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Sampaguita

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SAMPAGUITA

Alexandria Delcourt



A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts University of Southern Maine

Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE


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We hereby recommend that the thesis of *Alexandria Delcourt* entitled *Sampaguitta* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains the first 115 pages of a novel that takes place in the Philippines between 1908 and 1944. The main character, Sampaguita, is a young girl who is growing up in a house with her wealthy father, a prominent lawyer in their town, his wife, their children, as well as her mother who is a concubine and dances waltzes with American soldiers in the local cantina for 10 cents per song, and the rest of her siblings. The first part of the story chronicles her father's decline into alcoholism, which causes the family to go broke. Sampaguita takes care of her siblings while her mother is working and is one of the only people left who still shows affection for her father. When Sampaguita is forced to start begging for rice from the neighbor's cook at the age of 14, she falls in love and has a clandestine love affair that results in a pregnancy, and is then sent away by her father into the country until her baby is born.

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PREFACE

I inherited my story from a family I barely knew the same way I inherited the blood under my skin and my low tolerance for alcohol. In 2005, my aunt returned from a family reunion in Honolulu with a tan and a green plastic folder containing the reunion itinerary, a list of the entire extended family's names, spouses, children, and birthdays, and eighteen spiral-bound pages titled "The Pablo Family Story." I was eighteen years old at the time and had just graduated high school, the thought of writing a book or a story or a poem having never even crossed my mind, but after reading the pages my grandmother had written, which chronicled the early lives of both her parents, the story of how they met and survived the war together with four small children and then moved to the United States where their family grew even more, I had one of those moments people talk about when your path is suddenly illuminated and carved before your feet the way the grand canyon was carved, appearing now as if it had been there forever. I knew that one day, I would write a novel. I wanted to stand on the shoulders of the people whose lives and circumstances had created my own and push the boundaries of our blood to places we had never existed before the way they say every new generation of philosophers builds upon the ideas of their forebears.

The ideas of legacy and inheritance and memory and kinship nagged at me, and the biology and chemistry classes I was taking in college weren't sating the longing I had to learn about connection and people and culture, which was confusing because I had spent all of high school preparing for a college career in the sciences, taking AP classes and testing out of freshman biology. I was sure I was going to work on a lab sequencing DNA or curing cancer. In my second semester I took a class called The African Storyteller. The professor, Harold Scheub, framed the hundreds of oral stories he had collected by walking his way up and down both coasts of Africa as fitting the ritual structure outlined by cultural anthropologist Victor Turner wherein every story had a separation, liminality, and reintegration: the stages for a rite of passage. There was something about the way he could infuse even the most seemingly simple children's folktale with social utility and the grace of passing on knowledge between generations that flipped a switch in my brain and I switched majors from biochemistry to Cultural Anthropology and Religious Studies with minors in Folklore and African Studies faster than it took me to read my grandmother's eighteen pages for the first time.

I had taken so well to the science fields because of how factual they were. There were none of the blurred borders and relativistic social constructions that you find in the humanities to deal with, subjects I was always hesitant to breach because of the complexities of my family's cultural and social

identities. I attended Catholic school in my early elementary years and my friends were other Filipino kids whose parents were friends with my mom. During that time, my dad was very active in the Native American community in Madison and was an MFA student studying woodcarving. We attended powwows and ceremonies, and then came home to eat whole fried smelt with rice and fermented fish sauce for dinner, which we sometimes ate with our fingers, dropping Spanish and Tagalog words into the conversation when I didn't know the English equivalent. On Christmas we made traditional French pork pies, a recipe passed down from my dad's Quebecois grandmother. In middle school my mom remarried and we moved to a small German town in southern Wisconsin. I learned to speak German in school and later, Latin. By the time I was old enough to drive, I didn't mind when my friends would say things like "I mean, you have brown skin, but I don't think of you that way, you're basically just white." In fact, I preferred it that way because I wanted to be like my friends.

But there was something in learning about the ritual structure, overly simplified as that may be, that brushed against some core element of my thought patterns and made me, for the first time, want to figure out where I fit, and because of that, it has stuck with me to this day. The ritual structure subsequently became the first guide I had when putting together the preliminary outlines for the novel I wanted to write, which I started doing

shortly after taking that class. Having never taken an actual writing class, the only way I knew how to frame the story was to start with a separation, by having the main character, Sampaguita, who is based on my paternal great-grandmother, Aurora Pablo, leaving home, and though the story and the drafts have appeared in many different iterations, the basic structure of the story has always stayed the same because it's the best way I know to keep the story authentic to myself. By modeling my structure after the folk tales I had learned about, I hoped that I would be able to craft a story that sat comfortably with people at their most primal levels, as corny as that sounds.

I grew up a musician taking piano lessons for seven years, voice lessons for six, and violin lessons for twelve. I had been singing in choirs and playing in orchestras for almost a decade by the time I graduated high school. I painted quite a bit as well, tried my hand at photography and stained glass, and a plethora of other artistic media, but writing was the first form of expression I found where I wasn't afraid to share my work. I've always been shy, often quiet, and have always completely hated and dreaded playing music in front of people, in recitals or concerts. But for some reason, I don't mind people reading what I write, which is strange because I find that what I write is even more personal and more directly reflexive of my thoughts and feelings and person than any other form of expression I've tried.

Perhaps this stems from a love of languages. Growing up in a house with multiple languages, I found that learning languages, manipulating words, and understanding that names and words can hold power over the things they represent was easy for me to understand. At the same time, representation is in every way malleable, relative. Words are like a game. A word in a certain sequence can have one meaning, while the same word in a different sequence can mean something entirely different. Language, in that sense, is like a puzzle, the ultimate in freedom of expression, the ultimate in limitless possibility. There is no such thing as an out of tune word as long as you know how to manipulate meaning. If a sentence doesn't make sense, it still has meaning, and as long as the meaning you intend is garbled, then a garbled sentence can win. Language, to me, is the ultimate game, and I think that's why I enjoy it so much. Meaning can be wrong, but language can't.

My first formal introduction to the writing craft was in an anthropology class called Ethnographic Writing wherein I conducted ethnographic field work at a Tibetan Buddhist temple and then wrote about it. I was reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* at the time, at Harold Scheub's insistence, and was asked to rewrite my ethnographic piece because I had embellished the facts, describing a sudden hush that fell on the crowd when Geshe Sopa entered the room even though they couldn't see him yet because the door was behind the large golden statue of the Buddha that took up most of the front wall, or writing

about how the monks' prayers rode on the wind and muted the sounds of traffic driving past the temple grounds. This you cannot do in ethnographic writing.

It took me three attempts before I finally made it all the way through *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but it wasn't until the fourth go-round that I was able to appreciate what it, in its narrative entirety, accomplishes as opposed to reading it merely for its anecdotal episodes and lyrical prose. After all, at the time I wasn't used to reading narratives any more complicated than Harry Potter. But in Márquez's book I found a home for myself as a writer and for the story I wanted to write first. It just fit. There was no question in my mind that I belonged in a postcolonial family saga full of magic carpets and spirits and prophecies, watching generations unfold to manifest and re-manifest the stories and lessons of the people who preceded them because I, at my most basic, am a character from a postcolonial family saga who makes major life decisions (like choosing which MFA program to enroll in) by consulting tarot cards.

Worlds opened up for me after reading García Márquez. I took the year and a half after finishing my Bachelors and before applying to MFA programs to immerse myself in multicultural literature. I read everything from James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, to Sandra Cisneros, Joy Harjo, Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, Sandra Benitez, Amy Tan, Rudolfo Anaya, and Tess Uriza Holthe, my classics. But of

course, the books I was most drawn to continued to be the postcolonial-family-saga-magical-realism authors like Isabel Allende, Barbara Kingsolver, Gabriel García Márquez, and Luis Alberto Urrea.

In some ways I feel like my work directly pulls from the tradition of postcolonial literature. I try to layer the cultural experience of my work by including traditional folklore, and customs, food and ethos, but then trying to give nod to issues like social stratification, colonized language, and religion. In many ways I feel that imperialism and religion in particular beget this genre of magical realism. When we see cultures and ideologies clash, especially where one culture may have much more strict views on what does and does not count as government and spirituality, mysticism and magic become a way to explain new experiences that people, until the point of colonization, had not had to include in their worldviews and lifeways, and this is the way I strive to use magic in my work.

In other ways, I try to build upon the literary traditions I feel closest to. While I love using lyrical prose and rich, poetic imagery and metaphor, I also try to infuse my writing with some modern syntactical structure, particularly in the dialogue. I'm also very drawn to the idea of placing scenes out of order in the final draft. Garcia Marquez does this to a certain extent in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, but he skips ahead and backwards in time in a way that links the links the events together narratively in order to show patterns develop over

long periods of time. I, however, would rearrange the order of scenes to begin with events of separation, then explore the theme of liminality, and the resolve themselves in the end, thus making the physical act of reading the novel a rite of passage.

In the summer of 2010, the year after graduating college, I spent three months in California with my grandmother (Aurora Pablo's daughter), so I could ask her about all the things she wrote about for the reunion. I didn't really know what I was doing, how to conduct this kind of research, or what sorts of details would come in useful for me when working on this project, so I tried to just listen and asked things about the kinds of games she played as a kid, what it felt like to be in a monsoon, and what types of materials her house was made out of. These types of details are what I try to draw from when fleshing out the world I'm attempting to create.

The first half of my project, which makes up most of the creative portion of my thesis, is an account of events that my grandmother was unable to talk about because they happened well before she was born. As much as possible, I have tried to take some of the anecdotal family stories and infuse them into the narrative even if it means changing who they involved or exactly how they happened because without direct sources, all I can do is hope to capture the spirit of the story I've been given rather than capturing the events and people as they actually were. This was a difficult hurdle to overcome. Situating

fictional details and scenes and episodes in larger cultural, national, and political background is probably the thing with which I struggle the most. I have always had a very difficult time with history and conceptualizing the passing of time or even remembering what year something happened or how old I was because I don't think in terms of spatial organization. I have no idea if there are 200 or 700 jellybeans in the jar. The people who ride in my car have to give me directions by telling me to turn 'toward the driver's side' or 'toward the passenger's side' because left and right don't make sense. Though it has never been confirmed, I suspect it's a mild form of spatial dyslexia. All this is just to say that the difficulties I have had with the ongoing historical research of this project, which is a major component of historical fiction, is probably the reason so much of what I write is character driven and has more to do with relationships between individuals than recreating a time and place in an accurate way.

When I finally began the process of writing a first draft in the summer of 2011, I began to realize how difficult it would be to write. I was writing about a time and place with which I was unfamiliar no matter how much reference material and historical research I did, and writing about people whose lives meant something to me, but with whom I would never be able to communicate or connect with person-to-person. I felt very much like a fraud or a usurper, appropriating a culture and situation that, while I am very connected to it in a

familial way, didn't always seem like was mine to take and manipulate in order to serve some personal purpose I had that didn't really involve anyone else. This was another hurdle to pass, one that tugged again on those questions of inheritance and legacy and kinship once more.

How much do you take from the generations that come before you and how much do you discard, refigure, adapt? How much do you throw away? What I began to realize is that it's not enough to say that we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors when we mine history for stories and wisdom. By its very nature, history is an act of preservation, not fact, its products designed to allow one to *re-member*--literally to re-inhabit, to re-live—and thus by its own practice, force the past to repeat itself through the minds of those in the present.

The more I write and draft, the more I see myself in the characters I write. The more it becomes *my* story to manipulate and bend and embellish. Yet at the same time, it also feels like it gets closer to the true spirit of the story I wanted to write all those years ago. This helped me realize that the inspiration I felt did not come from the events of the story I read, but rather the parts of myself that the story tugged on.

The things my family went through, the struggles and happinesses they experienced and situations they found themselves in or made for themselves are the reason I'm here today. And at the same time, I, too, am the reason that

they still exist, that their legacy will continue. I'm talking both about familially, as in my DNA is a continuation of theirs, but also that their story gets to continue living, that the events that took place get to be recreated, remembered, revisited, reinhabited, and that in this way, history gets to repeat itself.

This was a crucial realization that allowed me to move forward with less inhibition. I stopped thinking about it as a story to which I owed due justice, a set of shoulders to stand on as I tried to create something greater. Rather, it became like a roadmap, a way to learn the same kinds of lessons they learned by delving into the characters, finding the things they had in common with myself, holding their hand and understanding that no, they wouldn't do this, or yes, that feels like something they would do. And I realize that if they were around to read what I was writing today, they probably would not recognize themselves as the characters, which is something I worried about and tried to avoid for a long time. But that doesn't feel like the point anymore. What I tried to do is take a set of stories that evoked some response in me, and find what it is that's universal and recreate it. One of the truest things I have learned as an MFA student is not to trust the things books say because they're filled with bias and lies, but instead to trust how they make me feel, and this realization has gotten me to the point when I stop trying to stand on the shoulders of the past

as if I can learn its lessons without living them myself, and realize instead that I walk hand in hand every day with those whose stories I cherish and love.

This thesis contains the first 115 pages of the novel, which is probably close to the first quarter or third of the entire narrative, (which only constitutes the first half of the eighteen pages my grandmother wrote for the reunion). The rest of the story follows Sampaguita as she is sent away to live in the country because she's pregnant, her marriage to her future husband, Rosana's death, and the disintegration of her parents' relationship. Then, World War II forces Sampaguita and her family into hiding while her husband fights and becomes one of the few survivors of the Bataan Death March.

At its core, I still think of this story as a folktale, a story passed down through generations that contains some crucial piece of social utility, some lesson to be learned, a rite of passage we must endure (and hopefully enjoy) as we journey to become changed by the end of the book. For this reason, I thought it would be a nice nod back to my writerly roots to include actual Filipino folklore into the narrative. This is why we see Tomás telling stories to Sampaguita every morning, like the story about the field of lilies, or the one about the Dama de Noche. The scene where Sampaguita chases her brother through the market only to discover him dancing with gypsies has a distinct folkloric feel to it, as does the story of how Carmen kills Johnny Aquino, though both of those events actually happened. These more folklore-inspired

sections of the story mirror the events that the characters go through in their everyday lives and in most cases, the events that truly happened as far as I have been able to discover. To me, this is a way to ground the story and make it as authentic as possible to the spirit of the story that inspired me.

SAMPAGUITA

Alexandria Delcourt



ONE

*Cual navío juguete de las olas
Destrozado por fuertes tempestades,
Perdido en las inmensas soledades
Del rugiente desierto de la mar:
Solitario, sin guía ni esperanza,
Sin luz que le conduzca á salvación...
Así vive afligido, madre mía,
Sin ti mi corazón.*

-Pedro Paterno

Sampaguita left her father's house in Pasig an hour before dawn on the first day of her fourteenth monsoon season. Not by choice. Across the river from the house, the first vegetable and spice vendors were just arriving to set up their stalls under wide umbrellas the colors of chili peppers and saffron to stand out against the green crosshatch of weeping leaves and grasses and trees that grew all around, crept down and were overcome by the swollen river.

The night before, as her brothers lay snoring around her on their cold, hard bamboo mats in the humid darkness of their bedroom, Sampaguita's father, Tomás, had shaken her awake, handed her a small leather traveling case. "Mija, put your clothes inside," he said in slurred Spanish. "You are leaving in the morning." Sampaguita did not cry, only stared at the rain outside the window as he spoke. And when he tapped her bony shoulder to make sure she had heard him, she turned and looked so sharply into his olive eyes that his

body began to feel cold. They were just like his. “Yes,” she said in a whisper that was wind against a broken edge of glass. “Solitario, sin guía ni esperanza, sin luz que le conduzca á salvación.” Tomás recognized the lines of verse, but chose to leave rather than face the lines that might come next. They were the last words she spoke to him for three years.

After he left, Sampaguita climbed out from beneath the mosquito netting draped over her mat, her tangled black hair snagging on the cloth, and ran into the next bedroom. Her mother, Carmen, was sitting beside a chest of drawers on a stool padded with a thin blue cushion that she had sewn herself in the early days of her life in Tomás’s house. Her nightgown was twisted around her torso, its frayed hem like wisps of cloud against the woody morena skin of her exposed calves. The black of her long braid was sharp against the white fabric and framed her soft, round face like a halo. She was looking at the old photograph of a young man again like she did sometimes when she thought nobody was watching, but it had become so smudged with fingerprints and creases that Sampaguita could never make out his features.

“Where?” asked Sampaguita in Tagalog, all pretense of calm melting away.

“Sampaguita,” whispered Carmen as she took her daughter’s face in her hands.

“Where?”

“To the country,” said Carmen.

“I don’t want to go. Make him...”

“Sampaguita, you know I can’t do that. It’s not my choice. It’s Rosana. And what about the neighbors?”

“I don’t care.”

“Flower. It is not so bad. It will be a peaceful place,” Carmen said, her eyes averted.

“What peace?” asked Sampaguita, suddenly defiant. “The peace of the old? The peace of the dead? Is that what you think of me?”

The photo beneath the cushion stirred at the mention of the dead and Carmen shifted to prevent it from escaping and then and looked angry. “Susmaria, Sampaguita! Don’t speak ill of the dead. They are not all at peace,” she said cuffing Sampaguita’s shoulder once before pulling her into a hug.

The next morning, Tomás did not know why he was nervous. He looked down their unpaved street at the exact moment the first chicken wobbled in the garden behind the kitchen and saw the horse-drawn *calesa* that he hired cluck toward him in the dark. The driver was named Juan Diego. He was a short man with tangled black hair that dripped down his back, his teeth stained red from chewing on betel leaves and smoking tobacco. His right leg had been amputated below the knee where the broken ankle and deep gash he acquired

fighting in the revolution ten years earlier had become infected. There was no need to call out to Sampaguita or fetch her from the bedroom as Juan Diego approached. She had awoken by her own prescience before dawn and carried the traveling case that she packed the night before to the front room where her father and mother were waiting. Neither of them spoke to her. None of her siblings were awake yet and Rosana, her father's wife, was still too ill in bed to come downstairs. Sampaguita was surprised that this made her sad. She walked straight ahead, the calm in her face masking the thrashing beat behind her rib cage and the sick trembling she felt deep below her navel. Only when she had stepped out the door did she let any tears form, but they were hidden in the raindrops that landed on her face. The wooden frame and wheels of the *calesa* had become swollen and slick because of the rains, and her foot slipped as her mother helped her climb below the eaves of the carriage. She fell forward onto the floor, her stomach colliding with the low wooden bench, and cried out as a pain spread from her stomach down to her pelvis and up through her back. Her mother closed the door behind her and went back to the house, becoming less and less visible as she ran through the dense rain. Sampaguita saw Rosana looking down at the *calesa* from an upstairs window, her face gaunt and ill and half hidden behind a gossamer curtain. She, too, was crying, though her eyebrows were gathered in a hateful scowl, fingernails tapping the window sill like a quick drumbeat. The latch on the little wooden door locked itself in fear

of Rosana's glare and shivered, unnerving the horses and sending them into a panicked run. Juan Diego flew back in his seat and yelled before regaining control of the reins and Sampaguita, terrified, threw all of her weight against the door, scoured the pocked and rotting wood that smelled of mold with her fingertips searching for a way to open it. She pounded against the lock, which was blurry through her tears, but the door would not open, and she let out a wail because she did not want to leave, but it was lost beneath the sound of sucking hooves.

