

Noelle De Jesus

Small Sacrifice

On her knees, Bridget scrubs the stone floor of the study downstairs with a stiff cleaning brush that she dips into a pail of water mixed with detergent and antiseptic. With an old rag, she wipes down the windows, the sills, the baseboards. She even lifts furniture away to be able to take out the carpet, so she can get it shampooed professionally. Finally, she moves most of her husband's books from the shelves into cardboard boxes to be donated to school libraries in Dundrum, outside Dublin. Her brother Joseph will no doubt have his own books and want space for them. This room is to be Joseph's room. It has a view of her small but thriving garden which he can easily get to from the patio off the living room. Her brother Joseph's room. Her brother Joseph who left home when she was just sixteen to go away to study and live in the far off Philippines. Her brother, Father Joseph, the Jesuit. It occurs to Bridget that she might also be cleaning for Teresa. That was something their mother used to do whenever Mrs Hammond came to cook and clean. Even though Teresa is fiercely clear on that score.

"I'm not a maid, Mrs Bridget. I'm a part-time caregiver. I take care of the patient. I do bathing and food preparation. I launder the patient's clothes and bedding. But I don't clean the home. I mean... not unless I'm paid to do that."

Teresa is small but sturdy looking. She has long black hair parted in the middle and pinned neatly in a bun that sits low on her nape. Bridget can't tell how old or young she is. She looks like she could be anywhere between 35 and 50. What it must be like to look like that?

Bridget herself is far from sixteen. Some days, she feels fit and fifty, but she is sixty-four now, and when she looks in the mirror, sometimes she sees someone who might as well be 70. Bill has been gone two years, and the years have been lonely and difficult. The children, they have their own lives; both live a great distance away. But her older brother, he has always been a world away, teaching at a university in the city of Manila where people he told her, were a mix of Indonesian, Malay and Chinese... and often, even a bit of Spanish. Bridget cannot imagine that.

Bridget hired Teresa who confessed this possibility has come at just the right time. She has been desperate to leave her current job.

"It's too hard already and I am older now. It's time I work for a family."

Bridget thinks Teresa being from the Philippines is a kind of sign. It will not be so completely strange for either of the two in her home.

Brother and sister have always been close despite the distance; they wrote each other at least once a month, more often twice, through the many long years. When mail became email, the letters got shorter, less formal yet more frequent. Joseph referred to annoyances about life in this crazy, strange and foreign country. Sometimes, he wrote forlorn musings that conveyed homesickness, with nostalgic reminiscences of their parents and their life together as siblings such a very long time ago.

Bridget believes she understands the life her brother chose. She has always been attentive to the messages between his lines. One of the older priests had passed on, he wrote once. "The poor man had nobody around him, just the few of the older fellow priests sat at his wake."

Another time, his good friend, Felipe who had been stationed at a college in the southern islands, where communist rebels had skirmishes with the Philippine military, returned to the main residence in the capital, ready to resume a quieter life. But Joseph wrote her, "The man is nothing like he was." He had apparently become a stranger, changed by the strife he had seen and lived through. "Or maybe I am the one that has changed." Bridget feels her brother Joseph's pain, and it is akin to her own. She too feels old and sad and tired.

She recalls the way they used to while away long afternoons together. Trivia games. Brain twisters. They would do word puzzles and solve riddles as they walked to the shops to do their mother's errands. Often, it would be Joseph who fetched Bridget at school, because their father was working late and their mother was feeling poorly. They knew that phrase meant Mother had too many drinks after lunch. Many times, it was left upon her and her brother to fix their own dinner. Bridget remembers Joseph kept his mates away from her.

"You're too good for them," he told her. But when she told him she was getting married, her brother returned to perform the wedding rites. He insisted on talking to William first, one on one. Joseph said to her, "You've found a good man, Bridge."

Bridget knows things will be hard. They will argue and get on each other's nerves. Sooner or later, life will change and bring new challenges. But it will also be something different for her. Joseph will teach her things, the way he used to. For so long, he lived in another world, and she had stayed right here her entire life, lived right here in the seaside town of Dundrum where they both were born. Winters might be hard on her brother after his lifetime in the tropics, but the house has a new heating system now, in addition to the fireplace and the kitchen stove. And in the summer, they will have the fresh sea air. Having her brother in the house would be a way, Bridget knew, of seeing his world. And it will be a change; it will mean thinking about someone else besides herself. And there will be Teresa who will help her care for her brother.

"It's time to come home, brother," she wrote him. She was pleased that Joseph's reply was prompt. A message arrived with a ping just a few hours after she had written the email.

"Yes, I believe I will come home. Thank you, Bridge."

