

## Jakarta Games

“He’s practicing again,” said Claire. Her hair was damp from the swelter and smooshed against the sides of her head. “I don’t want to call on him tonight.”

“You’re going to,” instructed Tony. It was just the two of them standing there in the street.

“Why does he always play the same thing?” she asked, looking at the house.

“His dad makes him.”

The piano notes wandered about the expat compound like uneasy ghosts, casting a slanted mood on the place. They’d wander off beyond the compound walls, into the exotic verdure on the outskirts of Jakarta, and weren’t ever heard of again.

Tony lifted his cap a little and scratched his scalp. He was tall for his age and had pieces of volcanic glass for eyes. Many adults thought him profound past his years because of how little you could read in those eyes. The teachers at the international school remarked to the boy’s parents on his keen intellect, mostly because he hardly said anything.

“Go home,” he said after a while.

“No.”

“Go home.”

“You’re going to call on Pieter. I’m going with you,” Claire said, ready to argue on it. Tony surrendered every so often, but the satisfaction was silly after all the work it took. Sometimes she’d be set for a fight and he would be agreeable. She knew her brother better than anyone—well, until he

became such good friends with Pieter, and maybe even still—and she didn't know when he would be agreeable. Tony wasn't ever cruel to her that she could tell, but she cried regularly at that private face of his.

“Go home,” Tony said again. He would not be agreeable this time, and Claire did not want to call on Pieter so she went home.

The compound was an American suburb assembled in the 1970s. Its materials were a little strange and some of the plant life was like nothing you'd see back home. It had a row of shops that hardly anyone could keep in business, a community center that got used as a church, tennis courts, racquetball courts, a handful of miniature parks, and a wooded area with some small folklore to it. Families from all across the world lived in the neighborhood and you'd find yourself celebrating holidays you never heard of.

Tony pulled on the screen door and it shrieked. That was all the announcement it took for Pieter to answer. A flap of yellow hair swung across the boy's face while he put out his hand, which Tony shook according to their custom. Pieter had on a fluorescent green t-shirt and lint blue shorts, and looked like he had been in the air conditioning all day.

The curtains were closed up like a housecoat. That was one of the things different about their house, that they had curtains, not blinds. Mrs. Smit sat in her usual spot, in her shiny brassiere and white trousers. A cigarette with a square piece of ash stuck out of her hand and Tony could see the tall vein running across the hand, into the forearm, into the crook of her arm. He could see the same looking bottles on the table among the scattered ashtray.

“Moeder, I’m off out now,” said Pieter. The woman nodded and smiled at him and the boys went out the side door into the driveway. The stray cat they called Reebok with his wide apart eyes and fur filled with dead skin was sniffing at the trashcan in the drive. “Hoi, Reebok,” Pieter called at it. The animal went near the boy and got a kick in the ass. It thought on it for a second and then fired off into the bushes.

“Stupid Reebok, every time, man. Every time,” Pieter said in an American manner he picked up at school and watched the bushes with the cat inside. He didn’t look like he much enjoyed kicking it. Shit flows downhill, Tony’s father told his mother one time when he had to work through the holidays, and it mostly did.

The sun slid onto a translucent patch in the clouds and looked like a fried egg with a piece of wax paper on it. Tony lifted his cap and scratched at his scalp while a bird lit on a fence right by them and sang something in Indonesian. She cocked her head one way and then the other and sang again, only a little different. Reebok was still in the bushes or had snuck out the back, so the boys left.

There were storm drains throughout the compound with loose grates on them. If you were a kid, you could get around in them hardly hunching over. Tony and Pieter climbed into the drain by Pieter’s house and took it to the dumpsters behind the row of shops. They had wicker seats waiting for them that they’d rescued from one of the dumpsters.

“We’re going to be on different teams tonight, man, I know it,” Pieter said.

“You don’t know that. It should just be us against all of them,” Tony replied, and they shook on that. They were tall for their age and third and fourth oldest out of the neighborhood kids. The teams would be getting assembled and the other kids couldn’t see the rudders twisting in the dark, driven in secret by the two boys. The crafty pair drifted into the same team and no one thought anything of it

because the vessel came around like a wave pulled it. They had only to make sure they weren't both captains, and that was easy enough.