She turned around and looked through the back window at her house one last time before they rounded a bend in the road thinking that perhaps there were things she wished she had said to her parents before she left, wishing she could hug them instead of leaving in what she had tried to make a dignified silence. Sampaguita could barely make out the cream-colored walls and latticed windows of the house through the darkness. Her mother was crying now, too, but her father wore his indifference as comfortably as one of the crisp, cotton suits that he always had imported from Spain. To Sampaguita, he looked as distant as the ghosts her mother always spoke to her about, the ones that called out from behind doors or hid in the forgotten corners of the house. "Do not anger them," she was always saying. "They are the souls of the forgotten people, the memories of brothers and lovers who have done terrible things, the sons and daughters that even mothers try to forget."

Sampaguita felt those ghosts haunting her now, growing deep in the child she carried. Her mother's words were no comfort as she sat damp and frozen in the jostling *calesa*. She had no way of gauging how far Maricel's house was, nor how far they had come. The man steering the horses let out grunts every now and then as he spit over the side of his perch onto the road. For hours she sat without moving, one hand resting on the growing mound of her belly, her head leaning back against the wooden walls as she stared at a gaping crack in the ceiling above her. Drops of rain were falling slowly, steadily onto her face, her long, plaited hair, the worn leather traveling case that sat next to her, so that after the first few hours she could no longer tell if the moisture on her cheeks was rain or tears. Somehow it was a relief not to know, not to have to know.

Outside, the landscape changed from the cobbled streets, stone bridges, and muddy riverbanks of Pasig that she had known all her life to a mountainous countryside crosshatched with contrasting textures of green and ochre. Terraced rice paddies rose like grand staircases up the mountainsides all around and disappeared into the low hanging clouds, their crowns dotted with magnolia and acacia trees whose branches were tangled and spilling over with vines that hung all the way down the puddles of water at the trees' roots. The hills were like the ancient gods that her father had described to her in the stories he used to tell her, so big that she felt smaller than any other creature in

the world, yet somehow exposed as if the secrets she had been keeping since childhood were suddenly for sale to anybody who would pay enough money. The thick air around her echoed with the calls of howler monkeys and the steady gnash of rain and made her feel suffocated and like she would never be dry again. Sampaguita felt guilty as she thought about her mother and brothers back home, how much earlier they would have to wake without her to cook their breakfasts for them each day. She thought of Marco, too, and wondered where he might be now, and whether he was thinking of her, but the thought was too much to bear and Sampaguita cried harder for the rest of the trip, rubbing her hands over her belly and toying with the loose threads on the off-white skirt her mother had sewn for her with a tied waistband that she could adjust as the baby grew inside her. The skirt was one of Sampaguita's favorite possessions. The way its fabric folded and flared at the bottom reminded her of the pair of white lilies her father had given to her one morning when she was five years old.

It had been during the dry season, a bright day, humid and hot. She awoke early in the morning, just as the pink light was beginning to descend down the walls of her bedroom through the open window, as she always did, to the drifting sounds of hens clucking and vendors bartering in the marketplace across the river.

In the kitchen, her mother was preparing breakfast. With one hand, she was stirring a pan of eggs frying in butter with tomatoes and onions that was sitting at an angle atop three mounds of stone that held it over an open-flamed stove. With the other, she was slicing into the papaya half that lay face-down on a flat plank of wood she had placed on top of a rice barrel. Her practiced hands folded a sharp knife easily through the soft flesh releasing a burst of efflorescent fragrance into the air that made the flies and mosquitoes dance around her head. A plate of sweet, red, pork longanisa sausage burned black around the edges where the morsels of fat were squeezing out of the casing was sitting beside the stove so it would stay warm before it was served. Sampaguita, enticed by the smells sneaked into the kitchen behind her mother, giggling. She reached up and grabbed a fistful of the sticky, orange fruit. Carmen waited until her daughter's small hands were full before swatting her gently out of the kitchen with a battered kitchen towel because the fruit and the meats were supposed to be for Rosana and her three children, who were still asleep upstairs.

Sampaguita knew that her father was already awake and waiting upstairs at the front of the house in his study with his eyes closed, face clean-shaven, and when she entered, she found him sitting behind his desk in the solid, Spanish chair that was strictly off-limits to his children, unless they were completing schoolwork in the evenings. Sampaguita did not attend public

school because Rosana preferred to have her stay in the house and work, but Tomás still thought it was important that his favorite daughter be taught to read, and so had her sit on his lap every morning as he taught her letters and numbers and weaved his silly tales into tapestries for her, sometimes telling her of his history, sometimes inventing wholly new stories.

“My Flower,” her father called her. “Come here and let me look at you,” he commanded as she settled in the chair with him. “Let me see your eyes! Your eyes, so much like your mother’s! What are you thinking? Hmm? What are you thinking?” he crooned and smiled.

Tomás DeLeón’s study was overwhelmed with ornately hand-carved furniture whose curved feet rested upon an ash-colored rug. Rows of shelves lined its walls filled with books and the intricately carved ivory plates that depicted scenes of beautiful women and distant places collected from traders in the ports of Manila, where Tomás claimed that he had often walked as a younger man. Sampaguita loved to run her fingers across the faces of the delicate dolls and miniature sailboats that Tomás often spun into characters when he told her stories and read from his books. The room always smelled of gin and leather, which was, as Tomás always said, exactly how a man should smell.

“Alright now,” he said to her. “Listen carefully. The story I will tell you today is an important one.” He spoke soberly and his face became serious,

though he kept a small spark smoldering behind his dark eyes that told to her, as it always did, that he was still playing.

“A long time ago,” he continued, “there was a large field filled with thousands and thousands of white lilies. This was long before we Spaniards came to the Philippines. There were no ports on the river back then, and Manila wasn’t here yet...maybe just some little houses.” His fingers flitted through the air between them, indicating the scattered straw huts that he saw clearly in his mind.

“The lilies grew on the sides of the Pasig River and they were very beautiful, but they weren’t plain lilies like the ones we see in the market. They were bigger, and whiter, and they smelled better. They were sacred. Can you imagine? Nobody picked them, and nobody walked on them because it was said that as long as the lilies bloomed in that field, there would be peace throughout all the islands.

“So, for many years the lilies grew and grew and the people were happy. There was plenty of food to eat and the animals grew very fat.

“But then, one day, in the middle of the dry season when the air was heavy and humid, a big boat appeared floating slowly down the river and into the bay. The boat was full of Yellow Warriors: Chinese warriors. All of the people who lived near the water came out of their houses to watch as the boat, larger than any they had ever seen, pulled closer to the shore and stopped just

shy of the beach. Then, when everyone was gathered together on the riverbank anxiously waiting to see what had arrived, the warriors filed onto the land and suddenly began to attack.

“They came out with swords and spears and for many days the battle continued without rest. News of the invasion spread and hundreds of men came with their families to defend themselves and their lands, but it did not matter. The Yellow Warriors had endless numbers. More and more of them came off the boat to fight until the air no longer smelled of flowers, but of metal, blood, and fire.

“Finally, when the battle was over, the people looked around exhausted, and found the field littered with death. All of the lilies had been trampled, their petals stained red, and everybody wept for the losses of their loved ones. But they also wept for the destroyed field because they knew that hard times were surely to follow, and they were right.

“The lilies never came back and now the buildings of Manila cover the place where they used to grow.”

The story came to an end, and Sampaguita sat in thought for a minute. The story made her sad, the idea of the red field, the broken petals, and the air around her became heavy as the wells of her eyes grew deep with a hurt stolen from lifetimes before. Tomás had not been able to watch a woman cry without becoming angry ever since he was a child and saw his own mother weep when

his father died of a malarial fever, but he had never minded a child's kind of crying, especially not one of his own. So when he sensed the sadness in his youngest daughter's eyes and became inexplicably uncomfortable, he was surprised and stared at her as he would at a stranger. He didn't want her sitting on his lap at that moment, but tried to be reasonable with himself like any man of learning would do. He continued awkwardly, not knowing what else to do.

"But the lilies are still there," he said, and then reached down below the desk and busied himself with the clasp on his briefcase. Without giving her time to beg an explanation he pulled out two pearl-white lilies that were so immaculate, so iridescent in color that they cast a glow throughout the entire room and made the wrinkles at the corners of Tomás's eyes stand out sharply against his otherwise smooth face. "Para tí," he said and handed them to her. She thought they smelled like the kitchen did sometimes when her mother was mashing yams. Her smile exposed spaces where her two front teeth were missing, which made Tomás feel more at ease. He lifted her off his lap and placed her on the floor as he rose swiftly to his feet, and she hopped across the study and over toward the window at the front of the house. The lilies glowed in the slanted morning and made the dust that had settled on the desk beam like glitter. Held sideways in Sampaguita's tiny hands, their faintly sweet aroma was strong enough to fill the entire room. Years later, in times when she was far from home, and after the horrors of war had finally managed to relinquish their

grip upon her dreams, it was in that smell that she would finally be able to find comfort.

After her father left for work, Sampaguita sat on the floor of the study feeling rebellious because nobody was supposed to be in there when Tomás was out of the house, and there was something exciting in knowing that Rosana or Rosana's handmaid, whom all the children called Flashlight because of the way her large round eyes spotted every spot of dirt, could walk in at any moment. The danger made it all the more sweet when she pulled down the porcelain dolls from her father's bookshelf and kissed the tops of their heads, tasted their tangy paint on her lips. She sat in the corner of the room recreating her father's fable with the dolls as the Chinese warriors and her two flowers, which she named Sampson and Delilah because theirs was her favorite story out of the ones the priest sometimes told on Sundays at mass, as the Islanders.

In the adjacent rooms her siblings and half-siblings were opening their eyes and waking to brightening morning light and the aroma of breakfast. But Sampaguita, distracted in the study, was unaware of her own hunger until an hour later when the sound of footsteps grew suddenly loud in the hallway. The heavy strides were sharp on the bamboo floors though they were muffled under soft, cotton slippers. They shook her from her daydreams, the sounds falling like stones into the pit of her stomach as they echoed nearer until they were

right outside the room. She was trapped. Her eyes flashed toward the open door and locked gazes unintentionally with Tita Rosana, Aunt Rosana as she was supposed to call her, who was standing with her hands wrapped tightly into fists, frozen, staring, fierce.

Rosana's eyes were red, but whether out of anger or fatigue, Sampaguita did not know. Her nose was small and narrow above full, red lips and her light brown eyes, perfectly symmetrical. The hue of her skin was a light and milky tan that offset the shine in her wavy hair perfectly. It was a face that people had called beautiful her whole life.

"A Filipina who takes after her Spanish side in looks," said the women who came over to the house in the afternoons sometimes to play Mah Jongg or sip light teas and laugh their delicate laughs together with their backs straight, ankles crossed. "The most beautiful." But despite her beautiful face, Sampaguita found Rosana's glare terrifying. This was in part because Rosana often punished her and made her feel ashamed for spilling her drinks or standing in the way, but it was also because she knew she was not allowed in the study and worried that her mother would be angry, or that her father would forbid her from coming back.

For a moment there was no movement, only a stillness in the air and stifled heartbeats. But then the study exploded with action. Sampaguita scrambled backwards on the floor as Rosana approached, gathering in

momentum as her feet hit the rug. Sampaguita's lip trembled as she strained to remain in control of her hands and feet. She cowered and gripped Sampson and Delilah as hard she could, fighting to hide the alarm that was making her hands shake and her heart hammer and jump. Rosana's long, bony arms snapped forward and reached out towards the lilies.

"Give those to me!" She demanded, fire pouring from her mouth and nose. With a single violent movement she snatched the flowers away. "They were meant for me, I am his wife, thief!"

Rosana hovered above, her eyes severe and acidic and Sampaguita felt her feet melt into the wooden floor. And then Sampaguita saw the lily petals wither and fade to a sad, gray hue in Rosana's hand. Their stems tired and fell until the heads were bouncing limply against Rosana's fingers.

Rosana felt the flowers wilt and expression changed to one of indifference. "Go eat, you're far too skinny," she ordered as if Sampaguita was her own child. "What will the neighbors think?" Then, Rosana swung the door open wide and Sampaguita knew she had to leave the room. She passed her Tita's outstretched arm and felt a searching stare on her back as she broke into a run toward the kitchen. Rosana's footsteps retreated toward a cabinet in the upstairs serving kitchen where she kept her cut crystal glasses and vases, and Sampaguita knew that Rosana was displaying the lilies on the dining room table: a testament to the wonderful marriage that she would tell her girlfriends

about at their weekly game of Mah Jongg as Flashlight served them crackers and fruit.

“What a wonderful husband and father Tomás must be, to have bought you such beautiful flowers,” they would say, eyeing the sad droop in the stems. Nonetheless, the corners of Rosana’s mouth would lift, her teeth would shine, and until the day she died, she would make sure the world saw how happy she was.

Downstairs in the dirty kitchen, Carmen closed her eyes and leaned up against the small table, her hips digging into the hard, wooden edges. The baby was crying again and the sound was like bee stings in her ears. By her third child she hoped that the endless crying, the endless feedings would start to feel normal but it never did. Sampaguita had been the worst. She screamed through the days and nights, fed every two hours until she was a year old, and then overnight became a quiet and observant child. Roberto had been a harder pregnancy but an easier baby, and Cristofer, still an infant, had been the hardest pregnancy of all. She was sick for four straight months, yet never missed cooking a meal for Tomás’s family, something she had grown accustomed to doing over the six years she had lived there.

Sometimes Carmen felt like the only real family she had in the house were the ghosts she saw lurking in the corners of her eyes, and whenever she

was alone she talked to them about her day, and about the sweat that rolled off her neck when it was hot, and the gossip she learned from the neighbor's cook, and how much she hated loving Tomás, and loved hating Rosana, and sometimes it was the other way around. She had found the ghosts in the house when she arrived and wondered if they had followed her there, not that it mattered.

Behind her, Cristofer would not stop moaning as if in pain, squirming in the small blanket-lined basket sitting on the dingy, tile floor next to the barrels of un-winnowed rice in the back of the kitchen. Carmen wished he would stop, but then felt guilty and turned around to go pick him up. As she reached down for him she caught the momentary scent of flesh and sweat that lingered on her own skin from the night before, the smell Tomás left behind whenever he forced himself onto her in the evenings before bed, or sometimes after his supper. The scent mingled with the smoke of pork *langonisa* frying on the stove and the smell of Cristofer's dirty baby cloth and Carmen thought she might be sick again. She had been getting sick in the mornings for the last few weeks and knew well what that meant.

She bounced the baby in her arms for a minute and swayed back and forth in front of the open-flamed stove, ignoring the burning meat as she hummed a quiet lullaby in harmony with the breeze blowing in through the kitchen window. She was always humming lullabies though she didn't always

realize it, and even in the moments when she wasn't making a sound, the air around her felt as if it swayed in rhythm with her body. She often found that people would stop in the streets or in the market to listen to her voice as she bartered with vendors or called out to Sampaguita or Roberto. It had always been this way for her, which she thought must be the reason why some of her fondest memories were of evenings spent at socials that they used to throw in the town where she lived with her parents. She used to attend them as a teenager with the other girls she knew from school and they'd spend the evening staring at boys from across the dancing ring, trying to avoid the eyes of their chaperones. "If I had known then what was going to happen, I would have married the first boy who asked me to dance," she had told the ghosts through sobs on one of her first nights in the house. But that was years ago now.

As the meat continued to smoke, she rocked Roberto on her hip, her movements growing labored from the swelling in her ankles. Yet through the pain she managed to maintain that certain grace normally reserved for dancers and queens, not because she was trying, but because the lullabies she continually hummed under her breath were circular and never came to a satisfying conclusion, which didn't lend itself well to irregular movements of the body. The baby quieted when she offered him her breast to suckle. The contact was comforting and Carmen took advantage of the moment and went to bathe in the orange pool of sunlight in the doorway that led from the kitchen to

the garden behind the house where years later, Tomás would tie up the handsome peacock that arrived at his house and made him feel ashamed, but was a gift from his daughter's suitor.

This was Carmen's favorite spot, and despite her position in the house, when she stood here and felt the warmth of the sun on her skin and the comfort of her child in her arms, she felt happy. Beyond the garden there were three tall stands of palm trees that waved magnificently to her in the mornings and produced the most succulent coconuts, which Carmen used to make delicious coconut pastes and jams that even Nida, the cook who lived down the street in the house of The Famous Juan Salvador, proclaimed were the best she had ever had. Two small birds, as green as the vibrant mosses that grew on the banks of the Pasig River, were flitting in and out of each other's paths below the eaves of the palm fronds, and the way their flight was free and elegant made Carmen jealous. Just then the baby began to squirm and cry once more and Carmen wondered whether or not he could sense how strong her urge to run away was, and wondered whether that was the reason for his tears.

Before she could think on it any longer, she felt a tiny hand grip the back folds of her bright blue skirt. It was Sampaguita still wearing her thin nightgown, her hair tangled in a bunch and her face was smudged with dirt that clearly outlined the tracks where tears had recently fallen down her cheeks. Carmen bent down and brought her face level with her daughter's.

“What’s wrong, *Anak*, my child? Why are you crying?”

Sampaguita did not answer immediately.

“Flower, tell me.”

“I’m just tired,” Sampaguita said. She yawned in an exaggerated way and Carmen heard a whisper from the corner of the room and knew her daughter was lying.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“You’re just like your father! Tell me.”

“Nothing. I’m tired.”

Carmen sighed and adjusted Cristofer on her hip. “You’re lying,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“Mothers know.”

“How do they know?”

“*Ay Nako*, Sampaguita. Was it Rosana? Why are you keeping secrets? Are you scared? Or ashamed?”

Sampaguita did not answer, only buried her face into Carmen’s dress. Carmen did not know how to help, only sighed and wished even harder that she could take her children and leave the house. She ran her free hand down

the back of her daughter's head, smoothing down the strands of hair that had escaped her braids during sleep.

“Here, Flower. Eat some of this,” she said and handed Sampaguita a small bit of sticky rice that she had wrapped in a banana leaf earlier that morning. “Dip it in the sugar.”

Sampaguita unwrapped the rice and breathed in its sweet, sticky scent before she took a bite. Carmen waited until she had finished eating and then handed her the baby and turned again, poured too much vinegar into Rosana's breakfast.

TWO

Tomás walked from his home to his law office every day through the marketplace where the vendors and old men gathered to examine the size of the fish and tell stories about their youth. Crowds parted to let him through, the town as accustomed to his routine as he was, and whispers followed him as he walked.

“There he goes.”

“Tomás DeLeón.”

“So tall!”

“If only I had a daughter.”

“What would he want with your daughter? Hah? He has two beauties at home already.”

“He could afford more than two, everybody knows!”

“So handsome!”

“I hear his house has no rats.”

“I hear his children have no lice.”

“*Half* his children maybe.”

“Ay Na, don’t say these things! Look how tall.”

Despite what people said, Tomás had adored his youngest daughter, Sampaguita, from the moment she first opened her eyes and he saw that they were just like his. In her early years, mornings had been their only times alone together and in those moments he was loving and kind, qualities rarely seen in him otherwise. Most people shied away from his direct eye contact and he knew it, and enjoyed it.

