

Describe the Rapture

Synopsis

Nick, a freelance copywriter working on the brochure copy of a controversial high-rise residential building near the Rizal Monument, is distracted by an ad he reads online, about a film festival that's calling for screenplay entries. Motivated by the one million peso prize money, Nick tries to cram the writing of the screenplay in his day's schedule, even if the brochure copy's deadline itself is already pushing him to the end of his tether. Yet, he could not stop himself from getting distracted by many things: Carol, his beautiful next-door neighbor; the memories of his long-dead parents; the growing tumor in the neck of his beloved dog, Sam.

When Nick submits the brochure copy to Enrique Chavez, his work is rejected. Chavez exhorts him to further push the condo building's unique selling points in light of the controversy hounding the development, instructing him to describe a bright, sunshiny picture of the "good life" in the copy. Dejected, Nick decides he should instead focus on finishing the screenplay first. However, while he has finished most of the screenplay, he could not come up with a good climax, a "magic plot ingredient" that Nick believes will make it win—until he realizes something as he gazes at the thickening, menacing rainclouds outside his window.

With the screenplay done finally, and despite the heavy rain—the first rain that ends the summer—he rushes to the office of the organization in charge of the film festival, only to find it shuttered—the contest had been cancelled, and with it, Nick's hopes of winning the prize money.

Waiting for a ride home, he loses grip of the envelope that contains the printed out pages of his screenplay as he crosses the road, the wind scattering the pages all over the asphalt. Nick is entranced by the sight of it, watching the pages dance, realizing the odd beauty of losing everything.

Describe the Rapture

The deadline's in four days. I read the ad on Monday morning about some film festival that's calling for entries. The writer of the winning screenplay gets a million pesos, and the screenplay produced—actually made into a movie—for the film festival in December. Suddenly, I'm overwhelmed with a sense of possibility.

“Isn't that great?” I tell Sam, who at fifteen years old has overgrown the little nook underneath my work table. She places her chin on my foot and peers up at me. I know that look. “This can be serious,” I insist. “You don't believe me? A million pesos can go a long, long way. We can buy you a fancy, new pillow.”

Sam yawns. She rearranges her body to snuggle comfortably in the small space. My heart breaks seeing her like this—she doesn't realize she has grown old, and fat. In her heart, she still thinks she's Daddy's little girl. The little puppy that loved sleeping in the crook of my arm. The little girl who'd run to his Dad for a hug when a storm made those frightening sounds her mind couldn't understand.

“I'm doing this,” I tell her. “Our situation could change, you know.”

I slump back on my chair. I can see through the open window how the morning slowly matures into noon. Over the moss-laden concrete fence, Carol, my next-door neighbor, is watering her orchids and dragon fruit saplings, her pretty sun-kissed head bobbing up and down. She must be talking to her beloved plants again, inciting them to flower more, to blossom, to bear fruit. She stands up and stretches her back. As she squints in the sun, she sees me and waves a hand. I wave back, but I immediately turn back to my computer, pretending to be busy. There's always something about Carol's attention that makes me so self-conscious.

It all seems peaceful in this old house, yet such peace is deceptive. Desperation lurks in the shadows, and it compels me to churn out one bullshit after another. Working at home writing copy for this property development property has its perks—you don't have to suffer through horrendous traffic every single day, for starters—but the work is seasonal, and it takes a while for the checks to clear. Meanwhile, in between the cashing of checks, are bills to pay and mounting concerns for the few loved ones I still have.

Sam, for instance. Her growing tumor on the side of her neck has been a grave cause for concern, but I couldn't bring her to the vet because of the cost—surgery would burn money I don't have. Because I couldn't do much about it, I have been extra-sensitive and overprotective of Sam's condition—every whimper jolts me, every cry makes me run to her side and listen to the beats of her heart. People say she's just a dog, so what if she dies? She's old, she has had a good life, let her rest, put her to sleep. I resist; writing is such a lonely profession, especially when you work at home, and in those fifteen years Sam has always been by my feet, keeping me company. She's there no matter what happened, regardless of whether I churned out garbage or what I hoped to be the next great Filipino novel.

