
DROWNING IN MY BEDROOM
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STEVE COLE
ILLUSTRATED BY
ORIOL VIDAL

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Barrington Stoke

For Tom

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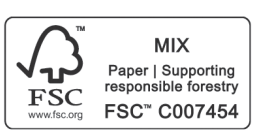
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CHAPTER 1

Lucky Beggar

Junjun

Well, it's raining again. What do you expect? Duh. It's August in Manila, which means it's Habagat – the season when it's super humid and there's lots of rain. It's bad news for me and my family, cos the rains mean we can't earn as much money.

My name is Junjun. I live in a shack made of scraps of plywood and corrugated iron under a bridge called Mataas na Lupa. I am 11 years old and the middle kid of five. I also happen to

be the only boy, which sucks cos I have to wear my older sisters' worn-out clothes.

None of us go to school. My dad collects bottles and newspapers from the rubbish to get the recycling money. My mum cuts the local people's hair sometimes, cos she has her own scissors. They pay her what they can. It isn't much.

I help my family make a living by hanging out on the corner of Singalong Street and San Andres, begging for money from strangers as they pass. It's so busy and noisy, but what do you expect? Manila is the National Capital Region of the Philippines, which means it's busy and noisy everywhere.

If I am lucky, I'll earn more than 150 pesos a day. (Where you live, that's almost enough to buy a tube of Pringles!) That's if the tourists are feeling generous. The bad news is, I don't get to keep what I earn. At the end of each day,

I have to give most of the money I've made to Mr Beltran.

Mr Beltran watches us. He's scary, but you can't dodge him. He is part of a gang that takes money from everyone who works on the streets around here. This includes the guy who sells mangoes, the ladies with the meat stand, the guy at the grocery store – and beggars like me.

Today is a bad day. When the rains come harder, the streets are emptier. Not so many people walking past means not so many coins for Junjun. Still, you've got to try, right?

I take off my worn-out trainers and hide them so it looks like I'm barefoot. It's a trick I learned from Mr Beltran so people feel sorrier for me. Then I just sit and look hopeful and watch the traffic go past.

Sometimes I feel as if everyone is going somewhere apart from me. The cars rush by,

cutting up the pedicabs (these are bikes that come with a sidecar, in case you didn't know).

And the Jeepneys cut up the cars, cos they're bigger – Jeepneys are like stretched-out Jeep taxis, decorated with bright colours. People squash into them like sardines in a tin.

My favourites are the cabs pulled by horses, splashing in the big puddles that are already forming at the side of the road. The horses look so sad and thin, but they're still strong.

I think that if those horses were people, they would be just like me.

I gaze over at the block of flats opposite. There's so much washing hanging out, it's like the walls are rippling with it. How many people must live in each room to make so much washing?

Sometimes I wish I lived in a block of flats. Imagine solid walls. Imagine a window!

Imagine looking out of a window and having a view of the whole city, with the washing blowing all about you like colourful flags. I'd feel like a king.

The rain started off light, but it has carried on all afternoon. I'm soaking wet and so is the cardboard I'm sitting on.

Round about four o'clock, I hear this funny electric humming noise and see a girl in a wheelchair trundle past. It's a wheelchair that moves by itself, so no one has to push. The girl steers it with a joystick. Her other hand sits in her lap, bent backwards. She has black hair in a sleek bob and red sunglasses pushed up on the top of her head, despite there being no sun today.

The girl looks my age, or maybe a bit older. You'd think she'd be happy to have a free ride, but she's not. She looks grumpy. An older guy is walking beside her, holding an umbrella over

her head, and he looks tired. Maybe they've had a fight?

Uh-oh – there's a cracked paving slab coming up, and they haven't noticed. The side of the slab nearest the right wheel is tilted up towards them, like a low wall.

"Hey," I call, to warn them. They both ignore me. Sure they do – I'm a beggar. Who listens to a beggar?

The wheel of the chair bumps into the cracked slab. The jolt shifts the girl forward, and she lets go of the joystick. The chair stops, and the girl tries to grip the joystick again, but she misses.

"Just be patient," the guy says.

When she does get hold of it again, she tries to steer backwards, but it's jerky – the movements stop and start.

"I hate trying to use this thing!" the girl shouts. Her voice isn't clear, but her face says everything. "I want to walk back today."

"You can't," the guy says calmly. "It will take too long. The forecast says the rain is going to get worse. I'm sorry ..."

The girl pulls at the seatbelt thing she has across her. But her fingers kind of clump together, and she can't get it off. I see the guy hesitate – like he wants to help her but doesn't really want her to get out of the wheelchair.

"Hey!" I call again. "That's a sweet set of wheels! Can I have a ride?"

The girl stops struggling and glares at me. She looks embarrassed.

I grin at her. "I bet I can pull wheelies in it."

She looks away. The guy looking after her guides her hand back onto the joystick. I can

see she hates that. Her body twists in the chair, and she bats his hand away. "I can do it," the girl tells him. And she does. She manages to steer the wheelchair wonkily round the cracked slab and heads off.



I clap the performance. She doesn't look back. Nor does the guy. I'm not sure he even noticed I was there.

At least it broke up my boredom. It was the high point of my afternoon, but it didn't earn me anything. By the end of the day, I've only made about 50 pesos.

Soon, Mr Beltran will be making his rounds, visiting all his "customers" on the streets. I don't want to see him, but if I don't, he'll send someone to fetch me. Mr Beltran takes money from us in exchange for "keeping us safe".

He smiles when he sees me on the street corner. Mr Beltran smiles a lot to hide how mean he is. But he stops smiling when he sees how little I've made.

"You know your problem, Junjun? You look too well," says Mr Beltran. And he grabs the neck of my T-shirt and tears it open so my

chest shows. Then he cuffs me round the face a couple of times, making me gasp.

"See, Junjun, if you look bad, people will feel sorry for you," Mr Beltran says. He leans over, real close. "You'll get more money tomorrow. Won't you?"

"Yes, Mr Beltran," I say, but I don't look at him. My left eye is swelling, but it doesn't hurt so bad.

He stuffs 15 pesos back in my hand from my 50 and pats me on the shoulder. "Off you go, Junjun," Mr Beltran says.

I'm not crying as I walk away, clutching the coins in my fist. Honest. It's just rainwater. And things could be worse. I'm actually pretty lucky. At least I'm not that girl in the wheelchair.

I picture her and think, *I'm glad I'm not you*.