

Bunso

By Emma Murphy

I search the summers that came before for signs of what we would become. Back then, you could always tell the season from the state of our knees.

There was a silent quality that came with November's end; the absence of a school day left the town still. It was during those slow days that my younger brother and I came to life. The garden became battlefield, kingdom, desert, and without the promise of our mother's tyranny—for she had gone to work for the day and left us to our own—we became the masters of an endless, unmapped sea.

I think back to that day in the mud. We had stormed ahead, and the skies followed. The rain was familiar, and we were well equipped: a prince and princess of raincoats and wellies.

As Josh ran up to me, the eighteen months between us became evident; he was like a baby deer still finding his footing. His uncoordinated stumbles were no match for my calculated strides.

'Hey, *ate*, look!' He opened his stubby hands to reveal a butterfly. 'It tickles.' Josh giggled, enamoured with his fluttering friend.

I watched as he unfurled his fingers, just enough for the insect to briefly come to the surface before trapping it once again. Children can be very cruel. Even at just nine years old, I felt uneasy about my brother's game. Eventually, I lost interest and couldn't understand why he hadn't. Josh's laughs rang out into the garden, and I stopped minding that the butterfly kept falling for the same trick.

High school saw the fall of our kingdom. After school we'd walk home in silence, tracking dust and dirt behind us. Josh didn't want to hear about my friends, and I knew he had no friends for me to hear about.

On the first night of the summer holidays, Mum had left *adobo* in a Tupperware container for dinner. I made sure to put chicken tenders in the air fryer for Josh. He had stopped eating Filipino food after his sixteenth birthday, insisting he was old enough to make his own choices. He had also grown out of calling me *ate*.

At the dinner table, I kept my slurps to a minimum, not wanting to irritate him. He had become temperamental. Mum said it was the hormones—out of our control.

'I didn't know you knew Carly,' I muttered, feigning nonchalance. I fished for bay leaves with my spoon, but they evaded me, finding purchase on the bone and fat that lay just below the broth's surface.

'I don't,' he said, not lifting his eyes. He stabbed at a tender with his fork, dragging it back and forth through the barbecue sauce.

'Dan's party—she said she saw you there. Well, a lot more than saw you there. She said—what she said was bad, Josh.'

He shrugged. 'She's your best friend. You know what she's like.'

She was my best friend. I couldn't understand why he had chosen her—or why she had chosen him. I thought I had done something wrong, and one of them wanted me to know it. Carly had a habit of saying things just to see how they'd land.

'Yeah, but it's not just her, everybody's saying it.'

'Whose everybody?'

'Just people, okay. The girls won't sit with me. I know they didn't tell me everything. They said something about a video?'

‘Why’d they be mad at you? That’s stupid. It has nothing to do with you—even if it wasn’t bullshit.’

‘So, it is bullshit?’ I asked.

It was a trade-off: him or her. I knew it at the time. *What does two years of classroom proximity and shallow boy-crazed gossip matter against someone I’ve grown up alongside*, I thought. From the walls of the womb to our house on 32 Halcyon Street, we had come so far together.

He had lifted his head then, and if he hadn’t looked me in the eye, he at least looked in my general direction. ‘Of course.’

When I filled the sink with water, Josh grabbed a tea towel. My chest warmed. He hadn’t rushed to his room as per his usual ritual, but when I turned to ask him about his day, I heard his footsteps die out, and the lock of his door turning.

As I lay in bed that night, like every other, I could hear him typing in five-minute increments; it could have only been a couple of words at a time, followed by a single click of the mouse. It had become my lullaby, as long as I blocked out the stifled moans.

I didn’t sit with Carly after that, and when Josh moved schools, I followed.

I had been at work when I had gotten the call to come down to the station, and Josh had only been twenty-five for twelve days.

It was a box of a room, and the aircon kept it like a meat freezer. I sat there like a little sardine, unpacked and spineless. I hadn’t had time to grab my jumper, and the goosebumps weren’t keeping me warm.

‘Your relationship with the accused?’ the officer asked me. She wasn’t like the cops that feature in movies, namely because she wasn’t a he. Her hair was pulled into a mousy

ponytail, much like my own, which I had been twisting in and out of its hairband the whole drive.

‘I’m his older sister,’ I told her. I had once thought I’d grow into the role—when I’d wiped Josh’s bottom on mornings before our parents woke, when he was still too young to manage it himself—I wasn’t so sure anymore. ‘He is my brother.’ The words came out unnatural, twisting tart around my tongue which lay heavy and dead in my mouth.

‘Where is your brother currently living?’

I had moved out of the family home, but Josh had stayed. The house didn’t require much maintenance. I told her as much.

‘When was the last time you spoke to your brother?’

I sucked my teeth. ‘I don’t remember, sorry.’

She didn’t look up, as if there was more to come.

‘I called a lot, though.’ I added. It had been a lot at first, borderline harassment. He’d pick up on occasion, and we’d talk trivially for a few minutes before exchanging rushed salutations. He always had to leave soon after, though he never seemed to have somewhere to be. Eventually he had stopped answering, and I stopped trying.

‘Okay.’ The officer sighed, closing her notebook. When I didn’t move, she nodded to the door. I was free to go.

