

BOHOL AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories explores the lives of people on and from the island province, Bohol—in the central Philippines, the region known as the Visayas—from which there is a troubling dearth of texts. The use of the writer’s native language, interwoven into the English narrative is a common technique of postcolonial writers; it is her way of asserting to the world the continuing presence of the Visayan culture and language despite centuries of colonization. The collection portrays not only the people of Bohol, but also Filipino Americans in Hawai`i, and women of the Filipino diaspora in the United States. A lengthy introduction examines how the stories are infused and shaped by colonialism, diaspora and feminism; it sets the context for writing as a member of an underrepresented group

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States, we have the freedom to tell the stories of ourselves and of our cultures and beliefs. In this age of globalization and migration, the world's stories continue to make their journeys to America. The people who traversed oceans carried their cultures with them and often recreated them in their host country, creating diasporic cultures. The ethnic mix of this country has become more diverse and thus, richer. Literature has reflected this increase in cultural identities and it has been enhanced by the variety of themes and styles, particularly in works of fiction by writers from a diaspora.

I am a woman, a Filipino American, an Indo-Pacific Islander, and an Asian American. I was born in the Philippines to a Hawai'i-born, Filipino-American father and a Filipina mother. When I finished my freshman year at the University of the Philippines Diliman, my father, who had moved to Hawai'i a few months ahead of the family, instructed me to obtain my U.S. passport at the U.S. Embassy in Manila so I could fly to Hawai'i. To my surprise, the U.S. Embassy officer informed me that since I had been living in the Philippines as an American, a foreigner in my country of birth, I had to pay the Philippine government some type of foreigner's fee for living in the country. My reaction was, "Huh?" I wanted to explain that I was a Filipina living in the country of my birth and I had never been outside the Philippines, but I realized that I was at the U.S. Embassy, in order to get my U.S. Passport. So I kept quiet and paid the bill for foreigners. That was the first time that I had questioned my personal and national identity.

According to Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, there are two categories of Filipino women writers: 1) “those who, for whatever reasons, draw much of their literary material from their memories of life in the Philippines—if not their own, then their parents’ memories of that life,” 2) second or third-generation Filipino women now residing in the United States whose “central concern is identity fixation within the American community to which they now belong. A recurrent theme in their writing is the trauma of their Otherness” (8-9). I believe I have more in common with the first, for my stories draw on my memory of life in the Philippines and my family’s memories of that life. I wrote the short stories in this collection with the aim of stirring readers to empathize, to imagine themselves into lives unlike theirs, and to appreciate the experience of the unfamiliar, odd, or even alarming in the ways people live across border and latitudes. Specifically, my stories explore lives of people on and from the island province, Bohol, in the central Philippines, the region known as the Visayas, from which there is a troubling dearth of texts.

According to Marjorie Evasco, among the emergent voices in Philippine Literature in the past decade, “the most exciting to read and listen to are those of the women in the Visayas and Mindanao who are writing poetry and fiction in Cebuano” (Evasco). She also pointed out that the first of the literary anthologies to emerge from the Visayas, *Centering Voices*, was published in Cebu in 1995 by Women in Literary Arts, Inc., funded by a grant from the National Commission on Culture and the Arts. As Filipino poet and critic, Merlie Alunan, reminds us, the scarcity of literary work by Visayan writers can be explained within the context of “nation” and “region”:

It implies a dominant north where resources, talent, expertise are concentrated, where power and authority emanate, where quality of performance is assessed and affirmed. For the southern writer, the concept of the north includes a colonizing national language, [Tagalog] which reduces the regional languages to secondary status. (qtd. in Evasco)

The rhythms of speech are as diverse as the languages spoken in the major Visayan islands and among the many tribes of the southern region, Mindanao. There are over one hundred seventy languages in the Philippines; the diversity of language also implies a diversity of attitudes and habits of thinking. Most, if not all the women represented in

Centering Voices write in English (Alunan, cited in Evasco). Those who write in their native tongue are aware of the politics of their choice: to regain lost ground and to reassert their native language as a medium for their works.

What I wish to explore here is twofold: myself as the writer, and my M. A. Thesis as an example of a particular genre infused and shaped by the historical forces of diaspora, colonialism and feminism. I will reflect on my development as a creative writer and on my style. Then I will examine the development, form, and content of my thesis, as well as the theories, the writers, texts, literary movements and literary traditions that have influenced my thesis.

My Development as a Creative Writer

My development as a creative writer was different from that of my classmates in the Creative Writing workshops at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa (UHM) English department; I was not an English major. Although I wrote a play in the Philippines when I was fourteen years old—a play that was produced and presented at the private high school I attended—I had not received any formal creative writing instruction at the time. Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, which I had read for an English class that school year, was what I used for my self-study of playwriting.

Years later, after I received a Bachelor’s degree in Hawai`i, I worked in the accounting field. However, I attended a weekend writing workshop at the Maui Writers’ Conference, and after a year or so, a screenwriting workshop in Los Angeles. Subsequently, I returned to my alma mater, the UHM, as an unclassified post-baccalaureate student, and took a few undergraduate Creative Writing workshops to see if my passion for creative writing could be developed into something productive. I wanted to learn about the craft of writing at UHM before applying for admission to the English Graduate Program.

In one of these fiction-writing workshops, Writing Centered in the Pacific, a Filipino classmate made a comment that my story was “too English despite the Philippine setting and the Filipino names of the characters.” At the time, I had read mostly British and American literature and only a handful of short stories by contemporary international writers. Another classmate suggested, “Maybe Lurlyn does not want to be considered a

Filipino writer.” The professor then asked me, “What kind of a writer do you consider yourself to be? Are you an American writer or a Filipino writer?” I thought for a moment and said, “I am a Filipino American writer.”

My creativity comes not from being Filipino or American, but from being both. When I sit at my computer, my bicultural identity becomes the site of inspiration and the source of material for my creative work. I write short stories set in the Philippines as well as stories set in the United States. Though the material may be Filipino, the writing, the crafting of that material is done in the United States. My adult thoughts and my craft as a writer have been shaped by my life here in the United States. For me to write only as a Filipino or only as an American would be to deny a big part of myself; it would diminish me.

I learned the process of writing in an academically rigorous, systematic manner in the UHM English Graduate Program. I continue to read diverse literary work by writers from numerous countries. The Creative Writing Workshops at UHM have helped me figure out why some aspects in my story do or do not work. More importantly, I am grateful to my M.A. Thesis committee chair, Professor Caroline Sinavaiana, and committee members Professors Katharine Beutner and Shawna Yang Ryan, whose comments on the manuscript have been invaluable in helping me take it to this level.

My Style

In writing, I express myself in a straightforward uncomplicated prose style. I seldom use metaphors or long multi-clause sentences. My prose style is closer to Ernest Hemingway’s than to, say, George Eliot’s in terms of sentence structure and language. As with Hemingway’s, my style is marked by economical use of words; it is in contrast to Eliot’s lush language in long, complex sentences. It is with the minimalist style that I strive to achieve Horace’s dictum: “delightful and instructive” (qtd. in Abad xiv).

The particular way I use language to create sentences originated in the Visayas in the Central Philippines. I am a creative writer who speaks my mother tongue, but uses English sprinkled with a dash of Visayan and Tagalog for my creative work. For as Aristotle noted in *Poetics*, “[a] really distinguished style varies ordinary diction through the employment of unusual words (Aristotle 75). My use of my native language in stories and poems recalls other writers such as Mexican American Sandra Cisneros, Dominican

Republic's Junot Diaz, Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo, Nigeria's Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Filipino Americans Jessica Hagedorn and R. Zamora Linmark.

While Hagedorn and Zamora Linmark interweave their native tongue, Tagalog, in their English novels, I sprinkle the Visayan, specifically the Cebuano language, in my stories. According to the Philippine Census, there are approximately 21,000,000 Cebuano speakers, and 22,000,000 Tagalog speakers in the Philippines ("Population"). However, seventy percent of the publishing and printing establishments are strategically located in Metro Manila ("State"). As such, there is a preponderance of Tagalog language literature and works by Tagalog-speaking writers being published. I hope that my stories will help fill a lacuna of stories about the people of the Visayas and Mindanao, two major regions where Visayan is spoken in the Philippines.

My Thesis

My thesis is in the form of narrative prose fiction. It is a collection of short stories in which I explore postcolonial or neocolonial life in the Philippines and Hawai'i. The collection opens with a Filipino girl in the Philippines immersed in religious and cultural traditions, and closes with a Filipino woman teaching in Maryland. The remainder of the stories takes place in the Philippines and in Hawai'i.

In recent times scholars have referred to works of immigrant writers as diasporic writing. The term "diaspora" has come to encompass several categories of displaced persons, and numerous ethnic and religious groups. Although officially, I have been an American citizen since birth, my work can be considered part of diasporic discourse since I grew up in one country and moved to another as an adult. My imagination was forged in one culture and location, the Philippines, but I had to grapple with the everyday realities of the United States, my current home, and use its language to construe and write imagined human experiences. As Salman Rushdie notes of the burden of the diasporic writer:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back we must do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical

alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, . . . (10)

Rushdie has been writing away from India; I have been writing away from the Philippines. For my thesis I have created an imaginary homeland.

Form and Content

There are three elements of craft and technique I used in writing these stories that I wish to explore: structure, linguistic technique and voice. The short stories here follow the Aristotelian three-act dramatic structure: the set-up, the complication, the climax and resolution. The endings of my stories are open, not fully resolved. Some critics, in their effort to define the short story form, quote the early masters of the genre, and some textbook chapters are fond of invoking Edgar Allan Poe's notion of the "single effect" (Bailey 6). Usually a short story focuses on one incident, has a single plot and setting, a small number of characters, and covers a short period of time. However, like some writers, I do not subscribe to this principle. I agree with Francine Prose in "What Makes a Short Story?" in which she questions the "single effect" and other theories regarding the short story. Prose posits that maybe what Poe meant by his unity of effect is that the short work of fiction should be "so beautifully made that it cannot be broken down into components or spare parts" (11). She also notes that some literary critics believe Joseph Conrad's "Heart Of Darkness" stretches the length of a short story as far as it can go without being considered a novella (qtd. in LaPlante 97). In the same manner, Joyce Carol Oates argued that for the short story, "length alone should be the sole criterion. Whenever critics try to impose other, more subjective strictures on the genre too much work is excluded" (LaPlante 97). For example, Nobel Prize in Literature 2013 awardee, Alice Munro, has several short stories, such as "To Reach Japan" and "Family Furnishings" that are over thirty pages long, have complex plot structures, and cover over four decades. Most of my stories, such as "Dilemma," have multiple settings, several characters, and cover a long period of time. I am engaged by stories such as Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog" ("The Lady WTPD"), which covers several months, and Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent," which spans over thirty years in the life of the central character and covers three continents.

One of the features of my characters' dialogue is the mix of non-English words with standard English. In all four stories, I used untranslated Visayan in some dialogue. In addition, Tagalog is used in "Dilemma," when the central character speaks to a Tagalog character at the laundromat. In another story, "Medevac Mission," there is a bricolage of narrative styles, and I used three languages in some parts of the dialogue: standard English, Visayan, and Hawaiian Creole English. I employed this linguistic technique to enhance the setting and characterization, and to signify cultural experiences, which I wanted to reproduce.

When I took a 400-level fiction workshop with Professor Anne Kennedy, she told me that I had a distinct voice. According to Tom Bailey, "voice is the sum of who the writer is on the page" (71). He further claims that voice has to do with such things as the sorts of character a writer chooses to write about and the particular places in which his or her stories are likely to be set. The sorts of characters I choose to write about are Filipinos or Filipino Americans; the particular places in which my stories are set are the Philippines and the United States. Just as Chekhov's "The Lady WTPD" shows his voice as anti-moralistic, my story, "Sacrifice" reflects my aversion to rigid religious tradition and traditional gender roles of girls in the Philippines. In addition, my worldview is manifested in the stories. I allow injustices to emerge in character and situation. For instance, exploitation is shown in how the wealthy matron takes advantage of a poor laborer's financial need and fails to provide proper safeguards that could have prevented the loss of life in "The Girl with the Blue Basin" ("The Girl WTBB"). Similarly, in "Dilemma," there is a moment when a character experiences racism from a colleague. And in "Sacrifice," citizens rally to protest abuse of power. Moreover, my use of the Visayan language interspersed throughout the stories is my way of asserting my voice and affirm my native tongue as a repository of enduring culture and the lived experiences of the Visayan community.

Another quality that diasporic writers share is the search for meaning in their new surroundings. Thus two of the stories explore such themes as the price of leaving home, the struggles of assimilation, and the clash of cultures. The protagonist Grace in "Dilemma" gropes for a way of giving meaning to her experiences in the chaos of a new dislocated life. Diasporic people participate in different cultures, yet retain for themselves

the refuge of their formative ethnic identity. In “Dilemma,” for instance, the protagonist moves from the tight-knit and self-sufficient community on the island province of Bohol to the unknown environment of Maryland. Thus, the literary fiction that I have here is coming not from one culture alone, but from overlapping cultures and contexts. As Amin Malak has stated:

The immigrant imagination is dichotomous by nature, locked on the horns of a dilemma, neither affiliated with the old root culture, nor fully fitting with the new adopted one. Accordingly, writers negotiating and articulating such an experience have to inhabit an alternative world, a third world: a world of their imagination, their memory, their nostalgia (Malak 52).

One of the tensions in “Dilemma” is that between the desire to belong in the new host society and the urge to hold onto something of the old. My thesis illustrates the conundrum facing the people of the diaspora in the modern world: how to balance the necessity of the past, of tradition, with the inevitability of change.

Influences

Theories

Cultural studies, postcolonial, and feminist theories have influenced my thoughts concerning writing. Cultural studies’ answers to the question—what is literature?—stirred me to write what the literary elite would term “minority ethnic” writing. The cultural studies notion that “literature consists of popular, mass, and minority genres as well as elite canonical works” has given me the freedom to write fiction that is different from that included in the canon (Leitch 28). The characters in “Dilemma,” for instance, experience the complexities of the lives of contemporary migrant workers who feel alienated in their host country and in an inner city public school district in Maryland, where most of the students are minorities.

Likewise, postcolonial theory also examines globalization, literature by and about marginalized groups and the complexities of postcolonial lives. The hybrid nature of people from formerly colonized or neo-colonized countries as well as the globalization of labor are explored in “Dilemma,” “Medevac Mission,” and “The Girl WTBB.” For example, in “Dilemma,” Grace speaks English to her colleagues and students while working at a Maryland school, but speaks Tagalog to a friend at the laundromat; in

“Medevac Mission,” Edwin’s labor was used in Turkey and in Afghanistan, while Afghan nationals were employed at Bellows Air Force Station. In the same way, “The Girl WTBB” touches on the issue of globalization when Remy and Carlos discuss their plans to work abroad: Carlos plans to work as a merchant marine, while Remy plans to work as a nurse in Europe or the United States. Another concept of postcolonial theory that is applicable to my writing is that postcolonial education—including the study of English literature and the English language—inculcates Western or Euro-American values. Thus, literary education supports a kind of “cultural colonization,” creating a class of colonial subjects often burdened by a double consciousness (Leitch 26). As Chinua Achebe declared in 1964, in a speech entitled “The African Writer and the English Language”: “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there’s no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it” (qtd. in Ngugi wa Thiong’o 7). In the same manner, I use my second language, English, to write fiction in the United States. The use of the writer’s native language interwoven into the English narrative is a common technique of postcolonial writers. My use of my native Visayan language in some parts of my stories is my way of asserting to the world outside the Philippines the continuing presence of the Visayan culture and language despite centuries of colonization. It also helps me connect to readers who are native speakers of Visayan; for language carries culture and a body of values by which we perceive ourselves.

Finally, feminist theory has also influenced the writing of this collection. I made a conscious decision to portray Filipino and Filipino American women and girls as central characters. Although I did not set out to write a feminist text, I realized when it was completed that the collection was oriented toward feminism: it demonstrated the core feminist theory—that men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially. For example, in “Sacrifice,” the child narrator’s family and maid are supporters of the female presidential candidate and they rejoice when Cory Aquino is finally proclaimed President, the first female president of the Philippines. Similarly, in “Dilemma,” the main character, Grace, embodies the feminist ideal; she is a woman who makes a success of herself despite seemingly insurmountable odds. Moreover, the collection illustrates that women are equal to men socially: Filipino women and a Filipino

American woman in the stories, “Dilemma” and “Medevac Mission,” teach in schools and colleges in the Philippines and in the United States. As a woman writer writing from the female perspective, I highlighted positive images of women such as the hard-working, ambitious, intelligent underprivileged high school student, Remy, in “The Girl WTBB.” To explore the notion that some women may be marginalized not only as women but as Asians, and that women from what used to be called Third World countries such as Filipino women in the United States feel silenced and underrepresented in mainstream social agendas, I included the scene in “Dilemma” in which the Filipino characters discuss anti-immigrant comments by an Anglo American teacher at the school in Maryland. Knowing both sides of the arguments of feminists—identity politics versus politics of difference—offers me a nuanced perspective from which to consider the possibilities and potential pitfalls of feminist theory related to race, class, or country of origin.

