To Come Back Again

Carousel Calvo

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Kate Sterns — Chair

Cynthia Quarrie — Examiner

Terence Byrnes — Examiner

Kate Sterns — Supervisor

Approved by

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

Date

Abstract

To Come Back Again is a bildungsroman of two characters – Luis and Rowena. The concept of leaving and returning (balikbayan in Filipino) is a major theme in the story. The novel details both characters' perspectives: Luis' reluctant departure from the Philippines juxtaposed with Rowena's desperation to enact her own departure. Luis' story starts when he is sent off to live with his aunt in Vancouver. He leaves behind a developing relationship with Rowena, which becomes the impetus for his longing to return to his former home. In Vancouver, he starts to question why he had to leave Cebu and to ascertain his purpose in staying in Vancouver. This anxiety manifests itself in a recurring nightmare. The pull of not only Rowena, but also his barangay (village), stifles any new relationships he forms. Despite his reluctance to entrench himself in Vancouver's cultural milieu, and despite the fact that the city itself has begun to influence his way of thinking and speaking, Luis begins to question his identity, which then casts doubt on his goal of going back to Cebu. Rowena's story begins a week after Luis' departure. As Luis was her only ally and the one person she thought would change her life, his leaving forces Rowena to come to terms with her own situation. She comes to question the idea of permanence. Upon meeting Mr. Park (an older South Korean man vacationing in Cebu), Rowena sees a relationship with him as a way out of her poverty. Both stories explore the ideas of migration, poverty, class hierarchy – Filipinos vs. Chinese-Filipinos – and family responsibility.

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Dedication

For my family and, most importantly, Jace

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"We, the acquiescent, unaware insurrectionists; we who have left and returned so constantly throughout history our language has given us a name – *balikbayan*."

Miguel Syjuco, *Ilustrado*

Twenty typhoons hit the Philippines every year. Some are windy drizzles, others are monsoon torrents, or tropical storms that rampage coastal shores with tsunamis. Inland they turn into flash floods and ravaging landslides. Whether made of nipa or corrugated steel, roofs dislodge themselves from their bindings and fly to where the wind and waves beckon. Always, the dike stands firm. Yet behind this solid sentry, homes are evacuated, possessions left behind to be swallowed by tide, wind, and water. Even then, some people hold firm to the belief that they will be spared. They latch themselves to their houses, holding on to the essence of who and what they are. When the storm moves on and the tide recedes, bodies float to shore, like offerings. Debris clutters the landscape along with the permanent garbage.

Part I

Luis

Chapter 1

July 1992

I had had no qualms about singing in front of the moon, so I sang Rowena's favourite folk song--off-key.

Matud nila ako dili angay
Nga magmamanggad sa imong gugma,
Matud nila ikaw dili malipay,
Kai wa ako'y bahanding nga kanimo igasa,

They say that I shouldn't
Wish for your love
They say you will not be happy
For I have no treasure to give you

Rowena looked back at the row of stilt houses and murmured something about the neighbours hearing. I didn't care. Rows of bangkas swayed rhythmically as the wind carried my voice towards the sea. I clapped my hands in time with the song's tune, hoping she would sing along with me. The shy smile on her face made me bolder. I swayed my shoulders and grazed her knee with mine. When she angled closer towards me, I turned my face and kissed her for the first time. Her startled look mirrored mine. Her song forgotten, I leaned over to kiss her again. In that moment, we were moved forward by fate, carried in space and time. Below us on the dike, the tide was high; the gentle splash of waves pushing themselves to wall, caressing cement. As our lips lingered, within myself something shifted. Her eyes widened, her breath murmured. I saw our future selves. She was older with deep laugh lines

but with the same waist-length black hair, crooked smile, and slender build. The certainty of my feelings lingered, a single-minded assurance that I would be with her. On that dike, watching stars reflect on water, I gently kissed her eyelids. Behind us, houses were dark. Some had windows open to let the night breeze in.

Rowena was avoiding me. I wanted to talk to her about the kisses, the feelings that surged inside of me. I tried talking to her when I visited her yesterday and the day before, but she was either with someone or she was busy with chores and errands. Today, I was resolute. I was going to talk to her. I looked for her at the end of the dike where the bankas were moored but she wasn't there. I looked for her at Manang Marta's but she wasn't there either. I finally found her at the well. I was about to call out to her but I stopped when I saw her pull her hair into a loose bun before pounding her younger siblings' clothes with a cloth mallet. Old biddies surrounded her, gossiping. She laughed when they laughed. She rarely talked, but she nodded enthusiastically, as if she knew why Mario had left his wife after eight years of marriage or why Jana needed to stop trying for another child after her third loss. She tittered with them when she heard how Marco had leapt out of Nida's bedroom window when he heard Nida's father arrive home. How he limped home, blood and mud congealing on his right shin. I wanted to interrupt and break up the camaraderie. A strange feeling of possessiveness came over me. I wanted her to come with me to Barangay Central to pick up a package my aunt had sent me from Canada. Suddenly, Manang Marta splashed Rowena with water from her laundry pail. Rowena, drenched, looked naked. Her white shirt became transparent. The two

prominent bumps on her chest became my central focus. When she stood up to shake the water from her long hair, I saw her belly button, small, and the curve of her slender hips. As she squeezed water out of her shirt and re-tied her hair, I blushed and hid behind empty boxes of Tanduay rum and crates of Red Horse beer. I looked around to see if anyone noticed me as I hid the bulge tenting my basketball shorts.

The next week a heavy storm decimated the stilt houses in Rowena's neighbourhood. They were nearest to the sea. Waves higher than the dike crashed on their thin walls and with indifference carried away personal belongings: bibles and photo albums containing names of distant relations and long-forgotten ancestors. A dog died, dragged by the undertow and spat out close to shore with other things that were once coveted. After the storm, Rowena had stood on the dike. She'd looked down at the seabed where her neighbour was picking up wet clothes; soggy shoes; broken effigies of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Without words, I helped her clear shattered bamboo and unopened canned goods. I carried buckets of water from the well as she scrubbed the walls of her family's small wooden house. I folded clothes with her, rearranged the little furniture they had, and watched her wash rice for dinner. The semblance of normality helped ease the rigidity in her shoulders and unfurl the furrows on her forehead. Outside, neighbours were doing the same. I could hear men re-anchor bangkas to moorings as waves slapped the hard surface of the dike. Despite the drizzling rain, women hung wet clothes to dry.

I couldn't take the back and forth of the waves, the affecting tide of knowing

and not knowing, of feeling and not feeling, so I told her of my aunt's letter and that I was leaving, but I'd be back, and that I'd always write.

She said she hated impermanence.

That night, as we stood on the dike, looking out at a darkening horizon, she had a look brewing on her face: part resignation, part anger. I understood the anger, but the resignation frightened me. She left me, standing alone, facing the sea with my shoulders hunched. She crossed the little bridge to her house. She closed her front door. I could not say what I wanted to say in words I knew, so I sang her song in the hopes that she understood how difficult it was to shape this burgeoning feeling.

Gugmang putli mao day pasalig
Maoy bahanding labaw sa bulawan
Matud nila kaanugon lamang
Sa imong gugma ug parayeg,

Pure love is all that I pledge
A treasure more precious than gold
They say that your love and caresses
Would only be wasted on me

The light bulb outside her house, which lit the bridge and part of the dike, flickered out. I waited in darkness, hoping to see her again.

Rowena's house will always look the same to me: bamboo walls coated with wet mud and dried salt; woven palm leaves along with rusted steel make a dilapidated roof; fishnets hanging on railings; and a sleeping dog next to a door. Seven people lived in a house that should have only fit three.

Rowena did not speak to me the next day. I waited outside her house accompanied by her old dog, whose breasts sagged to the floor. A window opened. Her older brother Jan looked out and laughed at me.

"Go home," he said.

"I want to speak to her."

"She doesn't want to speak with you," he said.

"Did she say anything? Did she tell you what happened last night?"

Rowena's mother came out to sit next to the door. Her belly swollen, eyes muted. She either pretended not to see me or was too weary to care.

"I heard you're leaving for Canada soon," Jan said.

"Rowena!" A glimpse of her face would have eased the anxiety I felt.

"I heard you're moving to a city called Vancouver." He dangled an unlit cigarette between two fingers.

"Can you please tell her I want to speak to her," I said.

Jan's black hair had streaks of orange from being too long in the sun, from salt and sea wind. He closed the window abruptly and I was left with Rowena's mother napping near the front door. The next-door neighbour tossed her urine out on the already discoloured seabed. For a moment, the air smelt pungent and acidic. Rowena's dog left me and trotted back to the house.

Each of the stilt houses behind the dike had fishing nets left drying in the sun. Some were mended, and some needed mending. When dawn arrived, men in bangkas would row to sea, hoping that by early morning they would have enough

to feed their families and, perhaps, a little more to sell at the mercado for profit.

Jan came out of the house with a spool of rope and checked his nets for rips.

Since the storm a few weeks earlier, Rowena had not spoken to me. My bags were already packed and I had a few hours before my trip to the airport, so I slipped out and made my way to her house. Neighbours stopped and exclaimed how lucky I was to be moving away, to go to a better place. They told me I would love snow, even though they had never felt its hungry cold, never seen mountains of ice in front of houses. They prattled on about leaving typhoons and storms behind, how poverty would be a thing of the past. I wouldn't become like the corner store boys, palahubogs, men who live drunk on cheap rum for lack of anything to do -- really, for lack of everything. I was lucky, they said. I didn't care about what I was going to. I cared about what I was leaving behind. Jan was on the bridge smoking a cigarette.

"Baby's coming out," he said.

"I'll wait."

"Aren't you leaving today?" he asked.

"I'll wait."

He flicked his cigarette towards the drying seabed and left me to stare at the closed door. I quietly sang her song.

Dili maluba kining pagbati
Bisan sa unsa nga katarungan
Kay unsa pay bili ning kinabuhi
Kon sa gugma mo hinikawan

Ingna ko nga dili ka motuo

Sa mga pagtamay kong naangkon
Ingna ko nga dili mo kawangon
Damgo ko'g pasalig sa gugma mo

This feeling won't fade
Even though that would be justice
Because what else is this life worth
If your love isn't there

Tell me that you won't believe
The insults that they tell about me
Tell me that you won't deny
My dream and faith in your love

Rowena came out carrying a pail with linens soiled with blood and excrement. There were sweat stains on her short dress mixed with blood spatter. Her long and matted black hair flowed down her back. I stood up when she saw me and walked towards her to help. We walked in silence, heading towards the nearby well. I wanted to tell her that I was going to be back, to make her certain, but the way she avoided my gaze made me hesitate. Again neighbours stopped me; they rubbed my cheeks, as if the luck I had might transfer to them.

"Bring home gifts, Luis! Don't forget!"

"Send chocolates – "

"Perfume –"

"Johnny Walker –"

"Don't listen to him. Luis, buy me Levi's."

"First time on an airplane?"

"You're going to love it there."

"You'll have nothing to worry about anymore."

Rowena walked ahead as they shook my hand and pinched my cheeks. We stopped near the crates of empty Red Horse beer and boxes of Tanduay rum. I looked at the sheen of sweat on her upper lip. I avoided her eyes and concentrated on the small mole above her collarbone. Tell her, I thought to myself. Tell her of how long the flight is going to be. Tell her you'll return as soon as possible. Tell her you'll be back.

"I promise…"

I looked towards the waterhole and saw the same old biddies washing clothes. Manang Marta saw Rowena and waved to her in welcome.

"You should go," she said. "You'll be late."