The day that Tomás bought his daughter the two white lilies was the hottest he could remember, which was something he always said whenever he told stories because in his opinion, the way a man handled the humid heat of their Island home was what defined him as weak or strong. On this day, the thick air dripped from every surface of the open-air market that stood just across the river from the DeLeóns' house. The market consisted of little lean-tos and shacks made of plywood and corrugated metal roofing that always smelled astringent and tinny when it rained and transitioned into a shop-fronted street the closer to the city it came. There the local merchants and farmers sold and traded fresh tomatoes and coconuts, garlic and peppers and avocados, eggs, chickens, pigs, and goats, talismans to ward evil, necklaces of woven flowers that the old women taught the young girls to make, and dolls and baskets woven from dried thatch. It was a place of gossip, a meeting place of the worlds where the rich came to buy from the farmers, the farmers came to trade with the poor, and the poor came to walk behind the rich and feel

wealthy for a moment themselves. Old women, who hid below their parasols to avoid the sun and keep their skin fair, crowded the little alleyways as old men and children sat around below nearby trees that swayed in lazy arcs to cool themselves.

Tomás was walking home in the late afternoon from the office where he spent most his time arguing arbitrary points with people that he knew would eventually concede to him anyway. It was then he saw the lilies. A bouquet of them had been wilting in the heat of the market in front of a small Chinese grocery store that was owned by a man named Sal Chen who had always smelled of fish and body odor. The edges of their petals were gilded with brown, their stems pallid and sagging when he'd first harvested them from the bucket. He fished two out and inhaled their scent, the smell traveling throughout his body, quieting his racing thoughts. In the haze he remembered many things, allowed his mind to escape into past loves and grief and was consumed by thoughts of the two women he had loved the most in his life. The withered flowers that drooped between his fingers grew warm as he stood and sunlight bounced from their petals in radiating waves like a desert mirage that illuminated the front of the shop. It settled in the hearts of the people nearby, who all felt a sense of calm wash over them and were seized by a sudden desire to return home to their families. When he looked down at the flowers again, he was surprised to find that they were healed of their droop and wither, as

pristine and alive as if they had been plucked from a fertile volcanic soil only moments before. He decided to give them to Sampaguita and purchased them immediately, along with a small amount of gin that he obtained from a spigot in the back of the shop and carried hidden up the sleeve of his white, cotton suit in a silver flask that was plain except for a small image of a seagull flying into the distance that had been carved into the lower left hand corner.

The Chinese storeowner raised his eyebrows in surprise when Tomás came in to pay for the flowers in addition to the gin. He teased Tomás regularly after that day, thinking that he must have acquired himself another mistress.

“Another woman? Again? Isn’t Carmen enough?” He would ask.

“Never mind,” Tomás answered.

“How many is that now?”

“They’re not for a woman.”

“A man then? Yes. Maybe your wife will react better now that it’s a man.”

“I said never man!”

“Is he very beautiful? Ah, he must be.”

Tomás always took it in good humor.

“No more, or I’ll have the judge throw you in jail.”

“In jail? Okay, throw me in jail! I know the best lawyer in town!” Then the shop owner would wink, and Tomás would laugh as he walked away because he knew that it was true: he really was the best, and everybody knew it.

Despite the teasing, Tomás felt no need for another mistress. Carmen was enough. She had been only fifteen when Tomás brought her to live in his house after the trial, a slight waif of a girl with fingers that were long and gentle, and skin almost as dark as Flashlight's, which made Rosana scoff. She was quiet, yet beneath her surface was a primal river of heat that ignited lust in Tomás's heart and between his legs. He had to mind himself constantly or else he would lose himself in thoughts of her, smells of her, and sounds of her. Her sounds, her humming, followed him everywhere. And the more he wanted her, the louder her music seemed to crescendo until it filled every corner of the house with viscous pulses, ripening the fruit they displayed on plates in the *sala* until every room smelled like sweat and rot and flowers. Tomás's mind was saturated with it. It wasn't natural, yet it was the most natural thing, and all the other men, even those who had sworn their lives to the service of God in Heaven, understood this. It was common for men to have multiple women, though they did not always live in the same house. Most men kept their *queridas* hidden in another house, paying for their food and clothes and even taking them on trips to the country or for lunch in a neighboring city. But that was not enough for Tomás, who despite his having a true desire to make his wife happy, was also bored with the routine of his life, fantasized about the danger and mystery he thought having multiple women would incite, and as he had done

with every undertaking in his life, wanted to win. In the beginning, Rosana tried everything to convince Tomás to get rid of Carmen.

“We don’t need her,” she would say. “We never needed her. Remember how happy we were before? We don’t have the room. We have small children. What will they learn with someone like that in the house? She comes from a poor family. And what is so wrong with your life and your family that you need more?” Once, Rosana even grew desperate enough in her attempts and so afraid for her children that she voiced her actual fear in front of her husband, an impoliteness she had been trying for weeks to repress. “Tomás, she’s a killer,” she said, her words so quiet they almost went unnoticed.

“That’s not what the courts ruled,” replied Tomás, who did not get angry as Rosana expected him to.

“Only because of you,” she replied.

“Sí, mi amor,” he said. “Because of me.”

For weeks she tugged at his ears any chance she could find to plead with him, and even stooped to pinching his buttocks and breathing her warm and alluring breath on the back of his neck in the way that he liked to remind him that she was still his wife and could still give him the things he felt he needed. But Tomás found these advances more annoying than he did alluring, and eventually he began sleeping in Carmen’s bedroom every night because even the smell of his wife’s Spanish perfume, which was mostly lavender and

magnolia with only a hint of something sour, made him uneasy. Carmen's bedroom was the one place Rosana would never come looking for him, more out of stubbornness than anything else. Tomás's presence in Carmen's bedroom was the ultimate shame for Rosana, and after only a few weeks, she declared that she would never lie with him again or give him another child, a vow which she kept until the end of her life. At the time, Tomás did not care. But still, he had compassion in his heart for his wife and even though he did not desire to lie with her any longer, her discontent concerned him so much that he consulted a priest for advice.

In the darkened, smoke-filled office that sat just off the main altar in the new Cathedral of St. Mary and St. Joseph in Manila, Tomás met with a priest named George Joseph Rosario del Toro, with whom he had never met before. The man had unruly hair that fell past his shoulders and robes that were an inch too short. He spoke with Tomas in private, which Tomás had requested because he hated the idea of anybody he knew seeing him ask for advice. "Remember James 3:16," the priest told him. "Where there is jealousy, there is confusion. And evil. And you have confused her position."

"Father," asked Tomás. "Perhaps there is a potion or tonic I could give her. To calm her, you understand?"

The priest looked at him gravely. "Mr. DeLeón," he said. "It is *never* the right answer to turn to witchcraft! There is only one God. These kinds of

jealousies are natural in women. Rosana is your wife, and you must not forget that. But tell me, do you love her?"

Tomás nodded immediately. "Yes, Father. I do, Father. Very much. That is why I have come here."

The priest was not sure whether he believed Tomás's words. Something about the eagerness in Tomás's nod struck him as off-putting and full of sin, and if there was anything he could say with certainty, it was that he was a skillful judge of character. "Perhaps you wish that Carmen was your wife," he said trying to hide his judgment. "But she is not, Tomás. You cannot take two wives. Remember your marriage vows."

Tomás did not say anything. For several seconds there was silence and Tomás sensed that the priest was waiting for him to confess a sin, or break down and weep, but he was determined to do neither. The priest was only a man, after all.

The priest finally broke the silence when the resolution became apparent on Tomás's face and when he exhaled, his breath was full of resignation. "These are men's times, Tomás. And you have a right to keep this woman if you can afford it. This does not interfere with a man's legal marriage. The church knows that. These men talk about *querida* this, *querida* that, and it is good for a man, they say. I would know not know. The men are strong on these islands. There are needs. So, you must give your Rosana time to settle down, for an

order and a routine to come back into your house. When there is no more confusion, there will be no more strife.”

Tomás vowed from that day forward to take his advice to the best of his abilities and ignore his wife whenever possible, which he did until six years later on day he saw his youngest daughter’s two white lilies displayed on his dining room table in one of Rosana’s Italian crystal vases.

He returned home late from work that evening, hair disheveled from a long day of running his fingers through it, and sat down at the head of the large dining room table next to his wife and their three children, Tomás Junior, Matthew, and Teresa. Rosana placed her hand on top of his on the tabletop and directed a forced but pleasant smile toward him. He ignored her. All three of the children sat quietly, their hands in their laps, no doubt on the orders of their mother, and waited for the food to arrive.

Tomás rubbed his temples with his forefingers and rolled his head to release the tension that had been building in his neck and shoulders throughout the day. He thought of Carmen and felt a burn in his loins, and then he noticed the flowers on the table and smiled. Rosana mistook his smile as affirmation that the flowers had indeed been meant for her, which put her in a better mood at once, but also deepened her feelings of bitterness because it reminded her of the fact that before Carmen came to live in the house, she would never have had to guess for whom they any gift was intended.

Carmen, Sampaguita, and Flashlight entered the room a short while later carrying bowls of stew and rice and large platters of whole whitefish decorated with wedges of lemon and sprigs of green herbs, plates of sliced tomatoes and steamed eggplants soaked in vinegar and garlic and fragrant lemon grass, bowls of fish sauce and pan-fried, bright, leafy bok choy. Nobody spoke as they maneuvered around the seated family placing the dishes in the center of the table, but Rosana's happy mood vanished the moment Carmen walked behind her chair and she smelled Tomás's sweat from the night before, a smell she knew well from what seemed like another lifetime. She tightened her grip on her husband's hand. The dining room, already humid in the heat of the day grew swampier as the food steamed on the table and large circles of sweat appeared on the underarms of Tomás's cotton suit and around his collar. He watched as beads of moisture formed above Carmen's collarbone and trickled between her breasts, and his breathing became shallow and quick. Rosana saw him staring and grew so angry that she started shivering, a shake so great it sent a tremor throughout the room. Like the breaking open of a mighty dam, the tremor released her wrath, which, from its intensity, caused the room to grow even hotter. Carmen too, was cross with Rosana for making Sampaguita cry earlier that morning, and when she felt Rosana's angry tremor in the room, she too grew even angrier, and the room grew hotter yet.

The three servants scooped rice and spoonfuls of broth and vegetables onto everybody's plates as temperature in the room continued to rise until everybody, with the exceptions of Rosana and Carmen, was drenched with the kind of sticky, pooling sweat that made the short hairs on the backs of their necks and arms adhere to their skin. Eventually, Rosana's daughter, Teresa, jumped up from her seat and ran from the room as a wave of heat-induced vomit threatened to erupt from her mouth like a volcano, and even Tomás felt sure that his skin would soon break into boils. He was about to demand that everybody leave the table when Carmen accidentally brushed the back of Rosana's arm with her fingertips and a bright white bolt that looked like lightning flashed between them, burning the places where their skin had touched.

At once the air exploded with a terrible moaning and creaking, and Tomás's first thought was that an earthquake was beginning and that they should try and save the expensive crystal in the bureau and carved ivory from the study. But then the chairs and table and cabinets in the dining room began twisting and warping and caving in upon themselves and he knew it was not an earthquake. Flashlight, who had thrown herself into a corner when the furniture started moving, was shrieking in her mountain language, words none of the rest of them could understand, but they inspired a feeling that the family interpreted as a terrible fear of God, and immediately, Tomás and Rosana's

oldest son, Luis, began praying loudly that his family be spared from death and from this hellish heat. The prayer, however, only made them all more fearful than ever. They bounded toward the doors on opposite ends of the room, but just as they drew near the walls, they were forced back toward the table again as the plaster began molding and distorting as if they were in a carnival room of mirrors. The ceiling shook and great cracks appeared above them and to each side with splitting sounds that pierced through the deep groans of the furniture. There was a shower of fine plaster dust that coated their hair and shoulders, the food sitting on the table, and then disappeared in the woven mat below their feet.

Rosana pushed her sons, Luis and Matthew, out of the room, and they both ran screaming toward the *lanai* and out the front door. Then she did the same to Carmen and Sampaguita as Tomás followed behind them, leaving Flashlight to wail in a corner holding aloft the small wooden talisman shaped like a small man she always wore around her neck like a shield. As soon as Carmen and Rosana were safely in the hallway, the warping furniture and crumbling walls grew still once again, and Carmen grasped Sampaguita's hand and dragged her downstairs and back to the dirty kitchen. Though the commotion in the dining room had stopped, the walls remained bowed, the cracks in their faces jagged and winding like veins one sees in cakes of dried mud. Coughing, Rosana collapsed to her knees on the dusty floor and wept.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Sampaguita inhaled the rush of clear, buoyant air, feeling as if her feet might lift from the floor in lightness. Her mother hugged her and pressed down her hair and brushed the plaster dust from her eyes and nose, asked her over again whether she was hurt or scared or confused, and was she sure she was fine?

“Yes,” Sampaguita said. “Yes, I’m unhurt.” The nausea she had felt in the dining room had dissipated once she reached the kitchen where the heat did not reach. She wasn’t scared, though, like her mother and the rest of the family were. Somehow, the bowing walls didn’t seem unnatural to her. She had heard of far more bizarre occurrences in her father’s tales and the Bible stories the priest told on Sundays, and tension that caused it was normal to her.

Carmen made the sign of the cross on her chest. “This house is full of the dead,” she said, assuming that when they’d opened hell in a flash of lightning, more ghosts must have emerged to join the ones already in the house. “They follow me everywhere.” She looked around the kitchen directing irate glances toward the far corners and rustling curtains.

Sampaguita didn’t know anything about ghosts, but through the ceiling she could suddenly hear her father’s voice yelling and Rosana’s answering. They were still in the hall outside the dining room.

“Flower,” Carmen said to her daughter. “Everything I do, I do for you, you know, hah?”

Sampaguita didn’t know what to think now. “What?”

“Never mind. I’m going to check on your brother.”

Carmen left the kitchen. As soon as her footsteps and lullabies had faded from earshot, Sampaguita ran around the house and snuck in through the front door, careful not to make a sound or step in a shadow where one of her mother’s ghosts could be lurking. The air in the hallway had returned to normal, though clouds of plaster dust were still billowing out of the dining room, choking her if she breathed in too deeply.

Sampaguita hid behind a credenza in the hallway where Rosana kept her playing cards and the antique set of ivory Mah Jongg tiles she only used for special guests and the wives of Tomás’s business associates.

“It’s that woman, Tomás!” She could hear Rosana spitting. “It’s her!”

“You are the wife. *You*. You are supposed to be the woman of this house,” replied Tomás.

“She’s filthy, indecent, ice cold. You see what she does to this family?”

“No, you will fix this!” Screamed Tomás.

“I can’t fix this.” Rosana’s voice was scathing.

As she listened, Sampaguita began picking away at the dark wood finish on the credenza's side because she was nervous, tracing a pattern like a flower into the grain pattern.

"You will fix it! You will hire the workers. You will see it done," continued Tomás.

"Then I'll need the money..."

Silence. The very last thing Tomás wanted to do was give his wife more money. Didn't they know how much he did for all of them?

"She is a plague on this family," Rosana finished quietly.

Sampaguita had a feeling they were talking about her mother, but that didn't make sense to her. Her mother was always kind to her, not indecent or cold. And then she thought maybe they had been referring to herself instead and became afraid. She thought about the lilies. Maybe Rosana was still mad at her for having them. Or maybe her father was mad at her because they had wilted. The yelling continued.

"More, more. Always you want more from me! But do you see everything I do for you? The work I do? No. You are blind! All of you, you will be the end of me."

"Tomás, this is not my fault!" yelled Rosana back.

“Not your fault? Not your fault?” Tomás’s voice was disbelieving. “I have plenty,” he said in a deep and menacing growl. “You hear me? I have plenty! Plenty of money, plenty of everything!”

Sampaguita heard her father’s footsteps heavy on the woven mat. He was walking toward her. She curled her body as small as she could, tried not to move, and she felt relieved when he strode right past in a rage without seeing her. Before Rosana had a chance to follow him, Sampaguita got up and ran as quickly as her legs would carry her out the front door and back around to the garden. She crawled below a leafy clump of fragrant Dama de Noche flowers and ferns and started weeping because she was sure now that they had been talking about her. They were mad because she had taken the flowers that were supposed to be for Tita Rosana and for that, she felt very guilty. In her mind, Sampaguita saw the entire house collapsing and her family crying and separated all because of her and she promised herself she would never let that happen. She would never tell another person about how Rosana had taken her flowers, and she would never take a gift like that again.

It was the first secret that Sampaguita ever kept from her mother. In that she felt a sort of safety that was unto nobody but herself and for the first time, *alone* was where she wanted to be. She didn’t need to say it, didn’t need to tell. It would only cause more fighting. Her mother would be angry again, Rosana would be mean. A secret, a lie, *her* secret. She took refuge in it, bathed in it,

wanted to shout it from the rooftop, but, of course, that would ruin it. It gave her purpose it seemed, a place in a house full of secrets. It was somewhere to live, to retreat to when the warfare around her became too much to bear. And she could use it, could wield it like a sword to make peace for herself, and her mother, and her father, and her brothers. “I am Sampaguita,” she said. “Sampaguita with a secret that is only mine.”

Tomás drank at least two full flasks of gin and woke Carmen up in the middle of the night every night for three weeks after the dining room walls had cracked. She hated the way he made her bed stink like alcohol. Years ago, she had learned that the best way to get through these nighttime visits was to keep her mind occupied. She was a master of memory. Carmen had lived and relived conversations with her childhood school friends hundreds of times. In them, they gossiped about boys or about their history lessons, stories their fathers and uncles had told them about how the revolution had begun. Tomás never noticed when she took trips far away, only mumbled on and on about her music, her sweet lullabies, as he panted and sweated on her neck and breasts.

He was so drunk during those nights that Carmen had to tell him four separate times that she was pregnant again before he finally remembered. The first night, he was so aroused that she hardly had time to lay Cristofer down on his little mat before Tomás was pinning her to the bed. Carmen didn’t resist

anymore. She just let him go about his business the way he felt he needed to and then she would go back to minding her children or staring out the window at the garden, humming, or pick up the conversation she had abandoned mid-sentence with the eyes in the corners of the room. In the beginning, she had hated Tomás and felt the need to scrub her skin clean in a basin of water every time he touched her. She scrubbed so hard that her skin began blistering, which only made his touches hurt more, but she kept on scrubbing because it felt good to be able to choose the pain she felt. She could not run away because of the deal Tomás had made with her father, and so eventually, she learned to become numb to Tomás's touches and stopped scrubbing so hard. When she stopped fighting back, Tomás assumed she had grown to love him as he loved her, and apart from Carmen, only the ghosts in the house knew that she did not.

Carmen's bedroom was nearly bare but for the small chest of drawers under the window covered with scattered hairpins and a photograph of her parents that she had placed in a small wooden frame that was missing its glass. The bed in the corner of the room was draped with a thin, patched quilt and blanket woven of thin strips of cotton, and the small, padded mat on the floor across from the bed where Carmen's children had each slept as infants, blocked in by a low lattice of bamboo slats. There were no curtains draped across the

window. Carmen didn't believe in curtains. She hated the way the wind rustled them at night, making them catch the moonlight and almost come alive.