Literary Movements and Traditions

The literary movements that influenced my thesis are realism and regionalism. Realists of the nineteenth century such as Chekhov and Charles Dickens wanted a truthful representation of the reality of contemporary life and they were sympathetic to protagonists drawn from the middle and lower classes. Similarly, in my stories, the central characters belong to lower socio-economic classes. Reacting against nineteenth century Romanticism, the realist writers included subjects and themes that Romantic writers “considered low, sordid or trivial” (Simon 513). One of the voices to the contrary, Chekhov argued that “[t]o a chemist nothing on earth is unclean. A writer must be as objective as a chemist . . . he must know that dung heaps play a very respectable part in a landscape, and that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones” (qtd. in Simon 513). This aspect of the realism movement is exemplified in “The Girl WTBB,” in the images of the cesspool, the scenes in which Carlos “crouched on the wood planks placed on top” of the cesspool searches for the pendant, and the scenes with the fireman trying to save Carlos.

The influence of regionalism upon my thesis lies in its tendency to write about specific geographical areas. In my thesis, the geographic area that is present in all four stories is the Central Philippines, which was a formative part of my childhood. I share my

predilection for writing about a specific locale with American regional writer, Flannery O'Connor, whose story, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is one that I find the most compelling for it explores the central issues of her time and milieu: class and racism. In my story "The Girl WTBB," class is similarly explored between the characters, Mrs. Josol and Carlos; in "Dilemma," Grace and her roommate talk about the racist, Mrs. Williams. Likewise, as Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden noted in *Southeast Asian Writing in English*, in the twenty-first century, younger writers in the Philippines have often used regional settings, often in explicit contrast to city life in Manila (154). In the 21st century, women writers from the Visayas and Mindanao are actively using the Visayan language to affirm their ways of seeing and saying things. As one of them, I use Cebuano, the language used by the majority of the population of the Visayas and Mindanao, the central and southern Philippines respectively, partly to contribute to the movement of Philippine women writers who no longer wish to be silenced by the literary elites in the nation's capital in the north.

In writing my thesis, I was responding, albeit indirectly, to two literary traditions: Filipino and Asian-American literary traditions. Within the Filipino and the Asian-American literary traditions, there are diverse styles, and yet, there is an underlying interconnectedness. I may be considered as one who writes in the Filipino or Filipino American tradition since I draw on general knowledge of the Philippines, Filipino culture, and historical moments on which writers of this tradition draw from. For example, the depiction of the historic People Power Revolution of 1986 in my story, "Sacrifice," is reminiscent of Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* and Jose Dalisay, Jr.'s *Killing Time in a Warm Place*, novels set during the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. In reality, the Philippines is a major exporter of labor throughout the world. Hundreds of thousands of overseas Filipino workers, as they are officially called by the Philippine government, return home for their annual vacation. Hence, homecoming is a common theme in Philippine literature. It is portrayed in my story, "Dilemma." My exploration of this theme recalls other Filipino and Filipino American stories of the same theme, such as in Alfred Yuson's "A Balikbayan Christmas" and Carlos Bulosan's "Homecoming."

The earliest anthologies of writings by Asian Americans aimed to represent Asian Americans' perpetual search for the self in the U.S. where they wanted to represent themselves rather than having white American writers do it for them. The first anthology of Asian American literature, *Asian American Authors*, edited by Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas (1972), included only American writers from three Asian traditions: Chinese, Japanese and Filipino, giving priority to American-born authors ("Anthologies" 33). The second anthology, *Aiiieeee!. An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, edited by Frank Chin, et al., (1974) included the same three groups. David Hsin-fu Wand, editor of another anthology *Asian American Heritage* (1974), extended the field to include Koreans, South Pacific Islanders, and writers whose sensibilities had been formed in Asia. My stories share thematic and linguistic affinities with Asian American literary tradition, affinities that can ultimately be traced to experiences of Asians in America. Like Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan who have juxtaposed cultural and linguistic voices in their novels, *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* respectively, and capture the nuances of Chinese speech through their prose, I emulate the nuances of Filipino speech in my stories.

One of the stories in this collection, "Medevac Mission," is set in Hawai`i and has a few local words or Hawaiian Creole English in the dialogue. Since I draw from my experiences and observations living in Hawai`i, and use some Hawaiian Creole English just as other Hawai`i authors do, one could say that in "Medevac Mission," I may also be writing in the Hawaii literary tradition.

Writers and Texts

Three significant writers have influenced my thesis: Jhumpa Lahiri, Jamaica Kincaid, and James Joyce. I found Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* thought-provoking. Traces of Lahiri's influence can be seen in my stories particularly in images of Asian food, protest, and migration from East to West. Just as Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter," "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," ("When Mr. Pirzada CTD") and "Mrs. Sen," portray central characters preparing, cooking, or eating Indian food, all my stories in the collection show images of characters preparing, cooking or eating Filipino food. As a powerful cultural symbol, food connects immigrants to their culture and country of origin while living in a new country. Not only does food sustain life, it also symbolizes the joys

and challenges of togetherness and of life's feast. In like manner, Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada CD" and my "Sacrifice" offer the reader the opportunity to experience an important moment in the history of the people of Bangladesh and of the Philippines through the first person point of view of a young girl. While Lahiri chose a ten-year-old Indian American girl to tell her story, I wanted an eight-year-old Filipina girl to be my narrator. Choosing very young girls to tell these two stories about a civil war and a revolution makes the story less didactic. Furthermore, in Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent" and my story "Dilemma," the central character migrates to the East Coast of the U.S. with a work visa and they both suffer from a sense of cultural disorientation during their first few months in the U.S. Like Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter," my story "Dilemma" employs silences between the husband and wife main characters with a conflict at the heart of the relationship. But while Lahiri's story ends with the husband and wife separating, my story ends with a homecoming and hope of improving their relationship.

In addition, in my stories, there are also traces of Kincaid whose work resonates with me. Perhaps it is because we both spent our childhood on an island, and our former homelands were former colonies of superpowers. She and I also share a penchant for writing about life of adolescent girls and women on an island. Her short story collection *At the Bottom of the River* has influenced my thesis. While Kincaid's central young female character rebels against her mother, in my story, "Sacrifice," it is the young male character who rebels against his mother. Kincaid's "Girl" explores the experience of being young and female in a poor, island nation, Antigua, a former British colony. Similarly, the central character in my story, "The Girl WTBB," is young girl living on an island in the Philippines, a former U.S. colony.

Furthermore, in my stories, there are echoes of the canonical modernist, James Joyce. He spent his childhood on an island; so did I. His island-nation, Ireland, like the Philippines, was colonized by a powerful empire. And his lived experience, like mine, was steeped in the Catholic religion. Joyce's story, "Eveline," particularly inspired me to write about a woman conflicted about leaving her hometown for better opportunities in a foreign country. The main characters in "Eveline" and in my story "Dilemma" face a difficult decision: remain at home or embark on a new life in another country. While the

main characters in Joyce's stories have an epiphany at the end, my characters do not necessarily learn something significant at the end; in fact most of my stories are open-ended. His collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, has influenced my decision to write about my childhood home. Geographically, *Dubliners* begins and ends in the same spot; so does "Bohol and Beyond." In questioning rigid religious traditions in my story "Sacrifice" and critiquing the gossipmongers in "The Girl WTBB" and "Dilemma," I joined Joyce whose work also critiqued religious belief and the culture in which he lived. However, while Joyce envisioned *Dubliners* as a looking glass with which the Irish people could observe and study themselves, I only wished for "Bohol and Beyond" to be a text for the people of and from Bohol to see themselves in print, in literary fiction, for I know of no collection of short stories about them, about our lives. In addition, I also hope that the text will engage readers who are not from the Visayas region but wish to learn about the lives of its people and its culture. The title of Joyce's text, *Dubliners*, calls attention to the name and location of his home city, the setting of his stories. This choice of title and a passage in the "Introduction" to *Dubliners: A Norton Critical Edition* has influenced my choice of title for my thesis. In the "Introduction," Margot Norris wrote, "In such humble circumstances, thus, did *Dubliners* and beyond it James Joyce's prose masterpieces see their beginning in print" (xvii). Hence, the title of my thesis is "Bohol and Beyond."

And finally, an influence in my thesis especially at the planning stage was a critical text—Tillie Olsen's *Silences*. It inspired me to write about Filipino or Filipino-American women and girls and their struggles. As Maxine Hong Kingston put it, "Tillie Olsen helped those of us condemned to silence—the poor, racial minorities, women—find our voices" (qtd. in Olsen xxvi). The issues Olsen presented in this text are centrally important to me as a writer; for in these short stories, I attempt to give voice to those who have been formerly silenced. A common theme in Asian American fiction is silence. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, silence is both gendered and racially constituted. In the same way, in my story, "Sacrifice," the central character is silenced for she is forbidden from acting like a boy; and in "Dilemma," the central character is silenced when questioned by a racist colleague.

I wish to emphasize that though the stories reflect lives of Filipinos in the Philippines and in the U.S., I am not a spokesperson for the Filipinos or Filipino Americans. This collection of short stories is a work of fiction—an interplay of reality and imagination. Literary fiction is also a way to travel through the human heart. These stories explore transnational themes and cultures that transcend geographic boundaries; they were written with an eye to fostering connections. As Herbert Marcuse, eloquently argues, “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (qtd. in Whiteson x). It is my hope that these stories will open new vistas for readers and hence improve their understanding of people from underrepresented groups.

Bohol and Beyond

Sacrifice

“You were the first girl to see Joseph’s penis,” my friend Luz often teased me. It was February 1986, when she and I were eight. In our hometown between the mountains and the sea, there were no street names. The mailman had no problem; people knew at least three generations of families. And that was how it had been for centuries. On the main road where my family lived, coconut fronds and huge banana leaves hung like frayed banners in the front yards. And the throbbing sea was everywhere surrounding the island.

Joseph, who was Luz’s brother, was one year older than her and me. She had told me the week before that their cousin, who was ten, came to visit and talked to Joseph about what it was like to take the first step to be a man. Joseph did not understand what he was talking about so the cousin, after telling Luz to go away, pulled down his baggy shorts and showed Joseph his wound. “I’m no longer pisot; I’m a man,” the cousin said. That’s why Joseph and Luz’s father made an appointment for circumcision with Dr. Rosello, one of the town’s three physicians.

My three brothers—nine, eight, and six—also asked our father to take them for circumcision on the same day that Joseph had this procedure. My three brothers, wearing loose, oversized drawstring shorts, walked with Papa to the mom-and-pop store to buy a newspaper, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, for Papa to read at the doctor’s office. Mama and I left the house with them; we were going to church to attend the class for my first Holy Communion.

A variety of motor vehicles passed, but Papa hailed only a tartanilya, an ordinary horse carriage driven by an old cochero, who clucked his tongue or rang a bell to lead the horse. The tartanilya rolled over asphalt and potholes, past the town plaza, past the seaside municipal building, the front of which was a replica of the Parthenon of Athens. The exterior walls of the municipal building needed a fresh coat of eggshell-color paint, but after twenty years of martial law, it was not a priority. Likewise, the paint on the exterior of the town's nineteenth-century Gothic-style church was now grayish and bursting with cracks and blisters.

My three brothers waved to Joseph, who was riding a tricycle with its top down after his circumcision. We saw the frown, the look on Joseph's face, which affected my brothers' demeanor: suddenly they were quiet, pensive, anxious. In somebody's yard, a white pig, foraging, ignored my brothers' imitation of its grunts among the tangkong plants. Then came glimpses of Dr. Rosello's trellis with grapevines near the breadfruit tree. We all got off the tartanilya. Mama and I and walked a block to church.

While Joseph and my three brothers chose to have their tuli performed at Dr. Rosello's clinic on the first floor of his house, some of their friends went to the municipal clinic for free circumcision. The four boys had the procedure done during election week when there were no classes. But in the rural areas this rite of passage for prepubescent and adolescent boys and was traditionally done during Holy Week by the village shaman or a lay man with expertise in circumcision.

Earlier that day, our family maid, Nang Diding, was in my bedroom getting my laundry. She was distraught because she heard of the scheduled circumcision at the doctor's office without the traditional bath in the river. She grew up in the rural area, and was worried for my brothers. She had long accepted as fact what her elders and the men in her family had taught her—that the traditional bath in the river and the chewing of guava leaves that preceded the circumcision procedure actually decreased the amount of bleeding. Besides, it was common knowledge that the results of river-ritual circumcisions were aesthetically much better than those done by physicians.

My older brother told me that before they left his clinic, Dr. Rosello had given them sachets of sulphanylamide powder and instructed them and Papa on its proper use. Pieces of white cotton T-shirt fabric cut in five-inch circles and with a small hole in the

middle to allow for urination were given to Papa; the fabric was to be wrapped around the penile head and tied with cloth-strings. However, the doctor also told them that they could use the town's folk medicine--guava leaves.

In a metal pot over an open fire in my backyard, Joseph, with the supervision of his cousin, and the assistance of my brothers, brewed fresh leaves from the guava plants at the back of the house. And so it was that, when I came home and saw dark smoke emanating from the backyard, I proceeded directly to investigate.

“What are you guys doing?” I asked running toward the five boys.

“Nothing,” Mario, my oldest brother, said, signaling me to go away.

I paced in front of the boys. I appraised each newly circumcised penis with the fastidiousness of a drill sergeant, with the stance of a quality-control inspector. I watched my friend, Joseph, and my three brothers anointing their own freshly wounded penises. They were not embarrassed. They had gone through a rite of a passage, which every boy or young man on the island was proud of. They were no longer pisot.

From the kitchen, our maid Nang Diding spotted me in the backyard with the boys. She sprinted and pulled me away and took me to the kitchen. She continued making green papaya salad while explaining to me her relatives' belief that girls must not see any stage of the circumcision, otherwise the boy's scrotum will enlarge.

I asked, “Why did my brothers and Joseph have to suffer the pain of tuli?”

“So that they will be taller, healthier, and more intelligent.”

“That's not what Papa said.”

“What did he say?”

“Papa said it's a test of courage and the ability to tolerate pain. He also said it's good for my brothers to learn about sacrifice.”

“Isabel! Nang Diding! Is my brother still there?” Luz was calling from outside, near the kitchen door.

Nang Diding opened the door for Luz, and served us my favorite pastillas de leche. As I put the soft candy in my mouth, letting it melt on my tongue, I observed Nang Diding, who put her ears closer to the radio. Her new favorite station, Radio Veritas, was broadcasting the news after the Presidential election. Like Mama and Papa, Nang Diding

wanted the woman candidate, Cory Aquino, to win, but she lost. All the grownups talked about the election results, but Luz and I liked elections only because we didn't have school. Nang Diding said, "Hush. Girls, listen to the radio, to the bishop. He is talking in Manila, far away from here."

"Fraud, vote-buying, intimidation of voters, dishonest tabulation of the returns, harassment, and murder. We, the Filipino people, are obliged to correct the injustice done to us. We, the bishops, urge you to protest according to the Gospel of Christ, that is, in a peaceful, nonviolent way," the bishop said.

I listened to the bishop's voice, but as when I listened to the priest's sermon on Sundays, I didn't really understand what the bishop was talking about. Luz and I stared at each other openmouthed. We were done eating, so we both went to the living room to watch television, but Papa and Mama were watching news. Mama signaled us to keep quiet and have a seat.

Luz and I were not interested in watching the news. Instead, we went outside to check on our brothers, but they were not there. We sat on the wooden-bench swing near the veranda. It was there that Luz told me that her mother disapproved of my behavior—that I did not act like a proper girl, that I did not wear a white lace veil like other girls at church, that I wore jeans to church, which invited the devil and would cause a tail to grow on my butt. And worst of all, Luz's mother denounced my impudence for she, Nang Belen, had heard what I said at the churchyard, when Father Alberto blessed my forehead after I kissed his hand. He said to me, "Bless you, child. You will become a nun when you grow up, right?" And as usual, I told him, "No way!"

That night, after dinner, Papa and Mama went to the living room to listen to Radio Veritas. There was nothing to see on television, but my older brother, Mario, forced me to sit on the sofa with him because he wanted me to hear the important news on the radio, news that Papa and Mama were listening to. My two younger brothers were playing chess in the dining room. Papa turned up the volume. My brother whispered that the man talking on the radio was the leader of all the priests and nuns and bishops in the Philippines. His name was Cardinal Sin. He said, "I am requesting all the children of God to go to Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo, and protect Defense Minister Juan Ponce

Enrile, and General Ramos and the troops who had defected to the opposition, and recognize Cory Aquino as the country's legitimate leader.”

I didn't understand what Cardinal Sin was saying, and I wanted to play chess with my brothers, but Mario kept telling me to listen. I heard Cardinal Sin read the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi, whom I did not know; but I also heard him read the words of Jesus. I knew about Jesus. Cardinal Sin repeated the words “peaceful” and “nonviolent” many times. They played the song, “Ang Bayan Ko” (My Country), which I knew, and another song that I did not know—“Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching as to War.”

The next day, Nang Diding called me and Mario from the yard. Mama and Papa wanted us to see what was on television. There were so many people; they looked like ants. Papa said that there were more than one million, maybe even two million people, including thousands of priests and seminarians and nuns. They were on the road called Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Manila. I saw crosses blocking military tanks and police cars. There were people holding rosaries, giving them to the men on the tanks.

“Did you see that?” my brother asked. “the people are giving the soldiers on the tanks and armored vehicles some food, rosaries and garlands of flowers. Why?” Papa explained that it was part of nonviolent and peaceful demonstration. I covered my eyes when I saw soldiers shooting. Then when the shooting stopped, I saw a priest with a rosary and he sang the “Ave Maria.” My brother said that's why the soldiers stopped shooting; they did not want to shoot the crucifix hanging from the rosary.

