

Audrey CHIN

A poor man

Anna, older brother! Please be accepting my abject apologies you are firstly hearing about my affairs from *anna mukavar*, our fellow villager, not myself. Also please be accepting my apologies this letter is in English. But you must be agreeing, these are not matters our family should be worrying about.

To start, I must say I'm still not sure how this is happening. But, as you are asking...

That time, I'm not thinking anything about marrying. I'm lately arrived. I'm still paying off agents' fees, tickets and etcetera like safety kit, working shoes and deposit for bunk in quarters. Like you tell me, I'm youngest son, a poor man; nobody marries a poor man. But then, one Saturday I am fainting on the roadside and waking to see the fat lady's servant Melli-ann holding a yellow umbrella over my head...

I'm falling at the drainage works. In Sunset Way. We're working there fourteen days, inside a tunnel by a fat lady's house. It's the hot season and no wind is blowing in and no wind is going out of our workplace. All day long we breath stink from stagnant and rotting leaves. It's like being dead. Fourteen days I'm trying to bear it, thinking what to do with hard-time money I'll be getting, telling myself I'm strong. But come Saturday clock-out, I climb out from the *longkang* ready to enjoy my off-time like a man and what is happening? I find myself lying on the cement floor and a goddess looking down at me.

This goddess is surrounded by golden umbrella light. Her eyes are soft like Coimbatore velvet, wet like father's milk-cow. Something cracks in my head and my heart. For awhile I'm not knowing if I'm back at the farm or arrived in heaven. But then I realize it's only the maid belonging to the fat lady, the Ma'am who every day sends ice-water out for us at break-time and clock-out. This maid is kind, like the fat lady. When I'm falling, *mukavar* tells me later, she's the one calling for Ma'am; she's the one putting ice-water towel on my head; she's the one asking fat lady to let me go into the air-conditioning house to recover.

"You have a good owner," I tell this servant.

Her face turns to ice. "She's my employer, not my owner," she tells me slowly like I'm stupid. Then she rolls her eyes and turns away. When I'm better to go outside, she's talking only with *mukavar*, never bothers with me again even I'm younger and handsomer.

After that I always watch Melli-ann; not straight staring like some country-boy but just one look before giving my water cup back. I also tell her to thank the fat lady. 'Your employer,' I remember to use that word. Melli-ann, she's never answering. She pretends she's forgotten the first time we talk. But I see she smiles.

Anna mukavar, he's also seeing. Before he already warned me: Filipinas, they only look up, I must go for Sri Lankans or Indonesians. Now he's showing me his small finger and twisting it around like winding cotton. "Be careful. After a Filipina gets you, this is what they'll do. Before you know, you'll be sending all your OT to her family farm."

"She's kind. She's having good teeth," I say. "And this also..." I make the number eight with my hands, two curves on top, two curves lower.

"Better you pay \$10 for short time in Serangoon. You go with her, you'll have nothing to take home."

He's older and wiser. But I'm daring to answer him. "I can dream, no? And if I'm getting the other free, it's \$10 to save. Why not?"

He tells me back, "And when has she talked to you?"

I smile. "Wait and see."

It's coming up to the rains. Still I'm waiting. But I'm not despairing. We're finished digging. Now we lay pipe. Outside. I'm breathing fresh air. Also, I'm three months experienced, senior enough to take watchman duty. That's one-and-a-half time pay to sleep overnight by the tool shed. No more crowding twelve men in quarters, sharing everybody's wet dreaming and night-maring. What more, I'm having spare to send home.

"Your life is good now, yes?" *mukavar* says when handing me my dinner-money.

"Almost." I point to my sleeping tent. "One thing more only, a Filipina under this rubber sheet with me."

Anna mukavar, pats my hand. "It's end of the year holiday."

He's smiling like a man sharing a stolen honeypot. But I'm not understanding.

"Holiday time, maids are free. Bosses all away with children," he tells me. He tilts his head towards the resting pavilion in the park. "Your honey chicken is there. Also friends. Next two weeks, every night. All hungry hens. Best time for you to try." He hands me another \$10. "Take. I score a free Sri Lankan last weekend. Go to the food court and use to buy some food to share with them. You can pay back next day, after you score."

I am not repaying *anna mukavar* next day. What I offer to Melli-ann – twelve chicken wings from the food court at the starting of Sunset Way – is giving me just one seat in the pavilion and one invitation to come again. I'm having to invest much more in Jollibee, Pizza Hut and light beer many more nights before I score. This, I must explain, is the reason why my remittance home is late last time.

Also, I must report, I am not firstly scoring with Melli-ann. Like *mukavar* says, there are many coming and going there. Those ones are happy hearing me tell about Ullikotthai, what I'm planning about my house and my future wife. Some inform me Filipino men are not so calculative like me. They're admiring I'm not sending my future wife away to Saudi or Singapore to be a servant like their husbands. I have an appreciating audience. Except for Melli-ann.