And I think perhaps there's still a chance. Maybe a good vet could remove that tumor without issue. I think of the screenplay and think about the money I could win—I count the eggs before they even hatch. My mother, God bless her soul, would frown at that. But when you have nothing else, all you could do is count.

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Carol is a cat person. Her three felines have names that sound like mere variations of Kit, or Kat, or Kitty. I often struggle holding a conversation with her, because I speak dog. Yet, we have other things in common: we both live alone, orphaned by fate and circumstance, and we both

care about the same things. And whenever I encounter writer's block, such as now, I simply walk over to her side of the fence and watch her tend her garden.

"I should charge you a fee for watching," she says, looking up. On her knees transplanting her dragon fruit saplings to different pots, Carol looks grimy in a nice way—like sexy grimy.

"You know, I learn so much just by watching you." I laugh.

"You're crazy." She stands up, shaking off the dirt on her skirt. I try not to look at the beads of sweat rolling down her chest. "Do you need anything?"

It's you I need. "No...I just...I just need to get out of the house for a while."

"Well, how's it working for you?"

I shrug. "Do you, by any chance, need some help with that?"

"Well..." Carol sighs and looks around her. "These potted saplings are quite heavy, so..."

"It would be my pleasure." I pick up the potted plants with a spring in my step. I always seem too eager to help, and I hope she notices that. I can't say what I really want to say, so I do everything except get to the point. I have known her for years, so I'm sure she considers me like an older brother—a much older brother. Yet, the bleeding truth, the thing I've been dying to tell her, is that living alone is bearable only because she's right over there, within reach. Pathetic, I know. I don't even want to think about the day when her US-based boyfriend comes to finally take her away. Sometimes, I'm afraid to look out the window only to discover her house all boarded up. I'm afraid of her leaving without at least saying goodbye. I straddle this invisible, unnamable borderline of worry and pain, but whenever Carol smiles and talks and looks over the fence and calls out my name, it's pure bliss. If only for a fleeting moment.

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I am compelled to focus my attention on writing a screenplay. It's something I've never done before. So I decide that my draft of the brochure copy for El Ilustrado Luxury Residences is good enough—maybe Enrique Chavez will look at it and wet his pants over its sheer awesomeness. Yet, I waste the first few hours staring at the wall, or relishing the memories that inhabit this old house. I grew up here. I know its every crevice, every flake of peeling paint, every chipped concrete off the wall, every amber-colored layer of age on the furniture. On idle days I walk about and make random taps on the walls or look closely at jambs and awnings and wonder how the house would look like long after Sam and I are gone. The house feels like a wife you know will outlive you, and you spend nights thinking about the next man she'll love, the next man who will sleep with her in your bed. Would he be gentle with her, would he understand why she keeps trimming her nails and frowns when it rains? Would he patiently wait when she takes too long in the bathroom? Would he be brave enough to pretend delight when she botches a recipe?

I tiptoe up the stairs and touch the handrail as I would brush a woman's skin. I turn the doorknob with the same gentleness I would hold the hand of a loved one. When I clean the rooms, I pursue every lint and piece of dirt with the decisiveness of an avowed savior. I go out in our little backyard in the morning, the sun crisp on my skin, and look at its crumbling lines and tangents. The house has voices that echo about the walls when every other sound had died down: the ghosts of children's laughter, good-natured banter of friends that had come and gone, worried murmurs, Carlos Jobim from the phonograph, the long-ago hum of Sunday afternoons. When I enter it sometimes I am greeted by an old fragrance that brings back the sweet smell of my mother's bosom—the scent of some baby cologne she once shared with her kids, the scent that reminds me of when my mother was young and beautiful, long before the cancer.

I should stop this, I tell myself. Focus on the present. Focus on the screenplay. Despite what I'm feeling, I just begin tapping on the keyboard, just to fill the blank page with anything. And just when my pace picks up—I'm quickly crafting dialogues, ideas, scenes—Sam's head appears between my legs from under the work desk, and barks. That's her way of telling me, "I'm starving." I didn't realize it's already night. "Sorry, girl," I tell the impatient lady. "Let's see what we have in the kitchen."