After two days, Papa and Mama and everybody were celebrating. Cory Aquino was sworn in as the new president of the Philippines. And the Marcos family was flown to Hawai`i by the U.S. airplane. Papa and Mama said that the American president Reagan helped Marcos and his family go to Hawai`i. My brother said that it was called the “People Power Revolution.” That was the first time I heard of a revolution.

It was a long time ago, when the People Power Revolution happened. I was eight. Then I was nine. I was ten. I was eleven. I was twelve. Much had changed in the world.

Now at thirteen, I watched the news on television about the Persian Gulf War. I heard that American President George Bush and Gulf War Allies had just given Iraq twenty-four hours to begin withdrawal from Kuwait. Here at home, I heard President Cory Aquino saying that the Philippines had sent 200 medical personnel to assist coalition forces in the liberation of Kuwait.

Joseph still had a lean basketball player's body and sad-looking eyes, but he had grown much taller than me. He was now fourteen. He had left his childhood behind for his voice had changed. There was something raging in his blood and hair sprouted on his face. His body was becoming that of a man.

One Saturday afternoon, Joseph and I were sitting on the branch of the manzanitas tree in my front yard.

"Joseph, what is wrong with your voice?" I teased him, swinging my legs.

"You can see Mactan Island from here," he said. But his voice cracked.

"What was that? You sound funny." I sang high like a bird, low like a cow, and something like a pig in between.

He jumped silent from the tree. I followed him. He signaled to his watch indicating it was time for him to go and play the organ at church. It was a strange moment when I became conscious of being separated from Joseph by gender. I, too, had entered adolescence.

Joseph now had a strange effect on me. At school, it was impossible to think normally when I saw him in the hallways or when he was nearby. He crept into my thoughts to the extent that I couldn't get him out again. One time, he was listening to me and Luz discussing our history paper about the courage of our island's hero, Dagohoy, the leader of the longest revolt against the Spanish colonizers, and I wondered out loud whether Dagohoy's courage was a result of circumcision; Joseph smiled and patted my head, and all my sensible thoughts evaporated.

Often, I feared Joseph could hear my heart beating. I felt myself turning red with embarrassment when he so much as passed by anywhere on campus. Even just to talk about Joseph was something I yearned for. When I was studying or doing my homework,

I stared out into space. On days when he walked with Luz and me from school, I secretly wished our houses were a gazillion kilometers away. It was inexplicable. Surely, we were bound together for life.

I was beginning to spend less time with my brothers. I stopped wearing baggy khaki boy's shorts. I was acting like a thirteen-year-old girl. I no longer climbed trees with Joseph and my three brothers. "Little girls do not climb trees," my grandmother used to tell me. Lola, as I called her, had told me that it was ungodly for girls to lift themselves into branches as a monkey would. I had heard the despairing sigh of worried relatives when they saw me up in a tree with the boys, stuffing my belly with manzanitas, chicos, or mountain apples. I was not supposed to be playing basketball with them. Or going fishing or crabbing in the river nearby, coming home wet with my shorts wet, with Joseph and my brothers running behind me, dangling a wriggling fish or an earthworm from my hand. I was not supposed to chase and torment the salamander with a stick even though I saw it eating a chicken from our backyard.

"Finally you're acting like a girl, not a boy," Mama said one day. "Your Lola and aunts had been worried about you, now that you're a dalaga. So act like a lady."

Upon hearing that, I set off at full speed, in defiance.

For me, Luz and Joseph's birthday parties were the highlight of each year. At Joseph's fourteenth birthday party, I prayed to be seated close to him at the table. I didn't use to care where I sat. After all, I was used to being around boys. I had brothers and tons of boy cousins. But this year, being with Joseph was different. I even noticed the little girls at church; they would go to the choir section where Joseph would be playing the organ, and the girls looked up to him, smiled at him as if he were a prince or Superman. The little girls would sit closest to the organ, their chins on their hands, their eager eyes on Joseph, playing. He would merely smile and tell them to go back to their seats.

My thirteen-year-old body had changed while I was busy with school and my extra-curricular activities. I was the leader of the church youth choir. And for the interscholastic competition for singing, I had to spend time rehearsing with my music

teacher accompanied by Joseph on the piano or his guitar. We practiced every weekend at school for two months to compete against other high schools on the island.

Joseph and I spent our free time oscillating between childhood and adolescence. There were times when we chased each other at the school grounds, or at the beach behind the church, or raced to the top of the church's bell tower scaring the pigeons, just as we did all these years. At other times we hid and kissed behind the ferns at the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes next to the church.

Luz had told me that her mother had been scolding Joseph because of rumors that he was dating me. Their mother supposedly warned Joseph to stay away from any girl. Luz said that for many nights, dinner-table talk grew sharper as days passed. Soon the tensions grew. Not a day passed without their mother scolding Joseph about the dangers of going out with girls. Every few days there was a reconciliation at their father's insistence, with sincere hugs and remorse. Joseph would agree to his mother's plans for him, then the next day, he would say he did not mean it. He could not do it. Again, the quarrels and hurtful words would resume. When I asked Luz what Joseph said during these arguments, she said that at one time Joseph had screamed, "You don't have the right to ruin my life!" When I asked Joseph about this, he refused to talk about it, except to say that he wished his mother were not this way.

Aware of what was expected of proper teenagers in our town, we realized that we could not act freely in front of others. Joseph and I made sure we did not walk hand in hand as we did when we were children. At church when his parents were present, Joseph and I ignored each other so as not to attract attention. In the last three months of school, Joseph and I loved each other with the depth and certainty that only he and I knew.

In June, Luz had her thirteenth birthday party at her house. She asked me to arrive three hours early so I could help her prepare something. I was waiting for Luz on the veranda of her house when her mother appeared holding her novena booklets, rosary and her handbag. She was on her way to church.

"Luz should be out soon. You know, of course, that Joseph is not here." Nang Belen said.

"No, I didn't. Where is Joseph?" I asked.

She did not look in my eye when she said, “Joseph has left the island. He’s gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?” I asked.

“Manila.”

“Manila?” I screamed.

“Of course Manila,” she said, as if he had not traversed the sea, but just walked to the market. “Joseph has been planning to attend the San Carlos Seminary in Manila from a long time ago.”

“When did he go to Manila?”

“This morning.”

“He did not tell me.”

“You think he tells you everything?” Nang Belen said. “It should be obvious that my son does not tell you anything. He has gone to Manila to become a priest.”

I was feeling dizzy. Her words did not make sense to me.

“The Catholic Church needs men like my son. Men of good character and courage. God is calling men like my son to save all of you sinners.”

“Imagine, a priest. Him!” I stood there wondering, But would the sun rise if I could not see Joseph? Then I became angry, but silent.

“Well, goodbye,” Nang Belen said. “Why don’t you go inside?”

The moment Nang Belen left, I was already gone. I was running fast. I needed to escape from there. From shame. From pain. I wanted to be away from her way of thinking. I agonized over why there was no way of changing things. And I ran on, along the coast where the sea breeze blew.

The Girl with the Blue Basin

The first time he saw her walking toward the river, she looked regal as she balanced on her head a blue laundry basin that caused her hips to sway. Whose clothes are in the basin, he wondered. Her white T-shirt, white skirt, and her long neck made her look like a swan. He had just relocated to this barangay. It was closer to the sea than his former home on the mountainside of the island. On his way to the market, he couldn't help following her, though it was difficult to be discreet since he was carrying a basket of fluttering chickens.

When she passed the chapel, she held on to the basin as she bowed her head for a moment then followed a path between high walls of trees that led down to the river. At the riverbank, the leaves of banana and bamboo trees rustled when a warm, damp breeze blew. The water shimmered as it splashed the river rocks. She placed the blue basin next to a boulder. Before starting to wash the laundry, she greeted and chatted with the other women and girls. He thought, How beautiful she is!

He had moved to Liboron to be closer to the mercado, where there were occasional jobs for strong young men. Unlike most of the town's eighteen-year-olds, he was not in college, though he had graduated third in his class of two hundred. Now, he could barely afford to pay his share of the rent for the tiny bamboo and nipa-thatched hut he shared with six job seekers from other barangays. The hut was located far from the neighboring houses. At first he had worked at the lumber store in town, but since the Philippine economy declined, nobody was buying lumber anymore. At the bridge, he had

observed the melancholy return of fishermen's canoes and pumpboats when the catch had been meager. Without a permanent job, he went to the mercado and to the river bank every day with hopes that somebody would hire him to lift or carry something, like sacks of copra, baskets of live chickens or a whole pig. For though he, like most townspeople, had long accepted his place in the town's social order, he did not succumb to despair.

A week later, while walking at night toward his hut, he heard music—somebody strumming the guitar and a girl singing. He wondered: Who's playing that music? Who's singing? That song seems familiar. He walked toward the source of the music, to a small wooden house with galvanized iron corrugated roof. Now it was clear. The girl was singing a very old song, one his uncle used to sing to him when he was a little boy. It was the theme from the movie *The Man from La Mancha*:

This is my quest, to follow that star,

No matter how hopeless, no matter how far. . .

It was the same song, "The Impossible Dream," his class sang during their graduation ceremony two years ago—after their indomitable English teacher, Mr. Romero, a Spanish mestizo, required them to read a chapter of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* and watch the film.

He stopped in front of the house where there was music and leaned against the hibiscus hedge as he listened. When the music stopped, he strained his upper body and neck to see who it was. He peeped through the hibiscus hedge, then through the open window, and his soul exclaimed, It's her! The swan, the girl with the blue basin. He was breathless, bewitched. He sensed something magical and fragile. He wanted to go in the house, and introduce himself to the girl. But he caught himself and paced back and forth near the hedges, secretly listening to the girl sing.

The next day, when she came home after choir practice at the parish church in town, nobody was around. Her older brother was with his friends playing basketball at the Cultural Center, and his wife was visiting her parents a few houses away. The girl gathered the clothes of her customers and piled them into the blue basin. She rolled her old Girl Scout of the Philippines neckerchief into a flat tangerine-colored coil and placed it on her head, before placing the basin with laundry on top.

As she walked toward the river, she passed a few women hanging clothes on lines tied to banana or coconut trees in their yards. They greeted each other and smiled. Across the street, her neighbors' two sons—a seven-year-old and a nine-year-old—called to her, but she was concentrating on memorizing “The Gettysburg Address” for an oral exam the following day. The brothers were carrying tirador. The seven-year-old aimed at a maya bird on a caimito tree nearby. A quick snap of the tirador's rubber band and a small stone flew toward the bird. The boys were laughing, jumping, and congratulating each other for excellent shooting as they raced toward the caimito tree. The nine-year-old held a dead bird with fresh blood on its chest and face.

“Ate, look at what I shot! One eye is knocked out!” the nine-year old called out to her.

“Oy! That's enough killing. Be kind to birds,” she said.

“But it's fun, Ate. It's just a game,” the nine-year old said.

She heard another snap of the tirador's rubber band. When she saw the stone skimming along the street toward her, she attempted to kick it, but she stepped on the stone and tripped, and she held on to the basin tighter lest she drop her customers' clothes. But she fell and so did the basin. At first, she lay there shocked. The two boys asked if she needed help. She replied, “I'm okay. Go on. Play, but don't hurt birds.” She saw her customers' clothes: they were still piled in the basin, which was sitting upright. She sighed with relief. As she started to get up, she felt a stabbing pain in her left knee and right wrist. Nonetheless, she knelt on her right knee, placed the coil on her head, and picked up the basin full of clothes. She brought the basin onto her head, getting up at the same time. She tottered as she walked limping, then stopped after two steps. “Arai!” she cried, and closed her eyes from pain. Her skinned knee and hand felt raw. When she opened her eyes, a young man with a look of concern on his face and a petroleum-can bucket for fetching water was in front of her.

“Please allow me.” He raised his arms to take the basin of clothes from her head. He suggested that she hold on to him to brace herself. When she nodded, he took the blue basin from her head and put it on the ground. “I'm Carlos Gallego from barangay Sohoton.”

“Remy Garcia.”

Carlos was wearing faded denim shorts and a green T-shirt. His wispy bangs and straight black hair framed a brown face with a warm smile. He told her he was one of the guys renting Nong Andoy's old hut, which was right behind them. At the moment, its yellowish brown bamboo walls and stairs seemed to sparkle from the hot late-afternoon light.

When the women gossiping at the clothesline across the street noticed something that was fodder for gossip—Carlos offering his white handkerchief to Remy—they made a bet: will she or will she not?

“No, thanks,” she said, running her fingers on her scraped knee. “The blood will soon be dry.”

The gossiping women pretended not to pay attention.

“My handkerchief is old, but it's clean,” Carlos explained. “Wipe the blood from your knee and hand, please.” When she still refused, he smiled—then threatened to lift her and carry her to Dr. Corpuz's clinic.

“Don't you dare!” She took his handkerchief and wiped the blood from her knee and wrist.

The gossiping women at the clothesline cheered, but softly lest Remy and Carlos be embarrassed.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Carlos said.

“Nice meeting you. Bye. I must hurry. I need to finish washing my customers' clothes.”

“You can do your washing later when you're not in pain.”

“No. They need them today before sunset. Besides, I have to do my homework.”

He offered to help her do the laundry, but first he wanted to try something he learned from his grandmother, who was a respected herbolario, to help her knee and wrist heal. When she agreed, he helped her sit on his bucket, which was turned upside down. Then he rushed to his hut. Within a minute or so, Carlos returned with a kasla leaf compress and small bottle of oil that smelled of peppermint. He used a couple of drops of the oil on her knee and wrist, which were already a bit swollen.

Seated on Carlos's upturned bucket, Remy watched the muscular young man, kneeling on the ground, apply the leaf compress on her knee, and tie it with his handkerchief. Sunshine glazed his bangs. A thoughtful silence fell. When he finished, a tiny bead of perspiration was about to drop from his thick eyebrows and suddenly he looked up at her face. His eyes—dark brown like the roasted cacao beans from her backyard—seemed to read hers as she unabashedly returned his gaze. When she felt herself blushing, she looked away. She remembered her customers' clothes in the basin and quickly stood up. She thanked Carlos again and reminded him that she must hurry to the river because she could not afford to lose her customers.

She cried in pain, "Arai!" as she took one step.

Carlos hailed an approaching pedicab. She held on to his shoulder as he assisted her into the pedicab. He moved the bucket to the back of the bamboo fence of his hut, then returned to the pedicab with the basin of clothes, which he carried on his lap during the ride. When Carlos suggested that Remy should go home to rest her knee and wrist and he would do the laundry himself, she protested.

"No! Definitely not. I will not allow a stranger to do my customers' laundry."

"Then, why can't you consider me a friend? Surely, in your barangay, a friend is allowed to help a friend in pain."

"But we just met!"

"So? New friends can become good friends," said Carlos.

"I guess. Friends," she said. "But, I will only let you help me wash the clothes. That means I have to be there, washing. Remember that."

"Where to, Boss?" the driver asked.

"To the river," Carlos said.

I like his voice, Remy thought.

Remy and Carlos chose a spot near a little shed—a roof of dried nipa palm leaves supported at its four corners by bamboo posts—in somebody's backyard next to a hedge of white gardenia, rosal. "This is the best spot," she told him. For there was no coconut tree. She didn't want a palm frond or a coconut to fall on her new friend's head. The tsismosa women, who were at the clothesline earlier, were now at the river doing more washing. Other women and children were squatting on large boulders, washing, raising

and lowering the garments and linen into the water, beating them with a small palo-palo, a cloth-paddle.

Moments later, Carlos insisted that Remy rest and just keep him company while he finished washing. They sat next to each other on the low rocks with their feet in the water. The tsismosas, who were trying not to be obvious looking at the two, were pleased. The water ran over smooth white and gray river stones, of various sizes. The sound of the water flowing blended with the laughter and chatter of the people of Liboron. When Carlos stood up on a mosaic of river stones, Remy exclaimed, "Watch out! Those stones are slippery!" He told her not to worry. He had worked in construction, walked on planks of wood between scaffoldings high above the ground.

"Do you ever get nervous when you're working like that?"

"I used to. When I started working, helping my father and my uncles with odd jobs when I was ten," said Carlos.

Remy told him that she was an orphan. Her parents had died when she was twelve years old. She had lived with her older sister the past five years on the neighbor island, Cebu, but her sister got a job as a live-in maid in Saudi Arabia. Remy returned to Bohol, which she still considered her home, and was now living with her older brother and his wife.

Remy passed the blue bar soap from the basin to Carlos. With her left hand, she helped him pound the garments with the palo-palo, but being right-handed she found it difficult. Besides, the ache from her right wrist and her knee lingered. Carlos looked worried when he saw her rub her throbbing knee. Remy tried to continue pretending that it was just a mild discomfort, but it was obvious now that she was in agony. Carlos did not even ask her if she wanted to go home. Before she knew it, the pedicab driver, who just dropped off a passenger, was carrying her basin of clothes while Carlos was helping her walk to the pedicab.

The pedicab slowed down and stopped a few feet from her house. Carlos paid the fare. Remy attempted to get out, but had difficulty extricating herself and the blue basin. Carlos helped her. The pedicab left and when the sound of its motor could no longer be heard, Carlos and Remy could hear the stream and birds chirping. Carlos carried the

basin to the top of the stairs. He held out to Remy a short-stemmed white gardenia and said, "Picked this for you. I hope you get better soon."

Relishing the fragrant flower, she whispered, "Salamat."

"You're welcome. Please rest," he said before leaving.

She watched him from her window until he was out of sight.

