

## Trinidad: The Three Who Knock

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### ***Eerst Klop***

Jonas Infante did not dream the knocking. He heard it in succession. Solid. Sonorous. But he was alone in a seven-room, century-old house, and it was 3:00 A.M. in the dead of the Dutch winter, who on earth could be knocking on his bedroom door? He could have at least switched the lights on and checked who it might have been, perhaps, with his never-used can of Mace on hand, the one his mother had given him when he moved out of the parental nest six years ago. But he was curled up under the dull brown comforter, a frightened fetus in a dry womb, unable to face the mysterious knocker. Whoever it was behind the door was not of this world. Other. Alien.

“Superstitious” was not one of the adjectives Jonas would choose to describe himself although as a young boy growing up in old Manila, his ears were often filled with bedtime tales of the undead, a family oral tradition that kept him at once entertained and spooked till the wee hours. But today was just a few weeks from the dawning of the new millennium—3 February 2000 to be exact—and he was a 26-year-old visiting scholar in Cultural Anthropology at the prestigious University of Nijmegen; by now, he thought he had transcended his pre-critical belief in the world of *multo* and moved

on to the realm of empirically verifiable data. For all that, recent events had punctured the veneer of rationality and certitude he would ordinarily wear like a uniform. Exactly eleven hours ago, just as he arrived from his usual half-hour bicycle ride from the university library, a grisly scene greeted him: the lifeless body of retired Professor Rogier van Hout, his 80-year-old landlord and housemate, was being wheeled into an ambulance. Their neighbor Gerben, a middle-aged Surinamese man with a slightly lopsided face, heard incessant loud knocking next door and came to check why Rogier was not responding. Puzzled to find no one at the front door, he made his way into the house through the back entrance and found the silver-haired Rogier slumped dead on his study desk, his right cheek resting flat on a pool of spilled coffee.

“Acute myocardial infarction,” exclaimed the paramedic, a lanky young man with a high-pitched voice, as he shut the ambulance door. With tentative steps, a shaken Jonas made his way into the empty house. There was a cold draft blowing through the wide-open windows of the study, breathing its way into the living and dining areas. Gerben, an adherent of the indigenous Winti religion of Surinam, had kept them open because he believed that Rogier’s *kra*, his soul, should be allowed to hover in and out of the house until he is able to transition and find his way back to the *dyodyo*, the supernatural parents. Folksy as that sounded, Jonah actually thought it made some sense. One thing for sure, he didn’t think that Rogier was going to socialize with the *dyodyo* when he finds them; incapable of small talk of any kind, the professor emeritus preferred to retreat into his hermetic world of reading and writing. In fact, they had been living under one roof for six months now with minimal interaction. That is why it caught Jonas by surprise when just yesterday morning, Rogier offered to prepare dinner for both of them. Just simple Dutch *mettworst* and *stamppott*, nothing

especially appetizing for a Filipino craving for kare-kare and sisig.<sup>1</sup> That said, Jonas was looking forward to what was to be their singular moment of human warmth. Of course, it was not fated to happen. Feeling cold from the draft, Jonas shut the windows.

It had been over an hour and Jonas had remained motionless under the covers, still paralyzed by what he knew to be irrational fear. “Panic attack,” he mumbled as he felt the continuous trickle of cold sweat that had by now soaked his body. Fending off the creepy thought that Rogier’s spirit was rummaging through the house to get to the *dyodyo*, Jonas’ mind drifted into the hidden regions of his memory, for what reason, he didn’t quite comprehend.

### **Pangalawang Katok**

Jonas was back in Manila as a seven-year-old, listening to the bedtime stories of his grand aunt Trinidad. There was a major power outage that night and he was scared of the dancing shadows cast on the wall by the kerosene lamp. Trinidad’s presence by his bedside didn’t help much; she looked like a shriveled gnome and spoke with a gravelly voice that reminded him of croaking toads in the rainy season. Catholic devotion and folk piety were a singular reality for her. Black rosary beads dipped daily in holy water were virtually glued to her gnarly fingers like a talisman.

No one quite knew her exact age, but the young Jonas was convinced that the elderly woman was at least 150 years old. Trinidad’s bedtime stories were always piously spooky, especially those set in World War II, which she often prologued with “*Noong tiempo ng mga Hapon...*”<sup>2</sup> From Trinidad’s little shop of horrors, the one narrative Jonas’ memory brought back to

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1 Kare-kare is a stew of oxtail, tripe, and pork hocks in a rich peanut sauce. Sisig is a sizzling dish of chopped pig parts, usually topped with an egg, and drizzled with calamansi or Philippine lime. Both are popular dishes representing Philippine culinary culture.