On the eighth night, Tomás came in too drunk for sex. He sat on the side of her bed with his head bowed down and asked her to come and sit with him. She did. He swayed as he sat, and he reached out to touch the baby's head where he lay cradled in Carmen's arms. Then he reached out to touch her breast. Carmen walked over to the mat in the corner and laid the baby down and then returned to the bed. She wished he would leave, but knew better than to say anything. Her resignation echoed with every step she took. From outside, the rush of the running river and breeze through the rustling leaves mocked her like laughter. When she reached the bed again, Tomás slumped sideways and rested his head on her lap, and then he started weeping.

"You know," he said between soggy hiccups. "It isn't my fault. I have *plenty*." He emphasized the last word and drooled on her skirt.

"Yes, I know, Tomás," she answered. "Everybody knows."

"What do they know?" he asked, suddenly alarmed. "What do they say about me?"

"That you have everything."

"I do, hah?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell you what I don't have."

“What’s that?”

“I’ll tell you. A dining room.”

“You have a dining room, Tomás.”

“No, no, no. I don’t.”

Carmen rolled her eyes but Tomás didn’t see it. She stood up slowly and laid him down on the bed to fall asleep. She couldn’t stand to listen to his drunken nonsense. He babbled quietly on the bed as she went to pick up the baby from his mat, but within moments of being left alone, Tomás fell into a deep sleep.

One night, weeks after Tomás first cried in her bedroom, Carmen got up in the middle of the night, checked to make sure all of her children were sleeping, and left the house. She walked out the back door, through the garden, under the palm trees, and behind the several neighbor’s houses until she came to the house of The Famous Juan Salvador. The ground was cold and wet with dew, almost as wet as the humid air that made the darkness penetrate deep into her bones. The lower floor of Juan Salvador’s house where the cooks and servants lived had very few windows, but Carmen knew exactly which one led to Nida’s bedroom.

Nida was her closest friend and confidant. She was ten years older than Carmen, but her spirit was light and childlike, her laugh like the kind of Christmas bells that children loved to run with and throw at stray dogs after

Christmas mass. She had worked in the house of The Famous Juan Salvador since long before Carmen had come to live with Tomás and Rosana. Carmen had asked Nida once why the man she worked for was so famous, but all Nida said was that he was famous for hanging paintings of himself all over his house and in all the important buildings in the city, and that if he ever was famous for some great deed he did or speech he made, nobody remembered it now. He was old now, in his mid-seventies, which made Nida's job easy.

"All I do is boil soup!" Nida told her one evening.

"Aye, Nida," laughed Carmen.

"Boil soup and cook rice. It's all he eats, naman. Anyway, what do I care? It leaves more time for me to spend with my Ernesto!"

They laughed and laughed at this. "Nida!" Carmen scolded playfully.

"What? You'd rather I spend my time making love with 'The *Famous* Juan Salvador? No, ahh. Give me Ernesto any day!" replied Nida, and they laughed even harder. "Ah, Carmen," said Nida once they had settled down. "Is Tomás still a tramp? Tell me."

"Yes, of course," said Carmen. "You know Tomás." She slouched in her chair fell quiet.

"Yes. Yes he's a scoundrel, Tomás," replied Nida. She waited a moment and let her words ring in the air before speaking again. "But, tell me, na. How big is his, you know...?"

Carmen looked up and they stared at each other for a moment, and then burst out laughing together once more. They laughed so hard that Carmen had to pinch the skin on her arms hard just to breathe again.

On this night, Carmen needed a laugh like that. She rapped hard on Nida's windowsill with her knuckles and waited, chilled in the night air. There was no answer. Carmen looked around in the darkness. Out of the corners of her eyes she kept seeing flashes of movements and hoped it was only the bushes and trees in the wind. She rapped again, faster this time but there was still no answer and she guessed Nida was with Ernesto tonight. Disheartened, she turned around and walked back to Tomás's house. Tomás was snoring in her bed when she arrived and the sight of him disgusted her. She felt the familiar desire to run away from the house returning again.

Instead, she walked to the corner of the room where Cristofer was still asleep and picked him up. He woke up and started to cry but quieted again when Carmen offered him her milk. She walked out of the bedroom and down the hall to where Sampaguita and Roberto were sleeping on their floor mats below thin tents of mosquito netting in the next room. With her free hand she swatted away the mosaic of gray moths that had nestled on her daughter's netting and then climbed underneath. She nestled the baby under one arm and curled her body around her daughter, who didn't stir at the contact. Her hair smelled like oil and grass. Carmen felt comfortable there on the floor under

Sampaguita's thin blanket. She lay awake for hours thinking about Nida and her laughter, Juan Salvador and his portraits, and about the ghosts that would not let her sleep. And it wasn't until very early in the morning that she finally drifted into unconsciousness, feeling more alone than ever.

THREE

It was a surprise to Tomás when Miguel Pais, his friend and accountant, showed him the paper calendar he kept propped up on his desk and he saw that a year had passed since damage had been done to the dining room walls. He had been drunk almost every night since. That morning, Miguel paid a boy from town to deliver the message to Tomás at his house that he was urgently needed at his office, and that he should come as quickly as possible. The message lifted his mood unexpectedly. He enjoyed the feeling that he was needed so much that he dressed in one of his best white suits and shaved for the first time in a week. He strode through the market and into the city, his spirits high and walked into his office. Miguel immediately sat him down and asked him if he knew what the date was that day. He showed him the calendar.

“That baby, Carmen’s new boy?” Began Miguel.

“Joseph,” Tomás clarified.

“He was born three months ago.”

Tomás shook his head in disbelief. “Sí. I can’t believe it.”

Miguel nodded.

“What about it?” Asked Tomás.

“Well,” said Miguel. “You haven’t come to work since then.”

“And how is my practice?” Tomás asked.

Miguel thought Tomás should have sounded more interested. “We kept going,” he answered with what he thought was nonchalant shrug that wouldn’t rouse Tomás’s suspicion. He took pride in the fact that he knew exactly how to appease Tomás, whom he had come to think of as a brother in addition to a boss. “You’re the boss!”

Tomás was both pleased and alarmed to hear this news. “What about the cases? The trials?”

“It’s only your name that people want, my friend,” said Miguel. “The Casal boy, Emilio? He takes on most of those duties.”

“But it’s going okay? I mean, the business?” asked Tomás.

“Better when you are there, Tomás,” replied Miguel. “That’s why I bring you here today. Tomás, you must to return to work and stop living on the money in the bank.”

“Agh! ‘Susmaria, Miguel. What for?” Tomás felt as if he was being attacked. He stood up from his seat and put on his suit jacket, preparing to leave the office and return home. He was insulted.

“You’ll run out,” said Miguel simply. “I would know. I’m your accountant.” He ran his fingers over his hair, which was slicked back with gel and parted on the side in a perfectly straight line.

“No, Miguel. Let the Casal boy do it all. I don’t feel so good.” Tomás said. He was eager to leave.

“You drink too much.” Miguel retorted.

Tomás turned to him, a sly smile spreading on his mouth. “Ah, Miguel, come now, hah?”

“No, Tomás, I’m telling you we need you to come back to work.”

“Miguel! Don’t you think I know what is best? Hah? I’m the boss!” Tomás was angry. He couldn’t believe the insolence. He walked to the door of Miguel’s office and opened it, but before he walked through, he turned around one last time and his voice crescendoed as he barked a threat. “Don’t forget that I’m the boss, Miguel!” he said, and then slammed the wooden door behind him so hard that its small glass panes shattered to the floor and nobody bothered to pick them up.

Even though she had never been to school, Sampaguita could read and write as well as any of her older siblings by the time she was seven. She poured herself over the books in her father’s library like water over a bed of flowers, and could remember every story she read. Each volume she pulled from the

shelf had a moldy, dusty scent that Sampaguita memorized as she flipped through its pages, associating the characters and histories with the paper's unique aroma until she was able to distinguish over 100 different novels by simply smelling the fungus on their spines and began exclaiming to her father when she saw him in the mornings that the rug in the study had the same stench as the lower deck of the tall ship named Santa Lucía she had read about the night before, or that his shoes reminded her of a sun-tanned saddle on the sweaty back of a ten-year-old horse in Mexico, or even once that his breakfast reeked of war tactics. She saw letters and words everywhere, rows of X's in the bamboo slats trussed together outside the kitchen windows where orange and purple U-shaped flower petals bloomed off of twisting S vines, swaying W's in the movements of the tips of leaves as the wind pushed them up and down from left to right and back again, wide convex C's that the old women selling papayas and star fruit on ragged blankets they laid on the ground in the market made with their arms as they motioned for her to come closer and see the brown spots on the skin of the fruits, which meant they would be at their sweetest to eat in the next hour or two. She traced Y patterns every day as she moved between her father's study, the kitchen, and the dining room where the cracks in the wall had inevitably grown by an inch or two in the night, causing the ceiling to settle further and further into a depressed sag. And because of the bowing, the floor of the dining room was covered in a fine dusting of white

plaster, which Sampaguita wiped away before breakfast. She studied the cracks every day and noted the ways they changed in the night. Sometimes the changes were subtle, but at other times the cracks shifted completely either because they wanted to be closer to the breeze coming in through the window, or to avoid the spiders that wove their homes in one corner or another. Sampaguita read the fine entwining cracks looking for prophetic messages, but usually they appeared as a jumble of letters that made no sense except on two occasions, once when she was able to discern the word HUNGER in their scribbles, and another time, the word AUTOMOBILE.

When none of the books on the shelves seemed interesting, Sampaguita borrowed the letters that arrived at the house early in the morning to read in secret, replacing them on the credenza near the front door before anybody noticed they were gone. In doing so, she learned the smell of the mold spores and leftover breakfast that lingered on the fingers of the boy who delivered their mail. She also learned that Rosana had been applying to seminary schools in Manila on her oldest son Luis's behalf, as well as medical schools overseas on Matthew's, signing the letters with Tomás's name. Sampaguita was the first to read the responses from the schools, which came back addressed to Rosana and smelled like the kind of mold that grew in the washbasins where her mother cleaned dishes and towels in the kitchen. As such, she was the first to

learn that Luis had been accepted into a seminary school and would be leaving in six months.

The secrets Sampaguita learned from reading her family's mail were as thick as coconut skins and she wore them like armor to protect herself whenever she heard her father and Rosana yelling upstairs, or her parents moaning together some evenings in the next room, which sometimes sounded loud like stray cats calling to each other in the dark, and other times as soft and disparate and ghost-like as the mist that settled above still grass on damp, windless, tropical nights. It was by reading the mail that Sampaguita discovered her father had been refusing to defend any clients citing ill health as his main reason, and after intercepting three separate correspondences in which the senders offered their condolences to her father for his chronic illness and misfortune, Sampaguita began hiding in the shadows outside his study and eavesdropping on his conversations when she thought he wouldn't notice to look for signs that he was dying. She became so worried that her palms erupted in itchy rashes, which her mother told her was the result of anxiety and warned her to stop sneaking around the house and to rub garlic cloves into her hands three times a day. The garlic had no effect on the rash, but instead left her stinking and pungent so that every time she crouched hidden outside of her father's study door, his nose rose into the air and he left his desk as if on the provision of a higher power and strode with singular focus to the kitchen for a

snack. He nearly caught her so many times that Sampaguita was forced to alter her strategy and, deciding that perhaps the best way to approach him was directly, asked him one morning how his heart was feeling.

“Like a barrel of fish,” he told her.

“Then I will get you some medicine,” she responded, wanting to appear as though she understood him.

“My Flower,” he said. “That would be helpful.” Then he handed her his silver flask, a quart-size glass jar, and some pennies. “Take these to Sal Chen.”

Sampaguita nodded.

“Have you seen the cracks today, Mija?” he asked before she left.

“Bigger every day,” she answered, and this made him laugh and rock backwards in his chair, and when she returned a half an hour later, he was still smiling and his voice lilted when he spoke to her.

“Our secret,” he said as she handed him the flask and the glass jar full of clear, sloshing liquid. He asked her to buy his medicine again the next day and every day from then on and Sampaguita, still afraid of him dying, obliged because her secret chore made her feel worthy of his love. Even when Tomás’s posture drooped, and his clothes became so dirty that the smell of gin wafted in every corner of the house, and he stopped shaving or cutting his hair, and walked down to breakfast still intoxicated from the night before, and even on the days that he smelled of sweat and shame so strongly that even Sampaguita

would not hug him, and when Rosana and Carmen and the rest of the children shied away from him if they passed each other in the hallway, Sampaguita insisted to herself and to God that he was a wonderful father because it was important to her that he feel loved before he died. There was power she felt in being his caretaker, power, even though it was slight, in knowing that she knew things about her family that they didn't think she knew, and this was why she loved the stories her father told her on mornings that he was coherent enough, and especially loved reading the books that none of the rest of her family had read. They were an escape meant only for her, a switchblade she could flip open if Teresa or Matthew pulled her hair, or Rosana glared at her in a way that made her feel small and ugly, or when anybody insulted her father.

By the time she was ten, Sampaguita was obsessed with secrets and listening behind closed doors. During the day while her mother swept the floors or nursed the babies, Sampaguita would sneak into the bedrooms of her half-siblings upstairs and look through the boxes they kept under their beds and hidden in the corners of their drawers behind the folded shirts and pajamas, and the letters they kept below the mattresses. The mattress in Teresa's bedroom was raised off the ground, her mosquito netting tented above it like a canopy that reminded Sampaguita of the great circus tents she had seen in pictures in one of her father's history books. In the corner of the room, there was an armoire full of white and blue blouses and black cotton skirts that she

wore to school every day next to the traditional butterfly-style wrap dresses she would wear to dinner parties hosted by the families of her school friends or else social dances in the city. The armoire had drawers full of hairpins and pink ribbons, parchment stationary decorated with little ink butterflies and matching envelopes, as well as a pair of red satin pajamas that she wore to bed when the weather was cool. Sampaguita extracted the contents of Teresa's boxes carefully, taking care to remember exactly how to return them to their places so Teresa would never know what she had done. In one of the boxes she found a bundle of letters that were tied together with a bow. They were love notes from someone who signed with the initials G.A.P.. Sampaguita had no idea who he was, but she presumed he must be a school friend because she had never seen letters like these come in the mail. They did not smell moldy at all, more like a mix between the kind of loam that she had smelled near the river, the kind that green and brown mosses especially love, and the oil her father used on his hair.

A couple of weeks later, Teresa came home from school with two of her girlfriends, Emilia Manalo, a chubby girl with milky skin and hair that tumbled down her back like wildfire, and Evelyn Simsiman, whom Sampaguita liked because she was always smiling and was never rude when they met accidentally in the market. Sampaguita listened to Teresa talk from outside her bedroom door with a clean rag in her hand so that if Rosana came near, she could pretend to be polishing the doorknobs or wiping dust off of the doorframe.

“Has he written to you again?” asked Emilia.

“No, not yet.”

“Soon though, you think?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes it’s weeks.”

Evelyn exhaled a happy-sounding “Mmm.”

“Read it again,” said one of the friends, and then Teresa’s voice took over.

“To The Lovely Teresa,” she began and then giggled in a way that made Sampaguita never want to grow older. “I was glad to receive your last letter. My day is made more beautiful by the scent your hand leaves upon the page. No doubt we will finally meet in person soon, as soon as I am able to...”

Sampaguita stopped listening. She already knew what the letter said and it was apparent that Teresa didn’t know who G.A.P. was either, so there was no reason to stay. Besides, Sampaguita found their pubescent love-filled musings distracting and unbecoming and didn’t want to listen anymore because they made her feel lonely. But before she left, she folded the rag until it was as thick as the gap between the bottom of Teresa’s door and the floor and wedged it under bottom hinge so that later, whenever the girls decided to leave the bedroom, they would be stuck inside and Sampaguita wouldn’t have to hide from them like a servant.

Downstairs in the dirty kitchen, Roberto, now eight years old, Cristofer, now six, and Joseph, the three year old, were stuffing their faces with the warm rolls of *pan di sal* that their mother had just finished baking. Sampaguita swatted the rolls out of their hands and pushed them all toward the door that led to the open patio behind the kitchen where the garden and the water storage barrels stood, stray chickens pecking dirt all around their bases.

“Aye aye aye!” Sampaguita shouted. “Those rolls aren’t for you.”

“But *Até*,” said Roberto, “they taste so good!”

“*Até* Flower, *Até* Flower!” sang Luis waving his arms, each one clutching a hot roll.

“Go outside where you won’t be in the way,” she told them, playing like she was the mother of the household like girls sometimes do and listening hard in case the girls upstairs were struggling against the door or shouting for help.

Later that evening, after supper had been served and the red sun had tumbled below the line of trees and brush outside, Sampaguita heard her father yelling from upstairs in his study, his voice dissolving through the ceiling as easily as rain falling through dry thatch. Sampaguita followed the sound until she was right underneath it at the end of the hallway near her mother’s bedroom door where old pots and dusty boxes full of baby clothes, old bottles, letters, and ripped rags had piled up over the years. Her brothers were all asleep already in the room that they all shared, but Sampaguita was awake still,

reading a book that smelled of dry bark and the little white toadstools that sprouted in the shade after thunderstorms in the springtime, which she had taken from her father's study the morning before: *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quixote De La Mancha*. The book was written in Spanish so she could not read it, but scattered throughout were little pictures that she loved to look at, one of a man on a great horse carrying a long spear or a sword through a desert, another of a fat man wearing a sweeping hat riding a donkey, and another of a great windmill.

"Too much? It's too much for you, is it? Hah?" her father was shouting. "Cracks appear in *my* walls and it's too much for you. I spend *my* money on what *I* like and it's too much for *you*?"

"Tomás," it was Rosana's voice, pleading. "Think of the children."

"What about the children?" he asked.

"You're a drunk, Tomás. It has been what, five years now? It's too much! Matthew says he wants to study medicine when he has finished with his schooling. Think of it, Tomás."

"You know nothing!" he spat.

"Just give me the money," she said. "I will get the walls fixed."

"Stop! Just stop! These walls, these walls! You're all obsessed!"

"Tomás, do you have the money?"

He did not say another word, but Sampaguita heard sounds like a chair being upended, and then her father's heavy footsteps walking away toward the back of the house.

Sampaguita sat down on one of the boxes. It had never occurred to her that he might not have money. They lived in one of the nicest neighborhoods in Pasig, three houses away from The Famous Juan Salvador, and everybody knew *he* had money. Sampaguita had even heard her mother and Tita Nida talking about it one evening the month before when the two of them brought the baby over to Juan Salvador's kitchen to share the plate of whole fried smelt that meant Nida was fighting with Ernesto again.

"How do you think I got this new blouse?" asked Tita Nida.

"Aye, Nida. You didn't," replied her mother. "Did you steal from-"

"Steal? No, Carmen, no. Juan gave me the money. He's buying and buying these days. He thinks he doesn't have long to live."

"He is dying?"

"He's old already, Carmen!" said Nida, her tone half aggressive and half jovial. "And he has more money than he has uses for it."

"I know some people who could give it use," said her mother.

"Well, you come to me if you need anything, hah? You know where I live. Sige."