So it was that Tony and Pieter disappeared into their reclaimed chairs and talked strategy before any teams were picked. That was in the days before the new kid, Kevin, showed up. He was the oldest and had been to three games. At the last one, he said, with verdant East Texas in his voice, that Pieter and Tony were on the same team again. And the other kids started saying it, too. So Tony and Pieter talked only loosely on strategy and picked bits of straw from their chairs.

Claire got up and rubbed the red impressions on her knees. The drawing still looked good from up here. Sometimes they looked good while she leaned close to them, but when she got up and stood over them, they weren't so good. She'd been working on the same drawing for an hour, and all the while, the piano down the street had been muttering through the window.

There were two posters stuck on the wall with stiff wads of blue tack. The one over the bed was bucolic heartland: glossy white fences, erupting silver clouds, plump and sweaty on rigid blue, and rows of green—the national flag breathing it all into dilated nostrils. The other one had a purple horse on it and was near the desk. The posters would come down. A corner might rip off or the blue tack would leave an oily circle on the wall. They'd been rolled up and squashed enough times there were white creases up and down them. When she got to a new place, she studied the walls for signs of the lives that were there before and put the posters up. Most of her stuff came in the shipment, and that took forever. But the posters came in her suitcase and went up right away.

“Claire, where's your brother?” came her mother's voice under the door.

“I don't know. I'm not his keeper.”

“Knock it off with the attitude and come eat.” The words slid under the door and were hardly noticeable out the corner of Claire’s eye. And when she thought about other stuff, she forgot they were there at all.

“Claire!”

“I’m coming!”

Tony entered the house. He pulled off his ball cap and rolled the bill in his wide, hairless hands—the same hands that thumped that boy in Bakersfield, California for kicking Claire, until the boy’s eyes staggered about. His sister came out of her room about the same time.

“You’re late,” she said all sore, even though he wasn’t really.

The maid was putting things on the oiled teak table. Her hair was glazed with coconut oil and loosely organized in a ponytail. She brought the dishes from the kitchen and no matter where she set them, Melissa moved them around. Tony was still standing in the hallway. The light from the kitchen didn’t quite reach his face, so it was dark with that precocious wisdom of his.

“Dinner, Tony. Go wash up.”

Dinner was fried chicken and rice. And it was either that or fish with steamed vegetables and so little spice that you couldn’t taste it if you knew it was in there. That’s all Melissa permitted the maid to cook. The dog, also an expat, lay under the table where Tony could put his feet on it. The animal produced a hoarse sigh and wielded her big head every so often to inspect the cool floor about the chairs.

“When is dad coming home?” asked Claire.

“Still two weeks. Hasn’t changed since you asked an hour ago. I’ll let you know if it does,”

Melissa replied.

“It’s Night Games tonight,” Tony said and felt his mother watch him.

Come home quick, she told Jake the first time he went away and called her a couple days later—a day after the first ladies get together she attended. I don’t think I’m going to like it here, she told him. I don’t think I’m going to like it much, and she cried. The other ladies sure know how to gossip. And in the silence coming off the phone, Melissa remembered the big cat they saw at the zoo the first week they got to Jakarta and were staying at the hotel. It was by itself in that wet, concrete enclosure. Most of the other enclosures were empty because they were doing work on them, and that cat looked ridiculous switching its tail at the wet, concrete-smelling air.

She told Jake about Night Games the first time it came up. She told him about the kids not being able to see snakes and whatever else was out there at night. He said they did a good job keeping the snakes out of the compound. Really? Melissa honey, this is the kind of experiences we were talking about. This is why we decided to come here, remember? (They had moved plenty around the U.S., but this was the first place overseas.) He was in Kuala Lumpur at the time. The kids will cherish these memories all their lives. And that was all they talked on it. And she wouldn’t say anything on it now but switch her tail at it. Tonight, the ladies were meeting at Susan’s house. I don’t want to go and if I don’t, they’ll talk about us. How about those snakes, Jake?