2 “At the time of the Japanese occupation”

life was *Ang Tatlong Kumakatok*—“The Three Who Knock”—a piece from Philippine oral folklore made more haunting because Trinidad claimed to have been an actual witness to it. She swore to its veracity in the name of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary. Before the American forces liberated Manila from the Japanese, talk was going around the city about the nocturnal appearances of three mysterious cloaked figures—a man bent-over with age, a tall middle-aged man, and a beautiful girl who was not yet in her teens—who knocked on doors just prior to the onset of a fatal tragedy. Like a haunted chorus, the plaintive cries of both young and old echoed through the arteries of occupied Manila when a smallpox outbreak claimed a hundred lives following a visit from the mysterious trinity who were said to have knocked on the doors of several blocks of houses. Naturally, sightings of The Three Who Knock would trigger waves of panic among the residents who would all seek sanctuary at the Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepcion. Based on Trinidad’s account, The Three Who Knock would never touch the doors of the cathedral. The building had a sacred unction that rendered it impermeable to evil of all sorts, like the bloodstained doors of the Jewish Passover. But on 3 February 1945, a date etched deeply in Trinidad’s memory, the city was thrown into a collective panic when, at the stroke of midnight, The Three Who Knock visited not just every house in the city but schools, hospitals, office buildings, hotels, garrisons, and, to everyone’s horror, the cathedral. That very day, the American bombing of Manila commenced, reducing the city to a howling wilderness. When the capital was finally liberated from Japanese control after a month-long bombardment, the number of casualties, majority of whom were Manileños caught in the American-Japanese crossfire, rivaled that of Hiroshima: 150,000. The beautiful colonial architecture was flattened and prominent in the dystopian rubble was Catedral de la Inmaculada Concepcion. In the mad scramble for shelter, a frightened young girl was shut out of the cathedral and had no other recourse but to seek refuge under a bridge. No one knew her name but everyone remembered one thing: she had black rosary beads coiled around her fingers like a talisman.

### Third Knock

Let me sleep, he prayed to whatever's out there. Let me sleep a dreamless sleep. But Jonas' mind gave itself up to the edge of waking and un-waking. The mysterious knocking Gerben heard yesterday followed by the sudden death of Rogier... the mysterious knocking on his bedroom door followed by... were these telltale signs of visitations by The Three Who Knock? The fact that he was in Nijmegen, a Dutch city Americans misidentified as a German stronghold in World War II and bombed to nothingness like Manila, seemed to support the conjecture. Was it his turn to die?

It was 5:30 AM and the faintest hint of daylight began to seep through the heavy fog that had blanketed the Nijmegen morning. It rendered Jonas' bedroom in grayscale. Through half-lidded eyes, Jonas surveyed his surroundings without moving from his position. Neat piles of books from Franz Kafka to Jose Rizal... an 11-inch Philips TV with rabbit ears antennae... an extinct but still reliable Apple LC II "pizza box" computer... a 1958 Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter he scored from a flea market... artifacts of his "normal." He peeled away the comforter and managed to wriggle out of bed. After sitting motionless for a minute or two trying to find himself, he stood up and inched his way to the door. Cautiously, he released the chain lock, turned the knob, and gave the door a gentle push. A light draft blew on his face and that unnerved him a little, but there was nothing but a deserted hallway and the padlocked door that leads to Rogier's bedroom. Jonas felt a profound emptiness as he made his way down the steep and narrow Amsterdam-style staircase to the lower floor of the house. It smelled of old books and stale coffee. Rogier. It smelled like Rogier.

Not thinking to grab a coat, Jonas stepped out of the house for some fresh air. He took a long deep breath as he allowed the cold wind to wash over his skin. It was too early for anyone to be out in the streets that hazy Sunday morning. The neighborhood was a ghost town. Jonas could see the abandoned brick church located just across the street—the secularization of Dutch society that began in the 50's had all but transformed churches

into museums, concert halls, or decaying monuments of a bygone era—and noticed that it looked particularly ghastly through the thick fog.

The cold numbed Jonas' face. He started to shiver. Turning toward the door, he realized he had locked himself out. As he fumbled with the knob, he came face to face with a reflection on the door's glass panel. An Asian face was staring at him. It was the face of a pale, olive-skinned young man with dark, disheveled hair. And his eyes. They were the disconsolate eyes of a child who was lost. Transfixed on the face on the glass, Jonas was a Narcissus for all the wrong reasons. It was at that moment when he caught sight of movement in the background. Through the fog, he saw what appeared to be three hooded figures emerging from the old church. They were moving sequentially, as though in slow motion. They were heading toward him. Startled, he pounded on the door, forgetting in that frantic moment that no one was going to let him in. Realizing the futility of his knocking, he gave the door one big, frustrated thud before turning around to find... nothing. The three hooded figures were gone. As if for validation, he took a closer look at the reflection on the glass panel and saw only the image of himself, a solitary figure cloaked in thick fog. He didn't see it coming but the Jonas of the looking glass began to weep uncontrollably. Perhaps it was the unexpressed grief over Rogier's sudden death. Or an intense nostalgia for the homeland he left behind. Or perhaps he was overtaken by the realization that the hauntings he had experienced in the last couple of days were conjurings of his own, materializations of a primal fear seen through the disconsolate eyes of a child who was lost. He was afraid that he was alone. Other. Alien.

That there was neither one nor  
three who knocked  
on his door.

### **About the Author**

Antonio D. Sison, PhD (asison@ctu.edu) is Professor of Systematic Theology at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union (CTU), with a special research interest in the confluence of religion, postcolonial and intercultural studies, and film/visual culture. He is the author of *The Art of Indigenous Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), *World Cinema, Theology, and the Human* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), among others. He wrote the original screenplay for "9 Mornings" (2000), Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) screenwriting competition second place winner, which was produced into a film by Star Cinema in 2002. A fan of retrotech, he wrote the initial draft of "Trinidad" using a 1958 Olivetti Lettera 22 portable typewriter.

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