She grabbed her bucket of soiled clothes and headed towards their sameness. She talked to the ladies about the new baby. She twirled her long black hair into a tight bun and squatted next to Manang Marta to wash blood off her mother's soiled clothes.

Chapter 2

My father's most prized possession is a large framed photo of his ancestors. In a faded black and white picture, my great-grandfather in a crisp Barong Tagalog and my great-grandmother in a traditional Filipiniana dress are surrounded by their children. They looked stern and unsmiling, but seated next to each other, they held hands tightly. My grandfather was the eldest of eight siblings and next to him was my grandmother with her Spanish last name. I remember my grandfather as a jovial old man wearing a fedora. He smelled of pomade and chewing tobacco, a pleasant combination. He carried a spit glass with him wherever he went. Because he had a habit of leaving his dentures behind, making it hard for him to eat anything solid, it was my job to prepare his dinner before I ate. I mashed rice and whatever meat was on the table with a bit of hot water and fish sauce. He loudly complained to my grandmother that she wasn't taking care of him, but she ignored the already familiar comment. Before he died, he taught me how to gamble. He instructed me on how to pick the best rooster during a cockfight: it was about feathers and feet. According to my grandfather, the rooster with the deepest colour and largest plume was the healthiest, and nails that are long and hard meant it had a high chance of winning. He'd wave the bet master over and discuss the odds of the gamecocks. He'd punctuate his remarks by spitting into his spit glass. Before betting, he rubbed my stomach for luck, which made me laugh with pride. Prior to a fight, he'd perch right next to his chosen combatant and pray. Those in the small arena prayed with him. It

wasn't odd for my grandfather to go inside the cockpit and bless it for luck. He was a curmudgeon, but when he died, his wake lasted more than a week due to the number of visitors from the gambling pits he frequented.

My grandmother was the quiet sort. She didn't talk much, leaving most words to my grandfather. She had a taste for green mangoes with spicy soy sauce and fish paste. We shared three or four of them together, our faces scrunched up in masochistic pleasure. My mother scolded me for indulging, but regardless of how my stomach disagreed, I always joined my grandmother whenever she brought some from market. Afterwards, we had hot water with a bit of sugar to mitigate the acidity in our stomach. One of my fondest memories is of when my grandmother finally taught my mother how to make shrimp sinigang – the sweet and sour soup became a favourite at our house. They made leche flan with extra caramel sauce for birthdays and Christmas Eve dinners. My grandmother also passed down the family recipe for ampaw. The crunchy rice crispy treat never lasted more than a day when they made it together. After my grandfather died, my grandmother did not wait too many months to join him. She didn't smile as much nor invite me over to eat green mangoes. She wore my grandfather's fedora all the time. Slowly she wilted, and, one night, died in her sleep. My mother said that grandfather pulled at my grandmother's soul, that it was inevitable she would follow him soon. As we prayed the novena for my grandmother's soul to rest in peace, the holy rosary tinkling from many hands, I worried that they would not find each other in the afterlife. During her wake, I smeared pomade on my hair and carried my grandfather's spit glass. I

sat myself next to the coffin and spat and spat in my grandfather's glass. I wore his old fedora. When she was buried on top of him, I cried with ecstatic relief. My grandfather must have been sad without my grandmother to nag him.

In my family tree, my mother's family name stood out beside my father's. She was a Go-Sy, part of a prominent Chinese-Filipino family on the island. My mother wasn't keen to expand on her Chinese ancestry. She did not want to talk about them nor about the time before she married my father. It was by happy chance that I was told, by my grandfather, the origins of my conception. According to him, my mother eloped with my father when her family heard she was pregnant. My mother's family had wanted to ship her to Taiwan and marry her off to a family friend. As my grandfather and I shared roasted camotes and a bottle of RC Cola after a cockfight, my grandfather said, "I don't condone what your Papa did. He asked me to convince the parish priest to marry them. As a man, I was proud that he came to the decision himself, but as a father, I wanted his future to be different. Any father would think the same." I didn't understand then what he was talking about, but later, after my time with my aunt, I remembered his story. I remembered how my grandfather fell silent as I sprinkled cane sugar on my camote. At that time I thought that my father's and mother's situation was a happy conclusion. In our modest house with our small garden, I had my family and my friends. I had Rowena. My grandfather spat out tobacco juice in his spit glass then rubbed my tummy as I finished my snack.

Chapter 3

Vancouver, August 1992

There was a heat wave in Vancouver when I arrived. It was the first week of August. But I didn't feel any of the sticky, thirsty, irritated air my aunt warned was waiting for me. When I walked out of the terminal, I felt cold. I wanted to be wrapped in thin blankets that smelt of eucalyptus oil and tiger balm. Even with my rain jacket, my shoulders shivered and the tips of my fingers tingled. I sniffed the air hoping for a whiff of pungent fish drying in the sun on nipa rooftops, or freshly laundered school uniforms hanging on laundry lines that snaked across and behind crowded stilt houses. I looked around hoping to see my mother's silhouette as she bent over to harvest green onions and tomatoes from the garden behind our modest house. My ears sought for a refrain of a folk song: *Matud nila ako dili angay*… I wanted to taste the dryness of Rowena's lips. However, inside the terminal, I sweated while I waited for the officials to allow me entry into my new home. I felt the heat of ambivalent stares. I had this idea that I would be denied entry, that the white man with a scar on his long nose would send me back.

"Who sponsored you?"

"My aunt…"

"Her name?"

"Janelle Maria Roño."

I didn't want to look him straight in the eye, but I was told by my aunt that I had to so they wouldn't think I was hiding something.

"What is your aunt's occupation?" he asked in a monotonous voice.

"She's a nurse. She works at Vancouver General Hospital as a nurse. She's a nurse that helps with babies. Pedia. Pediat. Pediatric nurse." I stumbled on the word, a word I was told to say repeatedly when asked about my aunt's job. I didn't know what it meant since we didn't have baby nurses when babies were born on the island. We had midwives. Midwives that carried with them both superstition and Catholicism. They submerged combs in coconut milk and sugar before delivering babies, so the mother's breast would be full after delivery; they kissed the holy cross before entering a home and splashed holy water on every room of the house to get rid of bad spirits. "She's good with kids," I said.

My aunt Janelle had a big sign in white cardboard: Luis Antonio Rono. She'd forgotten the line above the n. My Canadian documents had the same absence. My tongue curled against my hard palate to emphasize that I was a Roño not a Rono. I'd wanted the intimidating immigration official to change the spelling to my correct family name. He'd said, "We don't have the squiggly thing in our alphabet."

Looking at my aunt's sign with my new name in big bold letters, I realized I had left behind more than my previous identity. I had left my ancestry.

My aunt had platinum hair and an artificial beauty mark below her right nostril, like the pop star Madonna. Her skin looked lighter than the pictures I had

seen of her, like a cup of coffee with too much milk. She was my father's sister, having immigrated to Canada a decade earlier as a nurse. Her hug startled me. With her bright red lips, she kissed both my cheeks. As a sign of respect, I tried to ask for her hand so she could bless me, but she waved me off and told me that I shouldn't do it here where everyone could see her. I was confused at her refusal. At home, if I wasn't prompt when asking for a blessing, I was pinched. Or worse, I would see my mother's disappointed face, lips pursed tight and eyes bright as light bulbs. I shoved my unease aside. My aunt started touching my hair, arranging it into some semblance of uniformity. She looped her arm around mine and wouldn't let go. I smelt mint and alcohol on her breath. With me pushing the cart awkwardly, we headed to her parked car, her questions buzzing in my ear.

My aunt Janelle talked as we drove out of the airport. As she put it, I had to embrace "Canadianism." I asked her what she meant; she waved her hand to encompass everything around us: pine trees, mini vans, a bus full of passengers, and a sign that said Welcome/Bienvenue. I wanted specifics, but she did not clarify how I was supposed to embrace being Canadian. She expected me to know, so I nodded my head without understanding the how. She then pointed out landmarks as if I would remember. I fell asleep listening to her describe her downtown neighbourhood near English Bay.

My aunt's apartment had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room overlooking the city, and kitchen appliances with buttons for every convenience. It had carpeted floors that tickled the soles of my feet and overhead lights that

dimmed with a shift of a dial. *Is every house in Vancouver carpeted?* I thought. Aside from unwashed plates and glasses, the kitchen looked clean. It had white walls and white tiles, with counters that had a smell of disinfectant similar to the one I remembered from the airport. There were no open windows in her space. The outside did not intrude unless you wanted it to. High walls and thick glass panes mitigated the din of cars passing by. There was a door to a balcony with a small table and two chairs and an unused barbecue grill with its tags still attached. We were on the 15th floor and far ahead I could see English Bay, waters sparkling in the summer sun. I thought of Rowena's family and their cramped house and calculated how everyone would have had enough room to move when they slept. Three people could fit in my aunt's room and two in mine. The living room had enough space to fit another three bodies. I was exhausted from my long flight and an overload of sensory information. All I wanted to do was curl up on a flat surface and sleep. I thought of Rowena as exhaustion pushed me past coherence. I wondered how she was, and whether I was present in her thoughts.

The day after I arrived, I got sick. As the flu ran its course, I went in and out of consciousness. The first time I woke up was to a sunrise reflected on glass walls. The city looked surreal, reflections of itself bounced from building to building. To avoid vertigo, I closed my eyes and thought of Rowena and me on the dike: she was laughing with her hair billowing in the wind while I chased her. The second time I woke up was to my aunt touching my forehead with a cool, wet cloth. She eased me out of bed to the bathroom and suggested I relieve myself. When I returned to my

bed, she had a glass of warm milk and bitter flu tablets. When I fell back asleep, I dreamt of fishing nets and Rowena on the dike holding a newborn. I tried to get her attention but she did not hear me. She did not see me although I stood in front of her. The baby in her arms drank from her small breast. The fishnets draped behind to dry suddenly wrapped around her like a snake. She did not make a sound. I tried to stop the coiling net, but it undulated and flung me to the side. By the time I made it back to her, she was buried in rope and twine. I untangled the mound, but she was not there.

I woke up sweaty, thirsty, and with pain in my hands. I supposed they hurt from clutching my blanket too hard. It was night and the sound of rain made a staccato on the large window. The city was drenched. Some buildings were bright, yet empty of people. I got up to find water. The whole apartment was dark . However, city lights reflected brightly inside, which made it easy to find the tap. I fumbled around, opening cabinets and drawers until I found a glass. I must have made a lot of noise since the overhead lights clicked on and my aunt's sleepy form greeted me. I wasn't in the mood to talk and told her to go back to sleep. She nodded her head, yawning, and closed her bedroom door again. Alone, a sudden feeling of intense melancholy hit me. It may have been my nightmare, or the remnants of a stressful few days that made me break down.

I'm not ashamed to say that I cried that night.

I had an intense longing for my mother's hug and the familiar weight of my father's hand on my head. I'd never missed anyone; there was never a time in my life

when I was away from those who loved me. This was a concern for me before I left for Canada, but my mother had assured me that it would be all right, that I would get used to it. I wasn't at all sure she believed what she said herself.