I carefully mash cold rice with bits of boiled fish in Sam's food bowl. I watch her as she quietly eats it, softly caressing the bulge in her neck, wishing that the tumor, or whatever it is, disappears on its own. She finishes only half of the food, then she turns away and limps back to her old spot. If only Sam could talk. If only she could tell me what she's feeling, how she's handling the pain. Sometimes, when she looks at me, I feel like she's asking me the obvious, shameful question: *Are you letting me die?*

There are days when I wish my life's less a tragic cliché than a pathetic story my friends tell their friends, who in turn tell their friends or post it as a Facebook status.

There are days I wish my father had seen what was coming. If only he had that hole in his camera bag sewn shut. That Nikon lens wouldn't have slid through the stupid bag's hole right as he was crossing Commonwealth Avenue one night a lifetime ago. I told him that morning about that stupid hole. I even joked about it. This hole, I remember I said. It's big enough for one to pass into the next life.

My father, he just grinned. He'll get by, he said. It's just one photography coverage of a wedding, he said. This is just routine. Everything will be all right.

He should have listened to me. Or I should have steeled my resolve and insisted. That stupid Nikon lens, all worn out around the edges from years of use, wouldn't have slipped

through that stupid hole at the wrongest moment. He wouldn't have stooped down on reflex to pick it up.

He would have seen the truck coming; he would have dodged it.

He would have survived.

Damn it, I can't cry now. Not now, not right in the middle of a deadline. These memories, you can't afford to dwell in them. Not now. Smile your mea culpa smile and bury those memories under the subsoil of your waking life.

But more and more, I'm becoming one of those brain-dead patients you only keep alive with state-of-the-art medical equipment. I sit here each day and what I do is play King Sisyphus: push the boulder of my life's concerns up a hill, and not so much think about it even if it rolls back and each morning I find myself on square one.

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What I have so far is this screenplay draft, but it's all dialogue, scene sketches, how this woman's so smart and this man's a loser who thinks with his small head. Strangely, I started out by trying to make the man smart and the woman a mere sounding board, somebody secondary, like what God did during the creation. Make a woman so that the man gets a companion to watch the sunset. So that the man's nights are never cold and bitter and lonely. But the more I add detail—on how they meet, how the woman always chooses the red condom, how the man is unable to write without primetime soap opera blaring in front of him, how they live together, spend their days and their nights, settle their differences—the more he appears as this constipated mess of a writer who soon finds out that the single bleeding reason of his life's failures is himself.

I'm making up the whole thing, but somehow, fragments of my life find their way into it. The more I add flesh and sinew into the story, the more it all becomes so hard to write. Because it soon becomes painfully obvious: the man, the "invented" character, is me.

I admit, the screenplay's mostly about sex and violence, because that's what I think would click. In my story, things explode spectacularly, people die horribly, and women make love like there's no tomorrow. There's Wagner for the fantastic scenes and Strauss to make the emotional crises feel like the universe is on the brink of destruction, even if it all happens only in the male protagonist's head. There's a priest and hordes of sinners committing the oldest sins in the newest ways. There's a security guard who appears as a template for all security guards in existence; I even named him "Dodong." There's an evil, unseen adversary that makes the lead's life as hellacious as possible. And in the subtle threads of the story's plot and subplots, embedded are fragments of myself, invisible, unspoken—but as real as pain. And as horrible.

The only missing part is the climax. The meaning. What is it? How does it end in such a way that it leaves an impact on one's soul? And most importantly, what's the magic ingredient that might make it win?

I have no idea. And the deadline is in a few days.

Perhaps, this screenplay is my shot. If only I could find the magic ingredient. If only I could make the whole thing meaningful.

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The glass door slides open and out comes the secretary, her face inscrutable.

"The boss would see you now," she says.

I nod and stand and approach the light. I find Enrique Chavez planted in his big swivel chair, which is currently not swiveling. His eyes scan the print-out, then my face. Something tells me I'm not getting my check today.

"It's actually a first draft," I stammer, perhaps too defensively.