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Just when Teresa thinks she can no longer stand another day, let alone another month of working at the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum, this falls into her lap. It is a blessing from God, a sign that better things are in store, she thinks. She has prayed and prayed for something like this, for months now.

Teresa marvels upon the kindness of the Lord. He has always seen fit to answer her prayers, one way or another. She has, for years, made more than a living wage, one that's allowed her to put a roof over her head and food on the table here, and feed and send children to school back home in Cavite. The same work and what she might make back there would have never gone anywhere that far. That was the whole reason for leaving home in the first place, wasn't it? She cannot complain.

So many years ago, when her husband had lost his job in the Manila, Teresa only worked harder and then she was promoted to head nurse. When he still could not get a job, she applied to be a nurse overseas, and received an offer from an UK recruiter to be a nurse at one of Dublin's large government hospitals. She has worked tremendously hard. She sends money home every month. This paid—still pays—for all of them, for their two boys to go to school, for their home in the Philippines. Teresa has always kept her head down and stayed out of trouble.

But then she was transferred to Central Mental last year. Now that proved a much greater cross to bear, and this was even before the detox ward was flooded with more and more patients struggling with the terrible effects of meth addiction. These lost men of every age were always bigger and stronger than she. Now and again, one would overcome her and cause such trouble that she frequently felt she might die of it.

And then someone Theresa knew, also a Filipina, left CM for a job in family home, where she looked after an autistic child from nine to five, and half days on Saturday. The parents, the woman said, were kind, and they always paid overtime. Even though the pay is not as much, Lourdes said, it was worth more simply in terms of how much less you had to cope with mental stress and shocking, disagreeable bodily fluids.

And now here is Father Joseph who was himself a gift, even a joy. He is kind and charming, full of funny, interesting stories from places Teresa knows and remembers. Listening to him, she thinks, sometimes feels like being home. He can feed and dress himself. He teaches her things. He likes to go out for walks, and best of all, he asks for rice and Filipino dishes for dinner.

Mrs Bridget takes care of their breakfasts and for lunch, the kind old lady always leaves out sandwich fixings or a pot of leftovers for all three of them. When Teresa arrives at nine-thirty, Father Joseph is in the garden reading the paper, and she is able to make his bed and clean and straighten up his quarters.

“How about chicken adobo* tomorrow, Teresa, please?” he asks.

Teresa is only too happy to oblige. She is not a maid, but she enjoys cooking meals for Father Joseph and also for Mrs Bridget, who is curious and open to trying the new things her brother urges upon her. So far, Teresa has cooked the chicken braised in vinegar, soy sauce and black pepper corns, beef browned in dark soy with lemon and fried onions, and sweet and sour fish with pineapple chunks and sliced green peppers, always over hot white rice that she cooks in a cast iron pot.

Teresa’s favorite part of the day is her walk with Father Joseph along the shore. The old man has a bad knee and walks with a cane, but he knows exercise is good for him. It prevents muscle deterioration, so Teresa tells him. With Bridget’s approval and funding, Teresa buys a second-hand wheelchair from her former place of work, so she can wheel Fr Joseph to the shore and back. They both walk on the sand for half an hour until she has to wheel him back before nightfall.

Today, Teresa makes corned beef with carrots, cabbage and potatoes, but drains two cans of chickpeas into the pot. Bridget walks into the kitchen filled with smells of meat bubbling in rich broth, alongside slices of purple onions.

“It’s corned beef?” Bridget asks, sniffing.

“With chickpeas, it is Filipino-style,” Teresa says, turning the fire on low

for the stew to simmer.

“So you two are walking again today?”

“Best part of the day is vitamin D... you should come too, Mrs Bridget?”

“Maybe I will...when I’m not feeling so poorly,” Bridget says with a faint smile.

* adobo – a Filipino chicken and pork stew of vinegar and soy sauce

In his room, Father Joseph is dressing himself. Teresa notices that some days he has trouble. Sometimes he forgets how to put on his shirt. Sometimes, he looks at his socks not knowing what they're for. And then he looks at Teresa, and says things to her as though she is someone else entirely.

"Hello darling," Father Joseph says. "Come here, now." He pats the bed beside him. When Teresa doesn't move, he stands and goes to her.

Father Joseph looks into her eyes, leans in and then reaches to close the door behind her. Then, somewhat awkwardly, he puts his hand on Teresa's breast and squeezes.

*"Ikaw ay maganda!"** Father Joseph mumbles hotly.

Teresa removes his hand from her body.

"Come on, darling. You're beautiful." Father Joseph reaches for her waist with his other hand.

"Father Joseph, stop joking, now. It's time for our walk." She says these words with kindness.

"Sure, darling," Father Joseph says, "But first, it's fucking time."

And then, the man's pants are down, and he is pressing himself hard against Teresa's fully clothed body, thrusting rhythmically. It occurs to Teresa to wonder who she is supposed to be.