“Mom, we’re going out now,” Tony said and he had his shoes on again. His sister was standing behind him. They both had on long-sleeved shirts and Claire had on a ball cap, too, so you couldn’t see much of her red and gold hair. Her freckles were dark in the shadow of the cap and she looked older than ten.

“Come give momma a kiss. Be careful, okay?” Melissa told them. She shook their bills and kissed them and frowned as her kids stepped out the house.

It was the dingy gray right before dark when you can see a little of a person’s face, but your eyes ache if you keep at it too long. They knew each other pretty good by sound and it was made easier by the different accents. British Tony and his brother Christopher—they’d wear their hands in their pockets and speak a hundred miles an hour. Margo, the Canadian girl, who sighed when asked where in America she was from and knew just about everything on airplanes. Liam, the Korean-Australian boy, who said only a little and, one time, swore so loud his parents heard him from down the street and yelled at him to come home. And Pieter, who you know, speaking Dutch and English in the same sentence and sometimes speaking to you all in Dutch when you only know English (he’d laugh when he noticed and switch over to English). Berni and Sophie, French siblings and the other French boy, Alain. And eight Americans—some you’ve heard of already.

The kids were collecting in the street and waiting under a streetlight for the rest of them. There weren’t a lot of streetlights in the neighborhood and the ones off in the distance looked like little towns. Almost the whole posse had arrived.

“Go call on Daniel,” Tony told his sister. It was her turn, of course. They weren’t even under the streetlight closest to the house. Even if they were, Claire would still have to step into the black street and hope it wouldn’t just vanish right under her. It was a blackness very far from where she got her tonsils out or learned to bit a horse and grow yellow beans in the summers with her grandmas and grandpas.

“It’s alright, I’ll call on him,” said Christopher, and he wandered into the black before anyone could discuss on it. Claire wouldn’t ever know for sure, but she was pretty sure her brother wouldn’t have let her go through with calling on Daniel. She watched the street, where she thought Christopher was. Then she watched the light on the door and waited for him to show up in it.

“He is at the door.” It was Berni talking and the others stopped what they were fussing over and watched. British Tony walked over to the French boy and set his elbow on his shoulder. The door looked the same for a while and it looked like Christopher was about to give up when it opened. Claire saw the father fill up the doorway above the boy. The top of his head was shining all over, and she remembered the soft brown hair on the sides of his head and in his mustache from when she’d seen him pretty close.

The boy, Daniel, had the skinniest arms Claire ever saw and a little birthmark under his chin. The first time he played with them, they watched him go up to his house after and his father opening the door right as he got to it and pulling the boy into the house likely to pluck one of those skinny arms from its socket. He played that Moonlight song on his piano for hours sometimes, and that was all they’d see of him in the street. Sometimes he’d get let out.

Christopher walked to the end of the path where it joined the driveway and waited around, kicking at the concrete. His hair was wet with tap water along the sides and slicked behind his ears, you could even see it from the street light, and he had on the blue rugby shirt he wore for these occasions. Daniel walked out the house and followed him into the street.

The grass was blue in the metal-halide light coming off the tennis courts and squealed under everyone’s shoes. They stopped on the lawn to pick captains and teams. The gang tonight was British



Tony, Christopher, Margo, Liam, Claire, Tony, Pieter, Kevin, Berni, Alain, Daniel and another American boy called Alex. Liam, the Korean kid, got to pick this week's game. He wasn't all that big, more around, but he wouldn't let the big kids interfere with his decision. He'd stand there looking mad at the ground, and because he hardly ever said anything, you couldn't tell if you were having any kind of effect on him. So the big kids let off him pretty quick. He settled on capture the flag, which was fine by everyone.

"Alright y'all, who wants to be captain?" said Kevin. He was assuming head of the company as you'd expect of the oldest—of the one with half a head on the next biggest kid. There wasn't the regular fussing over captains with him in office. "When's the last time you were captain, Daniel?"

The boy didn't say anything but looked at the shining grass.