Three months later, Remy and Carlos were considered a couple by the regulars at the river. One time, Carlos brought two green coconuts and two straws to their spot at the riverbank. When they took a break from washing, they sipped a coconut water as they talked. Remy had learned that it had been two years since Carlos graduated from Santa Cruz High School. When he emphasized that he was able to attend high school only by working part-time as a part of the janitorial staff, Remy told him that her older brother, Isagani, now worked as the new head of maintenance at the high school. There was no public high school within forty kilometers from their town. The national government under martial law had no funds, the islanders were told. Remy was grateful that Santa Cruz High School offered free tuition and fees for families of faculty and staff; otherwise, she could not go to high school.

"I want my five younger sisters to go to high school," Carlos said. "That's why I decided to work, instead of go to college. My two brothers can work like I did while attending high school, but my five sisters cannot."

A look of gloom crossed Carlos's face. Remy felt a surge of empathy and tried to resist a sudden urge to give him a hug. She understood what he was feeling. He turned his face toward her and their eyes met. Then for the first time, they held hands. They wished for a cool breeze and moved into the shade under the giant talisay tree, but only warm wind was blowing on this humid day. Remy grabbed the old Visayan Lifestyle magazine she carried in her blue basin, the magazine that served sometimes as a cushion and sometimes as a fan. A loose sheet of magazine advertising supplement was blown on the ground as Remy fanned herself. Carlos picked up the sheet of paper. He glanced at the advertisement for Green Papaya Soap with the image of the famous French-Filipina model holding a bar of soap above the caption: "For a beautiful lady."

"I'm going to create something for my lady," Carlos said flirtatiously.

“Did I give you permission to call me that?”

“What? My lady? Oh, so--rry. You told me you liked Shakespeare.”

“But I do.”

“I guess—not as much as I do.”

Carlos made a paper boat. He folded the paper, ran a finger down to sharpen the crease, a fold here, another fold there.

“And voila! A boat for you,” Carlos said, handing the paper boat to Remy. “Let’s launch your boat.”

“Our boat,” Remy said.

“Where do you want our boat to go?” Carlos asked.

“Somewhere where there is a better life,” Remy said.

“That would be nice. Should we make a wish before we launch our boat?”

“Yes. To us! To our future!” Remy said. She handed the paper boat to Carlos.

“To your future! To the graduating class!” Carlos said, putting the paper boat on the river.

“I meant us, you and me, our future,” Remy said teasingly. Carlos’s face brightened. For like most Filipinos, they did not choose between despair and hope; they took both.

The swift movement of the water made their boat travel faster than anticipated. Some naked children bathing excitedly grabbed the boat and soon it was out of sight.

“What did you plan to do after graduation?” Carlos asked.

“I’m not sure. I just want to get it over with, graduation ceremony, I mean.”

She told him that she was apprehensive about singing solo during graduation ceremony, that her music teacher assigned her to sing the solo part of the graduating class song.

“You mean, ‘The Impossible Dream?’”

“How did you know?” asked Remy.

“I have spies,” Carlos said, winking.

“Oh. So, what do you plan to do now that there’s no job in town?” asked Remy.

“I’m going on a boat,” Carlos said.

“I mean seriously.”

“I’m serious,” Carlos said. “I plan to join the Merchant Marine. I have this flyer that I got from the recruiter I met at the mercado.”

“You think that will solve your problem?”

“I’ll be away six months, maybe a year at a time. But at least it’s a permanent job,” replied Carlos.

“A stepping stone to success?” Remy said.

“I don’t know. It’s not like I have better prospects here,” Carlos said. “I’m saving money for the employment agency fee, and other expenses to process all the paperwork.”

Carlos did not rely on chance for the improvement of his life. He had yet to get used to his new part-time job at the dockside warehouse, with its stifling air, the heaps of sacks, and the stench of moldy copra.

“How about you? What are your plans?”

“I will go to college to study nursing,” Remy replied.

“Do you think you’ll like nursing?”

“No. I’m afraid of blood and I don’t like being in a clinic.”

“So, why become a nurse?”

“Because I don’t want to be a maid, a servant. I have aunts and cousins who are working as nurses in Europe, and America. They work for a hospital and they are doing well.”

“That’s good to know.”

“In the meantime, I will be sewing T-shirts for an export company.”

“What? Where?”

“Right after graduation. I will be sewing at home.”

“Is that what you want to do?” asked Carlos.

“As soon as I can save enough money, I will go to nursing school.”

“I hope you’re not doing it for somebody else.”

“Listen to you. You’re the one sacrificing for your five sisters,” said Remy.

“It was a hard choice, but I believe it’s worth it,” Carlos said.

“I really admire you for it. I want you to know that.”

Carlos smiled. It was a sad smile that formed wrinkles at his eyes. For early that day, Carlos had been asked by the overseer of the cargador, the marketplace porters, to go

to the residence of the wealthy matron, Mrs. Josol, who promised to pay a large sum of money for a single job.

By mid-afternoon, after helping Remy with the laundry, Carlos went to the residence of Mrs. Josol. It was known locally as the “the big house,” owned for a century now by the Josol clan, the barangay’s elites. Although it had been renovated and expanded since Mrs. Josol started receiving remittances from her two sons and three daughters who worked overseas as nurses and medical technologists, it still had a backyard cesspool, which needed to be emptied by a tanker, instead of a more modern septic tank. In their barangay, there was no connection to the municipal sewer system. “It has worked for four generations of my family’s poop and pee, why change?” was her usual response to any suggestion of upgrading her cesspool to a modern septic tank. She became even more resistant to change after she heard from her friend, a nurse who had moved to New York. Mrs. Josol was now fond of telling anybody who would listen, “My friend who lives in New York told me that on the street where she lives on Long Island, all the houses still use cesspools for their waste. So why should I change my backyard cesspool, ha? It’s just like living in New York.”

The antique 22k-gold cross pendant with emeralds and diamonds that Mrs. Josol accidentally dropped in her toilet the night before was an heirloom. It belonged to her beloved grandmother. This was what she wanted Carlos to find. It was now valued at 200,000 pesos. It held the image of the crucified Jesus and had been blessed by the Archbishop. Losing it would mean bad luck and doom for the owner and the owner’s family. Mrs. Josol was not worried about its effect on her adult sons and daughters since they were all living abroad, and surely, bad luck did not travel that far. She was anxious only about its effect on her and her husband’s well being. Most of all, she was concerned about its effect on her other source of income, her coconut plantation.

Carlos was not aware that while he was at the river with Remy that day, Mrs. Josol had hired plumber, who failed numerous attempts to find the cross pendant in the toilet and house pipes for four hours. The plumber told Mrs. Josol that it might have dropped all the way to the cesspool. He also disclosed to Mr. and Mrs. Josol that he could not work at her cesspool to retrieve her cross pendant because he was not specially trained for it and he did not have the special equipment and gear for the job. The plumber

explained that decomposing human waste in the cesspool produced dangerous gases including methane, which could kill a person in seconds.

During his meeting with Mrs. Josol that afternoon, a few minutes after the plumber left, Carlos was understandably hesitant to jump into the cesspool. And yet he could not think of another job available now that would satisfy both his wallet and his heart. After a long pause he solemnly said, "I have no special training, but I will do it." A month's salary for a one-day job was a good deal. It would pay for this trimester's tuition for his two sisters. For a moment, Remy's graduation song reverberated in his mind: "*To be willing to march into Hell, for a Heavenly cause.*"

After meeting with Mrs. Josol, Carlos went back to Remy's house to help her with her Pre-Calculus homework. He brought puto maya, sweet sticky rice, still warm from his kitchen. Remy had a mango she bought from the mercado. When they finished with Pre-Cal, they cleared the table. Carlos served the puto maya while Remy got a knife. They sat next to each other. She cut the heart-shaped mango and held it to Carlos, saying, "See, it's like a woman's heart. It's tender and sweet, but in the middle it's hard."

"Are you hinting--you have hard feelings?"

"No. I'm saying sometimes a heart needs to be hard, tough, in order to survive, to carry on. My older sister told me that."

"For a while there, I thought I was listening to an old woman."

"You don't like old women?"

"Oh, I would be the happiest man on earth, Remy, if you were my old woman."

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not. It's true you know. I'd be the happiest man, if you became my old woman. I'd die happy even if I died soon after."

"Don't joke like that, Carlos!" Remy said, touching his arm.

He chuckled. Then he stood up. He gently led Remy a few steps away from the bench. He hugged her; he hoped she couldn't hear his wildly beating heart. He whispered, "I don't want to leave you; I don't want to join the Merchant Marines."

"But what else can we do? How are we going to live?" Remy said, embracing him.

“I’m not sure. I’ll work harder,” Carlos said. The church bells started ringing for the Angelus. Carlos noticed the darkening sky. “I better get going. It smells like it’s going to rain soon.”

“Wait, take my umbrella.”

“No, thanks. I don’t need it,” Carlos said. “Oh, by the way, I’ll be working at Mrs. Josol’s house tomorrow. Nong Fidel and Nong Asyong will be helping me. I should be here by four. Four fifteen, the latest.” He went down the rickety stairs of Remy’s house and took a breath of air. He could smell hints of lemonsito and kalachuchi that grew in Remy’s yard. Perched on the old avocado tree, the crows cawed and increased their deafening chatter as though agitated, when they saw him walking away from the house. The breeze roused the bamboo plants to screech and groan.

Carlos walked toward his hut. He felt a drop of rain, then another, so he hurried. There were other people walking, who were also in a hurry. On the glass wall of a shop window, he caught a glimpse of himself and the other pedestrians. There were folks definitely dressed more poorly than he was, but also those who were definitely wealthier. Nevertheless, he felt confident and hopeful. He thought, With God’s help and with hard work, Remy and I can make it together, forever. As he picked up the pace, he recalled the lyrics of the song Remy had been practicing:

*And the world will be better for this,
That one man, scorned and covered with scars,
Still strove, with his last ounce of courage
To reach—the unreachable star.*

The day after, Carlos started working at the Josol’s backyard after lunch when the assistants, two middle-aged men, Nong Fidel and Nong Asyong, arrived. Carlos crouched on the wood planks placed on top, which was now opened for this purpose. The cesspool was a pit sixteen feet deep and twelve feet in diameter, lined with cinder blocks laid on their sides and held together by concrete. With its cleanout pipe, a concrete cap, which extended above ground, was used to cover the cesspool. Nong Asyong could not stand the smell near the open cesspool. After five minutes of standing there to assist Carlos, Nong Asyong said, “I can’t stand it. Baho-a man ni! Oh, the stink!” He kept grumbling

about the “no smoking” warning for the risk of explosion from the methane gas from the sewage. Eventually, he said, “Pare Fidel, you stay here with the boy, I like go somewhere, smoke one cigarillo.”

Nong Fidel stayed with Carlos and held the flashlight to illuminate the cesspool. Carlos held a long bamboo pole with a net at the end, which he used to scoop sewage. Carlos yelled, “Nong Fidel, I think I see it! I see it in the net!” But when they looked closer, they realized it was not a pendant. After a while, Nong Fidel tried to convince Carlos to stop the search and tell Mrs. Josol he could not find the pendant, but Carlos didn’t want to disappoint Mrs. Josol. He continued searching.

When Carlos did not show up at Remy’s house at 4:15 P.M. as promised, Remy was agitated. To divert her from worrying, she got her blue basin and sorted her customers’ laundry. She found a torn sock. She threaded a needle, but after sewing a few stitches she pricked her finger. “Arai! What’s wrong with me today?” She walked to the window to see if Carlos was on his way to her house.

Remy waited an hour before telling her brother, Isagani, she was going to Mrs. Josol’s house. Her brother, still believing it was improper for her to be walking unchaperoned after sunset, accompanied her to the other side of the barangay. Besides, he needed to buy some *tuba* from the store. Remy walked so fast that Isagani could hardly keep up with his younger sister. It was after six and there was hardly anybody on the street.

When they reached the center of the barangay, however, they saw a crowd of people on the street, gossiping among themselves, in front of Mrs. Josol’s house. Some neighbors made toilet jokes; some merely listened and laughed.

Near the gate, Remy and her brother spotted the barangay kapitan talking with Mr. Josol at the foyer.

“I wonder what’s happening,” Isagani said.

Remy moved closer to the gate and saw that Nong Fidel and Nong Asyong were also talking with the barangay kapitan. “It’s Carlos,” she told her brother.

“How do you know?”

“Female instinct,” Remy said. She was worried. With her brother following her, she pushed her way through the throng of people and rushed toward the foyer. She asked Nong Fidel and Nong Asyong where Carlos was.

“Carlos didn’t want to give up the search for the damned cross pendant,” Nong Fidel said. “I had to use the toilet inside the house. So I left Carlos at the cesspool for maybe five minutes, maybe eight. But when I went back, *porbida!* I shouldn’t have left. I should have peed right there.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Remy.

“I ran back to the cesspool when I heard Pare Fidel scream, like he’d seen a ghost, a *santilmo*, or something,” Nong Asyong said. “When I got there, *ai*, *Susmaryosep!* Pare Fidel was speechless, pointing to the bottom of the cesspool. I looked down there, and what I saw? Carlos, floating face down.”

Remy could only gasp and hug her brother.

“Why didn’t you pull him up?” asked her brother.

“The rope, the one tied around his waist, the other end of that rope was submerged, so how can we pull him up?” Nong Asyong said.

“I prayed that Carlos was alive, that he had only fainted, like those women who fainted during Latin mass at church during Holy Week,” Nong Fidel said.

Remy listened. Their words were a jolt to her senses. She began to feel pressure weighing down on her. She heard Mr. Josol and her brother telling her to sit on the chair. Strength ebbed from her muscles. She noticed the fading stars floating in the sky. Then she felt as though her eyes were being forced to close.

The barangay kapitan approached the crowd outside the gate, and suggested to a few young men that perhaps they could help. But the young men, thinking the cesspool was the last place where they wanted to die, eyed one another. They said they had prior commitments and left. The barangay kapitan then suggested that somebody get a fireman.

The barangay did not have a fire truck, but the fireman arrived with a long ladder in a pick-up truck. The fireman carried the ladder to the cesspool, and put it in. The fireman asked someone to bring a strong wooden pole. Soon, a neighbor came with a long pole, “Here, I use this to skewer a pig, to cook *lechon* for *fiesta*.” The fireman took the pole. He stepped on the top of the ladder, which was now leaning on a wall of the

cesspool. He tried to fish Carlos out of the cesspool. It might have worked if he were helping a conscious drowning man in a swimming pool. But Carlos was not conscious. The fireman then tried to use the end of the pole as though it were a hook to pull the rope that was tied around Carlos's waist, but it didn't work. Pinching their own noses, Nong Fidel, Nong Asyong, Mr. Josol, and the barangay kapitan stood near the cesspool and watched. "I need to use something else," the fireman said, gasping for fresh air. "I need a strong rope."

Mr. Josol came back with their forty-foot clothesline. The fireman, carrying the rope, climbed down the ladder to get closer to Carlos's body. Once again, Nong Fidel, Nong Asyong, Mr. Josol, and the barangay kapitan kept a vigil close to the cesspool. With the rope, the fireman made a loop—a lasso. He held his breath and threw the lasso down. After a while, the fireman managed to secure the loop of rope around Carlos's unconscious body. He rushed back to the top of the cesspool. Now out of the cesspool, safe from methane gas, the fireman started to breathe again. With assistance from the four men, he pulled Carlos to the top. They laid Carlos's body on the ground. Nong Fidel immediately removed the rope. Nong Asyong hosed Carlos.

When Remy came to, she felt weak. She was confused at first, but her brother explained what happened as they followed the sound of voices into the backyard. They reached the cesspool as the fireman finished checking the body: Carlos was dead.

The fireman explained to Remy, to her brother, and the others present that methane gas and hydrogen sulfide in cesspools could kill a man in a few minutes. "Carlos should have used a self-contained breathing apparatus," he said.

Remy was dumbstruck. She covered her face with her hands.

Among the people gathered in front of the house, a variety of rumors circulated about Carlos's fate. A tsismosa spread a rumor that Carlos had become frustrated at being poor and had decided to drown himself in the cesspool. "Suicide. Sigurado ko," she said.

"Ai, Susmaryosep! God bless him," responded a grandmother, making the sign of the cross.

Another tsismusa proclaimed, "Carlos must have proposed marriage and was rejected by Remy. I don't blame her. How could a young man like him support a family? Where to get jobs, bi? You can't cook love. So what to feed the family, ha?"

The Josols' maid placed a Petromax lamp at the gate where the neighbors were gathered. Mosquitoes were feasting on people's limbs, necks and ears, so the Josols provided the coils, Lion-Tiger mosquito killer. "Somebody must send a message to the boy's parents and family," Nong Fidel said. A message was immediately sent through a pedicab driver. The Josols' maid and houseboy distributed some brown dead coconut fronds, which they twisted and tied into tight bundles to make torches so the neighbors could find their way home in the dark. When her brother helped light Remy's torch, a fine drizzle began to fall. The people felt light, lazy raindrops. One of the tsismosa women announced, "You know, when somebody had just died and it rains, it means that the dead one had some unfinished business and was not yet ready to depart from this world."

On the day of the funeral, her brother and his wife made sure that Remy followed the tradition of passing through smoke while still in the cemetery. The people believed that this ritual separated the spirits of the dead from the bodies of the living. After the funeral there were nine days of novenas, rosary, litanies, and Latin prayers at the house of Carlos's family. Every night at Carlos's house was a mini-fiesta of socializing and eating. After the prayers, Remy discreetly said goodbye to the family for she did not feel like talking or eating. Misty stars glimmered in the sky on her way home accompanied by her brother, but she did not see them.

