

The Hero of the Snore Tango

“The Tango was originally, and still is today, a *close hold* dance designed to be useful under crowded dance floor conditions. The couple, in contact with each other, appears to be completely absorbed in both each other and the music. The partners improvise the dance with steps, swivels and turns taken from the vocabulary of moves and the endless variety of permutations.”

—MURRAY L. PFEFFER

“The essence of tango is love, betrayal, and resolution.”

—ANGELA RIPPON

When Father died, the family rose to play its parts as kin bereaved with loss, but rehearsed in its grieving. There was no crying, no fretful skirmishes with acknowledging tragedy—we *all* knew his days had to end some time. We had played his death scene each in our minds all too frequently, in variations of muted drama. *I* had imagined elaborations of quiet dark dawns and bursts of hysterics—the way Tagalog movies paint us all. But it all finally came to this: a hurried waking nudge from Mother one early morning, and one sentence fraught with subdued disconsolation: “*Gâ,*” she said, “Papa’s not snoring.” We hurried to his room and there he was in bed, mouth slightly open and with eyes closed, his skin already clammy to the touch. “He’s not breathing,” I said, feeling no pulse.

“Is he dead?” Mother asked.

“He’s dead.”

“Why don’t you—I don’t know—why don’t you give him CPR, or something?”

“He’s *dead.*”

It was like the welcome inevitability of curtains finally coming down at the close of a *milongas* tragedy. Images flicker. A sad, forgotten crooner on his last note—*Mi Noche Triste*. A bellicose, jaded tango dancer with faltering *slow, slow, quick, quick, slow*, without heart, without farewells. He went. The last step executed, the last line uttered, the last gesture flung to an empty audience. There was the merciful close, and then the exit. There were no curtain calls, no bowing, just lights extinguished on this particular one-man show, until only echoes remained as dead as the cold grasp of his hands. I was a young man when Father died. Somehow, his death did not matter the way bad dances escaped memory.

* * *

WHEN I FIRST ASKED my mother where Father was, I was ten and learning fast that life was a series of questions without real answers, only a key to a reservoir of painstakingly remembered pain nobody talked about.

She would laugh at my prodding. “Don’t ask too many silly questions, ‘gâ,” she’d say, a brief grim look descending on her face, quickly coated over with a smile.

Sometimes, she’d simply say, “Manila,” as if that answered everything.

For a time, it did. Manila, for a ten-year-old boy in Dumaguete, was a place of flux and metropolitan magic. It was the destination, where father was, the mythological stead of big buildings, bright cars, and TV shows remembered fondly growing up—fantasies always in black and white, bearing RPN-9 as a kind of call number, and always dramatic, enchanting, and in places, funny, too: *John and Marsha*, *Connie Reyes on Camera*, *Shirt Tales*, *Duplex*. It was a delightful, unreachable world, peopled with faces just like mine—but they had none of my provincial stock, and none of the smallness of my town. I’d dream I could inhabit that world, too, where father was. If only I were bigger. I felt I had to be taken away from all the smallness of Dumaguete....

We had no TV, but our neighbors, the Daleses, did. Every day, I would troop outside their open wooden jalousie window, a stool in hand, and plop myself into my place as Mrs. Dales’s family watched the primetime shows inside their living room. There was An-An, Mrs. Dales’s sour college-age daughter, and there was Ted-Ted, a cheerful and chubby high school boy strapped to a wheelchair.

Ted-Ted and I were the best of friends—chubby boy in wheelchair and skinny kid without television. We memorized the TV schedule religiously. *Wonder Woman* was on Wednesday nights, and on the weekend we had the biggest treat of all: *Saturday Fun Machine* where, for a whole morning, we had the *Super Friends*. We were, both of us, caught up in our private Television World. Sometimes Ted-Ted would play *The Lone Ranger* (in a wheelchair!) and I would be Tonto; he’d be Superman and I’d be Aquaman, he’d be *The Hulk* and I... I’d be Dr. Banner, alter ego. We were theatrical.

Ted-Ted was my world for a while. We’d stay up late when we could, if there was no school the next morning—and as long as Mrs. Dales left the TV on and the window open. How one quickly learned to negotiate the obstructions of windows, spaces, and holes—and oftentimes the thinning patience of neighbors! At ten, boys were shameless about their needs or wants.

One day, I asked my mother, “Ma, why is Ted-Ted in a wheelchair?”

Mrs. Dales had said there would be no TV that afternoon; Ted-Ted had to have his bath. Ted-Ted had waved to me when his mother said that—chubby boy being carried into the upstairs bathroom by two men, Manong Ben, Mrs. Dales’s brother, and her nephew Carlos.

Mother paused, but did not look into my eyes. “He has some sickness in his bones,” she said. “Ted-Ted can’t walk, ‘gâ.”

“Is he going to die?”

“Don’t say such things.”

“An-An says people die sooner or later, anyway. It’s just a matter of time, she

says.” Then I was silent. Mother was kneading margarine into freshly baked peanuts. The room smelled sweet. “Was that how Ted-Ted’s father died? Did he have a sickness in the bones, too?”

Mother sighed. Looking straight at me, she said, “I really have no idea, ‘gâ. I don’t know Mrs. Dales’s family that well... and besides, it’s really none of our business. Now get to your homework. Don’t you have homework for tomorrow?” I shook my head.

“Ma—“ I began again.

She looked up.

“What is it now?”

“Ma—I can’t remember Papa that much anymore.”

She smiled and said: “Oh well, neither can I.”

* * *

IN THOSE DAYS, we lived in a run-down apartment in a run-down neighborhood in Dumaguete, just a few blocks west of the Redemptorist Church. It was big enough for a family of seven: six boys and a mother, although Joshua, the eldest, was already itching to graduate from college and escape somewhere, to Cebu perhaps, where his girlfriend was working as a Banco Filipino bank teller. We all bore our sacrifices and painfully realized ambitions. Even at ten years, I knew that. Mother promised I could have Joshua’s bed when he’d go; or maybe even Erwin’s. Erwin was always somewhere else—in the movie theater, in the town plaza, in the Insular Hotel where he ostensibly worked, he had said, as a kind of “receptionist.” Who knew where he’d go next? I didn’t. We all shared bedrooms and pains, but never dreams. We only had mother. And father was in Manila—“doing *what?*” I’d stubbornly ask, a hundred times.

“Being stupid, for one thing!” Joshua barked back once when I asked the question yet again. I cringed. It was a complete surprise: Joshua was normally a quiet man, given to observing everything else around him with the sedulousness of sponges. The Sponge, I used to call him behind his back.

Mother quickly shushed Joshua.

I needed a hero, a father-figure.

“Papa was *nobody’s* hero,” Damian laughed. Mother shushed him, too.

