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INTRODUCTION

by SAM HOWE VERHOVEK

When my friend and former colleague Tomas Alex Tizon passed away in 2017 at the age of fifty-seven, he missed by hours hearing news that would have thrilled him and ratified the central thrust of his remarkable career as a reporter, author, and consummate storyteller. *The Atlantic* magazine called to tell Alex that the story his wife, Melissa, says he was “born to write,” about the woman who raised and nurtured and loved him under conditions that amounted to indentured servitude, would be on the cover of an upcoming issue.

The story of Lola, starkly and provocatively headlined “My Family’s Slave,” is complicated, nuanced, at points horrifying, and at others touching—here it can make you weep; here it can make you laugh out loud. It is raw but minutely observed and beautifully written. It is a love sonnet folded within the layers of a crime story—or, maybe you find yourself asking whether it is the other way around. It has the ring not just of truth but of a certain type of painful honesty that was characteristic of Alex and his work. Deeply self-critical, as he often was—he authored an earlier book that *The Atlantic* described as a “self-lacerating examination of the complexities, humiliations and small victories” inherent in his quest for an identity as an Asian American male—in this

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story, Alex struggles to come to terms with how he and his siblings could ever atone for what he casts as a sin that began with his grandfather in a faraway country, in a different culture, in an earlier era. It is one that can never be put right, although largely because of the conundrum at the heart of the tale: he loved Lola, and she loved him.

The piece engendered enormous discussion and no small controversy, although much of the latter was chatter on the Internet so instantaneous and so vituperative that I found myself skeptical that the purveyors of it had fully read and truly thought through the complexity of the 8,500-word piece. In any event, it soon became the most read, the most commented on, and the most forwarded piece in the magazine's Internet-era history. Remarkably, according to Chartbeat's annual ranking of the one hundred most popular digital articles, it also became the most read English-language article on the Internet for all of 2017, consuming fifty-eight million minutes of readers' time—more than *triple* the combined reading time for the next most read piece. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks picked it for his annual Sidney Awards of must-read magazine articles, and a year after Alex's death, he won the National Magazine Award, the most prestigious honor in the industry.

To my mind, Lola's story is a vintage Tizon piece, reflective and worthy of his talents as a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper reporter, a rising star in long-form magazine journalism, and a widely admired professor at the University of Oregon, who stressed to his students that great writing is built only on a foundation of keen observation, having a patient eye and ear for the smallest of details. One can be a great reporter without being a great writer, but it is nigh impossible to be a great writer without being a great reporter. Alex, obviously, was both.

The idea for this book took root in my mind at Alex's funeral, a sad but also—as was very characteristic of Alex and his large extended Filipino American family—boisterous celebration of his life. It occurred to me then that all his many young nieces and nephews and cousins, the ones who talked about how much they

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would miss their goofy Uncle Alex, deserved to know much more about him in time. Of course, I hoped they would always remember Alex in all his goofy gloriousness, but they should also know the depth of his soul, the strains of sweetness and sadness and struggle that made him a very complex human being—and an exquisite writer. The more I thought about it, though, I realized that what Alex had to say, and how he viewed the world, should touch a much wider circle of people. Alex's work deserves to live on long past his tragic death at too young an age, and thus the best of it is collected in this book. It is one from which teachers, students, and general readers alike will benefit if they seek an answer to this basic question: *How do you tell a great story?*

Beyond that, I suppose, the book may be helpful to aspiring writers in another regard, to those who are perhaps struggling with this question: *How do you recognize a great story?* This was perhaps Alex's greatest journalistic gift of all. His interest—his mission, really—was to bring visibility to people at the margins of society, to explore the lives of those “who existed outside the mainstream's field of vision,” as he puts it in his book, *Big Little Man*: “Invisible people. Barely discernible beings who lived among us, sometimes right next door . . . who moved through life largely unseen because their stories were largely untold.” Hence, the title of this book as well as the epigraphs on page vii.

As his wife, Melissa, describes it, Alex believed very strongly that every person had an “epic story” within and that his job was to help coax it out.

“Somewhere in the tangle of the subject's burden and the subject's desire is your story,” he told her.

The more inconsequential society at large considered the person, the more Alex was interested in the challenge of piecing together his or her life story. In our “look at me!” world, where getting yourself to “go viral” on the Internet is considered a thing to be celebrated, and in a nation with the loudest, most attention-desperate president in our history, Alex sought out the sounds—and sights—of human silence. What a gift. What a soul.

As suggested in *Big Little Man*, Alex was drawn to invisible

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people in large measure because he had contended with his own sense of invisibility for so much of his pre-adult life. As a Filipino American male in an immigrant family living an itinerant life, he struggled to find his place in the American narrative. Popular culture and professional sports in the United States were devoid of Asian male heroes; the West was always won by John Wayne-type cowboys on the screen, not by the Chinese immigrant workers who laid track for the transcontinental railroad in real life. He was generically derided by classmates as a “Chink” in elementary school in the Bronx or as “Oriental” by somewhat kinder-hearted teachers. Still, “Oriental” seemed soft, yellow, and feminine in the American interpretation, qualities that didn’t align with the young man Alex wanted to be. This label, he said, was an even more insidious form of the invisibility he felt.

Once Alex became a reporter, his interests were far wider than those that could be seen through a racial lens. He was drawn to life’s outsiders and misfits, to eccentrics, to loners and losers. He was interested in the people and places left behind by rapid changes in technology, in labor demands, and even in cultural mores. If a person was mocked or misunderstood or just ignored, Alex wanted to know more about him or her. He was interested in criminals, not because he liked them but because he wanted to understand how they reached their detours in life. In selecting the stories for this book, which I did in consultation with several of his editors, I decided it was best not to group them chronologically, even though that might have helped show Alex’s evolution as a writer. Instead, I have compiled them loosely by the sort of “invisible person” he is profiling. Notice, please, that I do not use the term “archetype” in the previous sentence, if only because I can hear Alex in my mind: “‘Archetype,’ man? What the hell kind of word is that?”

Alex writes of lonely immigrants struggling to forge a new American identity; he takes seriously a group of people who call themselves “Surfers for Jesus,” alienated from mainland life and preaching the gospel on Hawaiian beaches amid the eternal quest for the perfect wave. In “Thom Jones and the Cosmic Joke,” a

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2000 *Seattle Times* story included here, Tizon writes of a former high-school night custodian who became a celebrated writer, with a short story published in the *New Yorker*, followed by an O. Henry Award and a two-book contract with Little, Brown and Company. The cosmic joke? Writing was pure torture, a terrible amalgam of writer's block and self-doubt, a concept that Alex spins brilliantly into a complicated musing on career choices, the notion of a calling, the role of suffering, and the difference between satisfaction and happiness.

“Now, my life is hell,” the author and former janitor tells him. On the other hand, he confesses, “I’m not happy if I don’t suffer at least five hours a day.”

Journalism is, in a way, a form of pointillism. Each story is a dot or a dash on the canvas—and, for the best reporters, across a long career, these small points and plots come together to form a larger narrative, a coherent sense of what makes his or her stories unique and what messages they convey. Alex’s life and career were cut short, but what stands out nonetheless in the body of his work is his belief that every person has an epic story to tell, even—and perhaps especially—the invisible people.