Melli-ann is mostly rolling her eyes when I talk. And when I'm finished, she's telling me why she's not impressed.

"What for you want to go home? Better stay here until they kick you out. You never think! \$100 there, \$1000 here for same work," she's making it her business to tell me. As if we Indians cannot count better than Filipinas!

"I'm knowing that," I reply to her. "But this is not my home."

"Home with no money is just fighting and fucking and beating each other. Nothing to miss."

"At home, no matter what, we're the same blood, together."

"Tchhhhhh!" she bares her teeth at me. They shine like a sickle, cutting across her face. "Don't talk to me about same blood together! Father, daughter, brother, sister, what do you know about it?"

I'm upsetting her upside down and up again, but for what I am not clear.

No, I may be wanting but it cannot be Melli-ann I score with.

I am scoring with Christalle, who has short curling hair and likes to be called Billy. She's always teasing my eyelashes are sooooo long and sooooo pretty I should be a girl. I want to tell her she's a man because she jokes too far for a girl. But I'm not doing that. She is frightening me. A bit.

Anyway, she's the one who opens my tent-flap and pushes herself in late on Christmas night. "I have a present for you... And me..." she's saying. And then she's reaching under my *lungi*.

Billy has a body like a wrestler. I'm not wanting to be a pretty boy for some she-he. But I won't be winning if I fight her, I'm thinking. And my small tent will be falling down if we are moving too much. It's a December thunderstorm outside. I'm not wanting to be soaking wet, I'm also thinking. No such thinking for my third leg. Before I can count how many fingers Billy is using on it, I must confess, it's already boiling over like a pot of *pongal* rice.

After this I have different eyes for Melli-ann's friends. Sure nobody has her soft eyes and her breasts like young coconuts. Nobody is giving me better advice for taking care of myself. But Billy, she can sing any kind of song, any style. And she's expert with her holding here and there. When she wrestles with me, I'm not caring who's on top or underneath. Whether she's pressing me down or turning me over, Billy is sending me flying.

There's also Mie Mie from Burma — Never saying a word in the pavilion; flat chest, skinny arms and legs, nodding head like a puppet. But she has a thick plait long to her hipbones and blacker than midnight. She's pinning it up at work. At night though, she lets it run free down her back. And I'm noticing that every time she's nodding, this plait twists and slaps like a panther's tail. I find out, she's not just a wooden doll...

Like father is telling us, even a broken pot can contain sugar. I'm starving for Melli-ann's honey when anytime I can be eating sweetmeats at her neighbours'!

In the New Year, I give *anna mukavar* back \$40 for his \$10. But, *mukavar* is not accepting. "I'm not one who is here, there and also taking a share of the boiled rice," he says. "First you look at the oldest sister. Now you get the younger and also play with the cousin. You know what happens to a man's top-knot when he has two wives?"

"I don't have a top-knot," I reply. "And these two are not my wives. Also, you know how they live, worse than widows. I'm giving them something to dream about during their working time. No one will tear my hair out because of that."

Anna mukavar rolls his eyes, same way like Melli-ann. "If you want to try different cooking, don't go to next-door shops," he says. "Also you want to know who is number one before you are losing it doing something stupid."

"Who is number one?" I'm knowing the answer but I'm not knowing how to make my answer happen. Anyway, New Year is over and also night-watch. The Ma'ams are all come home. We have no more gatherings in the pavilion. I've no more chance to wrestle with Billy or play with Mie Mie's plait. Melli-ann is not having anything to get angry about. I'm not even saying enough for her to roll her eyes or scold me. Only we're saying "Have a drink" and "Please" and "Tell your employer I am thanking her" and "Don't mention" and "You are welcome".

"I miss you," she's also saying one evening at clock-out.

"I'm missing all of you too," I say.

She rolls her eyes.

"All of us?" she asks.

I look down, shuffling my feet.

"My ma'am is watching fireworks this weekend. You want to come eat with me?" she says.

I am sometimes very stupid. "Lorry comes at 6.30. I cannot miss it. Otherwise, I am paying \$10 for taxi back to quarters or sleeping on the roadside," I say.

Melli-ann turns away. Her face is part angry, part something else, same way like our cow when we take away her calf to sell.

“As you like,” she says.
I can be saying, “No, I don’t like but this is life for a poor man.”
Maybe she can be forgiving then. But what I am doing is jumping onto the lorry and watching like a fool as Melli-Ann walks away and the fat lady’s gate closes.

If I’m writing a story, older brother, this is the end. That night in quarters, *mukavar* tells us we are changing assignment next day. Next morning, we will be connecting pipes at the main road, seven hundred metres from the fat lady’s house. I have no chance to see Melli-ann again, don’t be talking about saying sorry.