Medevac Mission

Leah tried to suppress a sigh. Her older brother, Edwin, had just phoned to say that in a few days, he was leaving for an aeromedical evacuation mission in Afghanistan. It was Halloween, and she knew traffic would be bad due to the parade in Waikiki at night. She was running late for her graduate seminar at the University of Hawai`i, so she told him she would call later. She didn't tell him her thoughts on the risks of this Hawai`i Air National Guard mission, or her brother would have talked philosophically and repeated what she called his mantra: We must venture out into the unknown world to live fully. Her brother always pointed out her predilection for abstract theorizing, and advised her to forget her ex-fiancé, and get on with her life.

Leah's tiny apartment was ideally located on the seventh floor, high enough to have a view of the Ko'olau Mountains. As she rushed back to her desk, she had a glimpse of the rainbow. She clicked on her presentation slides for the Asia-Pacific Conference at the East-West Center and mumbled, "Just like Edwin to do that—tell me he's going on a mission in a war zone as though he were only telling me he was on his way to Foodland to get his favorite lomi-lomi salmon." Once, when she confronted him about this nonchalance toward his previous deployments and missions abroad, he'd responded, "What d'you like, a tsunami warning siren?"

She had no time to eat a meal, so she munched on a chocolate-covered macadamia nut as she analyzed the presentation slides. She decided to add relevant information from the front page of the local paper, the *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, which

she had taken from the faculty lounge yesterday, when she was correcting freshman students' essays. At twenty-eight, Leah was younger than most of her colleagues at her day job at the Honolulu Community College. With a yellow marker, she highlighted this passage from the newspaper article:

At Bellows Air Force Station, the \$42 million high-tech infantry immersion training area will be updated. It is a military version of a Hollywood set, which includes fake buildings, markets, barking dogs, 20 smell generators pumping out the aroma of everything from fresh bread to decomposing bodies and avatar people projected on walls. Soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and other trainees have to make split-second decisions to shoot or not to shoot the wall-projected avatar people during training. When the U.S. military gets out of Afghanistan, the training area at Bellows will be changed and be more representative of its new focus, the Asia-Pacific area. Subsequently, the wall-projected avatar Afghan people will be reprogrammed for other nationalities. Signs will also be updated. The new signs will be in Korean, Mandarin, Indonesian and Tagalog. A key portion of the training—cultural interaction—can be accomplished regardless of the physical environment.

She clicked on her computer again, scrolled down to find the slide with information about Bellows. She finally found the slide that read:

Continued use of Bellows Air Force Station by the military is hotly contested. Sovereignty groups, Native Hawaiians and many residents of Waimanalo would like to see Bellows no longer used for military training and returned to the State of Hawai'i.

Edwin was thirty-two now. But years earlier, when he was twenty-two and his four-year U.S. military service was over, he returned to Hawai'i for good. It was a relief for Leah and her parents. He married that year and joined the Hawai'i Air National Guard. He had explained to his new bride and to the rest of the family that unlike the U.S. military, the

Hawai`i Air National Guard would not have any deployments abroad. The following year, he and his wife had a son.

Edwin was always a hands-on dad, but more so when he became a widower, when his wife had died of cancer over a year ago. He was a single dad who was devoted to his only child, Matt. Concerned friends and relatives complimented him on his looks and his personality, and suggested online dating or speed dating. Others recommended importing a young wife from the Philippines, and sometimes they showed him snapshots of a younger sister or a niece. But Edwin had never thought of remarrying.

A few weeks before, when her brother first came to her apartment at the beginning of the semester to help her move in, she had opened the window blinds and pointed to the Waikiki Community Center across the street. “A few of its clients are Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans who have PTSD, but refuse to go to the V.A. Medical Center. And they are homeless,” Leah told Edwin. She expected her brother to say something about the veterans, but he only said, “What kind of architect designed this apartment? Why would someone choose to view the world through such a small window?”

That was the same week when over a hundred friends and family of Leah’s twenty-six-year-old cousin had gathered at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl to pay their respects. Noel, was a helicopter pilot killed in Afghanistan. A maile lei was draped on his portrait in the gazebo where the short service was held. Leah and her brother were standing next to Papa and Mama during the burial ceremony amid the sound of three Hawai`i Army National Guard Chinook helicopters flying overhead. She saw Noel’s parents and sister—her uncle, Tio Dadoy and aunt, Tia Rosie, and Christine—standing two rows in front of her. Leah could still recall how proud Tio Dadoy had been after meeting with the U.S. Army recruiter who asked him and his wife to sign the documents because Noel was only seventeen at the time. “Noel gonna be one pilot. Good, you know, the military. He’s gonna have college money after four years. Then after college, get good kine job,” Tio Dadoy had said in front of Papa and the entire family during Noel’s high school graduation party. Noel’s parents, who immigrated from the Visayas in the Central Philippines when Noel was a young child,

wanted something better for their only son. “The army will make Noel a good American citizen,” Tio Dadoy said quoting the army recruiting officer. Tio Dadoy and Tia Rosie didn’t think of war. They didn’t know they were sending him away from Hawai`i, from home, for good. They didn’t consider whether or not they were prepared to pay for their life in America with their son’s life. Leah nudged her brother and said, “Did you realize that Noel is two years younger than me?” Her brother, wearing dark aviator sunglasses, nodded and continued to focus on the seven white-gloved soldiers in dress-blue uniforms escorting Noel’s flag-draped casket. Three rifle volleys were fired in honor of Noel. The heart-rending taps echoed across Punchbowl. The haunting sound like a plaintive wail moved Leah to whisper to Edwin, “I’m glad that you’re here, and not in Afghanistan.” Her brother remained quiet.

The night before, at Tio Dadoy and Tia Rosie’s house, before the start of prayers for Noel’s soul, his sister, Christine talked with Leah as they arranged the trays of food the relatives brought with them for after-prayer snacks.

“I remember telling Noel that he was a hero because he had been on the front lines as a Black Hawk helicopter pilot in Iraq and more recently in Afghanistan,” Christine said. “But he always said that he was not a hero. He insisted that it was the people who died and left loved ones behind that are heroes. Well, I guess now he’s a hero.”

Leah hugged her cousin who was wiping her wet cheeks. “Noel absolutely loved flying, didn’t he. Him and my brother. That’s all they talked about—airplanes,” Leah said.

“Noel always told us, ‘I have the best job in the world. I can’t believe we get paid to do this. Remember?’” Christine said.

“Yes. I am kind of glad Edwin has bad vision and couldn’t be a military pilot,” Leah said. “But still, I’m always worried when he’s deployed outside the U.S..”

“Christine, Leah, come now. Prayers will start in a minute,” Tia Rosie said.

Noel’s family lived in Waimanalo near Bellows Air Force Station. Bellows Beach, which bordered the entire length of the station, offered a variety of outdoor activities for

military families, but it was open to the public on weekends. Ever since Leah's family had moved to Hawai'i when she was in elementary school, Bellows was where her extended family—several aunties and uncles, cousins—had gotten together for picnics, swimming, and singing. After church on Sundays, her family piled in the car. With her brother strumming his ukulele, they didn't mind the long drive from Pearl City because Bellows, with its verdant grounds, giant old trees interspersed with coconut trees, had the ambiance of their former home island in the Philippines.

That was probably why during their first months in Hawai'i, young Leah and her brother, who was in middle school, used to giggle walking past the lifeguard's shed at Bellows. They wondered what Kimo, the lifeguard, would do if they showed him what they liked to do at the beach. Leah remembered that as a preschooler in the Philippines, she walked with her brother to the beach. They held on to an imaginary Tarzan rope to swing on; then Leah and her brother would jump from one branch of a tree to another, scan the waters, making sure that there were no fishing nets left by fishermen to trap fish, before diving into the sea below. The waters teemed with multi-colored fish of different sizes, small crabs, seashells, sea slugs, and sea snakes. Swimming, she and her brother held their breath as they witnessed a large gray fish devouring a small yellow fish.

As young children, they absorbed new things in Hawai'i faster than their parents did. The more they learned about the customs of their new home, the more foreign their old ways, their old home, became. Leah and her brother decided not to show Kimo their old Tarzan moves. They did not want to be obviously foreign, even as young children.

After Halloween, six days after her brother's phone call about his medevac mission to Afghanistan, the family had lunch at their parents' house near Pearl Harbor. Papa cooked most of the food. Around the table that day sat Papa, Mama, Tio Dadoy and Tia Rosie, Leah, Edwin and his son. Prompted by a nod from Mama, Edwin said, "Matt, why don't you lead us, say grace?" Matt mumbled a short grace and only spoke clearly at the end, "For what we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord, Amen." Lunch was a seven-course meal: fried empanada, vegetable lumpia, rellenong bangus, chicken adobo, pansit bihon, salad greens, and jasmine rice. As her brother talked briefly of his upcoming mission in Afghanistan, his nine-year-old son did not touch his food.

The boy's mind was far away; he seemed lost and forlorn. Matt started eating only when his dad talked to him about the aircraft—the KC-135R Stratotanker, which he had seen and touched at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. After lunch, when Leah was savoring her second serving of ube ice cream, her brother sat next to her and reiterated that it was only a two-week mission, and reassured her that he would be back soon. Yet she was so upset that she got up without finishing her ice cream and walked toward the garage.

“Remember when I was deployed to Turkey two years ago?” said Edwin walking behind her.

Two years ago, her brother still had a wife; Matt had a mother. That's what Leah wanted to remind her brother, but she kept her mouth shut. On the way out the door, she picked up the jar of Papa's homemade pickled mangoes that Papa had placed next to her purse on top of the piano.

“You asked me to bring you some Turkish Delight that you said you'd read about in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,” said Edwin. “Well, I returned with the Turkish Delight, so, it will be just like that. What kind of candy from Afghanistan do you want me to bring home for you?”

“I don't know. You choose,” replied Leah, as she put the jar of pickled green mangoes and her purse in the car.

“Okay then. Just make sure you bake your special apple pie when I return. We'll have a party! Eh, by the way, how's Steve?”

“Good.”

“So?” asked Edwin.

“So? What?”

“Steve's good for you,” said Edwin. “Eh, what Aunty Lani tell you? Too much thinking, no good. That's true about matters of the heart, you know.”

“I no listen to Aunty Lani,” Leah said.

“Da's why hard.”

As Leah was putting the jar of pickled mango in her trunk, she wondered, What would it be like to be married to Steve? Just the thought of it made Leah shake her head and smile. How could she even think of him as a boyfriend? He was just her brother's best friend. To convert him into a husband was ridiculous.

“What are you smiling about?” Edwin asked.

“Nothing.”

In mid November, Edwin and his Hawai`i Air National Guard unit departed for the two-week Afghanistan mission. As planned, Leah shared with her mother the responsibility of taking care of Matt. Her brother’s townhouse became her temporary residence. One afternoon, Leah drove Mama to the Chinatown open market before they picked up Matt at school. When they arrived together at his townhouse near the Aloha stadium, Matt put his backpack down next to the dining table before going to the kitchen. Leah carried a bag of groceries to the kitchen. Mama placed two grocery bags on the kitchen counter. She pulled out a package of shrimps and fresh fish that she had just purchased from a Vietnamese vendor in Chinatown and put it in the fridge. When she found what she was looking for in the other bag, she put one on a plate and offered it to her grandson.

“Here, Matt. Siopao from Filipino shop in Chinatown,” said Mama.

Matt accepted the warm steamed bun and said, “This is manapua.”

“Oh, I forget. I’m used to its Filipino name, not the Hawaiian name,” said Mama.

Between bites of steamed manapua, Matt explained to his grandmother that his dad was based in Ramstein Air Base in Germany, his home for the two-week mission. He and his team picked up the wounded American soldiers in Bagram Air Base, in Afghanistan, and took the wounded back to the American hospital in Ramstein.

“And Dad is the avionics guy for the mission,” Matt said. “So he makes sure all the electronics in the cockpit and the airplane are perfect, I mean, work perfectly before the pilot takes off.”

Leah glanced at her nephew: the boy had thickly lashed black eyes like his dad’s. Leah remembered when her brother was about Matt’s age in the Philippines, and they were riding a tartanilyas, the horse-drawn carriages for hire, at the market. Edwin often imagined the horse was the winged horse, Pegasus, son of Poseidon and Medusa. Leah recalled her brother telling her, a preschooler at the time, that riding Pegasus was like flying to heaven. It never occurred to young Edwin then that as an adult, he would be working on avionics and sitting in the cockpits of multi-million dollar aircrafts, making sure they were fit to fly.

“Dad’s friends, they refuel the KC-135 while the medevac technicians are bringing the wounded soldiers into the airplane,” Matt continued. “Mama, I can show you how the Air National Guard guys do this on YouTube. And sometimes, Dad also helps prepare the patients. Like buckle up, for takeoff.”

Leah, who was cutting red bell peppers, helping Mama prepare chicken apriteada for dinner, said, “Edwin had mentioned that the medics sometimes asked him to watch the patient’s temperature, hold some gauze, or pass the oxygen tank.”

“And they do all these in the cabin of the airplane that’s flying high in the sky. Cool, huh?” Matt said.

“Must be hard,” Mama said.

“Yeah. And you know, they have to do all these at night, like when it’s dark, super dark. Mama, Aunty Leah, are you listening?”

“I’m listening, Matt. I can listen and cook rice at the same time,” Mama said.

“I hear you, Matt,” Leah said.

“The pilot has to fly in total darkness. Like totally dark. He can’t use even a tiny light from his airplane.”

“Why?”

“The Afghan enemy soldiers will shoot them.”

“Oy! Susmaryosep!” exclaimed Mama invoking the Holy Trinity.

“You know, this stuff is all classified, I think. But I’m pretty sure it’s not classified to me; I’m his son.”

“Matt, you talk like an old man. I mean, a grown up,” said Mama.

“I’m nine years old,” Matt said.

“Aunty Leah, Mama, come.” Matt left the kitchen and sat in front of the computer in the dining room. He pulled up a photo on PowerPoint slide.

The two women stood next to Matt and focused on the computer monitor.

“This is for my oral presentation in Social Studies, about my dad, my hero,” said Matt. “See, that’s the KC-135 Stratotanker, and that’s Dad and me.”

“Who took the picture?” asked Leah.

“Uncle Steve.”

“I want to hear your presentation. Why don’t you stand here in front of Mama and

me. Pretend we are your teacher and classmates.”

Matt stood up holding a hard copy of his speech. “Ready? Okay. The Hawai`i Air National Guard has two missions: the federal and the state missions. Its federal mission is to provide operationally-ready combat units, combat support units, and qualified personnel for active duty in the U.S. Air Force in time of war, national emergency, or operational contingency,” Matt said, with difficulty pronouncing some words.

“Wait, Matt, hard for me to understand those big words,” Mama said.

“But Mama. I copied it like that from their website.”

“Come Matt. Let’s try and think of simpler words. You don’t want your classmates to fall asleep while you’re giving your presentation,” Leah said.

Ten days after Edwin’s departure, nearly thirty of Noel’s extended family including Leah, Matt, Papa, and Mama gathered at his gravesite to celebrate his birthday. Christine said that the last time she’d seen her brother was when he was home on leave last year and celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday. She and her parents visited Noel’s gravesite every week. Now they removed a small American flag, which was tattered and replaced it with a newer one. It had been four months since Noel’s death. Leah was seated next to Christine and Tia Rosie, a few feet away from the crowd. Leah asked Christine how she was doing.

“Not well. The sadness doesn’t seem to go away. There’s a void in my heart, in my life,” Christine said.

“How are you, Tia Rosie?” Leah asked.

“Not good, Leah. I don’t know how to deal with this. I still can’t believe that he is gone,” said Tia Rosie.

Noel was the pilot in command of the downed chopper. Christine said she was waiting for answers as to what happened that night in Afghanistan. Noel’s Black Hawk was a chase aircraft following a medevac helicopter as they responded to a suicide attack that killed some Afghan police officers and wounded others. A Pentagon spokesman said after the crash that it appeared that bad weather was the cause of the accident. But Christine didn’t think so.

“If you look at the casualty report from the government itself, they list the cause of death as hostile fire,” Christine said. “I’m not 100 percent sure of anything.”

“You told me you were waiting for the full investigation report. Did you get it?” Leah asked.

“Not yet,” said Christine. “The other choppers made it through that weather.”

Matt came closer to Leah. He said, “Other choppers made it but not Uncle Noel’s? That’s bad. I hope my dad’s airplane doesn’t crash in Afghanistan.”

“We too, Matt. We pray for his safe return,” said Christine.

“Thanks. Dad will be back in two days.”

Later that day, Tio Dadoy and Tia Rosie went to Papa and Mama’s house to invite them to attend the ceremony in the chamber of the Hawai`i State House of Representatives to award the Hawai`i Medal of Honor to Noel and other service members who had died in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past twelve months. Thirty-one service members with ties to the islands would be honored for their sacrifices with the yellow-and-red Hawai`i Medal of Honor. Leah’s family promised they would attend. As Tio Dadoy and Tia Rosie were saying goodbye, they stopped briefly in front of the television to listen to Representative Mark Takai, in a House floor speech earlier that day. He said, “In the past few years, the war against terrorism has changed our world and our lives in a profound way. Ultimately, it’s not about politics, it’s not about winning. It’s all about the families and their loved ones and what these brave men and women sacrificed for our country.”