"Well, you and me are captains," he said at the boy and announced, "Alright, Dan and me'll be captains." Claire thought it funny calling him Dan. She'd never heard him called anything short for Daniel and Dan didn't look like it would ever fit the boy.

Tony picked up his hat and scratched at the scalp. He looked at Pieter who looked back a second after, right around the time Kevin picked him. It was Daniel's turn.

"Claire," he said, hardly audible from inside his irregular shadow. It was the first time she ever got picked first and she shook her head while the others snickered. It was Kevin's turn again and he picked British Tony. Back to Dan, who picked American Tony. Claire watched her brother walk toward them, eyeing his captain the whole way.

Alex was second oldest of all the kids and about the size of Tony (you'd have to inspect them back-to-back and set something along their heads to know who was bigger. They'd done that a few months back and Alex was a little bigger. But that was a few months ago so who knows anymore). He wasn't much at sports and didn't ever get picked right up front. It shook out that Daniel's team was

Claire, Tony, Alain, Alex and Margo, and Kevin's team was Pieter, British Tony, Christopher, Liam and Berni.

Claire crouched inside a small clearing with her brother, Daniel and Margo. Alain was the jailer and Alex watched the flag—roles she wasn't eligible for. It was likely the enemy flag was also in the woods, but part of their turf snuck into the neighborhood, so Tony set Daniel in that direction by poking his finger toward it.

Claire could only think of the snakes lying right where her foot was headed. It helped that she stepped on her brother's steps, that he hadn't prohibited her following him, but then her shoulder jerked when she thought of a snake falling out a tree on her. Tony kept stepping into the complex blackness of the woods, with only a little light reaching in from the tennis courts, getting closer to the compound wall. If there was an enemy, Tony could run plenty faster than Claire. She'd get jailed (which wasn't so bad) or run headlong into something. Or be left alone in the woods right next to the wall with poisonous snakes sliding over it. So she kept still until there was just the noise of the woods and the chittering static coming from the woods beyond the compound.

Tony found the enemy jail with Liam sat on a sideways tree, peeling apart a branch. He snuck behind the boy and squatted in the jail, then got out without the boy knowing or caring. Tony caught sight of his teammate, the tall Canadian girl. From where she was coming, he figured they'd covered enough ground, that the flag wasn't in the woods after all.

"Nothing?" Margo asked with hardly any sound coming out her mouth. Tony shook his head widely enough for her to see it in the dark. He made toward where he'd just come from—to go behind

the row of empty shops (except the one lousy restaurant), into a part of the neighborhood where they weren't likely to be seen. She followed him, knowing what he was up to.

A cat had come to visit Daniel while he was wandering the neighborhood and rubbed its chin bald on his knee. When he lived in Oregon, there was a neighbor dog that got beside itself sometimes and would jump the fence and sit outside the boy's house. It skittered off if anyone tried to collect it, but his tail fired up when he saw Daniel.

Footsteps came tumbling into the street. The cat looked at them and its piss-orange eyes flashed. Daniel scratched its spine next to its tail and it closed its eyes. Then it ran like hell.

"Have you seen anyone? Liam said Tony and Margo came this way."

"No, I haven't seen anyone. Where is Chris and B.T. and Berni?"

"They're still looking for their flag. I figured I'd head back to catch anyone sneaking around our territory. Be on the look out. I think they're close."

Daniel looked at the voices floating in the air just above the fence and saw the white t-shirt in a tree a few yards from them. He thought it had to be in someone's backyard, but it was actually a little park among some houses—the same place that crossed Tony's mind when he figured the flag wouldn't turn up in the woods. The same footsteps struck up again on the street, this time going the other direction.

Tony opened his mouth real big to suck in air so it wouldn't make a commotion as it went in. There wasn't any sound as he ran, and he could hear Margo making a little sound behind him and

getting quieter. There were two slender paths going into the park. Those wouldn't do. There was a house with something like a dog house in the back, right up against the fence. He could use that to peek over the fence, get a feel for things.

