rain fell in sheets. The boy’s eyes were closed forever; his little chest was still. Domingo pressed his lips to Carlos’s forehead, whispering a prayer in the old Ilocano dialect. Carlos opened his eyes once more and murmured, “Papa...” And then he was gone. Domingo’s heart shattered. He felt a cold rage

and sorrow swirl together inside him. He realized something that morning: from this moment on, he could never hesitate. He would carry Carlos's memory like a burning flame.

Domingo knew he had to bury Carlos with respect. He found a quiet spot beneath a leaning coconut tree by the creek. With trembling hands, he dug a shallow grave in the red earth, the rain still falling softly around them. Paulina kneeled nearby, her face raw with grief. Domingo pressed his lips together, closed his eyes, and whispered a prayer in Ilocano. He had never been a religious boy, but now he prayed fervently for the boy's soul. Then he began to sing softly an old lullaby his mother used to sing to him. Carlos's small body was so still in his arms that Domingo could feel each ragged breath. He gently laid the boy to rest. Paulina wept quietly; one of her tears fell on Domingo's arm. Domingo wiped it away with his own sleeve. He picked ferns and vines from the forest floor and covered Carlos's body, carefully patting the earth down. He carved a small cross from a palm frond and pressed it at the head of the grave. Then he found a red hibiscus—a flower Paulina loved—and laid it on top. Standing back, Domingo brushed the rain-soaked soil from his hands. He looked at Paulina. "I will find help for you," he whispered. Paulina nodded, her hand finding his. They stood together in silence as morning light bloomed through the bamboo.

He knelt at Carlos's grave one last time before turning away. Paulina stood beside him, tears on her cheek. "Promise me you'll come back," she whispered, voice breaking. Domingo pressed her hand and nodded. "I will send help for you," he promised again. She pressed a hand-carved pendant into his palm—her rosary, carved from the nut of a pilinut. Domingo swallowed hard and, without another word, he slipped into the jungle. He moved south as the sun rose, following narrow animal paths. He traveled by night, taking shelter in coconuts and sleeping unseen beneath thorny ferns. During the day, he crept through villages, always staying out of sight. He washed in streams and scavenged fruit from wild trees to eat. Every dawn he paused at the tree line to pray that Paulina and the villagers remained safe behind him. By the third night, he staggered into Vigan, exhausted but determined. He had survived the journey through the mountains and now needed to find the Americans.

III. What He Carried Home

My grandfather told me that on that night, he sat silent by the fire, staring at nothing. He never spoke of how many lives he saved or how many he lost. He never bragged about the uniform he would one day wear, or how he would serve as a Senior Chief in the U.S. Navy. Instead, he only said this:

Once they know your face, you stop being a ghost.

He waited for me to understand. I stared into the darkness and waited. The jungle had washed away the footprints, but something was forever carved in him.

He sat back as dawn crept into the sky. He did not ask if I understood. He already knew I did. He had walked away from that bamboo grove with two children and left with none. He carried those losses in silence and learned to live with them. The boy who had fought so hard for Paulina would one day sail across oceans for thirty years. But on that day, in that jungle dawn, he only survived.

I sat quietly in the dim light, watching him stare into the flames. I felt his story settle in my bones, too. I could see in the flickering embers the boy he once was and the quiet, strong man he became. For a long moment, I said nothing. At last, my grandfather looked at me with clear eyes. "That's how it was," he said simply, his voice gentle. "I'm just glad the bamboo grove still stands."

He had told me about fear and loss. As we walked back to the house that night, I finally understood his meaning. He had been afraid of everything, and yet he did what needed to be done. He didn't wear the title of a hero; he wore the scars. When I saw the faint pink line on his shoulder, now covered by a sun-faded uniform, I knew it was from that day in the grove. I did not ask him about it. He never needed to say more.

Years later, I would watch the same sunset from his porch and remember his words. He showed me that heroism is not in victories but in surviving with honor. Domingo Sipin would serve in the Navy for decades, and I would grow up hearing his gentle advice. But this memory of the jungle and the children wept in silence became part of who I am. My grandfather never claimed to be a hero. He just lived through war, and he asked me to live through it with compassion. For me, that was enough.