Sampaguita heard her father coming down the stairs, the soles of his slippers slapping against the wood, his gait like an unsteady, arrhythmic heartbeat and she could tell he was drunk. Not wanting him to find her eavesdropping, she hid on top of the boxes where it was dark and there was only a salamander shuffling sideways down the adjacent wall for company. From her vantage point near the ceiling, Sampaguita could see into her mother's dim bedroom where the door was left open a few inches. In the small flicker of light from the candle on the chest of drawers, she could see Carmen lying on the bed, her eyes closed, Luis snoring softly next to her with his head resting on her outstretched arm. Her mother was breathing deeply and steadily, but Sampaguita could tell she was awake because she had her head turned so she, too, could listen to the fight upstairs. The shadows that rested atop the boxes in the hallway shrouded Sampaguita so well that her father did not see her even though he was walking directly towards her. Just before he reached the end of the hallway he turned opened the bedroom door, his bulk filling the doorway, and Sampaguita watched him stare at her mother but could not see his face.

Tomás entered the bedroom. He saw Luis asleep on the bed, and annoyed, stared at Carmen again who sat up to look at him. He made a motion with his hand, indicating that he wanted her to move the baby into the other room, that he wanted her alone, but she shook her head at him, loose strands

of coarse dark hair that had escaped from her braid flying around the sides of her face, and Tomás furrowed his brows with an anger so palpable that it woke the baby, who started to cry. Tomás had expected Carmen to be alone. He searched her dress with his eyes, but Carmen shook her head again and pulled the thin fabric strap of her nightgown tighter around her shoulders, a silent communication, and wrapped her arms tightly around the baby Joseph's tiny body. Tomás let out a low growl and stood his ground. He was angry now but too confused to do anything about it because the room was spinning around him, the dark purple sky outside the window blurring with walls that were creamy in the candle light, the brown wooden floor, her bright green dress.

Carmen stood up and walked toward him, pushed him backwards gently with the palm of her hand until he was standing in the doorway again.

"Not tonight," she said, her eyes flickering over to where Sampaguita watched, hidden in shadows.

Tomás just looked at her, his cheeks and eyes reddening as his anger rose. "You, you..." but he was so dumbfounded he couldn't think of the right words. Never before had he been so openly, so crudely, so disgustingly defied by a woman and the thought nauseated him. He turned around without another word and stalked out of the bedroom, but instead of heading upstairs he paused in the hallway and then returned to the bedroom slamming the door open so loudly that a dozen songbirds outside the window screamed and all

took flight at the same moment as upstairs, the cracks in the dining room walls groaned and scuttled into the words COWARD.

“You,” he began, “would be in prison, locked up behind bars for the rest of your life if not for me! You are nothing without my love and now, you get nothing from me, no more money!”

Joseph’s crying escalated to a wail that made Tomás uncomfortable because it sounded too much like a typhoon or a mudslide or an earthquake or any other disaster that heralded the end of the world, which only threw into sharp relief the lie he had been trying to believe: that he had much money left to give in the first place. When Carmen did not respond to his insult, Tomás turned and left rather than look any longer at her beautiful disbelieving face, and walked straight upstairs, stomping his feet so hard that every step creaked under his weight, up to his bedroom where he sat down on the plush, feather bed that he shared with his wife, and then belched.

Rosana was shocked to see him there and sat up straight to make room for him. He rarely joined her in the bedroom this early in the evening, especially when he was drunk, as he was now, or angry with her, as he had been just minutes before. He was normally in his study, or in Carmen’s bedroom, or kissing the lips of a gin bottle until well after the constellation that Rosana always thought resembled a hand with six fingers had fallen beyond the line of the river outside their bedroom window. Tomás did not even notice his

wife. He stripped off his over-clothes quickly and lay down on the bed fuming but not actually wanting to sleep because he was too angry, but also because he was afraid that if he allowed himself to dream, he would have to admit that he wanted to be able to give Carmen and Rosana money, there just wasn't any to give. His breaths were frayed, irregular, and so potent with gin that the air around him nearly caught fire from the heat of his rage.

Tomás did not calm, even after one hundred breaths, but his breathing was stopped at the back of his throat as the unexpected hand of Rosana lit on his shoulder. He froze. She slowly began to move her hand down the length of his body. Slowly, slowly, feeling him. Her touch was familiar, remembered from what felt like a different lifetime. It had been many years since Rosana and Tomás had awoken together. In the early years of their marriage they had savored the luxuries of a richly furnished home and loving family together, but things were different now and her touch only infuriated him further.

He swatted her hand away and rolled over onto his side to sleep. She stopped moving, rejected. The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees. Tomás knew that kind of coldness, the chill of Rosana's tears. Even though he could not see them, he knew that they were cascading down her cheeks even as he lay there. He felt her rise from the bed, heard her glide spirit-like out of the bedroom and into the dining room, where she sat on one

of her imported wooden chairs and wept next to the vase that sat on the table and had once held two white lilies that she knew had never been meant for her.

FOUR

After Tomás stopped giving any money to Carmen to buy food, she decided to accept a job in order to feed the family rather than beg him for money, which is what she thought he wanted. The job, dancing waltzes with American soldiers who paid her ten cents per song in the local cantina. Sampaguita had been listening behind the door when her mother first told her father what she had done, and Tomás was so livid that she went behind his back that he threatened to evict her from the house, but they both knew it was an idle threat.

“What will people think of us?” He asked in what was nearly a yell. “It is for the man to work and bring home the money! They will think we have no money.”

“For the man to work? And what do you do all day, hah? What is your work?”

“I have *plenty*! Do you hear me? Plenty!” roared Tomás.

“What will you do, Tomás? Hmm?” Replied Carmen. “Divorce me? I am not your wife!”

Two years later, Tomás had still not returned to work. It was the middle of the wet season and the dawn sun was lost behind a dark and oppressive cloud cover to all but those with the very best memories. Nevertheless, Sampaguita woke when the smell of morning reached a certain pungency and went to the kitchen to assemble a plate full of sliced pineapple and mangoes in soy sauce before walking upstairs to her father's study to make sure he hadn't died in the night.

She entered the study without knocking. Tomás was asleep on the ash-colored rug that sat the floor before his desk. His arms and legs splayed out from under his body at angles that reminded Sampaguita of cicada legs, his face pressing hard into the floor, as if he had crumpled there mid-step the night before and not moved except to breathe since. There was grit and a layer of sticky dirt on the rug that Sampaguita ignored as she lowered herself down to a sitting position next to her father who smelled of alcohol, shoe polish, and something else that might have been garlic or onion.

"Papa," she said, one hand shaking her father's shoulder. "Papa, wake up, it's morning."

Tomás stirred and wiped his mouth with the back of one sleeve, lifted his head and looked at Sampaguita. The woven pattern of the rug was pressed into the red skin on one of his cheeks, flecks of dirt sticking to his face, which Sampaguita wiped off and helped her father stand. He wavered as he stood and

had to grab hold of the cabinet on the wall to steady himself, knocking *Sampaguitas and Other Various Poems* by Pedro Paterno, Sampaguita's favorite book, from where it stood on the bottom bookshelf.

"I brought you some fruit," she said.

"Mija," Tomás began. He was still drunk, his voice hoarse and inarticulate. "Mija," he repeated and then fell backwards into his chair.

"Here, I brought you some fruit," she repeated.

Tomás sat and ate the fruit with his fingers, spittle and mango juice trickling from his mouth as he chewed. Sampaguita watched him eat and did not feel sorry for him. Occasionally, she wiped the dribble away from his mouth with a rag as she read to him from the book that had fallen to the floor, a book which normally had a fragrant must that burst like citrus from its page, but which today was overpowered by the odor of her father. When he finished eating, Sampaguita took his plate away and brought it back down to the kitchen where she and her mother worked around like silent threads weaving in and out of each other's paths, never bumping into one another, never even brushing their fingertips against the hem of each other's skirt by accident. The air around them was calm and comfortable and occasionally, momentary snatches of the silent lullabies that used to follow her mother and fill the rooms around her would lift their spirits as if on a wings of a great butterfly.

Sampaguita finished washing the plate and was about to return to her father's study when they heard a sound like canon fire exploding through the ceiling from upstairs followed by breaking glass and books falling to the floor. The ceiling shook as another loud crash, as if the desk or a chest of drawers had been upended, filled the house. Sampaguita started to run toward the door, worried that her father was finally dying, but her mother pulled her back.

"I'll go, you get out of the house, no listening," she said, but when Sampaguita did not move, she added, "Sampaguita, he's fine."

Sampaguita was left alone in the kitchen worrying about her father and a minute later, Roberto, Cristofer, Luis, and Joseph, their youngest brother, came bursting through the kitchen door asking for their mother.

"Come on," she told the four of them. "We're going to the market to get some medicine."

Outside, they were instantly drenched, the water seeping so deeply under their skin that they bloated by an inch or two around their waists and their fingertips turned slightly more pink. Luis and Joseph made a game of falling down in the mud and splashed them all with handfuls of muck as they crossed the bridge. In the market, they dodged in and around the shoppers and vendors, trying to walk below thatched awnings or bright umbrellas held overhead by bent old women whenever they could until they reached the Sal Chen's little shop. Pools of water formed at their feet as they stood in the

entryway, which made Sal Chen irate and he yelled at them because he didn't want parasites on the floor he had just mopped.

The air inside was sour and fishy and the tiny hairs inside Sampaguita's nostrils flared as she refilled the flask and some bottles from the shiny spigots in the back of the shop. When she turned around again, the first thing she saw was Roberto sucking on a small pink candy that Sampaguita did not have the pennies to pay for, but the second thing she saw was that Joseph, the youngest of her brothers, was not there. Sal Chen dropped the basket of bananas he had been placing on display and the pink candy flew from Roberto's mouth as Sampaguita screamed and then ran out of the shop with the bottles of gin she had not paid for, and Roberto, Matthew, and Luis ran after her not realizing that Joseph was gone and thinking that their sister must have caught the same madness as their father.

Back in the doorway of the shop, Sal Chen was screaming for them to stop, entreating the help of the people walking past to chase after the thieves because he would not leave his shop, but the only people nearby were crouched old men who had a hard time understanding his Tagalog through the strong Chinese accent, and who, even if they had understood, would not have cared. He yelled some more and said they were dirty and called their mother a Dama de Noche, and that if they did not come back to pay, he would have them all arrested.

Every minute or two, Sampaguita stopped running and smelled the air for hints of the precise combination of mold spores and dust that everyone who lived in her father's house carried, but the smells of canned vegetables, dried meat, buckets full of writhing fish, garlic that was near the point of rotting, and all of the dust on all of the clothes of all of the people walking around her were too overpowering. Once, she thought she smelled the kind of mildew she associated with a book she had read once about a family of Badjao sea gypsies who lived on a boat and followed the tuna to earn a living.

"Joseph! Joseph! Where are you?" she shouted. Images of her brother being kidnapped or found washed up down the river floated unbidden into her mind, and she was overcome all at once with fear for her brother, and worry for her father, and anger at the rain that never seemed to end, and she, like her brothers, thought she must have caught her father's madness because she heard, or thought she heard, a soft melancholy melody that reminded her so much of her mother's old lullabies that she turned and searched the crowd for Carmen's face.

She followed the sound to an area on the opposite edge of the market from where Sal Chen's shop stood, Roberto, Matthew, and Luis still close behind her, where they found a large gathered crowd that they hadn't seen before because the rains were too thick. They walked between legs, taking refuge under the canopy of wide umbrellas, toward the front of the crowd

where the music was coming from and saw that a large tent had been erected in the middle of the market where a group of people who smelled like the sea gypsy book were standing around tables full of blue and silver fish that they were selling, yelling the cost out as people pushed forward to purchase the ones that looked most fresh. In one of the back corners behind the fish tables sat a man whose arms were thick and brown like Banyan branches, and whose wet hair hung like vines around his neck and shoulders. He was cradling a Spanish guitar on his lap, picking at the sinewy strings with his agile fingers, an intricate melody that sounded red like a sunset and smelled like her father's medicine. The satiated and unconcerned way he crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair made Sampaguita feel nervous and consumed with attraction and fascination in a way she had never experienced and didn't recognize, her panic nearly forgotten. She thought she understood the way Teresa, Emilia, and Evelyn had giggled together over G.A.P.'s love letters years before. The man was staring down at something below the edge of the table that Sampaguita could not see, his coal-black eyes kind and laughing while some of the other men he was with pointed his direction, smiling.

"Badjao," she told her brothers but they didn't know what she was talking about and contributed it to the madness. Still, they allowed her to tug their sleeves sideways and followed her around the table toward the guitar player, and then Sampaguita let out a noise that was equal parts relieved

laughter and exasperated sob because Joseph was standing there next to a tattered brown guitar case gazing up at them unsurprised as if he had expected them to show up any time. The tiny child was dancing madly, naked but for a sagging, cloth diaper and soaking wet from the rain. The people gathered on this end of the crowd stared down at him adoringly, hooting with laughter at his ridiculous movements and throwing pennies into the guitar case.

The sun set a couple of hours later under lazy clouds of insects who were falling in love with the swarming red and purple and white flowers. Those vendors who carted their wares in collapsible carts and tents to the market every morning were packing their things and preparing to leave before Roberto and Cristofer were finally able to convince Sampaguita to leave. None of the books in her father's library had ever inspired a longing to see what lay outside the city she knew so well the way this musician with eyes like the wind had, and this is how she first came to associate the feelings of love with those of travel, a pattern she would repeat three times throughout her life.

Later, they returned home to find that neither their mother nor their father were there. Tomás started following Carmen to the cantina in the evenings after receiving a letter from Miguel Pais informing him that all of his employees, except for Miguel himself, had quit due to a 'poor working environment,' and that the only reason Miguel continued to work the ledgers of Tomás's practice was out of loyalty for his old friend, and because otherwise,

the taxes would not get paid, which he did not want to come back as a dark spot on his career. He reminded Tomás that he had been paying to keep the building where the two of them had once worked together out of Tomás's savings, but now that the accounts were nearly empty, he had no choice but to let the bank take the office building, and he hoped Tomás was not too angry. Miguel, meanwhile, had been hired to work for Emilio Casal's new practice.

The owner of the cantina, Fernando De La Rosa, had inherited the bar from his father who had been one of Tomás's most loyal clients and always came to him for advice and representation when the bank tried to take back the bar due to missed payments. It happened over a dozen times in the years that Tomás was practicing regularly not because Mr. De La Rosa was having financial difficulties, but because he was a perpetual drunk who thought that paying taxes was the first sign of giving up on life. Because of this, Fernando De La Rosa did not kick Tomás out of the cantina even when he attacked one of the soldiers waiting in line to dance with Carmen, instead kicking the soldier out and telling the authorities he didn't see what happened and thought it was best to blame the bigger of the two men because the bigger man always starts the fight. Fernando gave Tomás one drink free of charge every night that he came in and talked with him from behind the bar, remembering his late father and laughing at the stories he told.

“The stories I could tell you, Fernando, would make your hair fall out,” Tomás once told him.

Fernando was not a stupid man. He poured glass after glass of liquor for Tomas, made sure his cup never rested on the bar for more than a few minutes at a time. He wanted to be sure Carmen could continue to dance uninterrupted, which was in his best interest because she was the most sought-after dancer he had ever hired. Men lusted after her, were as drawn to the lullabies she made them hear in their heads as Tomás was. But though they lusted, in truth, none of them would actually have married Carmen, knowing what they knew about her and the trial. Still, any time Tomás was not laughing or sputtering on his drink, he was eyeing the other men in the bar, waylaying them with whatever threats he could communicate with just his eyes and making most of them uncomfortable.

“You see that woman?” he asked anyone who sat down next to him. “You see she’s pregnant? You see? What do I care if she dances with every man in the world? I have plenty of her, you know? It’s me she loves.”

The regular patrons humored him and nodded and bought him more drinks when he started talking about Carmen, afraid of another brawl or of having to listen to him mutter for the rest of the night when they’d rather dance and laugh or watch her themselves. Sometimes Tomás preferred to sit in the darkened corners of the bar where the other dancing girls sat and talked with

each other, waiting for a handsome enlistee to ask them for a waltz as they sipped their glasses of wine and avoided touching the sticky table tops. The roof was thatched above rickety wooden walls that whistled when the wind picked up, but this only added to the music emanating from the opposite end of the room where a phonograph the size of a small sheep sat atop the leather traveling trunk Mr. De La Rosa found washed up on the beach once while on vacation to the coast with his wife.

After months, the lines of men waiting to dance with Carmen grew longer until they stretched out the door of the cantina and down the small dirt road that led directly to the front door. The building stood some distance from any other buildings, unlike the more posh establishments in the city where Tomás used to dine with his clients when they won in court. The cantina was surrounded by folds of lush grasses and trees that toppled with bougainvillea and fireflies and Tomás supposed that the dim lighting and cricket calls only increased the allure that men found in his woman. His agitation grew with her popularity, and as a result, Tomás took it upon himself as a kind of personal crusade to make sure that there was no doubt in any person's mind that Carmen belonged to him and only to him by continuing to keep her pregnant. His plan was halfway successful. The American soldiers whispered about her, about the honor they felt to have spent the duration of a quick tune in the company of a woman so clearly loved that it was as if the very fertility of the

earth itself rose up and took the form of a woman. They did not care that she was almost always with-child, birthing son after son. They gazed upon her as they would upon a holy angel, with light and awe upon their stunned faces. To them her sagging body was the epitome of beauty.

When it was known that the grungy man in the corner of the bar was there protecting Carmen-the-Angel, the soldiers grew less and less willing to sneak light touches or pull a little bit too forcefully on her as they danced. However, the thoughts and fantasies that plagued each of their minds in the nights after having shared a dance with her grew increasingly desperate and complex until each of them had their own unique visions of what Carmen-the-Woman, not Carmen-the-Dancer, was like in real life; each man believing themselves to have a special and covert relationship with her, believing that she went home thinking about them each night as well. They enjoyed their fantasies, but were content to leave them at that. Tomás spat in their faces, unaware that none of them actually wanted anything more than to enjoy her body and their own private thoughts.

Carmen knew Fernando De La Rosa, of course, but it was Nida who suggested she talk with him about dancing and arranged a meeting for the two of them, which was easy because she sometimes danced in that cantina with Ernesto when she was finished cooking for Juan Salvador. At first Carmen thought she might enjoy the dancing, the time away from the house, the

swirling, static-laced waltzes, dresses that Fernando supplied the color of wine or sky that coiled around her feet as she spun, the break from the whispering ghosts of the house, and in the beginning, she did enjoy it. The dancing made her feel stronger than she had in many years, the muscles in her arms and legs finding some of the hardness she remembered from before she had been pregnant with Sampaguita, and the line of men waiting to stand by her side made her feel beautiful in a way that quieted the lullabies she always hummed, not out loud, but inside her mind where she thought nobody else could hear them. The time she spent in the cantina reminded her of her childhood, the days when she and Josephine had taken dance lessons from a strict woman in their neighborhood named Florentina who people claimed had once danced for Guangxu, the Emperor of China, but who was also the only person on their street with a phonograph.

She had danced every night in the cantina for weeks already by the time Tomás started coming to watch her, and she was worried he might be there to collect her earnings, but after talking with Nida, Fernando reassured her that he would not give Tomás her money.