Chapter 4

The rains in Vancouver are different. They don't allow for play, where children dance under its enveloping showers. It lasts for hours, sometimes days. Instead, people hibernate in their homes, think of sunny days and summer nights. We hope to bottle sunshine for when skies turn dark and a blanket of clouds blocks the sun. Limbs start to feel lethargic and moods change; people become either sullen or quick to react. Some process their changes more drastically, as if the weather intensifies their personality. When the rain started in late October, my aunt overslept, overate, and overindulged in certain appetites. During that first autumn, she changed her shift at VGH to afternoons. She came home late, smelling of spirits, and with rain-wet hair pungent of sharp tobacco. She marked days in the calendar with an X, counting down. For what I had no inkling. Sometimes when the rains refused to let up, she didn't come home. I would worry and call her pager, but she rarely called me back. I waited for the clatter of heavy-heeled shoes, and the opening and closing of the refrigerator. I waited to hear how firmly she closed her bedroom door.

I did this for many winters.

In the mornings, I woke up and prepared her breakfast: coffee in the percolator, slices of fruit in the fridge and an empty bowl ready for her daily cereal. After school, on the table, a short note and a ten-dollar bill for my dinner. Before bed, I made sure to leave the kitchen light on. Then there were days when she did

not leave the house. She would call in sick to work and sleep, or stare for hours at the television in her room. Sunny days, rare as they were, she came out of her room flashing her vivacious smile. On our balcony, she soaked up the sun's rays, her eyes looking up to the heavens.

Chapter 5

December 1992

Dearest Rowena,

How are you? How is your family? I wrote you several letters but you did not reply at all. I asked Mama if I could talk to you but you always decline. Mama said there was never a good time, either you were busy at school or other things. It's been several months. Summer has changed to fall and now it is almost the start of winter and I still have not heard from you. I miss you.

I looked outside as the snow fell in heaps, covering the awning next to the gym. I saw my ESL teacher, Mr. Lansing, run outside to cover his sporty new Toyota Celica. Some of the class leapt to stand next to the windows. Some, like Winnie Kim and Jennifer Chui, pretended not to be affected. They made snide remarks: FOBs... so ignorant... seriously do they need to be so obvious?

They laughed with their group of friends, speaking in heavily accented English. The two girls who had stood at the window heard them and wilted. They meekly turned their backs from the large window and went back to their seats. When Mr. Lansing returned, class resumed.

Snow is light: deceptively so. It immediately melted once it touched my palm, leaving a wet, tingling sensation. I opened my mouth to taste it, but aside from a

cold tongue, I tasted nothing. I grabbed a handful in my hands attempting to feel the heft of it. I had joked to my father that I would send a package of snow home for him. I let freezing water trickled out of my loose fist and felt my hands burn from the cold. I threw the ball of snow at the nearest car; it splattered soundly. Looking around, I wasn't the only one outside: I saw several seniors heading to the back of the gym to share a smoke. The two girls in my class giggled happily while making snowballs. A few students I knew in science class used discarded cardboard as a sled on the parking lot. They waved me over, but I politely declined.

My Aunt insisted we head outside and walk to Stanley Park to make a snowman. Even with thick wool gloves, my fingertips felt numb. It reminded me of that time we helped my mother shave ice for halo-halo. How happy we were taking turns cranking the wheel of the ice shaver. I've enclosed a picture of me with my Aunt and the little snowman we made. I hope this arrives safely. I think of you always. Please write back.

With love,

Luis

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My aunt woke me while I thrashed in my sleep. My teeth ground so hard she was worried I had bitten my tongue. The harsh fluorescent light in my room punched my sensitive eyes. To alleviate the pain, I rolled to my stomach; however, when I turned, I tasted bile in the back of my throat and gagged. My aunt hurriedly grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen.
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“It's not getting better is it?” she asked. I sipped the lukewarm water she gave me.

As my stomach settled, so did my mind, and with it, my headache subsided to a manageable throb.

“It's those letters you send... I don't understand,” she said.

I tuned her out; instead, I thought of the $75 I had saved while temporarily working for Mr. Fung at his corner store. I thought of Mr. Jupta's offer to pay me $20 dollars to clean his storage room and car this coming Saturday. I thought of applying for a part-time job at McDonald's. I thought of my mother when I had called her after dinner last night. I thought of the letter I had written to Rowena before bed. I thought of fishnets and a crying baby.

“I know it’s been difficult, but you can't leave,” she said.

I thought of my aunt late at night seated on the breakfast table, rain pounding on glass walls, eating chocolates and drinking a bottle of brandy.

April 1993

Dearest Rowena,

I dreamt of you again. I keep on hoping that every time I untangle the mound of nets you and the baby you are holding will be there, safe. My aunt thinks I have night terrors. She wants me to go see a doctor. She has told Mama and now Mama worries that I'm not adjusting well in Vancouver. I heard them argue about sending me back home, but my aunt insisted that everything will be fine and that I will adapt soon. Besides, she said, there was no money to pay for the flight back. When it was my turn to talk with Mama, a part of me

wanted to demand that I leave and come home, but I could not say the words that I wanted to say. I could not insist on burdening her and Papa, particularly when I have been so troublesome. It would have been nice to see you and my family. I told my family that I might be home for Christmas this year. I don't know how yet, but I'll be home.

I heard from my mother that your little brother died. I'm sorry to hear about what happened to the baby. How did it happen? Is your family ok? Are you ok? I can imagine you standing at the far end of the dike where bangkas are moored, watching the horizon change colours, concentrating on the sun as it slowly drowns. You're counting to a hundred. You're counting, as you always do. You never cry, which I sometimes wish you would. When night envelopes the horizon and one by one the stars come out to greet you, you leave, turn your back on the sea, and go home to hear your mother's wails and your father's drunken cries. You stand in that chaos.

I wish I was there to give you comfort, and sing you your song. My intentions are inadequate. They are so inadequate.

It's spring here. It's magic how trees that look dead for months suddenly sprout leaves and bud flowers. The sidewalk next to our building is lined with cherry trees. I wish for you to see them. They have pretty, pale pink buds. They remind me of your cheeks when you blush. My aunt tells me they'll fall soon; I wait after school every day with my eyes pressed to the lobby windows to see if I can notice the first flower fall, but she tells me it's a task as likely as noticing the first drop of a downpour. But I hope and sometimes that is all we need.

With love and condolences,

Luis

Chapter 6

I asked a girl out today. It wasn't that I liked her; rather, I was urged to ask her out by my friend Joshua, who knew of this girl in biology who liked me. I was sceptical since Joshua had a tendency to make things up to sound important. He insisted it was true, going so far as to swear on his mother's grave. For Joshua, this was as sacred as going to see Father Peter for confessional. The girl in question, Meredith, had a way of making boys sound and act foolish. In no way was she petty, but her personality begged for a more self-assured equal. Although I was slightly intimidated by her feistiness, when she talked with me she softened her voice and gentled her mannerisms. There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, as if a joke was about to burst out of her. Although most boys in my class thought of Meredith as a compilation of breasts, skin, and long legs, she reminded me of Rowena in the way she blushed and how her hair, although blonde, flowed down her slender back in gentle waves. I asked her out because when I saw her, I saw black hair and a crooked smile hidden in a girlish figure.

Our first date was at Gary Park near Steveston Village. We skipped stones, competed to see who could make the most ripples. We ate fish and chips, throwing our leftover fries to greedy seagulls. On the seawall, we walked to the very end -- which was across from the airport -- and watched airplanes fly above the horizon. We stayed there under a canopy of clouds seeing aircrafts glide like swans diving

into rivers. She told me to call her Merry. It suited her. Merry told me she wanted to be a marine biologist and work for the Vancouver Aquarium instead of becoming a lawyer like her father wanted. She hinted that she preferred flowers over candy when she saw wild flowers growing near the marshes. She had a weakness for Keats and romance novels. I grinned at the dissimilarity, and she pinched my arm for my audacity to judge. I liked how she laughed, as if it came from her gut then carried forward to her larynx then out of her mouth in one harmonious echo. She asked me if I missed my hometown. I told her I did. I told her I missed family dinners and watching tele-serials with my mother every night. She mocked me, telling me I was into soap-operas. I educated her on what differences I could find between a tele-serial and a soap opera, but she giggled at how I stuttered with my explanation. She looked prettiest when she was laughing. I told her I missed the smell of my father's strong after-shave. I missed eating cheap burgers and sweet cola, wasting my allowance at arcade shooting games and Pac-man, or playing basketball with the neighbourhood kids at the community basketball court. I did not tell her of my occasional night terrors: of how I hurriedly untangle mounds of the same fishing net, of how I wake up howling for not finding Rowena. I held her hand as I walked her home from the bus. When we circled her house for the third time, she asked me if I would call her. I didn't hesitate; I told her I'd need her number first.

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It's been months since my last letter. I've enquired about you every time I talk to my parents. I heard that your Father died in a fishing accident and that your older brother has
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abruptly left for Manila... I know it is not in your nature to ask for help but I've told my parents to lend you a hand. They have promised to do what they can. Mama tells me that you had to switch to night school so you could work. I understand why but I don't like it. Why is it that my letters come back unopened... unanswered. My friend Joshua thinks I'm too much of a romantic, believing in an everlasting love. He said fairy-tales aren't real. I don't think I've made us out to be some kind of fairy-tale. It doesn't feel like a fairy-tale. If keeping the faith makes me out to be a fool then so be it. I believe that someday I'll be back and we can be together. Please believe me when I tell you this.

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I had, of course, given in to my insistent urges. Our first time was in Merry's Toyota Celica. It was teeth and saliva, cold sweat and panicked breath. There were moments of hesitation: you sure about this? Yes, I am. Really? I think so. Wait... let me... wait.

I waited as Merry folded her shirt and tight jeans, hid her yellow panties inside her purse. My shoulders were cold when she finally lay down on the back seat and opened her arms to welcome me. As inappropriate as it was at the time, I remembered Joshua's comment: kiss her, she'll like that. Don't forget to touch her... gently, and when it's time, don't be rough.

At the seawall across from the airport, towards a bend, was a secluded place used at night for lovers. Several cars were spaced not too close from each other. Although we were quiet, her car rocked gently. I bit my tongue to stifle unavoidable moans while she held on to my shoulders, bruising them, when I broke her hymen.
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Afterwards, Merry rested her head in the crook of my arm as I watched airplanes taxi up and down the runway, leaving and returning from parts unknown to me.

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After almost two years together, it was expected that Meredith and I would be each other's dates for graduation dinner. It was also expected that we would spend the night together. Joshua had arranged the rooms at the Best Western five blocks away. Towards the end of the night, after many tedious speeches, the dance floor was crowded while the DJ played Nirvana and Red Hot Chili Peppers. Joshua found me sitting on a couch in the lobby of the Fairmont Hotel Vancouver. I had been sitting there for an hour in my rumpled suit, twirling the rose my aunt pinned on my lapel. The argument I had had with Merry still reverberated in my ears. Across from Joshua and me, two Americans complained about the high school crowd littering the foyer. Elevators were filled with packs of girls in bright coloured gowns headed outside to smoke and gossip. Their boyfriends trailed behind carrying pocketbooks and scarves, ribbing each other loudly about what might happen in the next few hours. Near the front desk a baby screamed for food or attention: snot and tears mingled with each other. Her mother plugged a pacifier in the baby's mouth while she dealt with the bell person handling her many expensive bags. Her husband was nowhere to be seen. Joshua sat next to me with a can of cola. From where I sat, it smelt of rum. I declined. I heard the swish of long skirts and smelt cloying perfume and nicotine as several girls passed by.
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"You want to talk?" he asked.

I remembered Meredith in her lilac dress, black tears streaming down her cheeks, her white corsage wilting as she screamed accusations.

"She found my letters," I said.

"I thought you threw those away," he said.

"Na, I kept them in my drawers. She was looking for a safety pin yesterday when she came across them. She had opened some of them."

"You tell her who she is?"