By then I was also beginning to realize it was a little difficult to remember my father’s face. He had been gone too long—three years? four years? That was already an eternity for any growing boy. Mother had given me his pictures, but they were empty indicators of some stranger: a grown man with pomaded hair, face angular and handsome—a picture without memory of touch, or smell.

After that, I learned not to ask too many questions.

Our apartment—foolishly dubbed The Locsin Greenville High-Rise (it was neither green, nor a high-rise)—was functional at best. It was nothing too horrendous to require both constant repair and a rash of overstretched architectural imagination, save perhaps for the peeling pink paint of the façade which distinguished it from the other drab houses lining the street. There were seven units all painted pink, with blood-red doors. We were known around town as the Pink

Row. Every time mother would flag a tricycle home, she'd say, "Sa Pink Row, *manong*."

"Pink!" my brother Damian exclaimed the day we moved in.

"Ay *naku*, think of it as whitewashed red," mother told him. "It's just color."

"And besides," Roberto grumbled, "there's no more money." Roberto resented most our poverty. I was too young to know what poverty really felt like, but it tasted like the sour grumbling of my stomach at the sight of somebody else's ice cream cone.

Mother gave Roberto a look of quiet reproach. Roberto would not say anything more, and quickly disappeared into the kitchen. Alvin did nothing but smile and stare. *Oh, we were tight, the whole family.* Mama, Joshua, Alvin, Erwin, Damian, Roberto, and me. *Tight*, like the lake of oil settling on top of bottled peanut paste.

Mother sold homemade peanut butter. It was a hardy living but it got us by.

We were children of the peanut, and the promisory note. We needed the latter for school.

"Ma, I've already shelled the peanuts," Alvin finally said, "I've dried them, and I've fried them."

Mother nodded, and quietly sat down. The peanuts, two kilos in all, were already golden-brown and crisp from the oil. Slowly, she poured the margarine over, and sprinkled brown sugar, carefully spreading the mixture until a note of satisfaction flashed briefly on her face. The room smelled sweet and buttery.

She turned to me. "Here you are, ready for the magic touch," she said smiling, handing me the Tupperware of peanuts and margarine and sugar.

I nodded, and quietly prepared to go to the marketplace, to the grinder off Sta. Rosa Street. 'Nong Kano, the grinder, would turn the mixture into our final product: a brown, tasty paste ready for bread and breakfast. Peanut butter. Already I could see that mother could probably fill six empty *Ladies' Choice* jars with this batch. Maybe even seven jars. She'd then seal each one with aluminum foil and Scotch tape—and *presto!* That was P25 per jar of peanut butter, sold door-to-door. Mother had a growing clientele, and there were healthy signs she may not be coping with the demand. *That was good.* We needed a high demand, and we could always buy more peanuts. I sighed happily. I knew there would be food on the table tomorrow, and hopefully next month's rent—but still there was no father to speak of. For a while, *that* mattered. I was already ten and nearing eleven by then. Time flew. It would take a while for me to learn the implications of father's absence, and also the familiar meanings of unemployment and a place called Tondo. It took time.

When I saw father again, I was in Grade Six—and here was this man, gaunt, white-haired, and almost ugly, so much the opposite of the man in the picture which I had tucked, like a prayer, into my wallet.

I had come home from school that day, tired and beaten by fractions and square roots. It was almost the end of the schoolyear, and we had flashcard exercises the next morning—a thing I dreaded. I hated mathematics: I remember, when I was in Grade Two, my teacher would drill us on our additions and subtractions and our

multiplication and divisions. “Charles Vintola,” she’d call on me, “what is $2 + 2$?” Mrs. Paltinca was a fat, forbidding woman—but I would just stare back at her, offering no answer. Defeated, Mrs. Paltinca would pinch my ears, and say, “Class? What is $2 + 2$?” Everybody would then chorus, “Four!” and everybody would look at me as if I was a rotten egg. All the while, I’d think to myself: *Why must $2 + 2$ always be 4? Why can’t it be six sometimes?*

I asked too many impossible questions.

It was on such days that I’d gone home, with books from the library in my knapsack. Since numbers confounded me with their precision and exactness, I would rather read—books were more magical, filled with more possibilities than classroom lessons, where the Hardy Boys always had mysteries up their sleeves, Tom Swift his gadgets, Alice her Wonderland, and where $2 + 2$ was not always a predictable four. Sometimes, it was five or eight, give or take a sunny weather, a talking rabbit, and Mary Poppins.

There he was, framed by the doorway when I arrived home. Somehow I knew who he was. I hesitated, then quickly lighted off the tricycle. Soon I heard the cab round the corner and I found myself walking to the door.

“Gâ,” the old man called out, calling me by my childhood term of endearment—*palanggâ*, dearest child.

I found it difficult to smile, to welcome old ghosts.

“Gâ, I’m back,” he said. “I’m back for good.”

Even old endearments no longer meant anything. I was pushing thirteen and I knew no father.

* * *

BEFORE HE MET MOTHER, he was a mathematics schoolteacher, and then a water technician for Nasipit Lumber’s Philippine Wallboard Company in Agusan del Norte when he married. When he had saved enough capital, father soon transplanted the family back home to Negros where he became a farmer. He danced with his fate and with his chances.

He was one of those boom-era sugar barons, a Bayawan *haciendero*—not of old Negros family, but “new money”: men who were out to try their luck in soil, and who quickly struck it rich in the early 1960s. When I was born in 1975, we already had a swanky new house down Poblacion Road, opposite Chua’s General Merchandise, in Bayawan, a small town in the south. In those days, when we were rich from sugarcane, mother made a charming hostess, and father made out as a slick, handsome cad—a ladies’ man with deep pockets, to be sure. We have sepia pictures to prove the gilded age: in them, pomaded men in jackets and ties (oftentimes just a formal shirt and flared trousers) and women in pencil-cut dresses and fly-away hairdos caroused together in endless snapshots of parties and dinners. My parents were the famous Tango Couple—Ceferina and Amado Vintola—who did with exquisite flair the Paseo, El Retroceso, La Salida, and then, with a flourish even Argentines would love, El Resolucion. They danced always to the sultry “A Media Luz,” or “Adios Muchachos,” or “La Cumparsita,” or “Valentino Tango.” I knew by heart the music of Carlos Gardel even before I knew the BeeGees.

Father was El Cachafaz, née Ovidio José Bianquet, or John Travolta, or Dean Martin, take your pick. He knew his moves—tango, foxtrot, cha-cha—but tango he loved best. He could out-dance anyone, even Uncle Freddy, who was slimmer and had once lived in Manila where he had made the rounds of the clubs as a bachelor. He was still a bachelor, and there were rumors....

Father was the Universe.