“Give half of your money to me,” Nida told her, “and you can use that to buy what you need. Keep the other half in case he takes it.” Fernando was in on the deal and only handed her half of her earnings at the end of each night as Tomás watched narrowly from the corner, waiting to take her home.

It would be too easy to hate Tomás, thought Carmen. The memories that returned of her childhood also came with the memories of that night, of the blood and pain, and of how gentle Tomás had been to her in the months that followed, letting her cry onto his shoulder and promising to take care of her, winning her freedom. He was young, and successful, and handsome, and what girl wasn't in love with him? He was the father of her children, and he looked at her with desire, and when his eyes found hers anytime he watched her while she danced, some old, invisible cord that he'd wrapped around her years ago tugged hard around her middle, drawing her to him before she remembered that she was working, and that he was a drunk who would probably force his way into her bed later that night. This small glimmer of empathy and love she felt for Tomás combined with the desire she had to keep her children housed and safe were the two reasons she felt compelled to take care of him when he was drunk and uninhibited enough to cry into her lap as he mumbled about the dining room walls, or how much he missed his office, or what a beautiful family he had ruined. And Carmen would stroke his glossy hair, now dotted with starry patches of white around his temples, hand him the pennies she brought home from Fernando's cantina, and appease him by saying that nothing was ruined, that she would find a way, and that he was still a matador.

Miguel Pais returned to the DeLeón house again on a bright and humid morning several months after he had sent Tomás the letter telling him that the rest of his employees had quit. It had been seven years since the walls in the dining room first cracked. Tomás had not slept at all that night and had become so drunk, he was barely able to stand up on his own to shake Miguel's hand after inviting him into the study. Against the disheveled and dusty study, and the dirty, tattered linen cloth that Tomás wore, Miguel's suit stood out crisply like a pristine leaf atop a pile of garbage. His hair was slicked back and he stood erect, a stack of papers clutched in his hands: the ledgers of Tomás's accounts, the look on his face, one of pity.

Tomás was not happy to see him. He met Miguel's eyes for a moment before looking away again and knew, even before Miguel spoke, what he was about to say. He thought that if only Miguel were a better accountant, he would have stretched the budget to ensure that Tomás could continue living his life. This thought angered him. Miguel reached out and placed a bony hand on Tomás's right shoulder, the contact as cold and distant as if one or the other of them was merely a reflection. Tomás grabbed the collar of Miguel's shirt and pulled him down so their faces were level with each other and snarled. The pine stink in Miguel's hair was an astringent assault.

"It is over, my friend," said Miguel soberly, unfazed by the force with which Tomás assaulted him. "There is no money left in the accounts. There are

no clients coming in. I'm the only one who still comes to work, but now I will stop."

Miguel paused a moment to gauge Tomás's reaction. There was none.

"There is still some money left in your savings, enough for a few months, perhaps." Another pause. "Tomás," he continued. Tomás raised his eyes, but Miguel did not say anything more, only placed the stack of papers on the desk and then left the room without looking back.

Tomás, deep in denial, was disconcerted at his own lack of reaction. He felt he should have been reeling, angry, worried for himself, for the future of his family, for his employees, his house, his business. But there was nothing. Slowly, it seemed that each individual piece of his life's puzzle, each thread of caring that secured his body to the earth below his feet was being severed, so that he would eventually float up, toward heaven, unencumbered and free from worry. This was nothing, a lightness where there should have been a heavy darkness, where there should have been substance and he sat in wonder, waiting for the world to explode. The gin tasted good and he was quickly lost in its eddying simplicity. He didn't remember closing his eyes, but after what felt like a mere instant, Tomás awoke from a deep sleep he hadn't meant to fall into. He snapped his head up from where it had been resting on the desk and was surprised that morning had risen and that he was still in the study. There was an inexorable hole that was forming somewhere near his stomach, through

which all sanity in the world seemed to be leaking, but he could not recall why. There was a vague memory in him that something terrible had happened, though nothing was clear. He sat up straighter and tried to remember through the throbbing in his temples, but there was no time to think because he sensed someone approaching from somewhere outside the study.

Sampaguita was holding a plate of fruit and looked surprised to find him awake. Tomás smiled when he saw her and the panic started melting away. She looked older this morning, he thought. Older and more like her mother than ever before. He even thought for a moment that she sounded like her mother when a small, simple melody floated in his mind unbidden as she stepped closer. And from deep within his subconscious, he felt the need to tell her how much he loved her mother, but when he tried to form the words, the veil of gin coating his thoughts held him back, and he instead decided to tell her a story as used to in the days before she learned to read.

“Today I’ll tell you a story,” he said.

This confused Sampaguita because he hadn’t told her a story in years.

“There once was a prince who was very wealthy, and very handsome. He was the son of a king. This was back in the days when all the world was ruled by kings, long before the Spaniards came, obviously. When this prince was a child, a holy man came to him and pronounced that he would either become a great king, or a great holy man. The royal family was determined that

he should be a king and so they gave him food, jewels, fame, and women, as much as he could want, and he was very happy. But his family never let him travel, or even go to the market, for they were trying to keep him from seeing the suffering of the world.

“Wait, this is the story of the Gautama Buddha. Hmm. Remember I told you this story? I guess this prince was just like the Buddha! He could have been a God if he had wanted. Hah! Yes? But no, this prince did not become like the Buddha. When the time came and he was old enough, the prince snuck away but instead of becoming a holy man, he fell in love with a woman instead.”

Tomás let his barking laugh rip the air before continuing.

“Her name was Annabel and she was not a princess. She was a simple, a girl from the mountains who prayed to Island gods and drank witch doctor medicines that make you drunk, but do not heal. But she loved him, fed him, cared for him when he was sick, or lonely, or injured, or hungry. She felt his happiness when he was joyful and his sorrow when he was not. And always she was humming. Humming. Singing songs to heal, songs to cook, songs to make the flowers grow, songs to make him laugh. And these songs were how he knew that she really loved him.

“In their love they conceived a child. The happy couple was overjoyed and the two made immediate plans to marry, though it made the royal family very unhappy. They disowned the prince and he was made to leave the palace

and the life that he had known without a penny to his name, but the prince paid them no mind. For a time the prince and his Annabel were happy and they grew to know a love far richer than the wealth of ten palaces, but it could not last.

“Eventually he began to miss the finery of a life blessed by luxury. He yearned to again taste the succulent foods cooked by the lowly hands of those who lived hand-to-mouth in the nearby villages of garbage and tin. And he dreamed again of dancing women whose images bounced from the facets of red and green jewels, which served no purpose except to sweeten the taste of sugar that he stole from the sweat of the cane farmers’ backs.

“He began to seclude himself away with only his thoughts and his regrets far from the kitchen where Annabel hummed her songs, and soon enough he forgot all about the dream-love that they two had once shared. The sadder he was, the sadder his wife became, as it should have been, and eventually there came a morning when Annabel awoke to find that the prince had left her, and returned to the palace. The royal family welcomed him back when he told them the lie that this girl had enchanted him against his will.

“In the palace, he ate and drank and had as many women as he wanted, and found the prospect of becoming king exciting. But again, a disquiet began to grow in his heart. In the nights he dreamed of his abandoned wife crying alone with her pain, and in the mornings he would awake to her songs, wishing

he could smell her sickly sweet fragrance again. His torment grew with the passing months and eventually he left the palace once more and sought to reconcile his life with Annabel. He traveled for an entire day on foot and reached their house by evening only to find that she was gone. He searched for her but she was nowhere to be found and soon it began to get dark. He sat in his house, confused and alone until the light was completely gone, and then a strange thing happened. He noticed a glow coming into the house from outside, and he smelled the sweet scent of his beloved. *Annabel?* He asked. *Is that you?*

“He stood up and went to the window, and when he looked outside he saw a plant that he had never seen before. It was a bush with many green leaves and it was full of small white flowers whose petals were thin and radiated out from the center like a star. It was the Dama de Noche flower. You know that flower, I think, but at the time, the flower had never before been seen in the world. The prince knew then that it was his beautiful wife, and that she could never return. He began to sob and he was left to live the rest of his life in sadness remembering the wife that he had once loved.”

Tomás finished his story and looked at his daughter. They sat for the span of several breaths, and Sampaguita was the one who finally broke the silence.

“Why do the people in the market call Mama a *Dama de Noche*?” Her words were sharp. They pierced him like arrows.

“Jesúsmaría. You’re too smart for your own good.” he said, angry. “Go get my medicine, here are some pennies.”

Sampaguita did not move. She was staring at the ledgers that Miguel had left on his desk.

“What are those?” she asked him.

“The business of men.”

“I know what Miguel told you,” she said. “I listened.”

Tomás did not know what to say. “You what?” His face was growing hot and this was unexpected because he had never felt real anger toward Sampaguita before.

“You’re crying!?” He yelled irately. “What do you have to cry about? Hmm? I’m the one who should be crying! But do you see me crying? No! Because I am the man.” His words echoed around the study as he sat unspeaking for a moment, shameless, and when he continued it was in a near whisper. “*Mija*,” he said. “I need you to go buy some more gin.” He tried to hand her his silver flask, but Sampaguita backed out of the study before he could find it.

Halfway to the bedroom, she ran into her mother who had obviously come rushing in a panic when she heard Tomás's raised voice. "What did he do?" Asked Carmen.

"He says he needs more medicine," responded Sampaguita, not knowing what else to say. Carmen's eyes moved toward the study door and her eyes were narrow slits, her stare so intense that the door nearly started smoking. She left Sampaguita standing in the hallway after instructing her to go the market and buy the day's rice, but no gin.

The lines of Tomás's world blurred around him, spun in his vision, retched the acid and bile from his stomach. Where was his flask?
"Sampaguita!"

Nothing.

"Sampaguita?"

He turned his head to search for her but all he saw was shapes and colors, muted.

"Tomás!" he heard his name.

Carmen. He found her eventually, once his sight settled and again began to make sense. She was saying something. Yelling. He only heard her shapes and colors. *Where did Sampaguita go? I need her for something.* What was it? It was yelling again.

And then Rosana was there, along with the children. They were looking at him. Was his mind still yelling? Not yelling, that was Carmen, or Rosana. He didn't know.

Someone was standing by his side. Someone was scattering the papers on his desk, the ledgers, *don't look at them anymore!* More yelling. Crying.

"I told you not to cry! Sampaguita, I told you. Do you see me crying? No. I am the man of this house!"

Blackness. Then nothing.

FIVE

Tomás sat in his study, ashamed for a month and five days after his family had discovered that he had run out of money, sober because Carmen refused to buy any gin. The first nights were the worst. Tomás convulsed and vomited and ran a high fever for three days. Carmen called Fernando over to come and sit with him while he healed because he had been through withdrawals himself four times. Rosana was so embarrassed that she stopped hosting her weekly Mah Jongg game and took to fainting at the slightest provocation in public in order to trick people into believing she had a delicate constitution so they wouldn't blame her for Tomás's irresponsible handling of money. She had Flashlight follow her around with a white lace cloth and smelling salts so she could feign a dramatic revival whenever she swooned in order to make the illusion seem more realistic.

After his withdrawals had ceased, Tomás only ate whatever food Sampaguita brought to his study, bathed in a small bucket of water that she brought him every morning, tried his best to be conservative with the chamber pot, and only spoke to say thank you and good morning and once, that he was

sorry after vomiting on Fernando's leather shoes. He used this period of silence to re-read some of the books that Sampaguita had grown so fond of over the years. He even began praying three times a day before his meager meals, a practice he had never taken seriously as an adult. But now, religion seemed a strategic plan to Tomás since what he yearned for more than anything in those days was forgiveness.

His newfound piety, however, was short lived and only lasted until the day that The Famous Juan Salvador bought the first automobile ever seen in Pasig. The contraption was a great black box with white wheels and looked, to Tomás, like a mix between a fancy carriage and an oven. Every instinct in his body told him that this piece of devilry was the work of the very same people responsible for putting him out of business, and he had a premonition that this machine was likely to cause his own death. However, he ignored those thoughts and ventured out of his study for the first time in a month to stare out of the window in the front room so he might get a clearer view because he had never seen anything more beautiful in his life.

The Famous Juan Salvador threw a great party in his mansion to celebrate the occasion, inviting all the neighbors and the elected officials of Pasig. He meant for the affair to be a civilized and sophisticated soiree, but the news of The Famous Juan Salvador's purchase spread from the house's servants to their families, who spread it on to their hairdressers and perfume

shop workers and favorite fishmongers in the market, who then spread the news to their aunts and uncles and cousins in town, so that by the time six days had passed, everybody in the city knew of the automobile and of the celebration that was to be held the following week. In the confessionals on the seventh day, all of the Padrés learned of this so-called “Carriage of Miracles,” as person after person spoke at great lengths about the seemingly limitless envy they had entertained toward Juan Salvador in the last week.

The following Friday, the neighbors (with the exception of Tomás, who watched from his front window), the elected officials, the servants, the hair dressers, the perfume salesmen, the fishmongers, all of their relatives, as well as the Padres arrived at the house of The Famous Juan Salvador at half past noon and weren’t even offended that there was not enough food. The crowd spilled out over Juan Salvador’s sweeping yard and onto the neighbors’ properties, and the level of noise produced by such a raucous crowd was enough to make the Padrés leave the party and return to their churches and cathedrals to pray on behalf of the souls of the partygoers, for they had a suspicion that the cheering and laughing and toasting and applauding was loud enough to cause a disturbance among the angels in Heaven.

The Carriage of Miracles, which Juan Salvador adoringly called Rosa, was so overwhelmed by the love and commotion created in its own celebration that it roared to life each time the gathered people made the even the slightest

cheer or drunken toast, so that by the time the party had reached its third hour, Juan Salvador was worried the car would run out of fuel and insisted that everybody leave.

That was the day that Tomás decided to return to work because it was the only thing he could conceive of that might result in him having an automobile of his own. In the coming months, Tomás began practicing law out of his study and tried to restore the tense calm that had been normal in the house before his family learned that they were penniless. He put on a pretense of good charm and joviality, holding his wife's hand when they sat together for meals, patting his sons on the heads even when they tried to push past him on their way out the door, and one time, taking them all to see a show at the new cinema near where his law office used to be. But all his efforts did not stop his children from tossing resentful glances in his direction, nor did they stop him from feeling overcome with shame when the cracks on the walls learned to write in complete sentences and began spelling out insults whenever he entered the room.

He called upon all his old clients, the ones who had returned for his services many times over the two decades he had practiced, who came from the town's wealthiest families and were the only ones who could afford to pay for such expensive legal counsel and told them all that he was returning to work. Just as he suspected, his old clients dragged themselves in shame and in some

cases, in secret, to Tomás's front door and presented him with the same cases of marital infidelity and business malpractice that they had had nearly ten years earlier. Tomás was sure that when he won his first new case his family would realize how sincere he was in his apologies and forgive him his transgressions, but he was mistaken.

The first case that he took to court was in defense of a petty thief, a man named Felipe Gavieres who was accused of stealing fur coats from the coatroom at the Army Navy Club. Tomás was sure he was guilty, but that had never stopped him from winning a case in the past. However, Tomás soon discovered that the tactful, sophisticated, and loquacious courtroom tactics and arguments that had worked a decade earlier no longer sufficed in the courts of the modern world, which, since the Americans had returned after the war two decades earlier, was becoming ever more Western in its thinking. Everything he thought he knew about practicing law was outdated and had been replaced with the alien banter of a new generation, who had a strong preference for Latin terminology and used sarcasm and boldness of tongue to make their opponents look foolish. In the years of his absence from law, the new generation, which included his own protégé, Emilio Casal, had swooped in to prey upon Tomás's abandoned clients and build upwards upon the legacy he'd left behind. He lost the case, but did not let that stop his efforts to win back his family. The evening after his loss he returned home with bouquets for his

daughters and small knives for his sons, all purchased with the money he had borrowed against the court case. The loss in court won him more disapproval from Rosana and Carmen, and the pure shame of it unexpectedly rekindled the strong devotion to the church that he'd known as a younger man.

In the evenings he began reciting long-winded prayers of penance that he'd begged Padre George Joseph Rosario del Toro to write exclusively for him, insisting that the standard Hail Marys and Our Fathers were too banal.

The priest thought this request was inappropriate and told him that what he really needed was to confess. Under the Seal of the Confessional, Tomás spoke at length about the many things he loved and hated about gin, and about the many things he loved and hated about women. He spoke of Carmen often, but anything he had to say about her inevitably led him to speak about the nights he spent in her bed. Against his will, the priest, who had long since been deprived of the lusty passions enjoyed by his parishioners, found that he enjoyed listening to this charismatic man speak about his life, both because it was fascinating to hear Tomás's innermost justifications, but also because the taboo of his lust for Carmen lit a passion in his heart that he had not felt since he first discovered the true power of God in seminary school. He made Tomás confess his sins over and over again until eventually he grew fond of Tomás in a friendly way and agreed to write the prayers he requested for the small price of 50 pesos.

The prayers, however, went unanswered and Tomás eventually made a habit of pretending not to notice any time his family was angry with him. To make matters worse, just a few weeks after he lost in court, Teresa, Tomás's oldest daughter with Rosana, made her courtship with G.A.P. known to her family. The suitor, they discovered, was the son of Miguel Pais. The boy's mother was named Nenita and had not attended public school, but grew up in a wealthy household and was taught her letters by a man obsessed with the West. He had traveled by boat to Europe and the Americas many times and returned with volumes of his favorite accounts written in English, which he used when teaching his students. Through him, Nenita acquired a great love for stories of the American West and insisted on naming her only son Geronimo Apple, which she thought was clever since their last name was Pais.

The first flowers that Geronimo Apple Pais sent arrived in a spectacular crystal vase that bounced the reds and oranges of the petals onto every surface of the front room where Rosana insisted on displaying them. The arrangement came with two live butterflies who, of their own volition, chose never to fly far from the bouquet, tethered as they were by the strength of his love. The only note was a small scrap of folded paper pinned to one of the rose stems, with the words 'For the Lovely Teresa, with love from G.A.P.' written on the inside.

Love letters began to arrive the next week: one every night slipped under the front door. The poems and silly verses in the hand-written messages had

been painstakingly chosen and translated from old French works of fiction into words only imaginable to the young and in love. They made Teresa smile, a happiness as contagious as the Spanish flu that had swept through the world a generation before. Her courtship became like a wonderful plague resting upon the family that kept the children awake at night in gossipy chatter and filled the house with a buoyancy that even spread to the neighbors, and they had nearly three weeks of sunny weather that, for once, was not sweltering in tropical humidity.

A total of fourteen letters arrived over two weeks, each one addressed 'To the Lovely Teresa,' and each one growing more confident and desperate than the one that preceded it. The last of the letters arrived tied to the neck of a spectacular male peacock who swaggered around the front porch with his plumage arrayed in its full glory, crooning warbles that could be heard even as far as the Chinese man's shop. Tomás had found it that morning as he was leaving for work and his children all squealed with delight when he showed it to them. They insisted collectively that the bird should stay, which Tomás allowed in order to try and win their forgiveness. But the creature's novelty soon wore off.