"I lied, told her they were letters from a cousin back home who moved." Joshua handed me his drink. "When I picked her up tonight, she had this... look." I took a swig and grimaced at the burning sensation in my throat, and the sweet after-taste in my mouth.

"What are you going to do?" Joshua asked.

"Hell if I know. She won't talk to me."

"Ever thought of just letting go, Lu," he said.

I finished what was left in the can, ignoring the burning sensation in my insides. I stood up needing to clear my head. I left Joshua on the couch and headed outside to the anonymity of crowds.

I graduated from high school without anyone in attendance. I saw fathers pat sons proudly on the back and mothers cry at beaming graduates. To avoid seeing emotional outbursts, I loitered further outside the UBC Chan Centre, watching cars

pass by on the busy roadway. I wasn't really waiting for someone – or maybe I was – but I hardened myself to prepare for the possible disappointment. My aunt had promised she would be there. She told me she had even booked the date off from work, but, as expected, an emergency prevented her from attending. She promised she would arrive in time to watch me accept my diploma. I wasn't holding my breath. An hour before the ceremony, the heat made me itchy inside my suit and gown. I took it off, but I left my blue cap on. I figured I should at least partially look the part. Across from me, a group of college girls passed by in shorts and bikini tops, heading towards a nearby nude beach. They saw me with my gown in my arm and shouted their congratulations. I waved back. One girl crossed the street towards me. She had blonde dreadlocks with a Rastafarian cap on her head, smoking a thick joint. Bob Marley smiled at me from her right arm.

"Take a drag, mon," she said in an imitation of a Jamaican accent. "Get you trough da ceremony."

I almost laughed. She offered it to me, and I took a deep drag and coughed it back out.

"That be it... that be it. Ya man nao!" she said.

I wanted her to stop talking. She sounded comical. I took another small drag while she grabbed a pen out of her back pocket. She scribbled something on my left hand: benefit concert, Wreck Beach, 5pm.

"See ya there, mon," she said. "There be plenty of herb there for I-and-I."

I handed her the joint back, laughing, but covered it up as another cough. She

hugged me, then congratulated me again before walking back to her group of friends. It was about half an hour until the ceremony started. Fake Jamaican and her friends hollered their goodbyes and headed off on their way. I looked at the writing on my palm and seriously considered not accepting my diploma.

I walked back to the Centre's entrance. Joshua was talking with Merry and, as I passed by, she pointedly ignored me. I briefly nodded my head to Joshua and hurried inside. I saw Merry's friend Denise call Merry to hurry along. Denise had a sheen of sweat above her upper lip. Her make-up was melting down her shiny face. When she saw me, she gave me an angry look. I started to feel euphoric, which buttressed me from unwanted attention. A pleasant sensation travelled from the tips of my toes to the insides of my head, as if a thousand hands were massaging my skin, my brain. I waved my hand in front of myself and accidentally pushed Mandrake Peters. He had a bull-headed look on his face, but when he saw my slacked jawed expression and blood-shot eyes, his laugh echoed pleasantly inside my skull. He casually draped his arm around my shoulders and whispering, asked if I had weed to spare. I did not answer. He left me as I followed the line snaking towards the back of the auditorium. I stood between Eric Rei and Mandeep Sandhu, as they talked about a summer cabin in Prince George. How they were going to invite everyone for the weekend. I wondered if they were going to invite me, but the thought left me as my limbs started to feel heavy. When Jessica Quo dropped her glasses and graduation cap across from me, I laughed hysterically. There was a pleasant buzzing noise in my ear and the tips of my fingers tingled. When I finally

looked up, I saw the crowd near the entrance had thinned, and Joshua was heading towards me.

“What the fuck did you take?” he asked.

“Blonde girl, acts like a Jamaican... weed... party at Wreck beach. We should go,” I said.

He pulled me out of the line towards the washroom near the front entrance. By now, I had a big foolish grin and another laugh bubbling in my throat ready to come out. Joshua scolded me as I tried to put on my regalia. I couldn't zip the gown properly and the cap kept on sliding to the back of my head.

“Shit, you're fucking stoned,” he said. “I can't stay with you, Lu; I have my Dad and relatives inside,” he said.

Colours swirled inside my head. I blinked and I saw Joshua pace the length of the small washroom. Fellow graduates looked down at me curiously. Some asked me questions, others talked to Joshua. I avoided looking at all of them. I avoided Joshua's anxious face. I concentrated on my tingling hands. I closed my eyes momentarily and dozed off. I woke up to him shaking me awake. His irritation was palpable. I stood up, feeling heavy, and washed the shame from my face.

“Go ahead, I’m OK. I'll follow,” I said.

Joshua looked at me dubiously, but he itched to head back to his designated line. I nodded my head in promise when he asked for the last time if I was going to be okay. Left alone, I took off my wrinkled gown and set aside the cap on top. I waited a few more minutes until I heard solemn music starting. This meant that my

fellow graduates were finally walking inside the packed auditorium. When I left the washroom, I headed towards the reception desk where a middle-age woman raised her perfectly lined eyebrow at me when I gave her back my regalia. She packed it in a bag and wished me good luck. I headed upstairs where families wait for sons and daughters to walk the stage. I sat at the end of a row beside craning siblings and fathers with binoculars. I looked down. Saw Alison Abbot received her diploma. I waited for Joshua to receive his. He looked around from the stage, hoping to find me. I waited to see if they would call out my name. They didn't. I stood up and left as quietly as I came in.

Chapter 7

Months after my graduation, I finally asked my aunt why she had petitioned for me to come to Canada. I had been happy where I was, I said; I was content. She told me that I was better off being here, that I would have a better life, that I could make something of myself. She was sitting outside in the balcony with a thick shawl wrapped around her shoulders to stave off the cold. Weak sunlight filtered through thick grey clouds. Behind her English Bay looked colourless. It was empty of people, even birds had already migrated south for the winter. She stared at me, eyes bloodshot and tired. She said: "I have a better life than the people I left behind. What have you got to complain about?"

I watched the dark clouds gather as light cold rain started to fall. How would you know, I said, but she did not reply. My packed bags were next to the door. I left her to her musings and the flask of brandy inside her purse.

I dream.

I am inside my old room in the house I grew up in. My mother's voice is jocular as she talks with Manang Carmen, her helper during the day. They are making Bam-e, my favourite dish made of noodles, shrimp, and pork. Aside from their lively conversation, I hear the sounds of water running over vegetables and the sizzle of hot oil in a large pan. I hear chopping on a wooden cutting board. Onions are diced, garlic crushed, and ginger pared delicately. I hear the clatter of utensils as the women taste and add spices. My father, oblivious to all the noise, drinks his morning coffee and re-reads yesterday's paper. My mother asks him to open cans and shake bottles. Manang Carmen offers him pandesal and replenishes his coffee. He declines, gets up and gently touches my mother's already wrinkled nape, then heads upstairs to the veranda where he will nap before the sun becomes too hot. I hear his long and sonorous snores. Roosters crow continuously and the small alley behind our house becomes crowded with pedestrian traffic, mostly students heading for morning classes. My mother will worry as the sun rises; she wants to wake my father before the sun burns and blisters his skin. My father gets up groggy and half-dazed then kisses my mother on the cheek before heading to the bathroom to bathe. My mother then heads back downstairs. But first, she takes a peak at my room to see if I am truly here, to smile at how I'm sleeping on the floor tangled in my old blanket, my old mattress now too short for my frame. She comes inside to turn on the electric fan. She tries to wake me to tell me that Rowena will be along shortly. When I do not wake, she leaves quietly.

I am on the dike and I see Rowena. Her long black hair waving in the wind. She has her back towards me. I run to her, yet I never get close enough. She faces the sea, holding a small bundle in her arms. Behind her, houses are empty with windows nailed and boarded. A few of the houses have no roofs, some have missing walls. Personal belongings litter the sea bed: bibles with names of forgotten ancestors, broken effigies of Jesus Christ on the Cross, clothes and school shoes, tin cans and pots and pans. Fishnets hang on railings. Bangkas are latched to moorings. They sway when waves slap the hard surface of the dike. I run to Rowena, yet I never get close enough. I see Dog running towards me, but then Dog suddenly disappears. I see fishnets rise, undulating like a snake. Rowena still faces the sea, oblivious. I scream for her to move away, but she does not hear me. She shifts her bundle, and I see a baby wrapped in white cloth. I run to her. I try to get her attention but she does not see me. Fishnets suddenly wrap themselves around her, covering her and the baby she carries. She does not make a sound. I try to stop the coiling net, but it flings me towards the sea. I swim as fast as I can towards the dike, but by the time I make it to her, she is buried. I untangle the mountain of twine and rope until my hands bleed, hoping this time I finally find her.

Part Two

Rowena

Chapter 8

So I watched Luis walk away, remembering what I told him that day when we cleared the house of debris and fixed the wooden walls. I had told him I hated impermanence, but I realized now nothing is permanent. Nothing stays the same. Squatting next to Manang Marta, washing my mother's blood and shit from the rags we used to birth my latest younger brother, I didn't want the life they all led. Nida, across from me, afraid to leave the house for fear of her father's anger. She stays home all day cooking, cleaning, waiting for Marco to show up. Her only rebellion is loving a man too cowardly to face her father. So Marco visits and they close the window and stay indoors until dusk when Nida's father comes home from driving a jeepney all day. I see Manang Marta's hands, white and cracked from using too much chlorine when washing clothes. Her back does not straighten now from the many years scrubbing the cement floor of their tiny cement house. She supported three sons who stole money from the cash box, drank the liquor from her own stock, and stayed home all day to sleep from gambling all night. I looked down at the soiled clothes and I saw my mother's legs opened wide, waiting for the child to come out. Blood and water on the bamboo floor. When my little brother came out, he was so small with an already resigned look on his face. Once my father is back from the fish market, he will join the palahubogs at the corner store to celebrate. I look at the path where Luis disappeared, wanting to leave as much as he wanted to

stay. He was stupid for thinking that there was something to stay behind for.

A week after Luis left, I had asked Manang Marta if she knew of a place where I could work. Carlo, her eldest son, was snoring on the bamboo bench. I watched as he scratched himself in the crotch, his hand inserting itself inside his basketball shorts. His eyes never opened. His snores continued. He reminded me of the pigs Manang Marta had raised last year, content in their own filth, eating whatever was given to them, slobbering and hollering when disturbed. Carlo had that same look of contentment the fat pig had when he settled in the wet mud in the afternoon heat. From where I stood, I smelled rum.

"Aren't you about to graduate from high school? You're in fourth year, right? What do you need work for? Who's going to help your Mama with raising your little brothers? Besides, I don't think your father would want you to leave what with your Mama not getting out of bed."

I understood her nosiness; everyone in the barangay shares every bit of good and bad luck. Everyone knows who had dysentery or who needs help mending fishing nets, who fucked which neighbour and whose funeral they were attending, but I resented her inquiries. I wanted something private to myself.

"Just tell me if you know of anyone looking for a tindera." I gave her a reason that she would understand. "Papa's fishing do not feed a family of eight."

"I know a girl who works for a rich Intsik. They might need a tindera at their warehouse in Carcar. Does you father know about you leaving school and going to work?"

"Can you tell the girl that I would like to work for them? Can you tell her that I can start right away?"

"Don't you want to finish your year?"

"I can go to school at night. The public school has a night school."

"You want to get raped?" Manang Marta woke up Carlos with her scream. He looked at me then leered.

"Who's getting raped?" Carlos asked from his reclining position.