He had mistresses to prove it—one was a 21-year old girl named Josie, the bane of mother's existence. Josie was the househelp, mother's second cousin actually, but she was "a stupid, social-climbing, useless, little wench," mother later told my aunties when she was in one of her moods. She had thrown her out when she caught Josie in father's embrace in, of all places, *the kitchen*. From then on, Father was more discreet with his indiscretions. His yellow Sakbayan—a funny-looking car without side-doors—soon became a fixture in the town roads at midnight. Mother did her furious cha-cha at home, always waiting, hoping, scheming.

All these I learned because I asked too many questions years later—and because I had too many old photographs.

Two days after my father's death, for example, we unloaded mother's treasure trove of photos from her *kaban*: there were moth-eaten magnetic photo albums bursting at the edges, black and white photographs yellowed with age and touch, and color prints the hues of which were saturated into a kind of deep sepia tone.

"And what was this?" I asked Mother, pointing to one photograph, a colored one with white frames: there was father and mother at the beach, in what looked like a picnic with family and friends.

She and I were home, quickly going through old pictures and father's clothes.

There were not too many to give away for charity. The funeral was still tomorrow afternoon, but we had decided we wanted a clean slate as soon as possible.

"What is what?" Mother answered. Outside, the crickets were singing.

Mother had been walking in circles—to the closet, to the bed, then back again. She sat down quietly beside me, the lamplight illuminating her face. She smiled.

Mother was still beautiful.

"*This one*," I said, handing her the photo I found. "Looks like a picnic. I found this in Papa's closet. He has a box in there full of old photos."

"This was such a long time ago, 'gâ. But let me see..." She took the photo and then smiled. "This was Roberto's tenth birthday. In La Vista del Mar. Your Tita Olivia had a beach house there..."

I nodded. "Looks like you had a great time."

"I guess we did."

"Have you heard from Rob?" I finally said, taking the photo back, and sifting through Papa's box for more. I wasn't sure what I was looking for. A memory? A sign? But of what? I had no idea.

"Roberto said he's too busy in L.A. He called to say he couldn't come. Plus it's all too sudden, he said." She stood up. I nodded. She was off to one side of father's bed. She fingered an old shirt. "I suppose that's all right?" she suddenly asked.

“Your brother not coming home for Papa’s internment?”

“I don’t know. Is it all right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Everybody will be here, though. Except Erwin and Roberto.”

“I suppose Norway, too, is far away,” she said.

I found another photo. It was a black and white shot of a loading truck, and of the whole family—everyone, except me—gathered around the truck’s forbidding hood. Joshua was already a teenager in the photo, a strapping young man with long hair. Roberto looked tiny, like an overachieving boy-doll spruced up in a Nehru shirt. Even then, he had his trademark strut. “Where was this?” I asked.

“Ah, Hacienda Rovin. That was during harvest season,” Mother said.

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I raised a questioning eyebrow, and she smiled. “Rovin,” she said. “Short for Rosales-Vintola. It was the family farm... Well, those were the days—I suppose I could say that?”

Those were the days, indeed. They ended too soon.

The 1970s had been heady, a flux of fortunes, and misfortunes. As quickly as the luxuries poured in, they just as quickly evaporated as everything came to a standstill: sugar prices and stock plummeted worldwide, and then, like vultures, Marcos’ cronies in the province began grabbing at what little there was left of the industry. Bank foreclosures threatened everything Father held dear. Rich *hacendero* friends were suddenly destitute, and then there was nothing, except for a fall from grace not even Father could tango out of. Mother began selling what she could sell off: the Sakbayan, the refrigerator, the furniture, the gas range, and finally the house. By 1981, the Vintola family suddenly had nothing: as the youngest, I was the “only toddler who did not grow up drinking Gerber,” Roberto used to taunt me. *Gerber?* I’d ask myself. *What was that?* I was six when the fall came. I had yet to learn deprivation, bitterness, and envy.

Father became a bus conductor. He was too proud to be anything else—he could not, or would not, find a job: everything else was entry-level, low pay, or worse, low in rank. Nothing like that for the Tango Dancer of the Universe. But in the end, he became a bus conductor because there was nothing much else to do, and mother’s childhood friend Tita Olivia, the owner of Ceres Liner, had taken pity on mother, and on the family. We were not used to begging. The depression had etched lines into father’s handsome face. How quickly he grew old and bitter. “And *this* is salvation?” he spit out when mother suggested he took the Ceres Liner job.

“Amado,” mother said, “*there is nothing else.*”

I remembered that day in a haze. I was six, or maybe seven—the memory is fuzzy, *except* for the sound of a slap. I still remember that sound—back of hand striking skin, and mother tumbling to the floor frightened and angry. Suddenly she was shouting back, “This is all your fault, Amado! All your fault! You had to be a gambler! You had to splurge! *Baboy ka!*”

I quickly ran away. I could not remember my brothers being anywhere. We each had our crosses to bear, and privately.

But then for father, after a while bus conducting somehow became liberating, having to travel everyday in buses going to and from Dumaguete and Bayawan, making holes with clippers of other people's tickets, keeping change, and folding bills with precision and by denomination, into the curves of each finger digits. In the meantime, we lived through the intervening years in near destitution. We soon moved to Dumaguete. It was a bigger place—so much more space for misery to spread, to dilute it, so to speak, and somehow we lived. Then one day, father came to tell mother he had quit from his Ceres Liner job.

“What happened?” Mother asked nervously, backing off a little. She knew her retreating tango steps for such days.

“I think I can do more than this, being a stupid bus conductor,” he said, sitting down. “*Punyeta*, Pining, I used to be more than this!”

There was a hardness in my mother's face. “So what happens now?”

“Now, I have to go.”

“But go *where*?”

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He said it out flat, as if the words were dead: “Manila. I'll find a job there, you'll see.”

Two years later, after virtually no word from father, mother finally received a letter from Tondo. *Father had joined a cult. “Putang ina!”* Joshua snapped. Scratched all over the margins of father's letter were expressions in Latinate—*esum christum domini*, or what not, I'm making this up from scratches of remembrance—but nothing we could understand, except the fact, father explained in his letter, that it was all for good luck. “Good luck?!” Joshua cursed, and stormed from the room.

Somewhere in the Pink Row, dogs barked. Ted-Ted was waiting for me.

Wonder Woman was about to start—but somehow, I felt compelled to stay. Everyone else was silent, even Erwin. Mother carefully folded the letter, and went upstairs. She paused at the top, and said, “Make sure the aluminum foil is wrapped tight. We have many more bottles of peanut butter to sell.”

A year later, Erwin took mother to a small restaurant downtown, and in the middle of *halo-halo*, he said, “Ma, I've met a Norwegian man. His name is Gunther. He's a businessman. He's nice, and he wants to help me. Ma, I'm going to Norway, to work, and I'm not coming back anymore.”