Within hours the house was full of the stench from the piles of droppings their new pet left everywhere it stepped. For weeks the odor lingered until it began clinging to the curtains and could almost be tasted in the

rice when it was particularly hot. Teresa, of course, seemed most fond of the bird and began saving the tail feathers the bird left behind when it molted. She kept them in vase next to her bouquet of roses, which had lived without wilting long after it should have died.

Tomás had been sitting in the front room for the last three days, leaving only to relieve himself and occasionally to eat. He had pulled a chair up to the credenza that sat below the large windows at the front of house after Teresa had placed the bouquet of peacock feathers there next to Geronimo's butterflies. And even though the windows overlooked the river, with its lush green banks under swaying canopies that spilled the light like delicate lace, Tomás found himself unable to look away from the bouquets. He sat in thought, mesmerized by the colors that danced on the walls when the butterflies flapped their wings. He found the feathers troubling with their mocking greens and blues, "the colors of rich men," he told Sampaguita one morning.

"They're very beautiful," she replied. But Tomás did not agree. When he looked at the bouquet all he could see were teal feather fronds like waves, a violent, swirling eye of ocean with an island floating in the center. Like his beloved home, an island separated by a long, white, feather stem from the land of his fathers: Spain. And if the eye of the feather was the Island on which he lived, than in his mind the Island was himself: an isolation of thought, a lone

sea of solidness in an ocean of broken waves, women, and wants that tugged at him from every direction like the cracks spreading in the walls behind the credenza. How was he supposed to pay for a wedding? And when all the town saw that he could not pay, what would happen then?

The sun rose and fell outside the window as he sat and stared and thought. In the mornings Sampaguita came and sat with him and brought him breakfasts. Sometimes she would try to weave stories for him the way he used to for her. In her stories those feathers had once belonged to peacock farmer in Spain. She told him about how the farmer raised his peacocks like chickens, and how the hens laid eggs for him filled with sweets like bibingka and suman, and how they only ate coconuts. Tomás hadn't had the heart to tell her that they didn't eat bibingka and suman or farm peacocks in Spain. It was sweet, he thought, how little she knew of life outside these walls. It was sweet for a moment, and then it was sad. And the more he thought about that, the more he realized just how cracked their walls really were, how full of holes and breaks the ceiling tiles were, how splintered and crooked the window latticework had become, and just how low his behavior had brought him. He realized then they were lucky that Teresa had gotten the attention of such a high-class boy as Geronimo and he hung his head in shame. Had he never abandoned his practice, it would have been his own sons that all the girls hoped for, but Luis

was off in seminary school, Matthew, in medical school, and Tomás felt a strange shard of regret that neither of them were married yet pierce his navel.

“These children,” he thought. “They will be the end of me.”

“We are worried about you,” Sampaguita told him on the third day.

Her words shook Tomás out of his thoughts and he regarded her, half in awe at how old and mature she seemed, no longer the young child he always conjured when he thought of her.

“You worry about me?” He asked.

“Sí, Papa.”

“You know,” he said. “I worry about many things too.”

“Like what?”

“You want me to tell you a story?”

Sampaguita wasn’t sure what kind of story he wanted to tell her, but she agreed nonetheless, curious about his thoughts the same way she was curious about books.

“Well, he began, there was a boy once, named Arturo, who lived in a house with his parents and his sister. We’ll call her Aldonza Lorenzo.”

“From Don Quixote?” asked Sampaguita.

“Exactamente,” he said. “This Arturo, he had such a nasty temper. He used to get into fights with everyone he met, fights about women, or money, or food, or nothing at all.

“Now, Arturo’s best friend was named John Aquino. Johnny, everybody called him. Arturo was in love with Johnny’s younger sister, Josephine, even though she was very beautiful, but still, Arturo loved her from the time they were children, from the very first time he saw her at age six. The only person who knew of his love was his sister, Aldonza, who thought he was silly because children should not be falling in love, but Arturo would never love anybody else after that day.

“The Aquinos were having dinner at the Lorenzos’ house the first time the Arturo met Johnny and Josephine. Their parents made them introduce themselves and they spent the evening playing together. Arturo was immediately enamored with Josephine watched her from the corner of his eye all night, scarring the image of her face into his mind forever. He was so young, and still developing, and what he felt was so strong that it became permanent part of him, and that’s why he could never love anyone else.

“Anyway, the Aquinos moved away after that night to another city and eventually thoughts of Josephine were driven from Arturo’s mind. After all, he was only a child.

“Aldonza was twelve and Arturo was thirteen the next time they saw Johnny and Josephine. It happened on Easter Sunday in the yard of the Cathedral Church of St. Mary and St. Joseph in Manila, that big domed church with the arches in front of the door, you know the one I mean?”

Sampaguita nodded.

“It was hot that day and inside the church, doubly so. They were like little sausages packed together in a pan because so many people attended Easter Mass, dressed in their finest clothes, all of them drenched in sweat.

“After the sermon, the Lorenzos were standing outside talking to some of their neighbors and Aldonza was standing with Arturo beneath a tree waiting for them to come when suddenly Arturo clenched his sister’s arm and told her to look at the girl poking her head around the corner of the archway at the church’s door. She had a thin pink ribbon in her hair that matched the pink of the dress that she wore draped and folded around her body in the traditional way.

“It was Josephine, Arturo just knew it, and without hesitation he began to walk forward toward her as his sister followed closely behind him. The Aquinos had just moved back into town and, as it turns out, they moved into a house just down the street from the Lorenzos. Mrs. Aquino’s mother had fallen ill, and they had come back to care for her, which meant that Johnny and Josephine had to start over at a new school without friends.

“Aldonza and Arturo had to weave between the members of the congregation and Arturo struggled to keep her in his sight. When they were only a few steps away, Johnny jumped out from behind a tree and stood in their

path, his fists up. You see, he had been missing the company of boys his own age and was craving a little fight, a strong boy, no question!

“Where do you think you’re going?” Asked Johnny.

“Nobody knows who threw the first punch, but the next thing any of them knew, there was dust all around and the two boys were rolling around on the ground like tumbleweeds, trying to hit each other and ruining their Sunday suits. Imagine! The commotion parted the crowds around them, but by the time the Padre arrived and pulled them off of each other, it was too late. There were large holes in the sleeves and pants of Arturo’s suit, his hair was mussed, and his nose was bleeding. Johnny wasn’t much better. The promise of a black eye glimmered on his face and his suit was ripped in several places.

“How embarrassing for their parents! They had to go for many months wearing torn suits because neither family had any money, but they didn’t mind that. From that moment on Arturo and Johnny were inseparable. They became fast friends, the type of friends who don’t need to say what they mean, but just act knowing that the other one is already reacting. Arturo only kept one secret from his friend: his feelings towards Josephine. Johnny was very protective, you see. The arrangement was perfect. Spending time with Johnny also meant that Arturo got to spend a lot of time with Josephine.

“Arturo was afraid to ruin his friendship with Johnny, so he lived with his love hidden for many years. As far as Aldonza knew, his childhood feelings of love had disappeared.

“When Josephine turned fifteen, which was shortly before Aldonza did, men began to show up from nowhere wanting to court her. They came to the Aquinos’ house, hired Haranistas to play love songs to her in the night, and many actually asked permission to marry her. It was hard for Arturo to watch, his heart broke each time, and he knew that he had better say something or eventually it would be too late and she would marry somebody else.

“Finally, he worked up his courage and the first person he told was Johnny. Much to Arturo’s surprise, Johnny liked the idea that his best friend would marry his sister and he helped him to come up with a plan to court her. Arturo couldn’t serenade her outside the window like other men did, but he was a great dancer, like his sister.

“So, once their plan was made, all he had to do was wait and listen each night for one of her many suitors to come and begin a serenade outside her window. Soon enough he heard the sound of a full band playing to her in the night, and so he got out of bed and sneaked over to the Aquinos’ house. Aldonza saw him leave and followed him in secret. The wet ground muffled her steps.

“In front of the Aquinos’ house, a large white tent had been erected and a full band with fifty members were crooning out love songs while a white man that none of them knew was singing opera songs to Josephine. She was standing framed in the doorway with the kitchen in the light bathing her from inside house like an angel. Johnny knew that Arturo was probably hiding in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to step in and sweep Josephine into a formal dance and whisper to her romantically, and profess his undying love for her.

“The opera man was very handsome and Josephine’s parents wanted him as a son because he was obviously wealthy, but just as they were about to approach the singing man, Arturo stepped out from the side of the house and walked toward Josephine with his arm outstretched. His hair and clothes were drenched from the rain that dripped from his fingers, nose, and chin, and the broken light from the kitchen threw curved shadows below his sleep-deprived eyes and making them look hollow and dead. Josephine’s parents were frightened. They thought he was a ghost!

“Mr. Aquino threw his arms out and pushed the children back into the house. Arturo panicked, thinking he had missed his chance. He ran forward as fast as he could, and looked very threatening with his arms flailing as if he was going to attack family. He was yelling, “I love you, Josephine! I love you,

Josephine!” as desperately as he could manage while the front door closed in his face.

“The singing man and his band disappeared into the night when he saw Arturo running like a mad man, and then Josephine’s father emerged from the house carrying a knife. He was angry that Arturo scared away the singing man.

“Arturo froze in the cold rain when he saw the knife. It surprised him, but Arturo was focused. He had come with a goal and nothing would deter him. Not even a man carrying a knife. He stood still as the old man drew near, the knife raised above his head. Then Mr. Aquino brought the knife down toward Arturo so quickly that everyone thought Arturo must be dead, but in the very last fraction of a second before the knife fell, Arturo dodged to the right and avoided the blow simultaneously landing a heavy punch with his left fist straight into the old man’s stomach.

“Mr. Aquino doubled over in pain just as Johnny resurfaced in the doorway of the house. He saw his father holding his gut, curled up on the ground next to the knife that he’d dropped in his shock while Arturo leaned over him poised to defend himself a second time if necessary. After taking a look at the scene, Johnny retreated once more into the cover of the house. He thought that Arturo had just killed his father. Arturo kicked the knife away to the side of the house where Aldonza was still hidden, though he didn’t know

she was there. It was the type of kitchen knife that would normally be used for butchering a chicken.

“For the moment, all danger was gone, which everybody realized except for Johnny. Johnny still thought Arturo had killed his father. And so he came out of the house again with a *balisong* in hand, ready to get revenge. Aldonza was determined to stop this madness. She grabbed the knife that Arturo had kicked away and ran toward her brother. She yelled a warning to Arturo and her screams caused Johnny to panic.

“When Arturo heard her screaming, he turned and saw Johnny behind him, ready to strike. He leapt sideways to avoid the blade and dealt Johnny a blow to the stomach exactly the way he had to Johnny’s father, but Johnny was a much younger man than his father and the punch merely knocked him back a few steps and angered him even more. Aldonza approached the pair of them as they circled in the street like rabid dogs, tangoing into a fight, and Johnny was too out of his mind with anger to recognize her. All he knew was that someone was advancing and carrying a knife. He made another swipe at Arturo with his knife, but this time, Arturo didn’t move fast enough. He was trying to dodge the knife but Johnny was too fast. He would surely have killed Arturo, but right in the last moment before the knife blade came down, Aldonza stepped in and drove her own knife deep into Johnny’s back.

“The tip of her butcher blade hit hard bone and slid sideways into Johnny’s moist flesh, which parted like butter as she plunged it further beneath his ribcage. Then Johnny dropped his *balisong* and stood frozen in place from shock for a second before he fell to the ground, splashing mud onto all of their shoes.”

Tomás finished his story and opened his eyes. Sampaguita was staring at him, a mixture of shock and confusion in her eyes. Tomás saw himself mirrored in them as well.

“What happened to Aldonza and Arturo?” she asked.

“Arturo was heartbroken and left town. Aldonza was tried for murder.”

“And?”

“And she was found innocent.”

“How?”

“It was self defense!” he said. “She had the best lawyer in town. I won her case and then brought her to live here in my house.” He almost smiled.

Sampaguita was confused again for a second, but then she realized what he meant. She was so angry and horrorstruck that she couldn’t speak or think. She just stood there, her face changing from scared, to sad, to outraged, and then back to scared. Tomás leaned forward like he was going to stand up, but before he could, Sampaguita punched him as hard as he could right on the side of his face and then, still terrified, ran away.

Tomas was angry then, not at Sampaguita, but at all the world, and he stood up, ending his three-day vigil. He called his wife and Carmen into the room and began a tirade of his angry thoughts, pointing out the fact that his sons were unmarried, and that surely this meant that he was losing the respect of the community.

“Your sons don’t want to be married yet!” Rosana informed him.

“What do you mean?”

“They are young still. This new generation does not want to be married so soon. Luis says he wants to study medicine after he finishes school. And Jimmy spends his time playing basketball now. And Matthew...”

“What are you talking about? Why don’t I know about these things? These are my sons!” Tomás was yelling. “This house is a disgrace!”

“It reeks of gin,” Rosana said steadily, quietly.

“I see. Always joking, hah? You think I don’t see you mock me?” Tomás, too, lowered his voice, waited a moment before continuing. “It reeks,” he said finally, “of women.”

After that, Tomás made his way through each room of his house with a pad of paper and a pencil, writing a list of all the things in the house that needed to be repaired. He tied the peacock to a post behind the kitchen, and then had Sampaguita go fetch Miguel Pais.

“Miguel, my old friend,” Tomás greeted him with a vigorous nod a tight hug. “Miguel,” he said. “I have returned to work!”

Miguel reclined his head, pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and leaned his head back half in amusement, half in angry exasperation because he had begged Tomás for so long to return to work.

“Miguel! Very soon we will be family. Your son, my daughter.”

“Tomás,” he said, “I don’t think...”

“No, Miguel. See here. Come and look at this list I have made. You see? We will take all of the money out of my savings, everything that’s left, and we fix this house. People need to see a nice house, Miguel. Here I’ll show you. Look first here at these walls. They’re cracking. It’s these women, Miguel. They will be the end of me.”

Tomás led Miguel through the house. They started on the verandah where Tomás pointed out all the places where the plants had overgrown, where the tiles were grimy and threatening to break. He showed Miguel the peeling paint on the windowsills and the crumbling roof tiles, the full gutters. Inside they walked through the *sala*, to the study, the dining room, the great hallway with its grandiose, curving staircase that led to the upper floor. The upstairs patio was in a similar state of disrepair, its curving, villa archways dirtied and covered in creeping plants. Downstairs, where Carmen and her children slept, Tomás found the kitchen walls coated in years of soot and ash, with pots piled

in corners and the door to the outside hung on its hinges. There was not a tile in the kitchen that was not broken or sitting at a crooked angle.

Though Miguel was hesitant and advised against it, Tomás insisted on taking out all of his savings in cash and told Miguel to deliver the money the next day. There was not much left.

“And hire some maids, too,” Tomás said. “I will use this to fix the house, then when I earn enough to buy my office back from the bank, we will throw a party to celebrate our children’s engagement!”

“Tomás, this is not something we have agreed upon, my friend. The boy acted without my permission,” Miguel replied slowly. But Tomás would hear none of it. He sent Miguel away with promises trailing behind him, that all would work itself out. “You will see, Miguel,” he said. “You will see.”

The next morning, Sampaguita woke up early. Her brothers were still sleeping, their thin, beige blanket tangled in bunches around their feet. A layer of moths like a gray mosaic had gathered on their mosquito netting during the night and Sampaguita swatted at the fabric to dislodge them before she climbing out from below its shelter. It was hot already that morning. She could hear the birds outside, their songs muffled by the thick humidity. Her skin was sticky with sweat like sap-covered leaves as she rose and crept as quietly as she could out of the room. Even from the hallway near the kitchen downstairs, she

could hear the sounds of her father's voice coming from the front yard. That was unusual. She found her father standing outside on the lawn below the verandah with group of ten men she had never seen before. He had bathed, shaved, and put on a suit as if he was headed to a business meeting or luncheon even though it was barely dawn, and from the spring in his step and exuberant arcs he made with his arms as he pointed towards the roof tiles and gutters, Sampaguita could tell he had been awake for hours.

Outside the house the world was sunlit in slanted orange. Morning spilled over the neighbors' roofs and white, stone verandahs covered in leafy vines and blossoms the colors of rust and saffron. In the trees the birds and insects were singing to the hush-hush of rustling leaves, running river, calls of vendors, and the sleekness of boats in the market. Sampaguita walked down to where her father stood and listened to him converse with the other men, who, she figured out from their talk, were builders, masons, carpenters, and painters. Tomás was reading to them from a list of projects in his notebook, and one by one the builders started walking away from the group as he checked off items, following the directions that Tomás indicated with his puckered lips. He never once looked down at Sampaguita, though she was standing right beside him as he talked, studying the men and listening to his words.

Before he'd even finished with the workers, another group of people came walking up to the verandah from the street. Miguel Pais was among them,

looking tired and annoyed, a briefcase at his side, the lone man in a group of a dozen women. The women, it seemed, were all middle-aged and dark skinned with their hair tied back in tight buns, and the loose cotton dresses they wore were pressed and covered with wrap-around aprons.

“Ah, Miguel. Good, good!” Tomás exclaimed as he saw them approach.

“Tomás. Here are the maids I have hired like you said. They have been paid already.

“That’s good, Miguel.”

Tomás smiled at Miguel and motioned with his arms for the group of women to follow him into the house. They obeyed without a word, leaving Sampaguita and Miguel standing on the verandah. Neither spoke as Miguel busied himself in his briefcase. Sampaguita, who was used to spending time with her father at this time of the morning, walked away, back toward the house. She walked through the rooms at the front of the main house looking for him but he was not there. Instead she found her way blocked by groups of builders already busy at work, measuring the walls here and there, carrying lengths of wood through the corridors, and chatting noisily with each other. One, who had a mouth full of fresh *pan di sal*, growled at her as she walked past him.

“Oy, see where you’re going!” he snapped, bits of chewed bread flying from his mouth.

Sampaguita finally found her father back near the kitchen, which surprised her. He was showing one of the maids where to find the peacock, tied to a post behind the house. As she followed them through the kitchen she saw that her mother must also have been awake for several hours already for there were pots of rice and stewing pork over the open flame, pans of bread and banana-leaf wrapped sweet rice on plates piling up on every surface. Her mother, however, was not in the kitchen.

Carmen was standing about fifty feet behind the house bent over a small bush beneath the stand of lazy palms. Her dress was green like the color of the bushes, but Sampaguita sensed her there and looked up. Her hair, tied up though straying strands had come loose and were tossing about her head in the breeze. The palms stood tall on a slight mound of earth near to the line where the neighbor's yard began. Sampaguita could see the rounds of small coconuts forming below the waving fronds, pale white in the morning light. They would taste good when they ripened, she thought could nearly taste the sweet *bibinka* and coconut jams on her tongue, and at first she thought that maybe her mother was there in the bushes collecting coconuts, but it was too early in the season for that.

"Here," Tomás was saying, "is that devil bird. There are piles of shit everywhere and its stink has filled the house."

The peacock warbled.

Tomás, it seemed, had not even noticed Carmen standing so far away from them.

“And never let that bird back in the house! I’ve had enough of tripping over its...”

The peacock warbled again. Carmen looked apprehensively at them, still unnoticed by Tomás or the maid. She stood still below the palm shade, as if waiting for some cue to return to the house. She didn’t have to wait long. After a moment, Tomás led the maid back into the kitchen again without a word or even a glance at Sampaguita.