"'Come home to where every single day'," he reads, his voice tired and raspy, "'you can breathe in the perfumed scents of the fairways and relax to nature's comforting music. And where on weekends you'll love strolling or jogging down the picturesque Club Intramuros Golf Course'."

Then to me: "This is exactly the same first draft you did in the previous project. You just replaced the nouns."

To me: "What's going on?"

I say nothing. How can I say I'm jaded, that as a freelance copywriter, I'm hard-pressed by the need to finish this before the bills pile up.

Enrique says, "I gave you a very generous deadline to work on this."

He laughs. The kind of laugh that makes you shudder because it's remarkable for its sheer absence of mirth. It's remarkable for its absolute joylessness.

Enrique tosses the copy aside and stands up, the swivel chair squeaking as if to accentuate his displeasure.

"I don't understand what those people's beef is," he says. He presses a button and the floor-to-ceiling window's blinds part with a dull whirr. The view is breathtaking: Luneta Park all dried up in the death throes of summer, the famous Rizal Monument, and the turquoise waters of the bay shimmering in the distance. "Look at that. Does that distract you from enjoying a view of the park?"

It takes me a moment to realize that he's referring to, of course, El Ilustrado, somewhere to the right, towering over a portion of the old LRT line.

“From a certain perspective, you still get to enjoy all of it. But when you read the papers, see the petitions, the rants on social media, you'd think we've built the Dark Tower of Sauron. ‘National Photobomber’ my ass. If it bothers you, why not change your selfie location? Is that so hard to do?” He turns to me, his eyes bloodshot. “El Ilustrado Luxury Residences is a fine development, Nick. It has all the bells and whistles, ultra-modern amenities, and what-not. It took us more than a couple of billion pesos just to build it. Can you imagine how much money that is? It's literally a huge truckload of cash. We had all the permits, the licenses. We didn't break any law. Now with just one luxury residential tower, suddenly the world is so sensitive about the Manila skyline? Can anyone believe that?”

“Well, I...”

“That's what we're up against, Nick,” Enrique says. “People with no sense of progress. So this brochure should be a bit different. You have to really play up El Ilustrado's unique selling points—in the context of this, the Manila skyline and all that jazz.”

He says, “This company is counting on you. Make the copy more effective. Remember, we don't sell houses. We don't sell condo units. We sell the good life. So make them *see* and *feel* and *taste* it.” He removes his eyeglasses and squints in the bar of sunlight streaming through the glass wall. “Write it like you're describing the rapture.”

I gaze at the view before us. From this vantage point, where people look so small, it's hard to imagine that there's more to this life than existential indifference. That no matter what you do, you don't really matter. The thing with writing about the so-called “good life”—you know, a happy nuclear family, beautiful people, healthy kids, in a place where it's always sunny

and where needs are fully met—is that I, who conjure it in the foggy spaces in my head, am not living it. I’m asked to write about the party, but I couldn’t join it. I end up squashing my face against the cold glass wall, gazing wistfully at the warm party inside. I end up spending the long night of my life in the darkness.

The “good life” is many things except one that is lived by those who are condemned to paint it. It’s a nice myth. It’s like the nice things people tell you when you were a kid and you were wondering about the point in all this.

That, and the fact that I’m sick and tired of lying.

All I’ve ever wanted to do is write. I’d write anything on my silly little Sterling notebook even as a kid: about the sun shining through the leaves just outside the classroom’s window. The girl with the lovely neck sitting in the front row, never realizing that I existed. What I felt when they took away my first dog, Johnny, to slaughter. Writing is the only thing I know, the only thing that matters. When I got the degree—the license to earn money from writing words, was how I understood its import—I was so happy. All I want is to write stories—good ones, tales that could hopefully inspire someone enough to change the trajectory of their lives. Stories that don’t lie, that shine bright with truth and meaning. But I couldn’t do any of it because I’m here, being paid to write beautiful lies just to make ends meet.