Mother paused, then slowly smiled. Finally she said, “Your *halo-halo*, *noy*. It's melting.”

* * *

“THIS IS DELICIOUS,” father said, and carefully loaded with his plastic fork a piece of pork barbecue into his mouth. I heard sounds of plastic utensils scraping styrofoam. We just came from his medical examination. The doctors only had bad news to tell. I was 24 then. I had no idea how to deal with father's streams of bad news. We were in Scooby's. I could not look at him.

A year later, he would die, but then I had no idea of that as yet. *Was 69 too young?* I could have asked. *Or too old?* He looked 80, but with the stubbornness of a two-year-old.

“Here, have some,” he gamely said, poking pork strips at my mouth. *Is he mocking me?* I reeled from his gesture.

“You’re not supposed to eat pork, Pa,” I said, voice firm, disapproving.

“Pork’s bad for you.”

“Don’t tell me what is good or bad for me. I know when something is good or bad for me. And pork tastes good. So, it’s good. How can anything that tastes this good be bad, *aber?*”

So go ahead and eat to your death, you old fuck, I thought. Oedipal bliss.

Now, he was humming the opening strains of “Don’t Cry For Me, Argentina.”

Don’t Cry For Me, Argentina! I shook my head.

He was dancing the tango in his head. After a while, he looked at me, but said to no one in particular, “It’s a meticulous dance, the tango, you know. Permits no mistakes or improvisation—just perfect timing. You can tell a bad tango dancer by the bruises in his shin.”

He shook his head, and swallowed his pork.

He had grown old too fast those last few years. His one kidney—the other one, diseased with nephritis, had been removed in an operation when he was forty years old—was showing signs of finally giving up. His blood pressure was rising,

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and his hernia had returned with bloated vengeance. He had grown increasingly cranky and forgetful as well as unforgiving of imagined sins. At 69, his last year, his gnarled skin—blotched with the dark spots of old age on a fast downhill slide—revealed, like a map of despair, too much of his private hell as he stubbornly refused to accept the fact that he was not young any more, or virile, or important. Or even effective, as a father and as a husband.

We had long ago given up on him as nothing else but a caricature of irritation.

That was the role we consigned him as he grew whiter and whiter hair, and as his body began playing tricks on him, not so much that he became a doddering fool, but enough to cause some embarrassment. On Sundays, for example, he’d snore through the pastor’s sermon like a wheezing bomb, and before long he resigned himself to the fact that church was probably not for him.

“Really, I’d rather watch basketball on TV on Sundays, anyway,” he finally declared, and Mother all too readily agreed. Church-going for mother was becoming a chore of frustration and embarrassment.

He had begun wetting his bed as well, and refused Mother’s offers of adult diapers. “I am *not* a baby,” he’d angrily say—but there was only so much that denial could do for the growing stench from his mattress, and he soon surrendered to this other round of humiliation. It was a battle, and we left him to carry on with the drama in his trench. He banished us all from his pain, refused to accept our proffering of reality. We were young—and thus unforgiving of slightest hints of geriatric logic. How did he *not* know he slept with the TV on? How did he *not* know that he peed in his bed? How did he *not* know he snored like earthquakes crashing into each other?

“He’s too young to be too old,” Erwin said in a huff, before he left again for

Norway, with Gunther in tow. Joshua was in Cebu, Roberto in Los Angeles, Alvin in Nebraska, Damian in New York. Times had changed. We were each our own bread winners. We had finally built Mother a house of her own.

Soon, father developed the habit of braving endless staircases or long walks, only to find himself defeated by brittle bones and straining breaths. Then, predictably, he would turn cranky and afterwards become a caricature of difficulty. At night, he would position himself in front of the living room TV, turn on his basketball games, and promptly nod off to sleep, snoring. When wakened, he'd vehemently deny sleeping, of course, but most of all snoring—even after that time when I once tape-recorded his loud snores to prove a point. It was a cruel point to make, but what was the recourse to battle denial?

He had also become the ghost of Mother's house. By two o'clock in the early morning, he was already up and about, a cup of coffee in hand, haunting the quiet darkness of the rooms with his slow walk and impenetrable thoughts. What does an old man think at two o'clock in the morning? We did not even bother to know, or ask. We were much too young; we knew only a kind of mocking. We only saw an old man behaving oddly. Old age was fast becoming a disease we did not want to have. We would not become father.

Father was dying, we knew that. We bore his eccentricities as measures of time drawing close.

I ate my lunch. He devoured his pork. He poured a generous helping of catsup over the meat, and ate some more. I tried to remember what it was like to have father when I was a child, but memories proved too weak—perhaps I was

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deliberately forgetting a lot. But I remembered some nights—memories jagged, like cut glass: father would tell me stories, and I was a child again curled in his lap.

“Let me tell you about Tuwaang,” he begun once after finishing some work around the old house, “This is a legend, *gâ*, so listen. One day, Tuwaang calls his aunt and tells her that he has received summons from the wind. The wind has told him he must attend the wedding of the Maiden of Mo:nawon. ‘Don’t,’ his aunt tells him. ‘I sense trouble coming your way.’ But, of course, Tuwaang does not listen to her, and still goes on his journey. With his lightning basket—”

“A lightning basket?”

“Yes, he has a basket that can make lightning. Do you want to listen to the story or not?”

I squealed with delight, and said to go on.

He laughed. “Anyway, Tuwaang puts on his headdress and the costume—which was of course made by the goddesses, *diwatas*—and then he arms himself with a long blade and dagger. He takes his shield and spear, and then, riding on a flash of lightning, he arrives at... Kawkawangan, where he rested for a while.

Suddenly he hears a *gungutan*—

“A *gungutan*?”

“It’s a bird. Don’t ask me what it is. The *gungutan* bird is crowing. He decides to catch it, but the *gungutan* tells him he wants to go with him to the wedding.

Tuwaang takes the *gungutan* along. Anyway, they both shake their shoulders and are then, like magic, carried into space...”

“And then? And then?” I asked.

But all he ever said was: “Go to sleep,” and then: “They’re still shaking their shoulders anyway. You’ll find out tomorrow where they will go. I’m tired.”

He had done this before: Cinderella without the pumpkin coach for rushing home, Aladdin without the lamp, Ali Baba without the secret word, Moses without the parting of the Red Sea. I felt—betrayed? disappointed? I couldn’t tell then—no child could tell the nuances of subtle hurts. I went to sleep, dreaming of unfinished stories. Tuwaang and his magic bird flying—*with the shake of their shoulders!*—into space. It was the stuff of dreams.

The next day, mother said father was gone. That was the first time I heard of a place called Manila. “Is that where stories go like magic birds?” I asked.

Mother looked at me, and then suddenly cried.