"Can you get up, you lazy ass? You're a no-good son making your mother work while you sleep all day. Get up and wash the dishes." Manang Marta smacked Carlos with an open hand on his bare shoulders. It left a red imprint that faded in seconds.

"Is there food? I am hungry," was Carlos' only reply.

"You and your brothers will be the death of me…"

"Will you shut up! You always nag. Nag. Nag. Nag. All you do is nag all day. Give me 20 pesos. I'm going to buy food at the carenderia." He got up and scratched his balls again. This time he looked at me. "Do you want to come with me, pretty Rowena? Luis isn't here to walk you around anymore. Do you want me to replace him? That lucky brat is probably going to forget about this place. I would if I were him."

"Stop talking nonsense! That child isn't ungrateful like you. He'll come back with presents. He'll come back and be somebody."

"Ha! I bet you 1000 pesos he'll forget he was ever born here. He'll forget how

preeeeetttyy Rowena is pining for him." He laughed at his own mocking voice.

"Manang Marta, just tell me when you hear from the girl." I walked away before I heard a reply, before I heard Manang Marta scream as Carlos snaked his hands inside her long apron, snatching bills and coins. I heard him run out of the store, Manang Marta screaming of how she's suffered so much.

I heard Berto playing outside. Boys with snot and dirt smeared on their small faces. Their bellies protruding. They'll grab whatever garbage has sunk into the sea bed: broken toys, empty bottles, unopened containers.

"I'm switching to night school." I told my mother while the sea wind gently rocked the fish nets drying on the bridge. "I'll walk home with Clara. Her boyfriend picks her up from school."

"No," she replied as she applied another layer of Vicks VapoRub to her chest and throat. She grabbed the Efficascent Oil and rubbed the pungent eucalyptus essence on her stomach and legs. The skin on her upper arms sagged; they jiggled when she rubbed vigorously on her upper thighs. When she finally lay in bed, there was a sickly smell of eucalyptus, Vicks, and sea wind.

"Who's going to take care of the baby and Berto? Who's going to cook and wash clothes? Who's going to clean and gut and salt the fishes? Who's going to help mend nets?" My mother turned her back on me as my voice rose. The baby mewled in the small box we put him in. A strong wind breezed through our tiny hamlet and my mother closed her eyes and covered herself with a thin blanket.

Chapter 9

Clara was waiting for me outside my classroom door. She had her backpack ready. Since it rained during the afternoon, her umbrella was neatly tucked on the side of her bag. I waved to her in acknowledgement. While she waited, Hector and Paul stood next to her, almost boxing her into a corner, their hair slick with thick gel while cigarettes dangled behind their ears. Hector, I could see, wanted to touch Clara's hair. His eyes were looking at the red scrunchy holding her hair in place. I know how much he wanted to pull it down. When Clara's hair was down, she looked like a hair model from a Sunsilk Shampoo commercial. Clara ignored them both. She tried to move away but Paul blocked her way.

"Can you please…?"

"Of course you can "pleaassse"..."

Clara moved to the right and Paul blocked her way again.

"Don't you have something better to do?"

Clara tilted her head up. Paul was tall like a PBA basketball player tall. He even played for the day time varsity team.

"Rowena, I'll meet you outside the school gate. Jomar is waiting there already." Clara turned around in a huff, her ponytail swinging angrily. Hector finally found his opportunity and grabbed the scrunchy off Clara's hair. He must have grabbed more than the hair-tie since Clara cried out in pain as her hair cascaded down her back in ebony waves. Hector finally smiled. Paul pulled a section of Clara's hair

deliberately. Like hungry dogs, the boys in my class surrounded her. Clara tried to pull her hair away from her face. She shook, maybe from anger, maybe from something else, but I understood her helplessness. I kicked Paul's shin hard, which startled him enough that he buckled to the floor in pain. I grabbed a heavy math textbook on the desk nearest me and smacked its spine across Hector's shoulder.

"Puta! Get the fuck away from her!" The crowd heard my voice and scattered. They looked warily at me trying to determine if I meant anyone else harm.

"Kayat! That hurt, Wang." Hector rubbed his shoulder and Paul glared at me from the floor.

"I'm going to do more than that if you don't leave right now." I threatened them with the textbook. It was 10:30 p.m and in 7 hours I had to be up to get breakfast ready, bathe and change Berto so he could stay at Manang Marta's, then head to Mr. Yang's warehouse by 7 A.M. to start work.

"You OK?" Clara had pulled her hair into a tight bun, the scrunchy a crown on her head. "Did anyone touch you inappropriately?" I leaned in to whisper.

"I'm fine. Let's just get out of here." She adjusted her pristine white school blouse, making sure the checkered red and green ribbon was where it should be, dusting imaginary dust from her red skirt. I shouldered my own school bag and left with her. We heard catcalls in our wake.

Jomar, Clara's boyfriend, was twenty, four years older, and had already graduated from college. Clara was quite proud that he had an engineering degree. Boasted about it to anyone who listened. Quite an accomplishment, not like the

palahubogs at the corner store, she would say. Jomar's not bad to look at, with dimples and Intsik eyes and hair parted in the middle like the idol Keempee de Leon. He had a swagger that accompanied the pretty boy smile. It was because he lived in the city for four years. He was always wearing Converse high-top shoes, as if rubber slippers weren't good enough anymore. He carried a battered book around: just carried it around, never reading it. He'd fold it in half and insert it in his back pocket. I tried to grab it once but before I could snatch it, he had slapped my hand away. Clara has seen it but said she didn't understand any of the words. It was in English but not in English sometimes. There were words like polis which she thought was about the policia. Who wants to read about the policia and how they don't help unless there was cash involved, she said. She told me she was bored after reading a few sentences. She told him to carry his engineering study book instead so he could finally pass the engineering board exam. To shut her up, Jomar would tuck the book deeper inside his back pocket. He'd grab her hand and twirl her around until she was dizzy and making happy noises. They were happy, as much as poverty allowed them to be. For me, I looked at them and wondered how long before Clara would have a child, probably married after she graduated from high school. He'd give up on being an engineer. The cost of educating him would have been for nothing. His parents will be disappointed that he won't want to take the board exam anymore. He will take over his father's mechanic shop. They'll have five or six children, probably two miscarriages, and by the time she's thirty she'll have that dead look in her eyes.

Usually, Jomar waits next to the fish ball vendor's stall. Sometimes he's talking with a group of students. Other times, he's by the streetlight pole, reading the daily newspaper. If he can get his hands on an English paper, he reads that instead. Tonight he was reading *The Philippine Inquirer* with his legs stretched out in front of him. Already the fish ball stall was full of students dipping their thin sticks into the deep fried snacks. Their chatter was loud, which attracted stray dogs. They sniffed around khaki pants and plaid skirts hoping a stray snack would drop. Opaw, the gate keeper - so named for his shiny bald head - gestured at me to come near him. I flipped him the bird. Once she saw Jomar, Clara dashed out of the school gate towards him. Her crown of hair bobbing then finally coming undone. Hair flying just like a Sunsilk hair commercial. The scrunchy forgotten on the side of the road. Jomar looked up from his reading to find her crying in front of him.

"What's wrong? What happened? Did they hurt you?" His concern made his normally soft-spoken voice hard and harsh. He had a hard glint in his eyes as he wrapped his arms around Clara. He looked at me accusingly. Jomar could not get past the gate, not unless he accepted Opaw's demands. Opaw leered and made smarmy gestures to students he fancied, didn't matter if they were boys or girls. He touched their bottoms, sometimes pinched them, sometimes caressed them. When he touched mine, I slapped him but that only made him open his mouth and stick his tongue out from between his missing two front teeth. He liked Jomar, liked the way he smelled and how he looked so much like the idol star Keempee de Leon.

Maybe Opaw envied Jomar's head of hair. Who knows. But as soon as Jomar asked him if he could pick up Clara inside school grounds, Opaw smiled and lunged towards Jomar's penis. Startled, Jomar punched Opaw, beat him till the bald man was on the ground blood gushing from a cut above his right eyebrow and the bridge of his flat nose. Jomar then told the gatekeeper that he would report him to the barangay captain. Opaw just laughed, a deep amusing laugh. He laughed so hard that he swallowed the blood that trickled down from his wounds. He then schooled the boy on the reality of things. He said: "He's my cousin, you fool! Unless you suck my cock, you're not stepping foot inside."

Now Jomar was clutching Clara so tight I thought she wasn't breathing. Clara made hiccupy noises, bawling until Jomar's shirt was wet from his sweat and her tears. He was powerless to change her situation. He was going to do something incredibly stupid soon.

"Was it Hector and Paul again?" he asked me, brown eyes flashing. They held on to each other. The top of Clara's head nestled on the crook of Jomar's shoulder.

"Why do you ask if you know already?" I was annoyed. I wanted to go home and do my homework. I wanted at least 5 hours of sleep. I should be grateful. I was maybe an unwanted third person in their couple universe but walking with them kept me safe from the palahubogs who were drunk and high from shabu and marijuana.

"I think your Mom should let you go back to school in the morning. We can convince her," he said to an exhausted Clara.

"She won't. She needs help with the carenderia. I've already asked, and she'll say the same thing, you know she will." She started crying again. Below the streetlight, they looked more like father and daughter than two lovers.

"I'll do the asking. I'll make sure she understands," Jomar reassured her. Tired of looking at them, I walked slowly ahead. I had to get home.

Although Jomar was a college graduate, he had no job since he failed to pass the engineering board exam. Now here he was with a college degree that he couldn't use. What use is an engineering degree in the barangay when most houses were built out of corrugated steel and sometimes stolen plywood and bamboo. Those who could afford to build concrete houses on solid land hire people with board certified engineering degrees, so their castles won't topple on them at the first gust of a tropical storm. The little money his mother gave him for weekly allowance wasn't enough to pay for extra expenses, like transferring his girlfriend to a daytime high school. They finally caught up to me, their arms around each other to hold off the coming disappointments of the world.

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When the moon was that round and the sea did not stir, I allowed myself to linger at the usual spot where Luis had sat. I hummed the song he always sang to me. Dog was next to me. He nuzzled my calf. I didn't want comfort but I was glad of the company.
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Chapter 10

My father hated Marcos. After a night of too many Tanduay rum bottles chased with a grande of Red Horse, he'd look up and swear at the moon for his life of misfortune. According to him, we were cursed for not having fulfilled my grandfather's duty on the night he died.

My father had always raved about my grandfather's supposed heroics. The details are hazy: during Marcos' era of Martial Law, my grandfather was apparently dragged out of the house by six men (sometimes eight, sometimes four) and beaten and tortured to death while his wife and children watched. My grandfather fought them off but since there were so many of them he could only incapacitate two or three at most. After the fighting which — of course — he almost succeeded in escaping, they trussed him and dragged him to an unspecified location. The one undeniable truth out of this elaborate story is that my grandfather's corpse was left across the street from the Mercado. His face was unrecognizable: they had broken his nose. His cheekbones were hollow, as if a heavy metal object had dislodged the bone underneath. His fingers were broken, some nails were gone. The insides of his thighs had cigarette burns and his heels had small knife wounds. What really killed him wasn't his prolonged torture but the neat slash across his throat. The tinderas had a fit, gossiping among themselves before being corralled back by their employers. The Mercado lit up with gossip. Every transaction started with my grandfather's name, every bargain his death. It didn't matter if they were buying the

wrong fish from the fishmonger, gossip ran so rampant that people ate their dinners with my grandfather's name on their lips. So in my father's stories, my grandfather was a freedom fighter, an Andres Bonifacio of the guerrilla outfit that had supported Marcos' deposition: they had connections with Aquino before he went into forced exile. My grandfather was supposed to have done something to Marcos' cronies on the island, something big and terrible. Of course all of this was speculation. No one truly believed my father's ramblings. Even Doña Chrissy, the oldest person in the barangay, asserted that my grandfather was just a two-bit hustler. He'd had the misfortune of pissing off some well-known loan sharks. Besides, why would Marcos care about our little seaside village. If there was money here, it wasn't enough to wipe Imelda's ass. That was a direct quote from her.