But this isn’t a story. It’s life. *Anna mukavar* is our fellow villager and he’s looking out for me. The next day he asks us to take tea-break in the Sunset Way food court. Before we’re drinking, he’s saying loudly to all of us, “I’m missing some tools. I’m thinking we left them at yesterday’s site. Who wants to go and check?” It’s burning hot. He’s knowing well nobody is wanting to walk all the way back to the fat lady’s house except one of us. He looks straight at this very one. This time, I am not slow to understand. Before he is saying my name, I am already racing out the food court and into the estate.

Every day at tea-break, the fat lady is opening her gate and leaving to pick up her grandchildren from school and Melli-ann is coming with our water. Today we are not there. There is no open gate and no Melli-ann. But I have run all the way down Sunset Way to here in less than four minutes. I cannot lose hope. I look through the wood strips on the gate, hoping the fat lady is still gone for her grandchildren... I’m lucky. The car porch is empty!

I press the bell. There is ringing inside the house. Then the inter-com on the gate-post clicks. “Why are you here?” Melli-ann is asking.
“I want to talk to you.”
Melli-ann’s voice comes back. “I don’t talk to fools.”
“I want to say sorry I’m making you angry,” I tell her.
“I’m not angry. You’re nothing to me. How can you make me angry?” she asks, her talking fast and loud.

Of course she’s angry. But I will be making her angrier if I say. So, I keep my mouth shut and chew on my tongue.
I hear the inter-com click off.
I almost give up. But I cannot be going back to *anna mukavar* empty handed after all his help. And certainly I will be regretting forever if I surrender so easily... I ring the doorbell again. “I’m a man. I cannot let you be getting away from my life like this,” I shout into the speaker. Nothing is happening.
I ring the doorbell one more time. “I’m wanting you to know you are the most beautiful woman to me,” I say.
Still nothing.
“I’m wanting to say I love you.” I’m adding. “I’m wanting to ask you to marry me.”
There’s nothing better I can be offering. I wait.

The gate begins to open.
“What is it? Is there a problem?”
It’s the fat lady. She’s leaning out of her car window, the gate opener in her hand.
“Aa-iii, ah, my boss he wants me to tell you we are moved. He says he’s grateful for your water,” I reply.
“It’s nothing,” the fat lady waves away my words, winds up her window and drives into the driveway, closing her gate.

Behind the gate, I can hear the grandchildren calling for Melli-ann. But Melli-ann is still at the inter-com. I can hear her sigh one in and then one out.

"Are you hearing me?" I ask.

"Sunday afternoon, three o'clock, at the food court," she replies. And then the speaker clicks off and she's in the garden, apologizing, "Sorry Ma'am! I'm coming!"

I'm early at the food court on Sunday, too early. When Melli-ann comes down the road, her person shining under her yellow umbrella, I'm already nearly finishing my fourth Guinness. Maybe, this is why I am not clearly thinking when she snaps her umbrella shut in front of me and starts to shout.

"You fresh-off-the-boats, you're all the same. This is why I never encouraged you! I knew you'd end up being this stupid! This possessive!"

How can it be stupid to fall in love? To ask the woman you love to marry you? I'm not saying all this but Melli-ann, she's knowing.

"Don't you know the situation we're in? We come and if our bosses don't like, we go, not even one day's notice. How can we promise anybody anything? Marriage! Only idiots can believe they're rich enough to want it —"

"— We can pretend," I am managing to interrupt.

She looks at me. And now her brown eyes are soft and wet again. "I have a husband in the Philippines. And one son. What can you pretend about that?"

This I'm not expecting. But I am strengthened by nearly four Guinness. "They are not here. We don't have to be pretending anything about them," I tell her. I slip one foot from my sandal and rub them over her toes. "I am here."

She rubs my toes back with her other foot. We sit like this, playing with our feet and taking sips from my last bottle for a long time. All the while, I am feeling hotter and hotter. "Let us be going somewhere," I say to her finally.

She swish-swishes the last mouthful of Guinness in her mouth. "What about Billy and Mie Mie?" she asks.

This Melli-ann, she wants to care for everybody, give everybody water even when she is not having any! And why not, I ask myself.

"I'm a poor man but there's enough of me to share if you're willing," I say to her, my number one.

"Tchhh..." she's exploding.

I'm doing something wrong again!

But then she sighs. "Something is better than nothing, I suppose," she's saying. "If you can pretend I am not married, then..."

I can feel her hand searching.

She hooks her smallest finger around mine.

So my *Anna*, this is how I am become like a landlord, rotating three women on my off-days. When I'm first arriving, this is completely out of my mind. But do not be worrying. I'm knowing my responsibilities. *Mukavar* is giving me much night-watch duty. Your remittances will be arriving as usually. As I said earlier, it is not needed to distress father with these matters.

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