* * *

THE SNORES BECAME the death knell for that last night. Or, more correctly: it was the *absence* of snores that made Mother wake up with a certain dread. She and father had long since gone into separate bedrooms since his snores had become too voluble; there were like the violent ragings of pregnant volcanoes.

Like most familiar things, those guttural night sounds from father’s throat had faded into our everyday existence, like cricket sounds. That night, almost dawn, Mother heard nothing. She couldn’t tell what it was at first, but she felt something was amiss.

When the end came, and the funeral rituals began, the days became marked by a peculiar sense of pragmatism and subdued sorrow. Surprisingly.

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My friends thought, for a while, I was just being heartless, a joker out of his league. “How can you just casually mention that Tito Amado’s dead?” my best friend Musan said, incredulous. “You’re joking, right?”

“No, I’m not,” I said, with a kind of dispassion which surprised even me. I had gone to visit Musan and some other friends who were holed up in his apartment the afternoon of father’s death—and I had spilled the news over the afternoon TV game shows.

I wasn’t joking. But how do you gauge readiness for endings such as a father’s death? How do you explain foregone closure to friends who could not possibly know how hearts cope for certain people? Mother, for example, after her panicked dawn wake-up call, now played gracious, grieving widow, quick to assuage condoling guests that this was not like anyone else’s regular wakes. “There’s no use crying,” she’d answer to the constant observations of friend remarking on her “surprisingly” stolid manner—“At your husband’s wake!” they’d tell her. But she’d continue: “Alive, there is so much to cry for to God, because miracles can still happen when one’s alive. But now, he’s gone. I can only cry so much, but there’s nothing else we can do about it.” Practiced lines, but she believed in their truth. They would then pat her shoulders or her hands, with such sincerity, admiring her strength and

her “unique outlook” on what was happening.

There were times, those days in Eterna Funeral Homes, when I’d wish for some break in Mother’s mien. I was looking for movie drama: couldn’t she at least wear black? or cry like a bursting dam? or tear open the coffin professing undying loyalty and love, swearing “*Papa! Mouban ko! Ngano man kang namatay? Nganong imo ming gibiyaan*” Oh, but mother was too strong and ready. She accepted her swarms of guests, offered tea or coffee, and if they liked, there were some hot bread at the back, “with your choice of jam.”

We—her children—were no different. We went to our father’s wake with nary a tear—only an instance of breakdown from Damian who, while singing bass with our church’s choir (they were singing a love song), suddenly had to stop singing, and burst into tears. But he—father’s most ardent critic—was never close to father. At least I had father’s unfinished stories. And mother had her tangos. I wondered: What would you want to say to anyone knowing he or she is about to die? *Everything*. The catch is, when do we know the absolute coming, the precise Day and Time of Death? This was Damian’s regret (and perhaps mine as well).

On Friday, we buried him. I was late for the burial. There had been paperwork to finish—*paperwork for the dead!* I shook my head. Funereal bureaucracy. The death certificate had been lost in some shuffle. *Shit*. And now traffic was bad. Chaos reigned at the intersection of Silliman Avenue and Hibbard Avenue, where the only measure of orderliness for traffic was anarchy. *I was late for my father’s burial!* Two o’clock and there were no uniformed traffic officers to regulate the flow east from the Boulevard, west from Tocino Country, north from Tubod, and south from City Hall: only an uncanny sense of accommodation, speed, and direction guided everyone else in their negotiations of turning right, left, forward, backward—*all of that*, plus the specter of that ubiquitous swarm of pedestrians walking across busy streets without preamble but with only the strong will of those who did not know the subtleties of green, yellow, and red. There were no traffic subtleties. This was Dumaguete.

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We crawled towards the center of the intersection—a small white pick-up, and inside, two individuals with their own worlds inside their head. The driver, Efren, a young dark man given to mutilating the lyrics of rock songs, must be thinking of some girlfriend. I was getting exasperated, and in the crawl, began hating life as well: the world was only too gray and flat—suddenly a choking reality that came and went at will, that polarized days and nights into extreme opposites of laughter and dread, that left one impaired from the ravages of living and having to live with the scars.

My father was dead. I hated my father. But how do you hate? How do you *begin* to hate? Suddenly, a truck came out of nowhere, and almost rammed into us. It came from the west, and was headed straight to my passenger side. “*Death seat,*” I muttered, panicking just a bit. Out of my own haze, I heard Efren buzzing his horn frantically. The truck stopped within feather inches—so close I could smell its crude gasoline engine smell. It stopped.

It stopped.

Somehow I felt betrayed by its stopping.

What would have happened: metal crunching against metal as the sound of rubber tires screeching against asphalt signaled what would have been a bloodbath on a slow sepia afternoon. There would be broken glass everywhere, and perhaps a jumble of leather, rubber, skin, bones. The impact would have sent our little pick-up careening eastward, towards the sea, and my own body would rattle like a bean bag, my neck immediately broken, shards of glass embedding themselves deep into our skin, our hair. There would be blood—a slow river of crimson bathing black leather seat, black asphalt street. And from the incessant shrill of broken car horns, there would only be that jumble of bodies and machines, an architecture or sculpture of the macabre. And nothing more of who I was except a broken body whose last thoughts were of tardiness for burials. Irony? I had no right to ironies.

But nothing. Soon our little pick-up moved on and then we were at the Memorial Park gate. Efren drove me to the spot—yet even from a distance, I could tell the whole ritual was over: there was nobody around, only traces of people and deeds of their condolence: some upturned styrofoam coffee cups littering the grass, some footprints smudging the points where the grass gave in to soil, and then there was the newly-dug earth forming a rectangular mound in the middle. Here father finally laid. I got out of the pick-up truck, and walked to the mound. I did not know what to do. Should I pray? I asked myself.

“*Humana diay*, sir,” Efren said. I nodded. I told him to wait.

Slowly I bent down on my knees, and scooped some earth from my father’s burial lot into my right hand. I did not know what it was about pain that seemed to sear such habits of loneliness into each one of us—but I felt somehow grateful for the silence, for the fact that there was nobody else to see me, or my grief. For it was grief I suddenly realized that was crawling down my cheeks—a surprising wetness that gathered but quickly banished away by my free left hand. I remembered him and the shadows he moved around in in the increasing darkness of nights. “You are luckier,” he said. “Me, I had no life to give for anybody,” he began, and I realized he was in pain as well—not the same as mine for that matter, but he felt his own brand of pain, and I realized all men were creatures of violation: we lived to hope, and we lived our hurts in silence and secret. I felt suddenly alone.

“I’ve kept my promise,” I finally said, and got up.