Leah and the family had finally adjusted to Edwin’s absence for twelve days. They had adapted to the routine of making sure Matt was doing well at school, going to soccer practice and games, and attending Boy Scout meetings. Leah was getting used to sleeping in her brother’s bedroom. Matt had previously marked the kitchen calendar for the fourteen days of his dad’s mission. Now he was counting days. He had been crossing days on the calendar, just as he had done for the days before Christmas when he was a kindergartner. And he looked forward to his scheduled daily conversation with his dad on Skype.

The thirteenth day of Edwin's absence was a Friday. Matt, who was usually asleep by eight o'clock, lay on his bed at nine, crying because his dad had not shown up for their scheduled Skype talk. "I want to wait for my dad. I don't need to sleep," Matt said. Leah promised him that she would ask his dad's boss at the Avionics office in the morning if he had heard from Edwin's mission. Matt nodded and asked, "Aunty Leah, do you think the Afghan enemy soldiers shot Dad's airplane?" Leah had to control herself and try to appear nonchalant. She reassured Matt that maybe there were some computer connection or satellite problems. Leah also told Matt that maybe his dad had a day off, and got lost driving around Germany as a dumb tourist who could not read or understand German. Matt laughed. He remembered his dad telling him on Skype how he had a hard time reading and understanding German words.

"Aunty Leah, you know Dad will be home tomorrow, right?"

"Of course. You should sleep now."

"Aunty Leah, I just remembered," Matt said. "Dad did not get a chance to talk to me on Skype because he was too busy roaming around Germany looking for a special model airplane for me."

"You're probably right, Matt."

"Dad promised me that he would get one that's made in Germany, and maybe one that's made in Russia. He didn't think there are model airplanes made in Afghanistan."

"You should sleep now."

"Aunty Leah, Dad will leave us again soon. Like in the middle of December to work on the mainland."

"But only for the air show that weekend. In Reno."

"Reno, Nevada. It's safe there, Aunty Leah. I know. Because it's in the U.S.," said Matt said before finally falling asleep.

She left Matt's bedroom, went to the living room, and watched the ten o'clock news on television. She saw a news segment showing President Barack Obama giving this part of his speech: "Today, let us offer gratitude to our men and women in uniform for their many sacrifices, and keep in our thoughts the families who save an empty seat at the table for a loved one stationed in harm's way." She turned the television off. She got up and walked to the dining table. She sat in front of her laptop computer and logged on

to her Facebook account. She clicked on a posting about a U.S. Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker that crashed that day in the rugged mountains of Kyrgyzstan:

One resident of the agricultural and sheep-grazing area said, “The plane exploded in flight. “I was working with my father in the field, and I heard an explosion. When I looked up at the sky I saw the fire. When it was falling, the plane split into three pieces.”

Leah blinked and re-read the passage: “When I looked up at the sky I saw the fire.” Reading it led Leah’s mind to a different realm. She cringed at the thought that her brother could have blown up in the air near Afghanistan, with no remains for the family to bury. She understood that the KC-135R Stratotanker was literally a flying gas station. If somebody shot that aircraft, with Edwin and his Hawai`i Air National Guard unit aboard, there would not even be a need for a rescue. No triage. No medical personnel forced to make a decision, to drop color-coded tags atop her brother’s and the medevac team members’ suffering bodies. There would be no bodies. No bodies of former immigrants and citizens fighting for America.

The next day Leah called the office of the Liaison at the Family Service office of the Hawai`i Air National Guard at Hickam. The Liaison officer confirmed that Edwin’s mission had departed Germany and was scheduled to arrive in Hawaii by ten o’clock that morning.

“Matt, get ready,” Leah said.

“Yay! We’re going to pick up Dad at Hickam now, right?” Matt asked, turning off the television.

“After we buy his favorite poke at Foodland.” Leah said.

“Oh. He missed poke. They don’t serve raw fish in Germany?”

“Not the local kine poke,” Leah said, as she picked up her ringing cell phone.

Matt stood next to her. “Is that Dad?”

“Hi, Christine.” Leah listened then said, “We’re on our way to pick up Edwin. Talk to you later.”

“Hi, Aunty Christine. Bye Aunty,” Matt said loudly.

On their way to the car, Matt asked, “Was Aunty Christine crying again?”

“No. She didn’t sound like she was crying. I’m going to help her with something that will make her feel not so sad all the time.”

“Like what?”

“Something your Uncle Noel asked her to do?”

“But Uncle Noel is dead! Did he like, talk to her in her dream, or something?”

“No, not talk. Noel wrote in his will some instructions and what he wanted his sister and his family to do.”

“What’s a will?”

“A very important document that grown ups write to tell their family what they want to do about things when they’re no longer with us in this world.”

“Like when they’re dead,” Matt said.

“Yes.”

Leah and Matt got in the car, which was parked at the back of the townhouse, and drove to Foodland. They went to Hickam after Matt finished eating his snack.

Later that day, after dropping off Matt and Edwin who was tired, Leah went to Christine’s parents’ house. As usual, Tia Rosie and Tio Dadoy kept telling her to eat some more as they were having snacks. Leah ate a warm malasada from Leonard’s bakery, cassava cake hot from Tia Rosie’s oven, and some mango ice cream. When they were done, Leah helped clear the table.

Christine removed the tablecloth. She said, “It’s been the most difficult thing to want to call and talk to Noel, and realize that I can’t,” she said, as she folded and tablecloth and gave it to her mother. “Memorial Day didn’t use to mean much to me, but after Noel’s death, it will never be just another holiday, another day off work for me.”

“Another day to remind me why I’m always sick from worry every time Edwin is sent overseas by the military,” Leah said.

“We had been looking forward to Noel’s return from Afghanistan, then the crash took him away from us,” Tia Rosie said.

Tia Rosie sat in front of Leah and Christine who now had their laptop computers in front of them. She removed a sheet of paper from a file folder and give it to Leah.

“This is for you, from Noel,” Tia Rosie said.

It was a note signed by Noel asking Leah to help Christine and his family with the Wounded Warrior Project. In his will, Noel asked his family to get 100,000 people to donate to the Wounded Warrior Project, which helps injured service members.

“Check your e-mail now. I just sent you the link to their website,” Christine said.

Leah read the mission of the Wounded Warrior Project. “I didn’t even know this organization existed,” Leah said.

“It’s fairly new. And not much publicity about it,” Christine said.

“I’m honored that Noel included me in his will to help you with this.”

“Here. See this paragraph? Noel included this because he knows you’re always saying, ‘What’s the evidence for that?’” Christine said.

Leah read the paragraph:

Of the 2.5 million U.S. troops sent to Iraq and Afghanistan, 6,667 have died in theater, and nearly 27 percent have a service-connected disability, according to the U.S. Census Bureau and Department of Defense. Many suffer from traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. The Wounded Warrior Project is committed to empowering these veterans, physically, mentally, socially and economically.

“This is definitely something I want to help you with,” Leah said.

Christine told Leah that fundraising for the Wounded Warriors Project had already helped her heal a little in the past two months. On days when she was feeling really down, like on her Noel’s birthday, she managed to find strength in his commitment to help the wounded service members.

“I didn’t want to face the truth that he is gone. Then I thought, ‘You know what? There are men and women in worse shape than you. Your heart is broken, but your body is not, so get with the program,’” Christine said.

“One day last month, Christine was so sad. She no like get out of bed. She just cry, cry,” Tio Dadoy said, when he came to the dining room. “So I tell her, ‘What Noel said, for you to cry and feel sorry for yourself. You’re supposed to help the other guys suffering, the wounded military who came back from Iraq and Afghanistan.’”

“And what did she say, Tio Dadoy?” Leah asked.

“I force her to get out of bed,” Tio Dadoy said. “I tell her, ‘Come on, I drive you to Wounded Warrior Office.’”

“Good for you, Tio Dadoy,” Leah said.

“Over there you can talk story with other families, folks like us who lost their son or daughter. They trying to help these guys too.”

“Papa is good about this. And he was right,” Christine said. “Last week, when the three of us went, I talked with two wounded veterans. One was a woman who showed me her metal leg.”

“Over there, when we go over there to deliver the check donations, they thank us. Feel good to help those folks,” Tio Dadoy said.

“This project has helped me,” Christine said. “When I just want to cry and break down, I imagine Noel telling me, reminding me that there are still people coming home from war and I can do something to help them.”

“I’m glad to be a part of these,” Leah said. She left the house with a new feeling that there was something positive she could do related to her brother’s career in the military, instead of just complaining about the difficulties of military life.

Two weeks later, as scheduled, Leah was back at her brother’s townhouse to take care of Matt while Edwin was gone for the weekend to Reno for the assignment with the Hawai`i Air National Guard. Edwin and over twenty of members of the Hawai`i Air National Guard were displaying one of their C-17 aircraft at the air show in Reno on a Friday afternoon. The Hawai`i unit had a tent in which they were preparing luau food for other military units at the air show.

Leah was at Honolulu Community College teaching. When she finished her class, she went direct to her office and checked her cell phone, which was on silent mode. It had a text message from Steve, Edwin’s pilot friend. Leah knew Steve was in the air show with Edwin. The message simply said: URGENT. Call asap.

“You’re joking, right, Steve?” Leah asked.

“I wish I could say I’m joking,” Steve said. “But one of the racing planes, not Hawai`i’s, crashed right into spectators and Hawai`i Air National Guard members were just a few feet away from the impact site.”

“It’s hard to believe.”

“It is. After the crash, the Hawai`i Air National Guard’s tent turned into an emergency center, a triage center.”

“What do you mean?”

“We had a nurse, emergency medical technicians, and two doctors in our unit. They treated the patients. People were in shock. It was total chaos here.”

“Anybody hurt?”

“Ten people were killed and a dozen were injured.”

“From Hawai`i?” Leah asked. She paced back and forth in her tiny office.

“Nobody was killed from Hawai`i. But one injured.”

“And my brother?”

“Resting.”

“Tired from helping the doctors and nurses? He did that during the medevac mission in Afghanistan.”

“He was unable to help, Leah.”

“Is he okay? Steve, is my brother okay?” Leah almost screamed.

“He is okay now. He’s sedated and asleep,” Steve said. “I’m with him in the hospital. I’ll stay with him until Monday. The Hawai`i Air National Guard will fly together on their plane on Monday. The doctors want to keep him here for three nights.”

“Oh my god. What happened?”

“He had minor injuries, a couple of shrapnel wounds from the crash.”

“I hate that word, ‘crash.’ My cousin just died from a crash.”

“Edwin was just unlucky to be near a crash site. But he’s okay now.”

“What time do you think he’ll wake up? Can he talk? I mean later, when he wakes up.”

“I think so. I will call you when he’s ready to talk to you and Matt.”

“Thanks for being there with my brother, Steve,” Leah said. “I have to go fight the traffic going Ewa side. I have to pick up Matt from school now. Bye”

As Leah was driving, she couldn’t help thinking of the absurdity of it all. She thought, My brother was unharmed in Afghanistan, in a warzone during the aeromedical evacuation mission. And now, at an airshow, in the U.S., something to entertain the

public and the military families, he had some shrapnel wounds from a racing airplane that crashed. It didn't make sense. There was no way of getting a firm grasp on it.

The weekend after her brother's return to Honolulu, Leah got a call from him.

"You left a file folder here. With newspaper clippings about Bellows," Edwin said.

"Oy, thank you. I was searching all over my apartment for it."

"You still working on this paper, your seminar paper on the military and Bellows?"

"Yes. It's due next week. I wish I could go inside Bellows, the one where it's forbidden to the public, the area where you need a military I.D. to enter," Leah said.

"Why? Are you a spy or something?" Edwin said.

"It's good research to be able to actually see the place, feel its spirit."

"Its ghosts. Remember in the Philippines? Places have ghosts; adults told us that when we were kids," Edwin said.

"Right. So. You can take me inside Bellows, today or tomorrow?"

"No can. But I have a better idea," Edwin said.

"I don't want your better idea. I want to enter Bellows military area today or tomorrow."

"You cannot drive your car. No military sticker. You can't enter the gate," Edwin said. "Pick you up at your apartment driveway at eleven. Is that okay?"

"Are you serious?"

"Be on time. Eleven o'clock at your driveway."

"Thank you. And, oh, please bring my file folder."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Leah couldn't decide, whether to change into swimsuit and shorts first or to read and refresh her mind about Bellows before she left her apartment. She decided to read first. She clicked on this file on her laptop computer:

Title: "Marines Mock Up Afghan Villages" from Honolulu Star Advertiser:

Bellows will continue to have 1,149 acres of thick brush and training grounds

spread among 87 structures with twenty avatar projection rooms, and 342 cameras watching the action. A half-mile away, emerald waves serenely rolled ashore at Marine Corps Training Area Bellows. The \$42 million Infantry Immersion Trainer at Bellows is on the three enclaves, that look like Afghan villages, right down to a fake red poppy patch outside one courtyard. They are populated by two dozen Afghan national role-players, and the villages have the smells of pigs, sheep and bread shops misted into the air for added realism. A separate army of contractors and 352 cameras watch every action behind the scenes in an “after action review” room.

The mock district center are highly accurate in scope and scale. Clothes hang on lines in a maze of walled courtyards. Vendors hawk fruits and vegetables. Music can be heard, and recordings of dog barks and children playing sound like the real thing. “It definitely gives you the feeling of being in an Afghan village,” said Sgt. Mike Smith. “It’s very realistic. It’s a lot like we’re actually in Afghanistan. The buildings—they look a lot like Afghan buildings, and the role-players they have out here look and act exactly as Afghans do.”

Training events now last about ten to fourteen days, and battalion-level exercises incorporate fifty to eighty five role players. Officials said SpecProTechnical Service has the contract for role players. The training manager said Afghans who lived on the mainland were brought in two or three times a year over the past several years to be role players. They were American citizens or permanent residents and stayed in hotels here off the job, the Corps said.

Leah meant to finish reading the article, but her thoughts wandered and the words on her laptop blurred. She remembered when she first saw Bellows when the place looked like her early childhood home in the Philippines—acres of pristine nature, unadulterated beauty. She heard her cell phone. A text message from her brother read: arriving in five minutes. Leah rushed to change into her swimsuit and denim shorts. She grabbed her sunscreen, sunglasses, hat, goggles, purse and ran to the elevator.

She stood at the driveway for a minute checking if her cell phone had enough memory for taking pictures at Bellows. She looked around for her brother's car. A green Prius stopped in front of her. The driver rolled down the window.

"Excuse me, Miss. Your brother had car trouble, and he asked me if I could give you a ride for your research at Bellows," Steve said, smiling.

"You making fun of me, Mr.?"

"No. I'm your taxi for the day according to Edwin," Steve said, beaming.

"Okay. Wait, do you have a military sticker, or military I.D.?"

"Yes, I fly for Hawaiian Air now, but I happen to be with the U.S. Air Force, Reserved. Come on, Leah. I'm not a bad guy."

"Okay. But don't bother me when I'm trying to add something to my research."

"I promise I will not bother Miss Leah when she's doing research."

Leah opened the car door and saw a ukulele. "That's yours? I didn't know you could play."

"Of course I know how to play. What kind local boy does not know how to play ukulele?" Steve said. "Shall we go?"

At Bellows Air Force Station, Steve drove around first to give Leah a brief orientation inside the station before he parked near the beach. They had a quick sandwich at the snack bar near the beach. When asked what she wanted to do next, Leah replied she wanted to sit on the beach.

"And bring your ukulele," Leah said.

They sat on Steve's beach towel. It was a shady area under the giant trees.

"I remember coming to Bellows with my family when I was a little girl."

"And I remember your brother telling me that when you were a little girl in the Philippines, you enjoyed listening to the young men in your neighborhood serenade your neighbor's beautiful daughter during your bedtime."

Leah thought of her brother: Which of the countless serenades they heard in their childhood had her brother talked about? Did he talk about the serenaders of Rosie de la Pena--the suitor, the violinist, the guitar player, and half a dozen of the suitor's friends singing love songs by Michael Bolton, Lionel Richie, and Basil Valdez? Did her brother

say that Rosie de la Pena's family served the serenaders the most delicious polvoron and torta? Did he mention that sometimes there was a poet who recited love poems before the music began? How about the lone serenader singing traditional local songs accompanied by a portable bamboo keyboard that made the most beautiful music?

Leah felt the gentle breeze, as she watched the breathing ocean. Steve tuned the ukulele then strummed Leah's favorite—Bruddah Iz's version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Then Steve said, "Leah, if I were in your neighborhood in the Philippines then, I would have serenaded you every night. But this will do for now, for here."

Dilemma

There was no room in Grace's life for vacillation now, but she could not help thinking of her predicament as she walked carrying a small buri bag of ripe papayas and starfruit from her mother's backyard. At Bining's store this afternoon, there were children sucking on ice-candy. With her hair fluttering in the breeze, Grace passed the tennis courts. She continued walking past the houses of her neighbors, who had lived here and seen her grow up from infancy through high school. A couple of white doves sliced the space in front of Grace. After five minutes of walking, she reached a house marked by a spray of red bougainvillea blooming near the driveway. Joy's live-in nanny was elated as she greeted Grace the way she had since Grace was a baby—gently squeezing both cheeks before hugging her tight. "Only you girls here now. Everybody's at the carnival," she told Grace. Yaya Gingging, the nanny, was a robust woman in her sixties who had been in the family's service for years. In the living room near the piano, Grace noticed the large portrait of Joy, and her husband and two children. Joy was now pulling her long black hair into a knot at the back of her head as she rushed toward Grace and gave her a hug. Another friend, Nene, was already in the dining room fanning herself as she sipped fresh-squeezed lemonsito juice. Nene also embraced Grace. The three young women had grown up together in this neighborhood and had been classmates from first grade until high school graduation.