My father had insisted that we protect our grandfather's legacy. He wanted every story to be better. It consumed his life. Over time I learnt to ignore his drunken antics. Who cares about a death that is as significant as dog turd settling in on the wet sea bed?

So when news of Marcos' death reached our barangay, my father went on a three-day bender. He drank from his bottle of rum while listening to the A.M. radio. His bloodshot eyes were heavy from alcohol and lack of sleep. My family didn't eat since he wasn't fishing. My older brother Ricky wasn't yet adept enough to row toward the sea and haul in the day's catch. My mother became frantic that we would all starve. She borrowed money from neighbours. They couldn't afford to lend her more than 50 or 100 pesos, but it was enough to buy two days worth of rice and

sardine cans. We ate the dried fishes that were suppose to be sold at the Mercado. Luis brought me food from his parents' kitchen. I shared them with Ramon since Ricky and Jan would have taken all of it and left none for us. After three days, my father lay down and slept at the exact spot where my grandfather's corpse was found. There was drool on the side of his face and vomit on his clothes and hair. The tinderas thought he was dead: a fishmonger jolted him awake by splashing cold water on his feet. My father, seeing where he was, got up, walked home, and slept for two days.

On the other hand, I was told that my mother was a very cheerful child growing up. Like everyone else she had many siblings. In the barangay, everyone had more than four children. She had met my father when he was pulling worms from the ground. They were six at that time. He had dirt streaked on his nose and around his mouth.

"Are you eating them?" she asked.

"Ya, you want a taste?"

He had offered her a fairly long and fat earthworm. She cringed at the slimy and disgusting way it wriggled on his hand. "They're good, if you're hungry."

"Hugaw! Why are you eating something so dirty?"

At that time, the dike wasn't built yet. The shore wasn't littered with garbage and the discarded remains of dogs, cats, or even human bones. They were farther inland where the coconut trees — before they were stripped and used for kindling or building materials — kept out the heat of the mid-day sun.

He had dangled the worm in front of her. She stepped back away but didn't leave, curious to see if he would actually put the wriggly mass in his mouth. He did. He dropped it in his mouth and chewed. He looked at her as she made a face in disgust.

"You eat fish, fish eat worms. It's like eating fish," he said.

"You're crazy. I'm going to tell your Mama," she threatened before walking away.

"She knows," he called out to her. After, he went back to scratching the ground. In the days afterward, they were inseparable. They married when she got pregnant, at the age of fourteen.

My father told me this story when I was eight while he taught me how to mend his fishing net. When I mashed my face into a look of disgust, he would say, "That's exactly how your mother looked."

As a ploy to garner votes for re-election, a smart councilman had thought it better to build a dike ahead of the stilt houses that would soon crowd the sea shore. My father, then sixteen, supported the idea. There was no space in his widowed mother's small house; his eldest brother with his own wife already occupied the second bedroom. So he cut down coconut trees to build his own stilt house, stole bamboo from a grove a barangay away, where his friend Santiago had shown him how to keep the owner from knowing. When the dike was completed, more stilt houses crowded behind it. Three kilometers of the shore disappeared. My oldest brother, Ricky, was two years old when the dike was complete and my father and

mother finally had their own place to call home. Their first year, a small tropical storm damaged the walls of their small house, tearing the plywood. The roof had leaked but didn't dislodge from its bearings. Their neighbours weren't so lucky. A stilt house collapsed when one of the beams that held it high up from the sea bed cracked from the intense gale of sea wind and water. Others were stranded in their houses as wooden bridges that connected the stilt houses to the dike disappeared. Some waded in the rising seawater to rescue dogs and young children. My mother had tied Ricky with a rope to her waist as the storm passed through.

Years later when garbage littered so much of the sea bed, another councilman, as a ploy to oust the current councilman from his seat in office, added more height to the dike and made small holes with large grills at the bottom so that the garbage could escape to the sea. Every year, after every typhoon, more stilt houses crowded behind the dike. The wooden bridges became elaborate. They crisscrossed from one house to another, like an obscure pattern only us residents knew. During midday, if one stood on the shore, clothes on clotheslines hid the horizon.

As much as I had wanted to run after Luis that day and say, Yes I will wait, Yes I will be here when you come back, I also knew that he would never come back. I went to the end of the dike where the bangkas were moored, hid myself inside a tarp draped over empty fishing baskets, and in the darkness cried for my own loss. I woke up with the lingering smell of fish on my skin. The boat was swaying rhythmically and I wanted to lull myself into believing that it was all a dream. That

he was waiting for me on the bridge that connected my house to the dike. There, playing with a rubber band or writing English words on the cement floor with the chalk he always carried.

LUIS LOVES ROWENA.
HOUSE
GARDEN
CAR
BABIES

I wanted to see him write our names in that silly poem he quoted all the time: ROSES ARE RED,VIOLETS ARE BLUE, I WANT TO MARRY YOU. I would pretend to erase the word MARRY, telling him that he didn't know what marriage meant and that I didn't want to be married because all I would ever do is have children and more children and get sad when they died. I would then have that dead look in my eyes and cry every All Soul's Day. And how did he know that I would say yes, that I would marry him? What I always said was, just because we were always together didn't mean that we would end up together. He would crinkle his eyes and pull me down to sit right next to him, wrap his arms around my shoulders and sing me that song he always sang to me. I would let him. I would let him sing in that broken voice of his that sounded like the scratched noises a karaoke machine makes when it stops working. He did not have a good voice, but the song was mine, the feeling was mine, the sea wind was mine, the world in that moment was mine.

But I left my sanctuary and saw that the moon was the same moon, the dike was still the tall, rough sentry that it was, and the houses crowded behind its walls

were the same stilt houses as yesterday and the months and years before. Despite typhoons and tropical storms, people had built their homes the same way they'd always built them. They had never learned to move away. They had never told the typhoon, the storms, the blackened sea bed, the capricious sea that they have had enough, that they were done. They should have packed their bags, destroyed their stilt houses, and moved far away. To move, just move. They endured to the point of stupidity. I didn't want that for myself. I didn't know how I was going to move forward, or what or where my destination lay, but I was certain, as much as the moon, the stilt house and the blackened sea bed were constants, that I would leave. I turned my back on them and looked towards the horizon where the sun drowned and I counted to a hundred.

Chapter 11

Mr. Park lingered at the warehouse entrance with Miguel, looking in my direction. He had just visited Mr. Chang and had been by the warehouse almost every day since he first visited Mr. Chang a month ago. I felt his gaze linger on my feet. Mr. Park had a thing for feet. Regardless if they were mud soaked or pedicured, Mr. Park looked, then flattered. He would like to clean them, he would often say. Marilou thought him odd. Something very Chinese, she says. Foreigners with "chinky" eyes were lumped together in the same category; Marilou mentioned them in reference to Mr. Chang and Mr. Chang's family members. She'd been working for them for almost seven years, since she got out of elementary school, forced by her father to go to work since he couldn't afford to send her to high school. She'd worked at the house previously as a kitchen helper, then as an occasional ya-ya, watching Mr. Chang's children. She told me she hated being there. She never told me why, but whenever Mr. Chang goes home to his mansion Marilou made it a point to be busy. She was afraid that she was going to be forced to go back. She'd always warn me to decline if and when Mr. Chang asked me to work at the house. I hadn't been asked so I didn't really think about it. I liked the warehouse because it had fixed hours.

Miguel laughed at something Mr. Park said while palming five hundred pesos. It was 1p.m and Tabuan market was closed. The mounds of dried fish were now covered with thick plastic tarp, their strong odour overtaken by the stink of gasoline

and horse shit. Stray dogs sniffed through garbage and gutters for discards. Horse carriage drivers rested their horses for the day. Vendors and merchants were asleep below tables or inside small tricycles. Siesta had begun. These three hours were a welcome break from having been at work since 5 A.M.. At four, when the sun wasn't as hot, the market would be open for business again. Tinderas turned on their FM radios. They ate and drank a mierienda of cheese rolls and hot instant Nescafé. They rolled the tarps and fluffed the mounds of dangit and pusit into peaks.

"Wang!" Miguel called out, "Intsik wants to talk to you."

"How much?" Marilou butted in. She sat beside me reading a gossip newspaper with grainy pictures of actors and actresses posing in an award show.

"Shut up, Marilou! Who wants to talk to you?" he said.

"Who wants to talk to him?" she snubbed.

Mr. Park looked from Miguel to Marilou, confused at their conversation.

"She no sale." Marilou pointed at me to Mr. Park. "Smart girl. No for you." Miguel looked like he was about to hit Marilou. In her own way, Marilou was looking out for me. As Mr. Park stammered in his own garbled English that he wasn't buying me, that his intentions were pure, "Bisita. Bisita. I bisita Rowena," he said. He was harmless. A bald Korean with a gap tooth. He told me he was forty but I knew he was lying. He looked close to fifty. He had puffy cheeks and a smile that didn't go away. He was close friends with Mr. Chang, they had met as students together at a Chinese university in Shanghai or Beijing.

"Four hundred and I talk to him," I told Miguel.

"Maldita! He didn't give me cash."

"Too bad," I said.

Miguel looked at me, then at the smiling Mr. Park. Miguel called out for two hundred fifty and I countered with three hundred fifty. We settled on three hundred. He handed me the cash and told me to wait for him outside the market after work. I told him Marilou was joining us. He said to do whatever I want. He went back to Mr. Chang and gave the Korean an Ok signal. With three hundred pesos plus my weekly wage of eight hundred, I had enough to give to Mama, and for me to save.

"Wang, don't see him. You'll have a bad reputation if you do," Marilou warned me with a disappointed look on her face.

"I know what I'm doing. You'll be there to stop him if he does anything anyway," I said.

"He better take us to a good restaurant."

Mr. Park patted Miguel on the shoulder before heading towards his parked car where his driver, Christian, was waiting.

The warehouse was dark. The fluorescent lights at the front of the store were off to conserve electricity. Sacks of broken rice, jasmine rice, and maize obscured the large Buddha altar, which had incense burning. Next to the altar, Mr. Chang reclined on his bamboo chair, drinking an ice-cold Coca-Cola as the tall fan turned behind him. The radio was on a Chinese broadcast. A DJ spoke a combination of

Bisaya and Hokkien, a language that reminded me of angry roosters in a cock fight. Mr. Chang turned the volume higher when Chinese opera streamed out of the radio. I've never seen the fat Intsik get up from his big chair. Even when Mr. Park visited, he stayed seated. He naps, eats, and, sometimes, when it's not busy, pees and shits in a porcelain bowl that Marilou empties out. He guards the money drawer day and night. When the warehouse closes, Miguel is tasked, together with Pepe - Mr. Chang's driver - to guard him as they walk towards his car. Pepe had a gun and Miguel carried a switch blade with him.