* * *

MY FATHER’S FAVORITE MUSICAL was Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Evita*. When the movie with Madonna came out, he persevered in asking my brother Roberto into buying him the soundtrack. Roberto shopped in Amazon.com. On his 68th birthday, father was presented the cassette tape without much flourish, but he devoured the music like it was the last feast on a deserted island. How he listened to it day by day. He even went as far as to watch MTV, to catch Madonna’s videos from the movie. It was the only time he had praises for the channel. Maybe it was the Latin rhythms that fascinated him: he was, after all, a fantastic dancer when he was a young man. Tango

was as easy as breathing to him, and he went into each dance like it was a passionate love affair. Maybe it was the relentless Webber musical flair that transcended rock, country, and Latin that got to him—the beat of “Buenos Aires” was always infectious, yet it was equally played on par by the country lamentations of “What Happens Now” or the seductions of “I’d Be Surprisingly Good For You” or the comic melodrama of “On This Night of a Thousand Stars.”

But it was “Don’t Cry for Me Argentina” that, I swear, brought tears to my father’s old eyes. It was as if he was crying for Evita herself. He knew the fashionable era, and had read about the real Peron in his newspapers. Was this a case of an old man in a painful nostalgia for those days when a woman was a woman and a man was a man, and the fashion was as chic as the pomade on one’s hair? For us, the age was just something colored a brilliant sepia brown in countless movies starring Audrey Hepburn. Was this an old man whose muted ambitions was like that of Eva Peron’s—to make the world take notice of him, yet not quite successful, trapped as he was in the aging body that was quickly failing him day by day? *Evita* was a tragedy set to music. Perhaps Father made that tragedy his own, recognizing the fact that in a few months he was going to die. Sometimes, after he died, I would listen to *Evita* and what struck me most was the sadness that pervaded throughout every note in the rock opera, a sadness not even I could know as long as I was young.

But I think I can finally cry now for Father. I finally knew what life was like—an endless negotiation of compromise and survival. When I was younger, I had been his Oedipal nightmare: I was nearly his Junior, my second name being his first name, “Amado.” Does anyone want to be his Father’s double? I had his face, his way with women—people kept telling me I was my Father’s younger self, a remark which would trigger something inside that recoiled at the idea. Was I going to become like the old man I knew, the one who haunted dark rooms and snored away many moons? Was I going to relive his history? But I should have asked my old man my frightened questions when he was alive: I would have known then of his struggles, his little triumphs, his little deaths. And yet all too late. His stories, explaining himself, have gone with him.

I stood there for a while, above his final rest, grass and earth under my feet. I was suddenly aware I was surrounded by a mass of tombstones. I decided I could not wait for next year, for All Soul’s Day—that perfect excuse. Without music, and only through memory, I danced a little tango of remembrance on my Father’s grave, and I prayed that this would become the closure by which we would finally love, with all our hearts, our dearly departed.

Sugar Land

AN EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL

Chapter 1

The invitation for the feast, one week from now, requires her to put on her best evening wear—it says so from the flap that bleeds with *gumamela* red—and to be prompt with her presence, seven o'clock sharp.

The old woman smells the silken envelope, and fingers ever lightly the card that bears her name. When she sighs, it is with practiced drama—and she believes herself sufficiently jaded by all of it. But, of course, she *will* have to attend. She knows she will not live down another year of ungracious talk, and while she can pretend nothing can ever matter, not even the flightiest of gossip, she knows she is too tired to even say no. She will make an appearance.

She expects, with an old certainty, that it will be the same. There will be the usual airy *beso-beso* among the women and the insufferably small talk with the men—and when they get a little doltish, she can always remark, with a cutting subtlety, with something like, “You were never this clever when you were a dazed, whiny sophomore in my class, my dear boy.” They will forgive her, of course. They always do, these fawning people.

She thinks the weather will be excellent, as was usual, for the party, and there will be some cocktails, and then dinner, and then dancing, and then the fireworks. There will be the usual faces, of course, the whole lot of them—the sugar people—and this, their biggest excuse to recollect, in an annual social orgy that demands the presence of all who feel they matter, an irretrievable past that feels golden in nostalgia—but, as she knows all too well, is littered with *aparadors* full of bones and secrets. She can almost see them now—their fading gowns, their old jewelry, their mannered ways of speaking, some in the clipped English of long-dead American missionary teachers, others in the harsh Castillian which is all that is left of a gilded age. *All they have left are their memories, and their good manners*, she thinks. And she sits there in the balcony of her house, willing the afternoon to end, seeing Dumaguete below her fade away with the August light.

Imagine, for a moment, the kind of dusk that falls on the small city. From where the sun sets, hiding behind the Cuernos de Negros, so called because from a distance they look like the horns of a mountain giant, the dull fading light—and it is *always* dull—casts a pall on everything else. The tropical brightness turns, and then

from everywhere, a slow shadow begins to wrap itself on seaside Dumaguete. There is not much to cloak, for the city is small. The narrow main street runs north-to-south, and extends far into the remote ends of the province of Oriental Negros. On the Avenida de Alfonso Trese, and the arteries of byways that bleed it, are where most things can be found—the banks, the restaurants and cafes, the department stores and groceries, the public schools, and finally, in one bend near the wet market and the river Banica, the city plaza lies squat and ugly, bordered on the east-side by the Presidencia, and on the west-side by the Catedral de Santa Catarina de Alejandria. At the heart of it all is the American university that sits, like a queen, on acres of rolling green, dotted everywhere by Federal-style buildings and the gnarled stateliness of acacia trees—and during summers, when the acacia trees shed their small leaves in breezy showers, they litter Dumaguete with a golden shade reminiscent of autumn. And by the sea, there is the Avenida de Rizal, an extensive boulevard that runs along the small city's beach front, and here the sugar houses—the little mansions of long-gone *hacenderos*—stand watch in a perfect row, the horizon in sight, some of them resplendent still, and a few others increasingly forlorn-looking as decay and neglect set in to work their way into the stone and tiles. In the outskirts, all the rest of them live.

That Dumaguete may as well be a large town is another way of taking to terms the blurry borders it has with neighboring municipalities: the airy hills of Valencia to the west, the sleepy bogs of Bacong to the south, the earnest everyday bazaar of Sibulan to the north. And to the east, there is the sea. And the other islands. Cebu. Bohol. Siquijor—Isla del Fuego of legend, the island of fire, where the witches lived.

The last thing to lose its sparkle by sundown are the waters off Tañon Strait, and it is the horizon, in fact, that one sees as remnant of the fading day—a faraway blue that glimmers and then fades. The shadows take time to deepen: the blue of the bright afternoon creeps, somehow, towards slate grayness, and nobody really seems to notice when night finally comes.

The nights in the small city are quiet.