It was May, the day after the annual fiesta of San Vicente Ferrer, the patron saint of this coastal town. Gastronomic indulgence was the norm yesterday and now most

people were remorseful. Even last night, as the three friends talked on the phone, they resolved to drink only tea or lemonsito juice, and eat nothing today. They laughed at their joint resolution. Temptation was staring at them from the dining table now: plates of warm kinatloan and a plate of polvoron. Joy was a Science teacher at Arrowhead Elementary School, a public high school in Maryland, where Grace would soon be teaching; Nene was a Math teacher in Louisiana. Like many islanders Joy and Nene returned to the island for their annual vacation from their teaching jobs in America. Grace eagerly listened to Nene and Joy's updates on their struggles as Filipina teachers in American inner city schools as well as their small triumphs and achievements.

After merienda, proud that they managed not to overindulge with the pastries, the three friends moved to the veranda. Butterflies were sipping the nectar of the red ixora blooming close to the railings. Grace smiled remembering that as children, they used to suck the ixora's nectar just for fun. Now, seated on rattan chairs, Grace's two friends gave each other an eye signal.

Joy nodded and said, "Grace, we have heard rumors."

"About Arnel," Nene said.

"I don't believe in rumors," Grace said.

"Grace, you could at least find out more about it," Joy suggested.

"But what can I do?" Grace asked. She had heard the rumors before. She had decided that it was a waste of time to mope and feel sorry for herself and her children. Her rational side, however, failed to stop her from feeling furious, dejected.

"You should check where he has been," Nene suggested. "You should follow him around."

"I can't do that. Be my husband's stalker?"

"So what? You should at least watch for suspicious-looking marks on his body or his clothing," Nene said.

"Sus, daghan na ko'g problema," lamented Grace. "I cannot solve both problems—the financial and the marital at the same time. I cannot send my kids to college and help with my mother's medical and household expenses if I don't leave for America. And if I leave, I cannot stop my husband's affair."

"We are always here for you, Grace. We are only a phone call away," Joy said.

“I have so much to deal with that sometimes I think I might explode,” Grace said.

“Soon, Grace, when you’re in America, you will learn that the human heart can be transformed,” Joy said. “You can tell your heart to forget about your problems: husband problem, money problem, mother problem, whatever. In America, you will have a new job, a new life.”

“And new problems,” Nene said. “You must leave your old problems behind so that you can focus on your new job and new problems in America.”

“Shut up, Nene,” Joy said. “You’re not helping.”

“Bitaw no. Maybe that’s why God did not give me a husband. I cannot handle a husband problem,” Nene said.

“Oh, I thought you were looking for a husband in America.”

“Oy, absolutely not,” Nene said. “Why should I be looking for a husband? I am trying to stay away from trouble, thank you very much. Besides, they said—at my age, thirty-eight, there’s higher chance of me being hit by lightning than of getting a husband.”

“Ikaw jood, Nene. That’s not true,” Grace said.

“Nene, there must be a special man who will come into your life sooner or later,” Joy said.

“Ai, sus, never mind. I have enough problems,” Nene said. “I have no time. In America, I earn so much more than what I used to get teaching in Manila. But can I afford to pay for a maid in America? No. ”

“Our parents were so lucky, teaching on the island and having enough to pay for live-in maid,” said Grace.

“Those were the days.”

“So, why then, do we still want to live and work in America?” Nene asked.

“Because we want to give back to the Americans. Because they gave our ancestors public education after the Spanish American War,” Joy said, tongue in cheek.

“You mean the first American teachers who came to the islands to teach?” Nene said. “They only wanted the Filipinos to speak English for President McKinley’s benevolent assimilation.”

“Contra vida jud ka, Nene. So why do Filipinos want to live and work in America?” Joy asked.

“Because we were all raised and educated with an eye to the West,” Grace said.

“No. It’s because we are three crazy women!” Nene said.

The month before, in early April, Grace, Arnel and their two younger children had moved away from Cebu City, their residence for the past eighteen years, and moved back on the island to live with her elderly mother and the caregiver in their eighty-year-old ancestral house. They had agreed that being close to their large extended family would be good for their children while Grace was teaching in America. Their eldest, Anabel, remained in Cebu City at the dormitory at the University of San Carlos where she was a college freshman. Their younger daughter, Marylou, was temporarily living with them; in thirty days, at the end of summer vacation, she would move into the high school dormitory of The Holy Spirit School of Tagbilaran, forty-two kilometers away. Most afternoons, she stayed in her bedroom, which she shared with her baby brother, Ryan, and spent most of her time reading *Pride and Prejudice*, part of her new school’s summer reading list. Their youngest, Ryan, who was three, was the baby of the family.

A week after they moved back to the island, when Grace was busy preparing for her departure for America, her husband had expressed his frustration one day, when they had an argument. It was the week after Grace’s return from a trip to Manila to attend a seminar of American classroom management at the recruiting agency’s office. She remembered him saying, “The trouble with you, Grace, is—you listen to other people and not to me.” It was true that upon moving back to the island, Arnel had asked his former high school classmates for the whereabouts of his high school sweetheart, Perla, the girl from the countryside. That was obviously a big mistake; everybody knew there were no secrets in this small town. Nevertheless, Arnel decided to visit Perla’s barangay, thirty kilometers away. When he sat with her in the living room of her parents’ small house, he gazed at her, and looked for some semblance of her delicate beauty, her fragility. They had not seen each other for twenty years. She no longer had a teenager’s body. He asked her why she had not married. She gestured with her left hand to suggest it was not important, and looked away. When she faced him again, he looked into her dark,

mysterious eyes. He was staring at her, but when he realized that it was making her uncomfortable, he stopped. They talked about their mutual friends, those who had plans to return to the island for the town fiesta, and other impersonal topics. After a few minutes, when he was about to leave the house, he suddenly felt awkward about his visit, his presence in her house. He stood up. He offered a handshake, held her hand, and said goodbye. It was not the same as when they said goodbye full of passion when he left the island for college years ago. It was obvious that the love was gone.

Three months later, in July, the night before Grace was scheduled to leave for America, she lay beside her son on his bed, under the mosquito net. After telling him his favorite bedtime story, she said, “You’re a big boy now, Ryan.” Grace caressed his bangs and cheeks, and said, “You and Marylou, you take care of each other, when she comes home on the weekends. Listen to Papa and your Lola, okay?”

Ryan nodded, and then closed his eyes.

Grace gazed at her sleeping son. The black wavy hair and round face reminded her of her daughters when they were his age. She kissed Ryan on his cheek, touched his face with her hand. She turned off the lights and the room was filled with darkness.

In the morning, at Tagbilaran Airport, after helping her with her baggage, Arnel looked at his wife, and managed a smile, rather pained and distant. At five foot eight, he was four inches taller than Grace. Now, most of his straight, short-cropped hair had turned prematurely gray. It seemed like he was older, but the truth was—Grace, thirty-eight, was a year older. His clean-shaven face with faint lines set in his forehead was still handsome, but today it looked wounded, cold. He gave Grace an awkward hug—a combination of goodbye with the acceptance of the inevitable.

When Arnel returned from the airport, their son opened the front door for him.

“Where’s Mama?” Ryan asked.

“She went to America.”

“Why?”

“We told you many times. That’s where she will be teaching.”

“Why?”

Arnel noticed the frustration on their son's face. "Ryan, remember, you asked me if we could go crabbing and fishing today?" he said, trying to distract the boy. "Come on let's go."

Ryan shook his head and ran toward the driveway. He tried to open the door of the minivan; he jumped up at the windows, craning his neck.

"I want Mama."

Aboard Philippine Airlines, Grace hoped that her seatmate did not notice that tears were welling in her eyes. Why am I flying away from my family, from what is essential in my life? She wondered, Is it my heart or something else that is making the sound of a frightened bird with enormous wings flapping, fanning my overwhelming anxiety about my new job—Filipina teacher of American children? What made me think I could even teach American children in the first place? Oh, the arrogance! She moved her left shoulder away from her seatmate, adjusted her blanket, and closed her eyes. She pondered, I must eliminate my negative thoughts—of failure as a wife, and as a mother; my future failure in my new job and in my life in America—so that these thoughts can no longer be heard.

Not too long ago, around Easter of last year, when the couple talked about the teaching job in Maryland, Grace showed Arnel the document stating that her H-1B visa would allow him as a husband and their children to go with her to America. She told him it wasn't financially feasible for all five of them to move to Maryland right away. Arnel's reaction to her decision to leave him and their three children behind for the first year of the contract was anger.

"Who are you kidding? You would be enjoying a single life in America while I am left here to take care of the children," Arnel said.

"I wanted to see for myself first if I could do the job—teaching American children—and if I could adapt to life in Maryland, if my body could tolerate the climate," Grace said.

Arnel was concerned about her health, her stomach ulcer, which had been bothering her lately. Grace had reassured him America had good doctors and she would have medical insurance, which she did not have in the Philippines.

“What would happen to our children growing up without a mother?” he asked.

“I want a better life for the children, better than our lives now,” she said.

“You don’t care that our children will be some of those ‘left behind’ children, left behind by their mother?”

“Better than being one of those ‘left out,’ with no college education, no job, no future.”

She tried to comfort him, telling him that he need not worry about the children and about housework. The children’s two grandmothers and his two sisters would help take care of the children. And a newly hired maid would do the housework.

“This is not for me,” Grace said. “It’s for my mother’s medicine, for her home repairs. And more important—it’s for our future house. Ours. Our very own house, not my mother’s, not the landlord’s. Our very first house.”

She heard him say he understood. And yet, it seemed as though he resented her for. He said, “You and I will be a long-distance married couple, for the entire year, sleeping in different beds, surrounded by different oceans.”

She ignored her husband’s apathy during the long interminable process prior to the job interview—several months of paper work, interviews, and written exams—required for certification by the Maryland State Department of Education. When the recruiting agency called to tell her that officials from Prince George’s County public school system wanted to meet with her in Cebu City for an interview, she was thrilled; she felt a sense of pride, of having been rewarded for her hard work, a sense of accomplishment. She expected her husband to feel the same way. After all, he knew all along that she had been working hard for their sake, for their children.

Her salary as a fifth and sixth grade Math teacher in Cebu City was not enough to support a family of five. Her husband, who had dropped out of college one semester short of getting a Bachelor of Science degree in Education, was employed as a school bus driver for International School Cebu. Even with their salaries, and her earnings from

tutoring a few children of Cebu's elites in the afternoons and on weekends, they were struggling. And that was before college and high school tuition for their daughters.

After the Philippine Airlines flight attendant picked up her empty cup, Grace looked out into the dark night a few hours after they had left Manila. She reflected on her relationship with Arnel—on the squabbles and the snide remarks, which continued to fester. She could not understand what had happened to the happy loving couple they used to be, why most of their discussions now had a tendency to deteriorate into sarcasm or a fight. She could still recall one of these fights when she hinted at the rumor about his affair a few weeks after they moved back to their hometown. At the time, she blurted, “I am not blind, deaf, or stupid.” Arnel seemed stunned; he stared at her before slamming the door as he left their bedroom. Since that outburst, Grace didn't know how to deal with her husband's sullen expression. Arnel served with silence Grace's favorite dishes, fish escabeche, salt-and-pepper shrimps, and chicken adobo, which he had been cooking for her often since the early years of their marriage. With her second job as a tutor on weekends and evenings, she didn't have time to cook. She had always felt pampered and loved by her husband whom they called “the master chef.” She noticed the recent change: at the dinner table with their children and Mama, Arnel managed to be civil, warm and affable, but with her alone, he was silent and distant.

Arrowhead Elementary School in Maryland's Prince George's County, was where Grace and her three roommates worked. It was located in the inner beltway community near the border of District of Columbia's northeastern and southeastern quadrants. The old red brick buildings stood in contrast to the green of the surrounding trees this summer. The school was on the watch list of public schools failing to meet state benchmarks, and the majority of its students received free lunch. All of the 120 new teacher recruits from different provinces of the Philippines were assigned to the district's public schools with similar profiles. Today, they were all gathered at the school cafeteria for the orientation for the Filipino teachers a few weeks before the beginning of the school year. Grace was seated in the front row. During morning break, Grace's seatmate, a woman from Manila, showed her a chart on one of the handouts distributed. Racial demographics of the school

district: African American students 67.4%; Hispanic 22.6%; Caucasian, 4.6%; Asian 2.9%; Remaining 2.4% comprising various other races.

“You notice? We Filipinos are two-point-something percent of students in this district,” said a teacher from Manila as she pointed to the last line on the chart.

“The two-point-something percent—teaching the majority of the population here. Strange, no?” Grace said.

“They are outsourcing part of the education of the American children,” a man from Cavite province said.

“Only in Math, Science, and Special Education though,” Grace said. “I wonder why Americans don’t like to teach these subjects?”

The new Filipino teacher recruits in the room were not complaining. Most of them had graduate degrees and had taught at colleges and universities, but the salary offered by Prince George’s County Public School System, was at least twelve times higher than what they were getting in the Philippines. At the session on classroom management on dealing with the unruly students, the focus was on preparing them for the environment in the average inner-city classroom. Grace and her fellow Filipino teachers, mostly women, were taught to be more authoritative. The trainers taught them how to have a powerful voice. They stressed that being nice, friendly or meek would not work in the inner-city classrooms. In the women’s room during bathroom break, Grace and her colleagues were amused comparing each other’s “authoritative” voice fit for their new classes, their first American students. Some of them were alarmed that there would be metal detectors in most of the schools. And they were told not to expect from their students obedience or respect, which the Filipino teachers were used to in the Philippines.

With jet lag the first few days after her arrival in Maryland, Grace had trouble falling asleep. In her bed across from Joy’s, she lay awake listening to the sounds in the neighborhood—the sirens, the honking, as they came closer and then retreated. Restless, she got out of bed one night and noticed Joy sleeping soundly on the other bed. Grace walked to the kitchen for a drink of water. The candle-shaped night light illuminated the hallway and the two framed prints on the wall: an image of Jesus and of the Virgin Mary. Grace looked at her watch: it was midnight in Maryland, but her body still thought it was noon, Philippine time. One of the two roommates in the second bedroom was snoring.

Grace sat on the sofa in the living room. She opened her laptop computer and checked her e-mails; she had received a few photos from her daughters. Still unable to sleep, now at one in the morning in July, she searched the web for “snow in Maryland” for when winter came, she did not want to appear ignorant to her students. How could they understand how an adult had lived her life without seeing or touching real snow? But Grace got more confused when she read an online newspaper report about last year’s snow: “Baltimore Gas and Electric customers lost power as a result of back-to-back blizzards because of the wet snow that dragged down trees and power lines.” She wondered, Wet snow? Is there such a thing as dry snow? What other kinds of snow are there?

Inside their apartment, there were old stains on the carpet, near the four pairs of flip-flops of different colors and summer sandals. On the shelf next to the fridge was a tin container of Skyflakes crackers, a green tin of Nestlé’s Milo chocolate powder, and packages of Philippine Dried Mangoes. In their tiny kitchen, two days ago, she and Joy fried four pieces of dried fish from Joy’s stash, and the apartment smelled of fried fish. A man from the unit above theirs yelled, “Thank you for the stink!” Grace and Joy looked at each other and laughed. Joy told Grace she only fried fish once a year because of this problem.

Most of the residents in the complex were African Americans and Hispanics. Asians and White Americans were a minority in this part of Maryland. She had met about ten Filipino teachers living in the complex. Because it took her awhile to follow American slang and accents despite having had English as the medium of instruction in school in the Philippines, Grace had yet to initiate conversation with non-Filipinos she ran into in the lobby or the elevators. Although she considered them friendly, her reflex was to retreat into survival mode, blend in with the wall, be invisible.

In the beginning of the school year, in her fourth grade Math class, she asked a boy one day, to read aloud a three-sentence math problem in their workbook and tell them the answer. “I forgot to do the homework,” the boy said. Grace asked another student, a girl, who also said that she did not do her homework. As Grace was walking toward the white board, Dion, the biggest boy, seated eight feet behind her, extended the middle finger on

his right hand and dramatically gestured it toward Grace's back. It caused a chorus of snickers. Grace turned around.

A girl pointed at Dion said, "He was giving you the finger."

"Dion, could you tell us the answer to problem number one, please," Grace said.

"Say what?" Dion said.

Grace was aware that Dion had already been suspended two times for inappropriate behavior in another class. She took a deep breath, walked to the white board, and showed them the solution to the problem. Grace asked Dion whether he wanted to stay in class that period, or have a talk with the guidance counselor. Dion chose to stay in her class and promised to behave. Eventually, as the weeks went by, Dion stopped misbehaving. More students stayed for the after-school help she offered.

In October, at a meeting with the other fourth grade teachers, Grace learned that her students were trailing the other fourth grade Math classes. Most of the students were absent at least twice a week, every week. At the apartment, when she discussed her challenges in the classroom, her roommates, who had been teaching in the school district longer, told Grace not to lose hope, and reminded her that some of their Filipino colleagues had experienced much worse in their first year at Arrowhead Elementary. Nora, who taught Science at Jefferson Middle School, told her that during her first three months of teaching in Maryland, she cried every night and wanted to go back to the Philippines.