"Marilou! I need to pee. Fetch the bowl," Mr. Chang called out. Marilou left the magazine on my lap. Since I'd worked here, I had never offered to help and she had never asked. I asked her once why she didn't quit. She hated being there and hated Mr. Chang and his family. She told me she was going to quit soon. She'd been saving for the boat fare and living expenses so she could move to Manila. She knew a girl who worked at a department store in Makati that paid better. I asked if she still sends money home. She said Mr. Chang kept half of her wages and at the end of the month her father picked them up at the house. While Mr. Chang settled comfortably in his chair, Marilou carried the bowl to the back of the warehouse, turning her head away from the stench.

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On our way to the restaurant, as a joke, I asked Mr. Park if he wanted to touch my feet. He had been looking at them, glancing at how I took my shoe off when I crossed my legs next to him. He quietly declined but I knew he wanted since his face

flushed rose red.

When we arrived at the restaurant, Mr. Park surprised me with a bouquet of bright, big white lilies. The smell was nauseating, like burnt candles mixed with overripe sampaguitas after a wake. He bragged that they were imported, bought specially for me. He said the flowers reminded him of me, of how we were both delicate. I laughed when he said delicate. I've never been called delicate.

"I no have for Marilou," he said.

Marilou fake-smiled and said that he was thoughtful for even thinking of her.

"We share," I said.

"Next time I bring two. Make you both happy." Mr. Park smiled showing his gap-tooth. We were uptown at Shakey's Pizza Restaurant. The crowds were mainly rich college students from the nearby university teaching hospital.

"You like food?" He pointed at the very large pizza on the table and the plate of fries.

"Ya, food good," I said. Marilou didn't touch the pizza. She had seen Mr. Chang's kids eat them all the time. I had a slice on my plate that I nibbled. I disliked the sweet and tangy flavour; it reminded me of overdone tamarind paste.

"He should have brought us to McDonald's," Marilou whispered quietly. "I wanted a hamburger."

I wanted a hamburger too.

"What do you do on spare time?" he asked. He had already two slices with his mug of beer. There was sauce on his face.

"We go home. See our family. We live in *probinsya*," I said

"Pra-bien-sita?" He stuttered the word, mangled the way it was being said. He rolled his tongue at every syllable.

"Live outside city." I wanted him to wipe off the film of red sauce around his mouth.

"Ohhh, same like me. I live in countryside too. My family has farm, big farm," He opened his arms, widened them that his hands were behind his shoulders. "I am eldest so I inherit farm."

As Mr. Park talked about his inheritance, the girl two tables from us mimicked Mr. Park's gestures. The group with her laughed. In their eyes, we were gold diggers while Mr. Park was either a gullible foreigner or a sexual predator who preyed on seventeen year olds. They giggled again. I overheard them say "probinsyana."

"Don't mind them. They're snobs," Marilou whispered.

"Rich girls no manners," I said loudly in English.

"Excuse me?" Mr. Park was confused by my reply. "Rich? Yes, I am rich." The group of girls laughed even harder. They speculated on whether Marilou and I were maids. How did the tacky Korean find them? One girl said we were probably call girls.

"I have rich farm," Mr. Park continued. "Rich farm I plant with cabbage for kimchi. You know kimchi?" When he said kimchi, the girls laughed even louder. The patrons in the restaurant were now looking at us. Mr. Park was telling us about

kimchi in his garbled English. Marilou stuffed her mouth with more french fries. There was a white man with a Filipina in another corner of the restaurant. They held hands once they were seated across from each other. But when the patrons in the restaurant became aware of us, I saw her withdraw her hand from his grasp. She pulled down her short skirt from under the table and sat upright. She looked angry and embarrassed. She noticed me looking at her and glared at me in resentment. Like Mr. Park, her white companion was oblivious to the scrutiny.

"You not eating. You want something else?" Mr. Park asked. I looked at his over-eager demeanour. The way his eyes disappeared whenever he smiled too much. I couldn't stand the pizza sauce rimmed around his mouth.

"Your face. Wipe face," I said. I dipped a paper napkin in my glass of Sprite and handed it to him. He was confused, squinting his eyes at me for clarification. I took another napkin and wiped my own face. When he finally understood, he wiped his mouth vigorously which only made the sauce spread to his left cheek.

Marilou got up without telling me. She pointed to the restroom when Mr. Park asked him if she was okay. I knew she was going there to hide. I took another paper napkin, dipped it in Sprite, and told him to lean towards me. I wiped the stain on his left cheek and wiped the corners of his mouth. Mr. Park smiled his gap-tooth smile at me in pleasure.

"I want spaghetti," I said when he asked if I wanted something else. The girls in uniform were leaving. They passed by my table, smirking.

Chapter 12

The first time Mr. Park took me to Robinson's department store to shop he asked me to help him buy a pair of shoes, but when we arrived, we stopped at the first fancy dress shop we saw. He told me to go inside and buy whatever I wanted. He pushed me forward while he stayed outside to wait. I went in and browsed. I didn't really want to buy anything. The price for one dress was three times my weekly salary. Besides, the sales girls ignored me since they knew from the way I dressed that I didn't really have any money. After a few minutes, I walked out of the store. He asked if I had picked anything to buy. I told him that I didn't know what to buy. When I didn't see the gap-tooth in his smile, I knew he was angry. We went back inside the store and he demanded to see the manager. One of the sales girls asked him what the problem was and he shouted that no one had helped me when I was shopping. His tone was curt and hard. It was the first time I had heard him speak that way before. The sales girl glared at me accusingly. The manager came to meet him and apologized for the mistake. She promptly herded me to a rack of expensive dresses and wasted no time in asking me questions about my dress and shoe sizes. When Mr. Park saw that I was being attended to, his gap-toothed smile came back. We came out of the store with several bags of clothes and shoes. The manager smiled at Mr. Park and told him to have a very good day. She completely ignored me. We stopped by several other stores where the staff did what Mr. Park asked while I stood near the mirror to try on whatever they brought me. Every time

I tried on a dress, I felt my skin tingle from the softness of the material. The way the silk draped over my chest and hugged my waist. I admired the way the long skirts floated down delicately whenever I twirled. Mr. Park clapped in appreciation every time he saw me in a new dress. When I had a moment to myself, a sales girl interrupted and asked me to introduce her to an older rich gentleman, perhaps a friend of Mr. Park. She gave me the phone number of her boarding house and told me to call her anytime. She was not much older than me.

Although I am now used to Mr. Park leaving his hand behind my back, I could not adjust to the stares and the scrutiny when we were out in public. We were heading back to where Mr. Park's driver, Christian, waited. I thought about how I might fit the clothes in the room I shared with three other girls. My gifts would cause friction again. They were already ignoring me because of my association with Mr. Park.

"I have another surprise," Mr. Park giggled happily. Christian met us and grabbed the bags from Mr. Park's hands. Once Mr. Park's hands were free, he held my hand tightly.

"What surprise?" I asked as I settled in the back seat with him.

"Good surprise, no worries, be happy," he laughed.

We drove out of the city, heading north to where most Chinese-Filipinos lived in gated communities with security guards who walked around with loaded shotguns. The buildings became more modern and there were no squatters living in abandoned lots. Once we drove uphill and passed by the Marco Polo hotel, the most

expensive hotel in the city, jeepneys were scarce as mostly cars with tinted windows passed us by. We stopped in front of a gate. A guard with his shotgun came out, so Christian rolled down his window to let the guard know it was him. The guard waved to someone at the guardhouse and the gate slowly opened mechanically. I knew where we were going. Even though I had resigned myself to what was about to happen, my hands shook from fright. Christian looked at me from the rear-view mirror. I couldn't read his face.

I stood rooted at the entrance of Mr. Park's house after Christian dropped off the bags of clothes. Mr. Park grabbed my hand and gave me a tour of his house. He showed me the kitchen where an old maid peeled apples and washed grapes. When she saw us, she stopped what she was doing and bowed to Mr. Park. He introduced me to her and told the maid to call me Ma'am. The old lady nodded, not saying a word. He ushered me to a large living room next. Behind the plump sofa were displays of tall, delicate looking vases. A large television dominated one wall. There was glass everywhere – the coffee and side table, a small glass sculpture of a woman dancing. I was afraid to be in the room for fear of breaking something. He pointed to the back yard, sliding the glass doors to let in the outside air. The garden had a carpet of well-maintained grass and bushes of bougainvillea and gumamela. A large mango tree obscured the next door neighbour's house.

The maid carried in a tray of washed and peeled fruits and a carafe of orange juice. She asked if we needed anything else. Mr. Park dismissed her.

"You like?" he asked. His eyes disappeared as he smiled widely

"Very nice house, very nice," I said.

"I rent from friend but I like so later buy maybe, if you like also," he said. We seated ourselves on the sofa. I was afraid to move or touch anything.

"Good," I nodded not understanding what he meant.

"You like, right?" he asked again.

"Very nice house… Ya, I like."

"Good, good. Move here tomorrow. Christian drive you to pick…"

I didn't hear what he said after that. The blood had rushed to my face.

"Rowena, listening?" he asked

"Yes, yes, I listen," I said.

At that moment I heard the sea. The sea right before a storm passes. The waves crashing on the dike, knocking the bangkas against each other. I briefly heard the hum of a familiar folk song before the strong wind snatched it away.

Chapter 13

Manang Marta called me to come home the night after Typhoon Pepang passed by the barangay. There was no bus heading south due to evacuation and food relief. All of the buses were being used to help bring food, so I had to bribe a bus driver to hitch a ride with him to Carcar. From there, it was easy enough to catch another bus further south. When I arrived, it was early morning. The streets were covered with garbage. Houses had no roofs, except the houses that had concrete walls and corrugated steel. I found Ramon and Berto sleeping at the Barangay center, huddled together with the neighbours who had evacuated with them. My mother was praying with the other wives and widows at a make-shift altar at the corner. Manang Marta saw me first. I was standing at the wide door staring at Berto's hand clutching Ramon's shirt.

"Help me in the kitchen." She handed me the pail of water she was carrying. "They've been praying for an hour now." She pointed towards where my mother was.

"Did someone…?" I followed her to the back of the center. There were big pots of simmering rice porridge and boiled eggs.

"Six are missing. They were trying to secure the bangkas at the end of the dike. Foolish. Nida's been crying all night: Marco was one of them," she said.

"Who looked for them?"

"Ramon helped with the search yesterday. They found Corinna and her daughters. She stayed behind in her house when she was told to evacuate. But they didn't find... They'll row to open sea today."

She ladled a bowl full of porridge and told me, "Eat. You won't have time later."

There was a line that stretched to the street outside of the kitchen. I scooped porridge while Manang Marta gave out the hard-boiled eggs. There was instant coffee on the table next to us. I saw Nida sitting down at a table not eating the food given to her, her father's arms wrapped around her. The children were gathered around Doña Chrissy as she told them a story. Everyone I met told me it's been too long since I'd visited. Asked me if there had been a lot of damage when I left the city. Some pointedly asked about my life in the city. Manang Marta heard and told them to go eat and stop bothering people who were working. I knew why they were asking and I was thankful to Manang Marta for her interference. When I saw Ramon and Berto line up for food, I asked Belinda, Manang Marta's niece, to take over for me. Manang Marta had told me our house had been damaged: a window was smashed when a neighbour's house collapsed. Several of the wooden bridges connecting the stilt houses together broke, so some families were left stranded until they were rescued yesterday.

"Are you going to help search again?" I asked Ramon. He looked more and more like our father: short but brawny, with powerful and calloused hands. His hair was turning orange from being out too long in the sun. He continued eating his

porridge and didn't answer me. When he finished, he left me at the table. Berto followed even though he wasn't done eating. "I'll be around here," I shouted after them. They were heading back inside with food for my mother.