For the old woman in her balcony, the dusk around Dumaguete is not

altogether the brilliantine kind that makes for a good postcard, all rosy and hazy, generic enough to be captured in photogenic posterity and to keep the romantic of poets busy penning sonnet after sonnet after sonnet—*Just the kind of poetry no one reads any more*, she thinks. The old woman has risen from her chair, and goes for the balcony's wooden railings, steadies herself carefully before breathing in the late afternoon breeze. From where she stands, her red *daster* clinging to her small frame, she divines with her ancient nose the quickening of the days, and knows, somehow, that there was a coming reckoning. She feels that strange certainty in her bones, the

way she can see clearly now the deepening of the night skies.

She feels her thoughts snap back. *What a thing to say*, she thinks quickly.

Nobody reads poetry? The old woman catches herself, and quickly laughs at the easy kind of cranky dismissal that old age fosters. Only yesterday, she threw away a book she was reading because the opening paragraph began with that most dreadful of words—“*nowadays*.” A lazy word only nincompoops use to sound as if they knew what they were talking about. Her throwing arm was no longer as strong as it had been when she was much younger, and so she merely tossed the offending tome away from where she sat, and the book fell without so much as a thud, between her bed and her dresser. She never bothered to pick it up. But the maid certainly would, and so she promptly told the middle-aged woman to throw the volume to the bin, to the fire, wherever the maid pleased. Just not inside the house. At 87, she tells herself she can afford to be dismissive; the days for her are becoming too short, and she feels the urgent end coming nearer and nearer. Patience, she finds, is not a virtue she has learned to occupy the graying years with.

Now, she looks out to the gathering night outside, and hurries it on.

Sometimes she thinks the sun takes too much time to set, grazing the tops of Cuernos de Negros first with the turtle pace of a geriatric lover, and then finally, before succumbing to nightfall, throwing out tendrils of purple and orange and green light, always refusing surrender. She finds such drama fussy and all too drawn-out. The sun, the old woman decides, takes too long to die. She hates all poets. She finds most of them to be insufferable boors who think themselves gods for being able to arrive at the slenderest poetic insight, often carnal, from a bite of a mango fruit. Or the sight of a crack on a wooden table. She should know. She had been a poet for most of her life. Her *aparador* in the bedroom—which is now locked, and dusty with age—contains the relics of that life: medals and citations and books and what-not that proclaimed her a poet of certain reckoning. She loved poetry once, until one day—that must have been some twenty years ago—when she had finally retired from teaching in the local public high school and had for company the withering hours spent on the completion of an epic poem about the goddess Mebuyan—she found she could not pen one more word without realizing, the pain almost unbearable but surprisingly fleeting, that it was all too foolish, this solitary struggle to express in ornate metaphors an observed life to a world that no longer listened.

And so she stopped.

It caused a small sensation among the literati—but those people, she decided then, would pounce on just about anything to brighten up desolate lives, all spent away within pages of books, within sacrosanct hours pursuing the muse with paper

and pen. *Poetry is dead*, she told them, *storytelling is dead*—and soon it would be rumored that the much-loved poetess from the South had gone soft in the head. “Ridiculous,” the old woman scoffed when she heard it, and proceeded to recite from memory a longish Carlos Angeles poem, and ended the grand poetic performance by spitting on the floor. It was during a birthday party for a big man in town—the President of the University, in fact—and the rumors deepened some more. “Cantankerous” would be another description of her that has been much banded about, to the dismay of many of her friends who remember her as a gentle poet and mentor. And a reviewer in one of those high-brow literary journals would call her “retirement from writing” a “willing descent into obscurity for a giant of Philippine poetry.” When she read that, she threw the journal away—out the window, in fact, and the book landed squarely on a stray cat which meowed in pain. “Cats,” she quipped, “make the best critics.”

These days, she spends much of her time reading romance novels, and the tartier the fiction, the better she found it to her liking—and once remarked, to the same stray cat that had since disappeared, that bodices were meant to be ripped, that muscles were meant to ripple, and that women were meant to know the many subtleties of moaning. Romances remain her last connection with words, as if, by virtue of that pulpy choice, she means to have a resounding last laugh in this war against all sorts of literary seriousness. But beyond the bodice ripper stories, she subjects the rest of her days with relentless bouts of self-study, and to the frank observation of the every day: her waking hours beyond reading, which were no longer much to begin with, were spent examining all manners of demons from her past, and when time permitted, she also let her mind wander to the streets below, far beyond the curve of her street from her hilltop house, and into the heart of the small city.

Her own house—a one-storey affair in hard wood and bricks—sits on a large hill at the outskirts of the city, right before the land rises into what is Valencia town. From her perch, the old woman believes she owns the most perfect spot to observe all that goes on in Dumaguete. The sight, she tells herself often, is better than any book.

It has become a daily ritual, something she does at the end of the day on her balcony. The night has already nearly fallen, and tomorrow is a Friday. The old woman sees and feels the city below mutely rising to the dark skies in scattered flickering lights—houses all around her turning on cheap fluorescent whiteness, the downtown buildings flooding with neon, the tungsten lamps of the far-off seaside boulevard slowly glimmering into bright orange balls—and she smells the unsaid stories that must go on below. Nothing much stirs in the streets. And yet she knows the small city holds all its depraved and delicious secrets beneath that sheen of nothingness, and boring calm. Unspeakable acts abound. She is an old woman, and she has seen so much of that—and the weight of the years she has lived through

only speaks of a history that bleeds, *but bleeds in secret.*

She looks around, gripping her eyeglasses close, and peers into the skirmish of darkness and electric light. *That split-level house next door.* She knows the wife's trysts with the fourteen-year-old brother-in-law. The baby in her belly is his, but the sterile husband is both ignorant and happy—and considers the pregnancy a miracle of divine intervention, and has promptly gifted the monastic Carmelite nuns in the next town a basket of eggs in thanksgiving for prayers answered. *That man by the acacia tree astride the motorcycle, waiting for things to happen.* She knows his family's landed history in Bais, an *hacienda* town an hour north—and how he has managed to lose everything, parcels of sugar land sold bit by bit, in heartbreaking pursuit of old wine and younger boys. *That forlorn-looking house with columns at the end of the road.* She knows of its foreclosure, and how haunted it is by the ghosts of murdered girls. *That sad, saccharine music that glides in from across the street.* She knows the guitar player's mounting debts—and the wife that threatens to leave for Japan as a go-go dancer, a *Japayuki*. “Tell her to go,” she told the man once. “Mind your own business,” the man replied. And he continues to play, nightly, the most mournful of songs. *For these people, there is no poetry.*

The years indeed have been long, she tells herself.

But there are, of course, things she does not see that night. There is the young writer on a boat which is now slowly snaking its way to Dumaguete's harbors, its engines chugging a promise of homecoming. How he tries, but he simply cannot sleep away, as he lies restless in his bunk, the torments of arrival. The daylight from the lone porthole in his cabin is disappearing fast, and as he stares into the halo of fluorescent light turning on above him, he feels himself heaving with the rhythm of the cresting waves. Up, down. Up, down. The waves seem to taunt him, and he knows that they too draw him nearer and nearer to a place he thinks he has abandoned forever. *Ten more hours,* he thinks to himself. He shuts his eyes, and tries to sleep. *I can't,* he thinks.