By late November, Grace was still trying to get used to autumn, to the gray windy days. She was still uncomfortable wearing wool jackets, scarves and gloves, which she bought from the Thrift Shop at her new church, St. Mary's. While some trees still had bronze leaves, and the willow trees were still shedding yellow leaves, Grace was amazed and sad that now the deciduous trees near the school looked dead. The day before Thanksgiving, Grace brought home-baked Leche Flan for the dessert potluck to add to the catered Thanksgiving Lunch at the faculty room. Food was set out on the extended table. This was her very first Thanksgiving celebration in America, her first time to eat turkey and all the trimmings. An American teacher, Mrs. Williams, heaped a lot of food

onto her paper plate. Grace was finishing a piece of pumpkin pie when Mrs. Williams asked her, “How could you leave your children in the Philippines to come here?” Grace smiled and shrugged it off with a light laugh. She had long ago realized that a light laugh could elude subjects she did not want to pursue. Grace went home upset and talked with Joy before their roommates arrived.

“Why did that teacher, Mrs. Williams, think that I had no heart for leaving my children in the Philippines?” Grace said, exasperated, pacing back and forth in front of Joy in the kitchen of their apartment. “There are American parents who live with their children, but neglect them. I see some of these children in my class.”

“Calma te, amiga. Don’t mind Mrs. Williams,” Joy said. “She is known for making the most appalling comments about non-American teachers. She sometimes makes facetious remarks.”

“And people don’t mind?” Grace asked.

“They just ignore her,” Joy said. “I overheard her telling somebody in the faculty room the other day that the principal was wrong, that the district made a big mistake in hiring Filipino teachers. Mrs. Williams said that if they looked harder, she was sure there were plenty of unemployed American teachers ready to teach Math, Science and Special Education.”

“She made it sound like we’re stealing American teachers’ jobs, as if we forced the principal to hire us.”

“Stop fretting about what she said,” Joy said.

“We are fortunate, though,” Grace said. “That our visa as Filipina teachers gives us a chance at becoming Americans.”

“But only if you do your job well,” Joy said. “That means increase your student’s test scores at the state exams. Then the county will sponsor you for a green card or permanent residency.”

Radio stations and the shops were playing Christmas music, and Christmas decorations were everywhere. Sitting with her laptop on the dining table in her kitchen, Grace scrolled through her Facebook timeline and read posts by her two daughters and husband. She communicated with her family everyday, but she still missed her three-year-old son

since he could not communicate on Facebook. And he would only say a word or two on Skype. One time, during their Skype conversation, Ryan told her, “Mama, come here.” And when she said she couldn’t because she was far away, Ryan just left. Because of the twelve-hour time difference, she and her family talked with each other only on weekends. Occasionally, she phoned using phone cards for the Philippines. Her mother kept in touch only by phone or e-mails. Grace would miss celebrating Christmas with her large extended family at her mother’s house and Arnel’s extended family at his parents’ house. In Maryland, she and her roommates were invited to a Filipino friend’s house for a potluck dinner and the usual karaoke sing-along.

One morning in December, Grace woke up, opened the drapes of her bedroom window overlooking the parking lot, and shrieked, “Snow! Joy, wake up! It’s snowing!” She moved to Joy’s bed and shook her sleeping friend. “Joy, come with me downstairs. Take my picture. I want to show my children, post it on Facebook.” Joy asked her to wear her first and only winter jacket and pair of boots, which they had recently purchased from Goodwill. Grace touched her very first snow, fine flakes of snow as Joy took photos and a video. For the first time, Grace felt the crunch as her brown suede boots tentatively walked on snow, stamped their shape on the blanket of white. There was snow too that glistened around the branches of trees and bushes. Click, click, click. The shots captured Grace’s excitement. The snowballs in her bare hands seemed magical to her.

Over the winter break, Grace and her roommates pitched in for the funeral expenses for the two Prince Georges Filipina math teachers, who had died the first week of December. Grace could not recall meeting the two teachers, but she felt for their families. The one who was distraught about her new husband’s affair hanged herself at her apartment; the other who had financial difficulties overdosed on over-the-counter drugs. The Filipino Teachers Association in Prince George’s County, which had over 400 members, met and discussed ways of handling stress to prevent tragic deaths like these. There were reminders that they had to reach out to each other and to their support network, including their assigned mentors, and school officials. During the discussion, the association president said, “Like Sisyphus, Filipinos are punished by being compelled to roll an enormous rock up a hill only to see it roll back down again and to repeat these

forever.” Grace and a number of teachers nodded in agreement. They knew most of them juggled responsibilities, multiple jobs, and hoped that somehow, someday, they or their children would have full and rewarding lives. They were aware that they might never get there, but they could at least take the first few steps.

On the last Saturday of winter break, her three roommates took her visit the Patuxet River Naval Air Museum. Nora stopped her car near the Patuxet River, and Grace heard the ice break loudly into pieces. This vision of something desolate—gray skies, leafless trees and broken river—touched a vein in Grace that made her whine to her friends about being cold, about wanting to go back home. Home on the island where the trees were always green, and the rivers didn’t freeze.

As they stood near the river, Nora asked, “Grace, I don’t mean to be nosy, but I overheard your conversation with Joy the other night. Seems like your hubby is seeing another woman.”

Grace remained silent. It was true she was at a loss about how to deal with the rumor that her husband was often seen having dinner with a younger woman in Tagbilaran City.

“Tell your husband how you feel and what changes you would like to see,” Melba said.

“And if he doesn’t change, then you decide whether you want to stay in the marriage or whether you would rather split,” Joy said.

“That’s right. Don’t expect your husband to change if he’s a womanizer,” Nora said. “Take it from me, Grace. My ex was one.”

In March, at the meeting attended by the more than 400 teachers from the district, the superintendent announced that due to budget cuts, the H-1B visas would not be extended to those teachers in noncritical areas, which meant many of them would be dismissed, and left without an employer to petition for them. A lot of the recently hired Filipino teachers were shocked to hear this since they were promised tenure when they were offered their jobs. Grace’s three roommates were not affected since their employer-based sponsorship had already been processed two years ago.

When all four roommates got back to their apartment, they gathered in the kitchen. While Joy was getting the green tin of Milo chocolate powder from the cabinet, the teakettle on the stove screeched. “The kettle! Melba, quick!” said Nora. She was busy showing Grace hot apple cider, convincing her to give it a try. Grace related her conversation with her school’s principal, Richard, who informed her that she could no longer teach at the school after this year.

“Richard said it’s nothing personal. It’s not about my performance. It’s the budget cuts,” Grace said, wiping away her tears.

Joy handed her a Kleenex.

“He told me he talked to two principals who might hire me. But I still feel awful. I’ve never been fired before.”

“Maybe the new school will be better for you,” Melba said.

“What about the principal of Pinecrest Elementary? She was nice and friendly with you at the conference last month,” Joy said.

That weekend, Grace e-mailed a dozen principals in the district. And during their nightly prayers in their apartment, the four roommates added prayers for a solution to Grace’s employment problem.

Winter dragged on; snow fell in late March. Grace was now used to arriving at school an hour before her students in the morning. The windowsills in her classroom were slick with icy dew. She thought that if she worked harder, her fourth grade students’ Math test scores would improve, and they might even behave better. Walking to her classroom from the sidewalk, through this gray, cold place, Grace also thought about her family, about her husband. It was true that she and Arnel had grown apart. During their conversations via Skype, there seemed to be nothing left between them but awkward silences or news about the children. The reports from the island about him —not showing up for dinner on Tuesdays and Thursdays, spending a lot of time with a younger woman in public in Tagbilaran City—filled her with anguish. She chastised herself. If only she hadn’t dared to leave her family for the sake of a better future for their children.

By mid-April, winter finally ended. The spring sky was now studded with glorious clouds. Grace was enjoying the warm days to which her body was accustomed. She had received a letter informing her that her H-1B visa would be renewed once for a maximum of six years. However, once her visa ran out, she should already have an employment-based petition approved or underway. Think positive, she reminded herself. Her attention was now focused on the children in her classroom to offset the pain of missing her own children. She had coped with her students' shenanigans. At first they were impenetrable, and their expressions were unfathomable. But by the end of the school year, Grace's students had improved their math test scores. And their behavior improved. Even Dion, who had given her the most trouble, told her yesterday in class, "You're still here, after everything we did to you. The American teachers usually leave us by winter break. Did you stay because your home is too far away?"

"No. I stayed because I made a commitment to teach you all, so you can move on to fifth grade. And later you can graduate from high school, get good jobs, and be good members of the community," Grace said.

"But you're not even from here."

"But I'm part of your community now that I teach here."

"Can you show us again on the globe there where your home country is?" Dion asked.

"That's so far," another student said, when Grace showed them where the Philippines was located.

When the bell rang, as she left the classroom to go to her other Math class, most of the students said, "Thank you, Mrs. Camacho."

One day during faculty meeting, when the principal announced that Arrowhead Elementary was finally removed from the list of those failing to meet state benchmarks in math, she took pride in her students' achievements and in knowing that she had made a contribution to that good news. Later that week, Grace received another piece of good news: the school two miles away offered her a position as a fourth grade Math teacher.

She could hear birdcalls. At school, there were birds with soft, drawn-out calls, which sounded like laments. They perched on the telephone wires as if positioned as sentries outside her classroom. Her students told her they were called mourning doves.

She almost didn't believe them since the doves she knew in the Philippines were white. The mourning doves near their classroom called to one another with a coo-OO-oo sound, which touched her in a peculiar way. The birds seemed to be calling wistfully—as if reading the longing in her heart.

One day over spring break, sunlight streamed in through her bedroom window. The apartment was quiet. Her three roommates went to Goodwill for their price reduction sale, when they bought most of their household goods, clothes, and books. Grace usually went with them, but today she was suffering from hay fever, and decided to stay home. She planned on grading some of her eighty-two students' math tests, but she didn't feel well. She lay down in bed and tried to rest. On her side table was a framed photo of her husband and their three children she had taken last summer during a visit to Panglao Beach. The children looked much younger then; her baby, Ryan, was only two. They looked happy, with a bright future ahead of them. In her mind now, she could see her husband serving their children dinner, dishes he himself cooked, with vegetables he grew in the garden.

Grace reflected on her life and reconsidered; she refused to give up on her twenty-year marriage. She was positive that when Arnel and the children joined her in Maryland, next summer they could work things out. She thought, I should be home with family. It is wrong that I am not home with my children and husband. She felt lost away from them, as if her life was leaking away. She realized now she could forgive Arnel. For if she were to brood upon his mistakes, her mistakes, they could not move on. She and Arnel loved each other as husband and wife, as childhood friends. They would be together as a family once again, next summer, if she had enough money to pay for their relocation to Maryland. She and Arnel could work hard to achieve the good American life, whatever it was, the life everybody back on the island imagined. Yes the challenges were daunting, but she decided not to linger on the mistakes of the past. She was now ready for whatever had to come next.

One Saturday, at the Laundromat, Grace ran into Edgar, a Filipino teacher recruit, living in the same apartment complex.

“Are you sure you want to go back to the Philippines?” Edgar asked.

“Of course,” Grace said. “Bakit, meron bang problema?”

“Well, if your Visayan island is like my province, you will meet relatives you never knew existed, and all of them will be asking for gifts or money,” Edgar said. “Even if you, a balikbayan, go and visit when it’s not Christmas, you will inevitably play Santa to both young and old.”

“I do have a few homecoming gifts, little things I bought on sale.”

“You know, one time, I sent my relatives a few cans of corned beef,” Edgar said. “Soon after, they sent me a message on Facebook: Edgar, send more of these good American corned beef that’s labeled ‘Premium Quality.’”

“Your relatives have good taste, no?”

“The thing is, they forgot to read carefully. The label clearly shows—‘Product of Brazil.’”

In late June, aboard Delta Airlines going home, there were a few Filipino teachers on the same flight. Like Grace, they had left their own children in the Philippines to educate the children of America’s inner-city children in schools shunned by many American teachers who preferred schools in the suburbs. Grace could have returned home at the end of the school year, but she chose to attend two seminars on teaching, which ended 2 days ago. She had also gone with Joy when a realtor showed Joy a few apartments that Joy might be interested in renting when her family moved to Maryland in July. Grace was looking forward to next year, when she would have enough savings to have her own family move with her to Maryland. During the flight, she was already worried thinking how difficult it would be to leave her family again after her thirty-day vacation. She would have to deal once again with the vast hole in her heart.

The night before Grace’s scheduled arrival on the island, Arnel put a bunch of worksheets in a file folder, which he placed on the side table in their bedroom next to a thick book and his laptop. He had just finished cooking dinner and putting four-year-old Ryan, to bed. Arnel had seen his son through another day, and again she had not been a part of it. He phoned their daughter, Marylou, at her dormitory to confirm pick up time.

Under the mosquito net he tried to sleep, but light from the full moon seeped through the window and was too bright for his eyes. On his bed, he tossed and tossed, unable to sleep.

At Tagbilaran Airport on the other side of the island, it didn't take Grace long to find Arnel and their younger daughter, Marylou, outside the Philippine Airlines baggage area. With a lot of drivers honking their horns, a quick hug before loading Grace's baggage was all they could do. Grace looked at her husband as he was loading the van, and all those feelings of family and shared experiences stirred within her. At thirty-eight, he was still boyishly good-looking with his swimmer's body. Their daughter, Marylou, still in her Catholic School high school uniform of white blouse and blue skirt, insisted that they stop at a café ten minutes away from the airport before driving home to Mama's house. They parked on the street outside Divine World University. At the campus café, they ordered three bottles of Coca Cola and took the empty table at the corner.

"Ma, close your eyes," Marylou said.

"Okay, my eyes are closed. What are you up to, young lady?" Grace said.

"Let me cover your eyes. I don't trust you not to peek," Marylou said as she covered her mother's eyes with her hands. "Hurry up Papa. Take it out now."

"What is it, you two? I can't stand the suspense," Grace said.

"Ready?" Marylou said before removing her hands from her mother's eyes. She pointed to the center of the table. "Ta-da! Look at this, Ma."

Grace's mouth opened wide, froze, as she stared in disbelief at a diploma from Divine World University granting Arnel Camacho a Bachelor of Science in Education in Physical Science four months ago.

"Oh my God! Is this real? I can't believe this," Grace said. She slowly touched Arnel's left hand, which was on the table. "Congratulations."

"Why are you crying, Ma? You're supposed to be happy and proud of Papa especially since he was the oldest of the graduating class. He even looked like a dinosaur among his classmates."

"Marylou, we need to plan and prepare for a graduation party for Papa. Let's go home, I want to see your brother and grandmother."

“Wait. I need to show you one more thing,” Marylou said. “Papa, hand me your backpack.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I can handle another surprise,” Grace said.

“Here, what do you think these are?” Marylou asked her mother. “These Calculus worksheets of thirty students? What are they doing in Papa’s backpack? And this thick book of super hard Math stuff for geeks, for this old geek? Why are they in Papa’s backpack?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Papa, say something. Don’t just sit there, like a mute.”

“Go ahead Marylou. You’re the one who planned all this,” Arnel said.

“Mama, are you ready to hear this?”

Grace nodded.

“These, you see, are worksheets of Papa’s students. He just started the first semester of the Graduate Program here at Divine World. Papa is getting his Masters of Arts in Education in Math. Did I say that right, Papa?”

“Right, Marylou.”

“And Papa’s teaching freshman Calculus here, at Divine World,” said Marylou. “That way, he has teaching experience for his future job in America.”

Grace was dumbfounded. She gazed at her husband. He had aged but only a little and with his hair almost all gray now, she loved him even more.

“How could you keep all this a secret from me?” Grace said.

“It was hard,” Marylou said. “Papa works so hard. Imagine taking the bus, forty-two kilometers, one way, just to go to school. And he does this two times a week. That’s why I hate people who spread rumors. They say Papa is having an affair with a very young girl in Tagbilaran, and people believe this shit.”

“Marylou, your mouth,” Arnel said.

“Marylou, this is not something you should be talking about,” Grace said. “You’re too young for this topic.”

“No. I am not too young,” said Marylou. “I am a big part of this.”

“Arnel, this is not something the child should be involved in,” Grace said.

“Just give her a minute. She’s okay.”

“By the way, I’m not a child; I’m a junior in high school,” Marylou said. “Ma, every Tuesday and Thursday, I eat dinner with Papa before he goes to his classes. But the tsismusas in town, they make up all kinds of stories.”

“It’s best to ignore them,” Grace said.

“I forced Papa to take me to McDonalds, to Pizza Hut, and KFC and to Gelateria Milano to get away from dorm food,” Marylou said. “And Papa here is so cheap, tihik kaayo, he doesn’t even eat anything. He only drinks coffee.”

“I eat real food, good food when I get home,” Arnel said. “Speaking of good food at home, we better get going.”

In front of Mama’s house, the hibiscus hedge was in bloom, all pink and red and yellow. This afternoon, the neighbors’ dogs were lying, dreaming, under the talisay tree. Grace left her husband and daughter by the sidewalk to deal with the luggage and the large brown balikbayan boxes bursting with homecoming presents. She walked toward the house and noticed that it looked much older than she remembered it; her eyes were probably comparing it to the newly painted houses in new housing developments in Maryland. She saw Ryan, her little boy, running toward her on the veranda, then abruptly stopping a few feet away to stare at her—his mother who had been absent from his life for almost year. She reached out to hug her son, but he moved away. The little boy with a round face stared at her, observed her from a distance. She approached her son. This time he didn’t move. She hugged him. She kissed him again and again on his cheeks, his nose, and his forehead, smoothing his black wavy hair with her hand. Then her son recoiled, as if he were afraid of her. She quivered inside with both pain and love.

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