But she endures it. He is frantic and clumsy and she has compassion for him. Compared to what happens in Central Mental, it is not too bad. This is a small sacrifice. Again, Father Joseph squeezes her breast through her blouse, groans deeply and then soon, there is a warm wet splotch on her thigh, a stain on her cotton slacks. Father Joseph then sits on the bed and stares into space in a kind of stupor, still breathing hard.

Teresa returns to the kitchen to turn off the soup. Then she deliberately spills some on her pants. The hot soup makes her gasp, and then she runs cold water onto it. This so she can say to Mrs Bridget, it's just the soup that Teresa spilled on herself by accident.

He is back to himself once they reach the beach. In fact, Father Joseph refuses to sit in the wheelchair once the water is in view. They both need to shade their eyes from the glowing sunlight. They throw stones into the water and watch the seagulls play in the waves till the sun starts hanging low and the air blows crisp and cold. They reach home a little late, but hungry. Teresa will leave after the evening meal. Mrs Bridget has said she should join them for dinner every evening and then go home; she will take care of the dishes and the cleaning up.

Teresa prays that Father Joseph will never do what he did today to Mrs Bridget. Better her than Mrs Bridget who is always so kind. Teresa hopes tomorrow will be a better day.

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Every night, Joseph goes to bed up praying that the doctors in the Philippines were wrong about him. Every morning, he and Bridget play brain twisters and trivia games. They do crossword puzzles and they play gin and rummy. Most of the time, he beats Bridge just the way he used to. But sometimes he loses and he gets upset.

* *Ikaw ay maganda* – You are beautiful

For breakfast, Bridget fixes hot porridge with milk and coconut oil and makes strong tea with a bit of honey. Joseph has read that coconut oil is good for his condition.

Brother and sister are careful not to say the name of the disease. It's the old family superstition. Never say the word cancer. Never say the word alcoholic. And Bridge has always been a good egg. She buys the coconut oil. She buys dark leafy organic greens and prepares salads with tinned sardines and lemon juice for lunch. She keeps ready plates of sliced apple or grapefruit, carrots and cucumber. She consults with her daughter who lives in Ohio, the wife of a doctor.

In his room, Joseph has masking tape and on pieces, he labels items with a felt tip pen. Sometimes he writes emails to keep in touch with friends in the Philippines. In the mornings, he stands outside on the patio, takes deep breaths and does side-bends, stretches and knee bends.

He is content. Even happy. Thank God for these good women. Thank God he lives in these amazing times. One day, he thinks, someday soon, scientists will find a cure for this, something to slow this cruel, random deterioration of his mind. After all, there are days when he feels he might easily say mass or even teach a class. He nurses this hope and recites poetry for Teresa on their daily walks on the beach. She has said to him that she wants to learn new things.

But Joseph has blackouts; he knows he does. He comes to and finds things in the room are not where they are supposed to be. Sometimes, the spells are dreams or memories. He gets visions of moments in the many years when he lived in the country of sultry yellow heat and wild typhoons. He remembers students filing into his classroom with their colorful, dripping umbrellas. And sometimes, he disappears into wonderful, forbidden places.

Today might have been one of those days, Joseph realizes, as he takes his slow steps with Teresa. They are there, it seems to him, much later than they are supposed to be, for one thing. Also Teresa seems quiet, absorbed in her thoughts. He hopes he's wrong.

It strikes him that Teresa resembles someone he used to know, someone to whom he almost lost himself. But he had been strong and held his ground. What was her name? It eludes him. He remembers only that he restrained himself. He conquered his flesh. All men are weak, and must ask the Lord Jesus for strength. The Lord did not fail him then. The Lord would not fail him now.

"I believe I'll take off my shoes and wade in the water," he says.

"Oh no, Father Joseph, we are already late. Mrs Bridget will worry."

"I know, I know. Just one minute... I want to feel the water and the sand on my feet."

"But Father... the water is freezing. You will catch colds."

She's right. The water is like ice.

It's nothing like the warmth of the China Sea on the Philippine shores. He comes back and sits in the cold sand to put his wet feet back into his dry socks. Then Teresa brushes his pants off with a small towel, and he sits in the wheelchair, suddenly exhausted.

Much later than usual that night, they sit down to steaming beef broth with carrots, cabbage, potato, with plenty of yellow garbanzos.

Joseph looks to the right at his sister and to the left at Teresa, and is filled once more with forlorn and pained regret. He is so sorry for the trials these two women will face, the difficulties he will bring them. In silence, he asks them for forgiveness. After blessing the food, he sings the Lord's

prayer in Filipino. Teresa sings it too. The women join hands and bow their heads at the table as they wait for Father Joseph to finish grace.