I want to tell these things to Enrique Chavez. But those words, somehow they’re trapped inside my skull. They march so bravely from my brain but they all lodge in my throat. My bravado takes place only in the micromoments between when Enrique says the word “This” and follows it with “Sucks.” And the only words that actually tumble out of my mouth are strange words of reassurance. I’m sorry, I just say.

I’ll revise it and give it to you in a couple of days, sir.

Then I flash my underdog, *mea culpa* smile.

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I spend the following day just staring at the computer screen. I try to remember Enrique's words, but the screenplay's deadline keeps hijacking my attention.

Underneath my work desk, Sam is asleep, but her paws claw the air, as she perhaps dreams of ancient hunts. "Samantha," I whisper. "Samantha, take it easy."

I gaze at the sky outside, at the dark clouds that thickly gather—has the summer ended already? What if I own God's gigantic hand for a minute, and flick away these human-made structures to as far as the Indian Ocean? What if I own God's hand for a minute and just smash these puny lives, these creatures who believe they're the center of the universe? That there's no good life, would they stop and listen? God speaks to you through pain. He speaks to you through terrible existential horrors to which you constantly respond with denial. And the funny thing is, God probably doesn't even exist. He's probably the Man Who Wasn't There. And you're just the frightened kid hiding under the stairs.

I stare long and hard at the grayness of it all. The black clouds are majestic. The sight of them gives you goosebumps. And then something hits me in the head. I freeze for a second in my small eureka moment.

I have found it. I have found the magic goddamn climax for my screenplay.

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The screenplay is about this man, a writer like me, who finds himself unable to practice his craft because somebody has been stealing all his ideas. The moment he pounds on his typewriter, the moment he even attempts to write the first word, the ideas fly from his head and settle in the

mind of somebody else, like magic. That somebody else is the unknown, unseen adversary. And he's very bad.

And the whole point of the story, the twist that gives the whole tale its sense of meaning, its emotional gravitas, appears somewhere near the end of the tale, right when the man, the main character, runs after the one he has thought all this time to be his adversary. When the man corners the adversary in Lacson Underpass, the truth astounds him. The truth wheels around its frightening head and faces him squarely, and it's so ugly the man recoils in horror.

The truth and the sheer ugliness of it shocks him so much he walks in a daze from Quiapo to Pandacan, his loaded gun hanging limply from his hand, his eyes completely blank.

And from there, everything goes downhill.

Finally knowing how it ends, I decide the screenplay's title should be, *Don't Blink*. I think it's a brilliant title—it does not give away too much and still retains some sense of mystery and foreboding.

My hands tremble as I press the Print button of my trusty dot matrix printer. The yellowed machine whirrs to life—two decades old, and it's still refusing to give up the ghost, like everything else in this ancient house. Outside, it has begun to rain, the heavy drops bombarding the parched earth. Summer's officially over. Sam panics and hides under the couch and plaintively howls, like she's singing a song of fear and interminable sadness. It's a song I only know so well. I lie on the floor beside her. I gently pull her out of her hiding place and put my arms around her, as I've always done. "It's okay," I whisper. "I'll bring you to the vet and have that tumor taken out. As soon as the next check clears. Just you wait, big girl. Everything's going to be alright."

She looks up at me for a moment, panting, before burying her face in my chest. I gaze at the ceiling as we lie there, listening to the printer do its job. I think I may have dozed off somehow, because when I next open my eyes, the house's shadows have shifted; they're now longer, darker. The dot matrix printer has fallen silent, but the torrent outside still rages, hiding the world under a curtain of water.

I stand up and collate the print-out. I stuff everything neatly into a thick brown envelope.

As I am leaving, I pass by Carol standing in her doorway, watching the rain.

"Can you look out for Sam?" I yell from the gate.

"Where are you going?" Her voice is almost drowned out by the noise of the rain bombarding the tin roofs. "Isn't this a bad time to go out?"

"I have to submit some work," I say.

"Are you serious?"

I nod. I look at my watch: less than an hour to deadline.

The rain is pouring in mad, silver sheets.

"Looks like you're going to swim," she says, and chuckles. She makes that sound you make with your mouth when you just feel so bad at the folly of people.