There is the tired history teacher who has made himself another cup of *barako* coffee—the strongest kind, the kind that embraces the wakefulness he needs before doing battle with the pile of student papers on his desk, still waiting to be read and marked—and he glowers at the prospects of having to contend with one more day of school, before school lets out for a week or so. He does not want to read any of these, but the papers are due to be given back to his classes tomorrow—and he knows he will not be seeing them for a week; he has twice ran out of green ink correcting both grammatical mistakes and historical sloppiness—“Ferdinand Magellan did not kill Lapu-lapu,” he would write, or: “Martial is not a man's name attached to some Presidential proclamation,” or: “World War II did not end in 1975, it ended in 1945,” or: “Your tenses and your sense of subject-verb agreement leave much to be desired”—and believes himself teetering on the brink of certain collapse. He wants

to stop. *But I can't*, he tells himself.

There is the young housewife in San Antonio Village silently staring at her expensive Mexican tile kitchen floor, discerning with strange fascination the haphazard design of the shards of a broken plate—how random the pieces rest where they are, how utterly, brutally beautiful. The house help—a squat and dark girl newly hired from the mountains of Bindoy town—is now fluttering about her with a broom and a small dustpan. “Ma’am?” the girl asks, then repeats herself when the housewife says nothing: “Ma’am?” The young housewife finally replies, “Yes?” “I’ll sweep this away *na*?” “Of course,” she says, her tiredness creeping into her voice, “and hurry please before my husband comes home.” She now turns to look out the window, into the new evening, and into the glittering lights of the other mansions around her. Everything looks a little too perfect. “Have you prepared the chicken curry I asked you to make?” “Yes, ma’am.” “How about the fern salad?” “Yes, ma’am.” “Good. Later, you can wash the dishes, and mop the floor. And tell *yaya* she must drop off David at school on time tomorrow. Tell the driver to be ready. Tomorrow morning, we go to the grocery.” “Yes, ma’am.” And she rushes off to her bedroom, and quickly closes the door behind her. She wants to believe she is happy. *But I can't*, she mourns softly, before she allows herself to forget—if only briefly—all that *is* with the night’s slate of TV sitcoms.

The old woman does not see any of that. But she imagines there are all manners of lives spread before her—stories of all sorts, all unsaid, all marvelously cloaked in wordlessness, all floating in the air and creeping in the grounds of Dumaguete’s sweet, sugar soil. She, too, harbors some secrets. Must she tell anyone her own secret history? She does not have long to live, she tells herself. But there are stories you are not supposed to tell. She will be the first one to tell anybody that. And it is impossible, in small towns, to speak of most truths without the weight of repercussion. The slightest of talks carry. In Dumaguete, all manner of gossip is spun to riveting proportions like tempests in a cup of *tsokolate*. Gossip is everybody’s entertainment in small towns. She has already entertained them enough with her “crankiness,” her outspoken ways. Must she give more—by telling her own story? It has been such a long time since someone from their small city has entertained them with an imprudence worthy of endless discussions over *merienda*. Already, it has been eight months since Paco Teves left his wife for the sordid old air of Madrid, sultry *lavandera* in tow; and a full year since Irina Montenegro gave birth to a first cousin’s baby. Within that same year, five marriages—one lasting only two weeks—have unraveled, and one whose throes of death were particularly exquisite, dirty laundry tossed in the most public manner, proving once and for all that fidelity in the small city was more the exception than the rule in good society. (The only stable marriage in town, it seemed to everyone, is that of Bibsy and Eduardo Carballo—but Eduardo, once a playboy, is now a mute cripple, and Bibsy is still the same flighty woman whose only virtue seem to be a simple-mindedness that borders on ridiculous. It is a marriage made in heaven,

forty-eight years strong.)

And the city, retaining much of the character of small town lives, encourages denial as a way of life and of coping. Old Amparita Diaz, in the next bend, is still quite steadfast in her belief that her grandson Jake will carry on the honorable ways of her dear departed husband, even when she knows the young man is a miserable gadfly hooked on shabu, and is selling their *hacienda* in Tanjay piece by piece, for paltry sums that amounted to quick pharmaceutical buffets. Manolet Perdices, on the other hand, has long squandered the legendary acreage of the family land, and goes about town in a red Tamaraw that has seen better days, hanging on to what is left, a sheer memory of long-gone sugar aristocracy.

The old woman knows all that, and has chosen to keep her place, and her peace of mind, by some elaborate fabrications of a past.

She stares from her balcony. And then something—maybe it is the whiplash of a stray breeze smacking her face, or noise from a distance, perhaps bats flying about the coconut trees nearby, or the hush of disappearing traffic sneaking up on empty roads—but something has startled her.

The 24-hour FM radio from inside her house, its volume turned low, squawks the comedic cackles of the regular nighttime deejay, spicing his “evening easy listening” music with stand-up humor, this time with the voice of a shameless beauty parlor transvestite, throatily masculine with a comic pitch to kill Mariah Carey. The radio cackles on. “Hey, how do you make God laugh? How do yooooooooooooou make God laugh?” the radio deejay booms, mimicking a local politician’s voice, perfectly low and vile. “How?” the transvestite’s voice asks. “By making a plan!” Cymbals crash, and canned studio laughter punches the line. *Susmariahosep.*

The old woman’s legs feel suddenly groggy, almost like gelatin. She starts towards the door, and slowly eases herself out into her garden. The edges of the Bermuda grass on her lawn are already laden with evening dew, and she finds the wetness piercing at and around her bare feet. She is startled that she has forgotten to shod her feet with anything. But she decides quickly that she likes the feel of the grassy spikes scratching her soles. Slowly, she bends down, *heaven knows why*, and picks up a small stone, and then she stares at the bobbing lights somewhere in the distance, down the road from her hill. *Santilmo*, she tells herself, invoking the superstition of a supernatural floating light, said to be the soul of a dead person, his untimely death unavenged. But perhaps the light she sees is only someone with a kerosene lamp. Or the one headlight of a dilapidated car. She stares hard, but the blackness remains unbroken: distance and sky are a wall, and the full moon has hidden itself behind the dark clouds. There are no stars.

This is for you, the old woman finds herself suddenly thinking, *this stone*. She is surprised by the sudden urgency rising from within her. She wants to throw the stone away, into the darkness, into the coconut trees, to that road, to those cars, to those houses down below. To throw it away with a wrenching thrust. To throw it at

the absent moon, or the clouds that hide it.

Maybe I can reach that, maybe I can throw that far, she thinks. Perhaps. Maybe. I can't.