‘I’m just having a hard time believing all this. It’s so unlike him. How many—you know he never—why would—it doesn’t make any sense.’ Words left my mouth on their own accord, a desperate litany.

‘It’s not your job to figure it out, that’s my job.’ She pushed her chair back and walked over to open the door, breaking the freezer seal and letting the outside air in. She held it open for me, but I stayed put.

I knew I was being childish.

‘And the women? Have you interviewed them too? Maybe they’re confused. People make stuff up.’ The words felt like a betrayal as I said them, but to say nothing would have also been.

She sighed again. ‘Not your job, love.’

‘He’s my baby brother.’

‘He’s not a baby anymore.’ Her smile was tight-lipped, a formality. ‘Look, it’s the door on the right at the end of the hall. There’s a button just under the table if you need.’

The room was the same as the last. Josh sat on the left side of the table just as the officer had. His hair had been cut right close to his skull since I last saw him, but he didn’t look different. I had expected to see some stranger in some orange get-up. Unfortunately, he was the same as the day I left him.

‘What the fuck happened?’ I hissed.

‘I’m not sure. No one’s told me anything, so.’ Josh had a habit of acting like he was on the outskirts of it all—an understudy who never realised he was already centre-stage.

‘Oh, so you’ve got no idea at all?’

‘No, not really. I mean, it’s all just stories. You know what it’s like for people like us. They’ll accuse us of anything.’ He rolled his earlobe back and forth between his forefinger and thumb. The way he did at the dinner table after the teacher had called home.

He cleared his throat. ‘You’ve got that lawyer friend, right? The one who got the fancy scholarship. What’s her name again?’

He always seemed to remember things once he found a use for them.

‘Carly was the one who wanted to study law.’

‘Oh, of course.’ He looked up. ‘You know it’s bullshit, right?’

A butterfly had flown into the only window of the room. It faltered clumsily before its body met the glass again, confused by the impact. It wasn't until its third attempt at breaching the glass that I realised Josh was still waiting for my answer.

“What? Oh, of course.”

I had to pull over twice on the drive to Halcyon Street. I didn't even make it out of the car the second time—just bent over the open window as soon as I shifted into park. I got sick until I couldn't, and dry heaved for some time.

Josh's bedroom hadn't changed in my absence. The unmade dinosaur bedsheets. The Lego constructions adorning the walls. The perpetually undrawn cobalt curtains with the afternoon sun filtering through them and turning the room into a swirling sea. They had a search warrant. The choice was only whether I opened the door, or they did.

From the corner of the room, on his desk among a stack of papers, the monitor hummed, as if to call out to me.

Three right clicks. Dozens of files. It was a flash of limbs. Tinny wails. Sternums and breasts collapsing into hair and hands.

The blue light ate away at my retinas, and I got sick for the third time.

On the day of the funeral, it isn't raining as it does in movies, or like it had that day in the mud. I don't go. Instead, I catch the W2 into town and sit in the top deck. Wind whips against my cheekbones like it's trying to tell me something—a whisper, a warning. It's the first summer since that day at the station—I used to think of it as the summer they stole from him. But he took it from himself; I know that now.

Mum isn't going either.

“The way he went was sinful,” she had said.

“So was the way he lived,” I had replied, talking as if he were some far removed figure.

“You mustn’t speak ill of the dead *anak*.”

There’s a hold-up at the intersection. Below, I can see a small crowd of women, a body of orange and purple. Some stand with raised fists to the sky, others hold sheets of cardboard that were probably once a side of a Special K box.

One of them looks like Carly. Another looks like the one from the gym, Jenny. I see Ava’s, and Amber’s, and Ella’s, and Maya’s. I long for them to forgive me, though I know now that it’s not my fault.

It has nothing to do with you.

By the time the light turns green again and the path clears, I’ve counted 27 times the words ME TOO.

Exegesis

My short story 'Bunso' explores whether familial love remains unconditional when moral conflict arises and whether moving on requires relinquishing the past. Inspired by Sarah Klenbort's 'Into the Woods', which captures the gradual breakdown of a mother-daughter relationship, I examine the dissolution of a sibling bond following a brother's arrest. However, while Klenbort employs present tense, I primarily use past tense which is focalized through the sister's first-person narration to demonstrate her attempts to find meaning in memories. Through analepsis, and retrospective reflection such as 'I search the summers that came before for signs of what we would become' (Murphy 1), I position readers to piece-together a non-linear recollection of events. I use the zoomorphic simile 'baby deer' to illustrate sister's perception of her brother as vulnerable and dependent (Murphy 1). She sees him as her 'baby brother' even in adulthood, which inhibits her ability to accept his misconduct (Murphy 5). The motif of the butterfly symbolizes Josh's victims; the game from the opening scene foreshadows his actions and violent nature. I intentionally leave the conflict vague, to reflect the stigmatization of sexual violence in society. I drew on my personal experience by employing cultural markers, such as '*ate*' and the title 'Bunso'—tagalog for older sister and little brother—to establish a loss of culture and family. The shift into present tense signifies the character arc, marking a subtle paradigm shift: the sister has reconciled with the past, is aware of her brother's wrongdoings, and is ready to let go of her role as his defender.