The air moved about like it had on a wet sarong. Sometimes it lifted voices over the wall from the nearby villages (they call them kampungs). Usually laughter. Sometimes voices that sounded like arguing. They'd drive by one of those kampungs on their way to school. One time, there was a lady walking on the rutted road with a bulging skin sack like a mango hanging off her neck.

"What are you doing?"

"What?"

"What are you doing? I come back to check on things and you're letting him take our flag."

"I didn't see him."

"You're standing over there looking at him the whole time. I watched you. Whose team are you on, Pieter?"

Tony stuck his head over the fence and saw Kevin and Pieter squaring off and Daniel there with the flag like an animal that died in his care. Kevin tagged Daniel on his shoulder and yanked the flag out of his hands.

"You think that's how this game works? You just walk in here and someone hands you the flag? You must be a real moron." Daniel's eyes flickered at the charge.

"Don't talk to him like that, psvlek," growled Pieter.

"What was that? Insult me in English. Don't be a coward about it."

“Why? I can insult you in Dutch and you are too stupid to know what I’m saying.”

Kevin gave Pieter a mighty push and he fell on his shoulders and let out a groan. Tony sprung over the fence.

Claire had made her way back toward her team’s flag. She could see a little of Alex going in slow circles around it and heard the enemy’s feet squishing leaves and branches in the direction of the jail. Tony had picked the place for the flag and there probably wasn’t a better one. Claire found somewhere she could look up and see the sky. The clouds were loose enough that you could see some of the stars beyond them. All of a sudden, she heard voices and was surprised by how easily they passed through the air’s cumbersome fabric.

“Is it over?” asked Alex. He didn’t know Claire was there, but asked anyway and she shushed him because now the enemy would know where the flag was.

“I don’t know,” she whispered back severely. They waited for someone to come take their flag or one of their own to return with the enemy flag, but no one did. There were more voices and they didn’t seem to fit the game. “I’ll go look,” Claire finally whispered.

She ran toward the tennis court lights. She ran along the street and in the black between the streetlights (it didn’t seem so bad after the woods). She listened for the voices and found them in the park. She found her brother. Kevin, Pieter and Margo were also there.

Tony and Kevin were pretty banged up. Tony was the most beat up with his collar bent out of shape and blood over his mouth. He looked like a kid he hurt the last place they lived. A gentle, fat kid called Randy. Tony had grabbed the boy’s head and slammed it on a locker until he blacked out. That was right before they moved again and Claire felt strangely excited to see her brother like this. Pieter

had a scratch below his eye from when he broke up the fight. Margo was standing around and didn't say anything. British Tony arrived and stuffed his hands in his pockets and didn't say anything. Daniel was gone.

The gloomy piano notes wandered far into Claire's life, rusting to powder and blowing across her mind as predictably as the wind blows. When she'd hear that Moonlight Sonata song, she saw the boy's pointy arms and chin and imagined him on a piano. She saw his scrawny lips smiling across his teeth like when they found him, some twenty-five years ago. After the tennis court lights got turned back on. After they searched high and low in the woods and even found the flag Tony stuck in there. One of the adults thought it was Daniel's t-shirt. They rounded up the locals in uniform from the front gate to join the search.

By the time they got to looking outside the compound, it was getting light out. They searched the woods beyond the walls and drove into the kampungs. Daniel's father was in one of those cars, but he wasn't there when they found the boy sitting cross-legged in the dust, overrun with puppies. The locals sitting around Daniel laughed with what seemed like relief when his search party arrived. Claire was among them. She didn't ever see Daniel again in the street, only heard him playing out his window. Dan didn't ever fit the boy, even when he got famous.

Soon after, Claire and her family moved back to the States. Her and Tony got to calling those games, Jakarta Games. She'd talk the most on them, of course, and wouldn't let up until she'd got him to smile. It didn't seem to bother him getting licked by that boy, Kevin, and she'd talk about it sometimes. When Tony was 17, he got killed in a car wreck. Claire never learned much of what was in that secret face of his. She wrote a letter to Pieter about it—that was how you stayed in touch in those

days—but never got anything back. He had probably moved again. And maybe it wouldn't hurt too bad if he ever found out, since they all kind of died—the kids you left behind in those other worlds.