When Ramon tried to leave with the rescue team, Berto cried. He didn't let go of Ramon's shirt until Ramon scolded him for whining and not being a man. I hugged him but he wriggled away and ran off to cry by himself. The center had a lot fewer people now. Most of the men had left already either to help clean-up or row to sea to look for the missing. Some wives went with their husbands to help clear out debris at the shore. Inside the center, the elderly huddled together while the children had an alphabet lesson with Manang Kristina, the elementary school teacher. My mother dozed on her small bed, a thin blanket wrapped around her. I sat next to her, fanning the flies buzzing around. The bowl of porridge was left uneaten next to her pillow.

"So, you're here," I heard her say softly.

"I was here early this morning. I saw you pray," I said.

"You heard?"

"Ya. Ramon's with them now," I said.

"God willing they're alive," she said.

"Do you want to eat now?" I grabbed the bowl and stirred the porridge around. It had become too dense. The rice had soaked up all of the water. A fly buzzed around the bowl.

"Who's Mr. Park?" she suddenly asked.

I stopped stirring. I couldn't look at her, so I concentrated on the kids playing hide and seek outside. Berto hid behind a coconut tree.

"Someone saw you..."

"He's Korean. Just a friend," I said.

"Girls are not friends with foreigners."

"We're only friends, Ma."

"Help me up, I want to sit down."

I put down the porridge and the fly landed on her meal soon after. I grabbed her under her arms and helped her to a sitting position.

"I'm going to get you another bowl."

I didn't want to face her questions. I didn't want to answer them.

"Does he give you money?" she asked in a whisper. "Do you ask for it? What do you do with him? What does he do with you? What have you done with him?" I sat rooted in my chair. I wanted to explain, to tell her that Mr. Park was a suitor, a sometimes bumbling, yet harmless, old man. She started crying softly at first, then with big heaving sobs that took her breath away. People crowded around us. Those who had heard her shout pretended to ask what was happening to her. Manang Marta and Manang Kristina drove away the crowd.

"Go. Go. She'll be fine soon," Manang Marta assured me.

I left the center and headed towards my house, away from prying eyes and loose gossip. I walked past the corner store, boarded up with planks of wood. A coconut tree obscured the store's roof as most of its branches had fallen off. Stray

dogs scavenged around a ripped garbage sack. I skirted around them as I passed. I saw people sweep their yards and set fire to leaves and bamboo. Some waved at me as I passed by. I waved back and hollered my greetings. When I turned a corner, the path leading to the main bridge that connected the dike to the shore was flooded with the water from underneath the stilt houses. It had turned the hard soil into black mud. I could see the shore where men were picking up large pieces of debris and stacking them in a pile. Far off, unmoored bangkas swayed with the waves. The sea was calm today, the waters placid: a good day for fishermen to head to open water. There were deep footprints ahead of me. I had to wade toward shore so I took off my socks, rolled up my jeans, and tied both shoelaces together to rest my shoes around my neck.

The mud was cold even though the day was hot and humid. It surrounded my feet and made it hard to lift them out. I grabbed a two-by-four lying around and used it as support as I walked slowly to shore. The mud coated me up to my calves. I heard shouting and the buzzing and banging of a saw and hammer. They were already re-building. Ahead, I saw a basin full of laundry stuck inside the mud. A girl's school uniform flapped in the wind on someone's roof. I avoided the broken bottles and fire lanterns and swatted away an empty carton of Tanduay rum. The bridge was up ahead so I walked faster. I felt a pinch and looked down to find a two-inch gash just above my knee. I hurried to the bridge as the blood trickled out. I cleared the wound with my shirt when a shadow covered me.

"That's going to get infected." I looked up to find Nida. "Here, use my

handkerchief." She handed me her white hanky. I cleared the mud from the wound as much as I could then wrapped the cloth around it. When I stood up, she had her eyes on the horizon.

"Do you want to walk to my house?" I asked. She blinked once then twice as if to make sure I was there.

"Sure," she said. "I think yours is one of the only houses with a roof."

"Lucky, I guess,' I said. "How long have you been waiting?"

"Since they left. I walked around the dike and the bridges as much as I could, you know, to see if I could find him. Maybe he was just hiding or resting or waiting…"

"I understand," I said. We walked in silence towards my house. I saw the little bridge connected to my house. The wind passed through where the window used to be. We went inside. Clothes and blankets were soaked with water. Berto's textbooks were ruined. The pots and pans were on the floor together with the broken dishes and glasses. Nida picked up the overturned chairs. There was a pail of clean water that had survived. So while she swept the floor, I cleaned my wound with rubbing alcohol and dressed it with my mother's handkerchief.

"Do you want to look for him again?" I asked after we tidied.

"It's Ok. I know he's not here."

We got out of my house and stood on the dike looking at the horizon for a long time. I allowed myself to think about Luis. I remembered the last time he had helped clean the house after a big storm, almost four years ago.

The men came back before nightfall. They came back empty-handed. I heard Nida cry out in pain. They'd look again tomorrow, they said. Futile really, since in a few days the dead would drift back. The sea eventually spits out what it swallows. Everyone gathered around the families who had lost family members. The widows and matrons started a rosary vigil, to pray for their safety and, under their breaths, their souls. I helped as much as I could in the kitchen, making sure there was enough food and hot water. Manang Marta was a mother hen, pecking at anyone who talked behind my back. When I gathered the food discards at the tables so I could feed the stray dogs, I overheard them speculating on whether I was still a virgin, on whether it was true that I had an apartment in the city. They wondered if I was pregnant, or maybe if I'd had an abortion. They said I was a mistress. That I was shameful for doing what I did. My father would have flayed me alive or dragged me to sea and drowned me there. They talked about how my family was cursed: a grandfather who was murdered, a father who was lost at sea, and two older brothers who had left home and didn't come back. No wonder I'm selling myself, they said. I heard mention of Luis as I cleaned the dishes. He had got lucky, avoiding my family's karma. He was better off where he was. I ignored my tears as I finished washing the dishes.

I cornered Ramon when I saw him head outside. He was leaning on a telephone pole, lighting a cigarette when I startled him.

"You have to talk to me," I said.

He cursed me out of fright.

"OK, talk," he said. He crossed his arms on his chest and waited for me to say something. All day, all I had wanted to do was talk to him, to explain about Mr. Park. But now, no words came out. No sound. No explanation.

"You're wasting my time," he said. "No one asked you to come back."

He was about to walk away but I stopped him. I held on to his arm.

"Manang Marta called me," I said.

"Then she should butt out of our business." He pried himself out of my grasp. Berto came out of the center looking for Ramon.

"Just go back to the city. It's where you belong."

He jogged towards Berto and when he caught up with him, Berto held on to Ramon's hand tightly and dragged him back inside.

Above me moths gathered around the telephone pole light. They fluttered back and forth, attracted by its light and heat. I waited underneath as one by one they fell to the ground.

Ending

The taxi driver tells me that we have arrived at the airport. I know this. I give him my fare plus a generous tip. He asks me if he should wait until I come out with the person I am picking up. He assumes that I am not flying since I have no luggage, apart from a small backpack that has my passport, plane ticket, and my tourist visa to S. Korea. He probably believes that I am picking up relations at the airport, perhaps a brother working as a bellboy at a resort in Abu Dhabi, or a cousin who is a domestic helper in Hong Kong. I don't tell him otherwise. I didn't want to bring anything; there is nothing of substance that I want to keep as memento. "It's Ok. Someone is going to pick us up later. No need," I lie. None of his business. Once he knows where I am going and what I am about to do, like my mother, he will judge. His professional demeanour will change, the polite and almost fatherly smile will morph into a sneer: a sly indictment of how I have compromised both my dignity and my soul. He waves me off and tells me to take care of myself.

My flight is in a few hours. I had been told by the agency to be there early. They said three hours; I am here at four. I head to departures. At security, there is no line. Two security guards lounge around gossiping. One leans against a large machine and the other sits on the long narrow table. When they see me, they shake their heads indicating that they are closed. I had miscalculated. I sat on one of the benches as far away from people as I can, but still near enough to security so I can

dash and be first in line. A grandmother in a wheelchair and her aging daughter slurp Mami noodles for a late night snack. The grandmother complains of how tepid the soup is, the daughter rolls her eyes and gives her mother a cup of coffee. Like me, they are early. A white boy dozes on a bench using his big bag as a pillow. He hugs his small fanny pack tightly in his arms. Once the PA announces that the flight from S.Korea has arrived, the white boy wakes up, shakes the fatigue from his eyes, and looks at his watch. He looks disoriented and, for a second, scared of his surroundings. He slaps his cheeks to wake himself up. He suddenly coughs, a big cough coming from his belly. This startles the grandmother. She clutches her bag and whispers something to his daughter. "Americano, Ma, Americano," she reassures. To ease her mother's anxiety, the daughter pats her mother's shoulder and wheels her to another section. The white boy belts his fanny pack around his waist then heaves his large bag on his shoulders. He rounds a corner, heading towards the food court. I do not like not being able to cross behind the gate. I want them to look at my documents and tell me that I am finally allowed to go through. Outside taxi drivers are smoking in a circle, waiting for the hoards of tourist and balikbayans disembarking. Cars honk in impatience as car owners idle on the road. There is an air of impatience all of a sudden. Infectious. The security guards are now alert, tightening their gun belts and adjusting their uniforms. The marked door behind them opens and a smart looking woman in a pilot's uniform comes out. They salute her. A stream of flight attendants follow in their mini skirts and tight fitting airline-approved jackets. The hats on top of their heads tilt to the side. They look like

Binibining Pilipinas contestants. The departure area starts to fill as more airline personnel come out of the gate. I inch toward the security once the door is firmly closed behind it.

They screen my small backpack and pat me down for unwanted items. Once they pass my belongings to the big machine, I am finally inside. An airport lady asks me where I am headed as I hand her my documents. She reads how I'm marked as a tourist heading to Seoul. Her eyebrows rise as she looks at my backpack, my modest clothes, my cheap sandals. I tighten my shoulders and look far ahead towards the direction of my gate. She tells me I have to pay an airport fee. In anger, I open my wallet wide so she can see the stacks of Korean won crammed inside. I take out the only pesos I have to pay. "Rich boyfriend, huh?" she says smiling. I ignore her question. The man behind me sniggers. I walk away with my chin pointed at the ceiling, my gate number vivid in my mind. What they say will not matter once I am inside my plane. As I wait at my gate, a line of Balikbayans come out heading toward the arrival exit. They're laden with heavy carry-ons. Some have thick gold chains around their necks, others have expensive handbags. I imagine I'll be one of them later, maybe in five years, when I'm properly married and settled in with Man-seok, Mr. Park. I would have learned enough Korean by then to speak fluently. I would have a child. The allowance Man-seok will give me will be enough so that I can buy a house for my mother. A house inland, close to the shore so she does not miss the sea, but further away so she is not affected by seasonal tidal waves. Of course, mother will have forgiven me by then since the money I'll be sending back

will help with living expenses. The stream of passengers slowly moves and I see a young man take off his cap and wipe sweat off his face. I scrutinize what I can see of his features and wonder why he looks so familiar. Then he turns towards me and I see the mole below his left eye. I stare. I stand up. I move seats, further away from him. He looks broader and taller than I had imagined. He wears a smile and a barely constrained eagerness as he sways back in forth waiting for the line ahead of him to move faster. He bounces on his feet, craning his neck now and then towards the front of the line. An old lady says something to him and he nods eagerly. The line finally moves faster. Once he turns a corner, he'll be gone again.

But before that happens, I take my bag and walk away.