Sampaguita decided not to follow this time. Instead, she waited in the doorframe that led to the kitchen and watched Carmen approach with hands buried deep in her pockets. She was walking quickly, with steps hurried and stiff like a frantic heartbeat. Sampaguita stood in silence, anticipating that moment when the familiar lullabies would surround her and fill her mind like food in an empty stomach, but as her mother drew closer there was only the sound of the birds and insects and the calls of distant monkeys in the air. Like Tomás, Carmen walked straight past Sampaguita on her way into the kitchen. Sampaguita found it eerie the way her mother walked with hips swaying back and forth with no accompanying melody. She felt unnerved and something akin to coldness, though the sun was warming her skin with each moment that passed, and with brows furrowed she turned after a tentative second and

watched her mother putter through the kitchen. Carmen paced around the kitchen turning from the pot of rice that was threatening to boil over, to a pile of dirtied plates and back again as if she had forgotten the reason she was there altogether.

Carmen picked up a hot plate of pan di sal then and turned suddenly around and silently handed it to Sampaguita, who took it feeling more confused than ever. Was this to be Rosana's breakfast this morning? The stewing meat and rice was not yet finished cooking, and it was far too early to be serving this food. Rosana would not be awake for another hour at least.

"Ay, *naku*," Carmen began saying without prompt. "Your father woke me up so early."

"Why?"

"Take the pan di sal to the table, *na*. And then come back for the rice."

"But,"

"*Susmaria!* Just take it, hah?"

Sampaguita walked forward past her mother, toward the hallway that led to the main house feeling as though the world around her were dream and she, merely an observer, as if her eyes floated feet above her head, her body acting of its own volition. Her path through the house again was blocked, but this time not only by carpenters and men patching the plaster cracks with a smelly thick paste, but by maids with their long feather dusters and ripped rags who

were documenting every surface of the house from the floors to the walls and the undersides of tables. Some even stood on rickety ladders reaching as high as they could to the cobwebs in the ceiling corners while still others ambled past carrying bags of reeking peacock droppings. Sampaguita finally entered the dining room where she nearly dropped her plate of bread in surprise. There were heaps of food already laid out on the table: more pans of pan di sal and steaming bowls of lemon and pork broths, whitefish pan fried with garlic, eggplants stewed in vinegar, boiled eggs and plates of hot greens, dishes filled with rice and small sauce cups of patis and soy sauce and calamansi, and even more plates of sweet leche flan and rice with coconut milk.

The same man who had snarled at Sampaguita earlier followed her into the dining room. His hair was dirty and dark, matted with plaster dust, or maybe sawdust, she didn't know. In his eyes she saw the wishes of a greedy man, they were the darkest brown with hints of yellow that matched the yellow of his teeth below the red-stained spit that pooled in his mouth from chewing betel leaves and smoking. She backed away, keeping pace with him as he strode forward toward the table. His hands seemed to move automatically, piling rice and fish onto his plate, spooning the savory juices of adobo over the food, grabbing roll after roll of the sweet pan di sal, and all the while his eyes never left her. He had the look of a hunter, though she didn't know what exactly he hunted.

Miguel Pais entered the dining room at that moment as well, and for that, Sampaguita was glad. The man tore his gaze away, bowing with slight deference to Miguel, whose suit was starched and as crisp as sun-baked paper. His hair was gelled and slick over his milky complexion. Miguel eyed the man with little interest before turning to Sampaguita.

“More rice,” was all he said to her, though by his tone he may as well have been speaking to a dog.

Sampaguita ran from the room, exiting out the front door of the house this time rather than traverse the hallway with its roadblocks of builders and maids moving about. Outside the air was lighter and her breathing came more naturally, though she still felt the rock of anxiety sitting heavily in her belly, weighing down her body until it seemed that each step took twice the energy it normally did. With the great effort she was exerting to keep herself from falling to the ground, time seemed to pass faster than its normal speed, so that she was exhausted by the time she rounded the house and entered the kitchen once more through the back door. Again she noticed right away the strange quiet in the room and she didn’t know whether it was a hush that emanated from her mother, or if it was merely the absence of the subtle, soundless lullabies that she normally heard there. Either way, Sampaguita, who still felt as if she were floating and disconnected from her body, could not bring herself to speak.

When Carmen finally noticed Sampaguita standing there in the doorway, she made a show of setting aside the butchering knife with which she had been preparing a recently plucked chicken that was lying like a naked mound of dough next to a small pile of berries.

“Anak, I need you to go to Tita Nida and borrow some rice,” she said, though she never raised her eyes to look at Sampaguita.

“Borrow?”

“Oh. You tell her I said.”

“Why?”

“Why? Why? Because we need more rice! Ay ay ay. I don’t have time to buy it, na. Go!”

“I will go buy it,” offered Sampaguita.

“No! Jesúsmaria! Just go there, and...”

“What is all that food for on the table?”

But Carmen, it seemed, was done talking. She turned quickly and stomped toward Sampaguita, an unfamiliar anger seemed to linger there below her words as she yelled, in the place where the music used to be. And even though Carmen barely stood taller than 5 feet and had skinny arms and tiny hands, Sampaguita still cowered before her glare.

“I said just go!”

And Sampaguita ran out before her Carmen reached the doorway, over the back patio and the sweep of lawn that led up to the palm stand. She ran below the swaying fronds and through the bushes where she had seen her mother searching for something earlier. Only after she had passed the bushes and was standing on the line between their property and the neighbor's yard did she slow down and take a moment to think about what her mother had said.

She didn't understand why she should have to ask Tita Nida for rice. That did not make sense. Even in the days when her father had been at his worst, they had always had enough rice, at the very least. And maybe she was just going to borrow some, and would return it later, but why not just go buy some from the market. Sampaguita herself would have gone. It would have taken only a few minutes. And she wondered, too, who all of that food was for. Rosana was not even awake yet. The builders and maids? She couldn't imagine why they would be feeding the help such a lavish feast.

Making her way through the thickets of palms and under some acacias that stood behind the row of houses on their street, she walked the length of two properties and down to the servant's door at Juan Salvador's house. It was early still but she expected Tita Nida to be awake. Cooks usually rose before the rest of the house. When the door swung open, Sampaguita was surprised to see a young man at the door rather than Tita Nida. He looked around her age,

though maybe a year or two older. He was not particularly well groomed, dressed in just an unbuttoned over-shirt and canvas shorts, his hair trimmed, but not brushed. His teeth, however, were nice and white, not even a little bit stained. The boy eyed her for a moment, took in her messy braids, the wrinkles in her thin, cotton dress where it had twisted around her during sleep. She did not know who this boy was, though she would have known if he had been a servant here. Why had he, and not Nida, had answered the kitchen door? But before she could say anything the boy was ushered aside by Tita Nida and disappeared back into the house.

“Who is it?” asked Nida. “Oh! Nining. Just you, *naman*. What are you doing here? Come in, here. That’s better. What do you want? You smelled my adobo, hah? Ah, just joking. Joking-joking *lang*. Ning, it’s good to see you! So pretty already. OK, *sige na*. What do you need?”

“Mm,” began Sampaguita. “Just some rice. My Nanay, she said...”

“Oh,” Nida exclaimed, her voice lowering, head shaking slowly as if in disapproval. “Rice again.”

“Again?”

“Carmen, *naman*. Your mother. All the time she is borrowing rice. Borrowing, right? She always says that. Boorroowiiing.” Nida took her time saying this last word a little bit more loudly. “But do I see it back? Hah! No. Of course, oh,” she sighed. “Your poor mother.” She shook her head again.

What did she mean borrowing all the time?

“Here, *naman*. I can give you this much today.” She handed Sampaguita a small canvas bag with 6 or 7 cups of hard, white, grain kernels inside it. The rice inside shifted from one end to the other as she took it into her arms from where Nida was holding it in the air between them.

“Um,” Sampaguita said, adjusting herself under both Nida’s stare and the weight of the bag. “*Salamat*, Tita. Thank you,” she said.

“Yes, of course, of course. Now go before somebody sees you, hah? Go.”

Sampaguita looked around again before turning to go. The boy who had answered the door was watching them from behind the door that led out of the kitchen and into the rest of the house.

“Go,” said Tita Nida a final time, giving Sampaguita a push back out into the open morning.

When she returned to the house, Carmen had already taken the stew and rice and remaining pans of bread and sweets to the table. Without the sounds of boiling and the countertops covered in plates, the kitchen seemed empty and even quieter than it had before. She handed her mother the bag and then sat down on one of the stools that stood beside the stove without a word. Her mother’s temper had calmed since she left. Taking one of the clean pots from a newly washed stack in the corner, Carmen walked to the stove and

poured some rice out of the bag. The dry grains landed with little tinkering sounds as they hit the metal.

Sampaguita waited in the kitchen, staring off into nothingness while the rice cooked. Her thoughts wandered back to the boy in Tita Nida's kitchen. He had smelled like morning after a rain shower.

"Here, 'Nak," her mother interrupted once the rice had finished. "Eat some breakfast." She handed Sampaguita a bowl of rice, still sticky with the fresh starch of boiling. Sampaguita could smell traces of leftover broth spooned into the bowl, a breakfast of borrowed rice and Rosana's leftovers. While Sampaguita ate, her mother made herself a bowl of rice and broth and came and sat down on the next stool to eat. For a while the two sat together, eating without talking, listening to the pounding hammers and the warbles of the peacock tethered outside the door. Sampaguita didn't understand why, but she felt nervous, as if she should be looking over her shoulder, as if she did not know what was going to happen next, and as she ate, letting the broth pool in the spaces below her tongue and gums, she tried to be calm.

"Don't worry, *na*," said her mother suddenly. "You are my daughter. It will be alright for you."

Sampaguita looked at her mother, unsure of how to respond, what to think. Her mind was floating above her body again. And like a deep breath before a dive, Sampaguita breathed one last moment of quiet. Then, suddenly,

like the sound of a gunshot there was a terrible banging clamor as Rosana slammed open the door between the kitchen and the hallway. Sampaguita dropped her bowl in shock as she watched Rosana run, as fast as a galloping horse, past the stove, then the stools, through the open back door, past the peacock and over the patio, and finally collapsed onto the ground in a heap, projectile vomiting onto the grass as she fell.

The peacock watched idly as Rosana rolled around near him moaning in pain and spitting up reddish bile that dribbled down the front of her dress and onto the ground. Flashlight, whose legs were so short that she hadn't been able to keep pace with Rosana, came running through the kitchen after a minute with a cloth to wipe her mistress' face. Carmen slowly approached Rosana and Flashlight, but Rosana snarled at her to stay back like the rabid dogs who roamed the neighborhoods sometimes did at night, but Carmen gently patted her back and helped Flashlight get her into a sitting position on her knees. Sampaguita found it strange to watch her mother caring for Rosana in this way. It went against everything she had come to think of as normal. She felt repulsed, then proud of her mother, but also jealous that she hadn't gotten that kind of attention earlier in the morning. Carmen screamed for some of the maids to help Rosana upstairs to her bedroom and Sampaguita spent the rest of the day boiling water and cleaning rags full of Rosana's sick. Carmen did not work in the cantina that evening.

The next morning, Sampaguita woke up nervous again. The first feeling she had was that of her heart sinking deep into the recesses of her stomach, and she found that she was holding her breath. Before she even opened her eyes, Sampaguita could hear the sound of hammers pounding and many feet traversing the floors of the main house, and above it all, her father's echoing voice. She did not even bother trying to find him. Instead, she headed straight to the kitchen where her mother was already busy, running back and forth between the back patio and Rosana's bedroom, emptying buckets and fetching fresh water. Rosana had been sick through the night, Sampaguita had listened to the pacing footsteps of her father through the ceiling of her bedroom as she fell asleep the night before.

"Oh, good, you're here," began Carmen as soon as Sampaguita had entered the kitchen. "You go to Tita Nida again, hah? I don't have time, Tomás..." she began her thought, but grew silent before she finished, shaking her head as she rushed out the door once more.

At Juan Salvador's, the boy once again opened the door at Sampaguita's knock.

"Hello," he managed to say before Nida shoved him out of the way again.

"Ning, I heard about Rosana."

"What did you hear?" Asked Sampaguita.

Nida didn't answer the question, but instead replied offhandedly, "it's terrible, awful." Then she handed Sampaguita a basket with rice already cooked and a bowl of fried pork. "Here. You give this to your mother, hah? Tell her to eat. And you, too. And your brothers." Nida smiled, shoved Sampaguita out of the door again.

Between the obsessive fussing of maids in the house, the pounding hammers and growling builders, her mother running back and forth from the kitchen where she sporadically cooked whatever dishes she could prepare quickly, to the upstairs where she was taking care of Rosana with a bitter, angry look on her face because Rosana demanded that only Carmen be allowed to enter the bedroom, her father snapping at everyone who came too close to him and pacing distractedly through the dining room and study, forcing more food onto Miguel who had stayed in the house at Tomás's request, Sampaguita was glad to have a solid meal of pork and rice to eat. She ate the food with vigor, scooping up the small, hard bits of browned meat and rice with her fingertips, pushing each bite into the cave of her mouth with her thumb. When she was finished, she fed the rest of Nida's gift to her brothers, and tried to hide for the rest of the day behind the house with the peacock.

In the mid-afternoon, shortly before the time that would normally have been Rosana's meal time, Carmen came to find Sampaguita behind the house.

"Do you need me to go to Tita Nida?" asked Sampaguita.

“Tita Nida? No. No. Sige, I need you to cook. Finish frying this fish? And the rice, OK? Here and this chicken, too. Put them on the table. Those maids are hungry-hungry. And Tomás, too. And Teresa. And you feed your brothers. I have to go.” She did not say where she was going, and was gone a moment later, having glided out of the kitchen like a ghost even as she spoke, with a bundle of fresh rags under her arm.

Sampaguita obeyed, but not without protest of her own. With nobody in the kitchen to hear her complaints, she stomped around in a rage that everybody had abandoned her to do all the cooking without an explanation, yelling at the peacock and letting the fish burn. She fed the bird the sweetest bits of fruit rather than the browned sections. On the plates she scattered bits of rice around and drowned them in vinegar, imagined Rosana’s face in the soupy mess, imagined her mother’s. She laid them on the table with no coverings to let them grow cold. She brought a plate of eggplant to her father’s study, stonily placing it on his desk and stuck her tongue out to his back when he did not turn to look at her. She did not bother cleaning the pots when she was finished. Carmen said nothing.

The next morning was the same. Carmen was tending to Rosana with Flashlight. Her half-siblings were gone at school. Tomás’s voice rose and fell over the clamor of the hired workers, conversing with a doctor he had hired

with money he borrowed from Miguel. Nida's whirlwind chatter. A breakfast of borrowed rice. The boy, however, had not been at the door when she knocked at the backdoor of Juan Salvador's house. And that had made matters even worse. She had been thinking about him in the quiet moments between day and night, when she lay down to sleep at night.

After a week had passed, Rosana still had not recovered. The doctor was unable to diagnose her. She continued to insist that only Carmen be allowed in the room, for she still had not forgiven Tomás for not being rich anymore. Plus, after Carmen had cared for her in the yard, she seemed to have grown suddenly needy of her company the way a child would with a mother. Her fevered screams filled the nighttime hours, making the curtains rustle in the darkness. And when Carmen surfaced in the kitchen to collect fresh water, or rags, or plates of rice for Rosana to eat, she walked in a stupor, bent and exhausted. She had stopped working in the cantina altogether, which was not a problem because with Rosana's illness, Tomás had been willing to pay the doctors and started giving Carmen money again from the meager wages he was now earning.

"The rice is burned and bitter," complained Carmen. "Don't you know how to even boil water?" she chastised Sampaguita. "Put some sugar, hah? Hide the tastes."

"Why does it matter? That rice is for Rosana."

Carmen knocked her on the back of her head. "Enough, Shhsst," she hissed. "You say *Tita* Rosana, hah? Ay 'Sus."

On the ninth day after Rosana had fallen ill, Sampaguita awoke to her father shaking her.

"Hija," he called softly. "Hija. Wake up. I am going to work today," he said.

Sampaguita stared at him silently.

"Did you hear me? I am going to start working today?"

"Okay..."

"And I don't need you to buy any gin anymore," he added.

"Okay."

"Hija," he paused. "Don't tell anybody I was here." Then he turned around and left without.

The only moments of pleasure she found anymore were in the times that she tramped through the bushes to the back door of Juan Salvador's house. Nida filled the mornings with happy, high-pitched chismis, and she always fed Sampaguita well. But more importantly, she caught glimpses of that boy on most days, though the two never actually spoke. She continued to go to bed with images of his eyes in her mind, for most of the time, it was only his eyes

that she saw. His eyes peeking out from behind a door, or a wall, watching her and Nida as if they didn't know he was there. She still had not learned his name.

But later, on the same day that her father had shaken her awake, even that small comfort was stolen from her. When she entered the cold, deserted kitchen on that morning, she found a steaming basket full of adobo and pan de sal already waiting for her outside the door. The peacock was examining it closely, let out a mournful wail as she took it into the kitchen and out of his reach. Nida must have left it there for her, she thought. And normally, a small kindness like that would have left her feeling touched, but this had left her in a foul mood, disappointed that she would not get to visit Nida's kitchen, not get to steal one more glimpse those eyes that she let distract her in her quiet moments. She let the rice burn again.

Meanwhile, Teresa was growing ever more angry and impatient that Geronimo had still not come calling at the house, though she continued to receive his letters.

"Patience, Hija," Sampaguita heard Tomás saying to her one evening. "I have spoken to his father."

"Yes, and Mang Pais does not want us to marry!" protested Teresa.

"Don't worry, I will speak to..."

“No! Because of you and Nanay being sick, he doesn’t want me anymore,” she cried dramatically.

Sampaguita could hardly stand to listen to her. Carmen, too, Sampaguita was finding increasingly difficult to be around. She had stopped her dancing, and the sweet comfort of her mother’s presence, the lullabies, were gone. Sampaguita wished that she felt concerned, wished that she wanted to help her mother, but all she felt anymore was anger.

The baskets continued to appear in the kitchens in the morning. Tomás continued to go to work in the mornings. Any time Sampaguita tried to visit him at dawn, before he left the house for work, he told her to go.

“Not today,” he would say. Or else “I have no time,” “you need to cook,” “go see to your brothers,” “I must leave early,” or any other number of excuses he conjured up. Sampaguita stopped trying. The only times she ever saw him anymore were when he began handing her the small allowance that he used to give Carmen, enough money to buy food in the market to prepare and feed the family. Apparently, he had started earning wages again.

“You see?” he told her. “I could never be broke! Never be broken! I am a matador.”

She took the money without question. There was no longer any need for her to go begging rice at Nida’s door, yet the baskets of food continued to be

delivered in the mornings, and the empty basket from the day before, taken away before she arose at dawn.

After three weeks, the builders and maids had finished their work and the house, once again, had been restored to its pristine lavishness. Tomás brought in gardeners to plant lush, purple, bougainvillea along the verandah walls, and below the windows. The whitewashed walls outside shone bright in the tropical sunlight. The paint fumes smelled rich, took a week, at least, to fully fade.

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