"That's okay," I say, trying to make myself as small as possible under my umbrella. "Can we have dinner when I come back? My treat." I say it as nonchalantly as possible, as though it is the most normal thing for me to ask. As though it didn't take me a tremendous amount of courage just to say those words.

Carol smiles and nods. "Sure," she says. "I'll wait for you."

I choke with happiness.

Then I run and brave the silver gunfire of the rain.

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The film festival's office is housed in one of those Spanish-era buildings in Intramuros. I expected it to be bustling with activity, especially with last-minute submissions. But the big double doors are closed and no one's in sight. There are announcement posters on a bulletin board beside the door. I begin to read some of the posters when a guard comes out from nowhere, wary of my presence. "What's this about?"

I point to the brown envelope with my mouth, as though we had prior arrangement and this is just delivery. After a minute of a stare-down contest between him and me, I remind him of his office's business. "I'm still on time, right? I can still submit this?"

"I don't unders—" the guard's face suddenly lights up—"Oh, yes, the contest! For the movies! Is that what you have, for the movies?"

This lifts up my spirits. "Yes, exactly. Do I leave this with you? Do I sign some registration form?"

"Sorry," he says, "but there's no contest, anymore."

This plummets my spirits to the depths of hell. "What do you mean?"

"They cancelled it." He shrugs.

"Just like that?"

"Yes, just like that." The guard sits on his plastic stool and flips through a notebook.

"Can you sign here, please?"

"Why? What for?"

"Everyone who visits must sign on the log book."

A million confusing thoughts crisscross my head that what the guard says barely registers. “I came here to submit an entry to the film festival. A screenplay. Do you really mean the whole thing’s off?”

The guard looks at me patiently. “The contest was cancelled last week. What I heard, the organization had a disagreement with the local government. Something about funding. The producers. Or the mayor wants to go another direction with the festival, so the organization had to dissolve the contest.”

“So you won’t...accept this?”

“Sure, leave it here,” he says. “But they’d just discard it.” He points to a nearby trash bin, the lid partly open, reams of bond paper jutting out like the tongue of some dead amphibian.

“There’s no point.”

Suddenly I am reminded of the security guard in my screenplay, the one named Dodong. I say nothing. Part of me wants to laugh a cold hard laugh. The texture of the paper, how wet and clammy it is. It feels like a dead body in my hands.

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I stand in the waiting shed among a crush of urban pilgrims, staring at the jeepneys and buses and trucks. They all zoom past us, and in the bluish dusk, they seem as if in a race to reach some finish line, wherever that is. Behind me, a street vendor’s radio blares out an Oasis song:

*“And all the roads we have to walk are winding
And all the lights that lead us there are blinding...”*

And in my head, there’s a voice that says: *Describe “raging mad.”*
Describe “breathtaking.”

Describe "oblivion."

I don't know. These days, you're buried enough in your daily job, you see your job everywhere. It becomes like a reflex. It becomes second nature. It becomes that voice in your head trying to see the beauty out of chaos. The wisdom behind failure. Willing perfection upon the flaws. Even in your shittiest of moments.

Describe the rapture.

And among the swarm of tired people wanting to go home, I am the guy who stands so quiet and still, as if I am frozen and I'm just waiting to be thawed out. The wet envelope in my arm is crumbling, and the thick sheaf of loose white pages seems dying to slide out. As if it's asking me to set it free. I hug it close to my chest; despite everything, I still don't have the heart to let it go.

Tomorrow, I will finish writing that brochure copy. I will make *El Ilustrado* seem infinitely better than what it actually is, like what I've always done countless times before. I'll wear my *mea culpa* smile and tell Enrique Chavez what he wants to hear. All the good things.

Or maybe not.

I let my feet take me across the street raging with traffic, but the envelope slips from my arm and the loose sheets finally slide out. They scatter as the wind sweeps them off the asphalt road, taking them away to God-knows-where. Somewhere, a woman screams, the blare of horns from a hundred blind trucks gets louder, closer. But I stand transfixed, watching the pages of my screenplay dance in the wind, the white sheets fluttering like unleashed butterflies. Beautiful in an odd sort of way, like unrequited love.

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