



Other Endings

Victoria Kapauan-Gaerlan

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Short Stories

Moon Over Mantawihan

"It's sturdy enough to cross the Tañon in a storm," he boasted.

"I'll take your word for it," she said while she held on tightly to the sides of the boat. She had possessed a fear of riding in light sea craft ever since she was twelve, when her father's boat had disappeared in a sudden squall. He knew about her phobia and had endeavored to cure her of it, ever since they had become close friends in high school. Now, fifteen years later, he finally got her to ride the Mantaga, a ten-foot fishing boat with bamboo outriggers. Building it had taken him the better part of a year.

"You know I wouldn't be in this thing if you weren't a licensed marine engineer," she said as she watched him paddling, taking the boat downriver, the nipa palms on either side of them like cadets presenting arms. She looked straight at him when she spoke, but every now and then, when she thought he was not looking, her eyes would take in his arms that were no longer as puny as they had been when they first met. Biyatilis, she had nicknamed him then, when his body had resembled the tall straight tree that people usually cut down for firewood. Now she called him by his real name, Daniel, the stress on the first syllable. Dan, occasionally. Never Danny, which was what his other friends called him, accent on the second.

"The committee didn't think you'd show up, you know," he said. "You never did in the past years we held a class reunion. What made you come this time?"

"I just never had the opportunity like I did now. With George off to Munich for the next five months-"

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"The travel order does not cover the inclusion of a spouse," she said, as if quoting from an office memo. "Besides, if I had gone with him you wouldn't have a crash test dummy."

"A sink test dummy, you mean," he said, but he saw her face clouding over and realized his mistake. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

She sighed and smiled. "You know, I still miss my father. I dream about him sometimes, people running about by the beach saying he's finally come back, safe. My mother staring out into the sea, waiting for him to return. She was never the same person after he disappeared." She closed her eyes and shook her head as if to rid herself of the memories, then immediately regretted the action because the boat began to rock. She clung to the sides tighter than before.

"Your knuckles are turning white," he observed. "Relax. Everything's going to be fine."

He had told her the same thing yesterday, when she turned up at the St. Anthony's Academy campus looking as if she had made a mistake in coming to the reunion. Everyone had been too busy at the moment to recognize her. She knew she no longer looked very much like the girl who had

graduated from high school ten years ago. Daniel had turned away from an old teacher he was talking to, and approached her with a smile that threatened to break his jaws.

"Laura." He was the only one she knew who spoke her name that way, Law-ra. He took her hand and squeezed it, then guided her to the registration desk, dictated her full married name to the girl in-charge. "Mrs. Laura Allego Donnelly, that's Dee-oh-double-en-ee-double-el-why." He had taken a pink alumna ribbon from the table and started to pin it on her dress when she realized his hand was shaking. "You still hate pink?" she heard him saying over the loud music. "Not much I can do about it, you see, it's blue for us guys, pink for you girls, and red for the faculty. I guess I should have made a special green one for you, but then everyone will ask you what it means and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

"It's good to see you too, Daniel," she laughed. "Why are you so nervous?"

"Nervous? What makes you think I'm nervous?"

"You haven't changed at all. Your hand is shaking and you're talking too much and too loudly. You're nervous all right."

"Where's your husband? Isn't he here with you?"

"No, he isn't. George is on a business trip in Germany."

"There," he patted the ribbon with his finger. He held up a steady hand in front of her. "See? I'm not nervous anymore."

He steered her toward the crowd in the middle of the room. Some people were turning their heads, wondering who she was. She recognized a few of them, but she was afraid to smile or wave because they might not smile and wave back. They smiled easily at Daniel who lived near the school and had faithfully attended all the reunions. But then they'd look at her again, some faces curious, some blank. Laura found herself wishing she had put on something more elaborate, but she had felt most comfortable in the blue button-down blouse and white calf-length flared skirt she had decided to wear. She had made all the other women seem overdressed.

"I feel like an animal in a zoo," she said softly. Daniel knew that tone; when she was frightened or apprehensive her voice would diminish into a near whisper. When she was in real trouble she wouldn't say anything at all.

"Relax," he told her. "Everything's going to be fine."

A few of the alumnae finally recognized her, after Daniel had reintroduced her around. The teachers were most happy to see her again, telling her how much she had changed, chiding her for not attending the previous reunions. Some old classmates noted how lady-like she looked now, compared to those years when she'd show up in school wearing her older brother Oscar's discarded denims under her skirt. After her father disappeared, she was never one to hang out with the girls. She had preferred

getting up before dawn so she could go off with Oscar to Marmol to catch uwang, river crayfish, for the midday meal.

Daniel stayed with her all the time, through the innumerable speeches by the administration people and a congressman who was also an alumnus, even through the buffet dinner where she hardly ate anything. There was to be dancing afterwards, but Laura had begged off saying she had to get home before midnight or risk being locked out by her brother, with whom she was staying. Despite her protests Daniel walked her home.

She listened to him talk about his work at the pier. How he had opted to go back to live in Tuburan after he got his license. The pay wasn't much and the work was nothing anyone with a basic knowledge of ship's engines couldn't do. But he had stayed single despite pressure from his relatives to change his civil status, and what he was earning was more than enough for himself and his mother.

"Mama would love to see you," he told her. "Maybe you could visit her before you go back to the big city."

"Tomorrow. I'll go see her tomorrow," she promised.

"After that I'll have a surprise ready for you."

"Will you be going back to the party?" she asked him when they reached the gates to her brother's house.

"No, I think I'll go home myself. Unless you'd rather I stayed so you can tell me all about you and your husband, what's-his-name-"

"George."

"Yes, George."

"He's in Munich," she said, almost to herself. "Why do I feel I need to keep telling myself that?"

"Why indeed?" he mused, half-smiling. "See you tomorrow, Mrs. Laura Allego Donnelly." He turned and walked away, leaving her by the gate.

Her brother Oscar was still awake when she came into the house, his son Alberto asleep on the bamboo sofa so she could have his room.

"Who was that who brought you home?" her brother asked her.

"Daniel Ligaray."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"People saw you?"

"I suppose."

"Best not to let that happen again, Orang. People will talk. You know that."

"Yes, Manoy Oscar."

"Think of what your husband would say if he found out."

"Yes, Manoy."

"I don't want your reputation tarnished."

She said nothing.

"I'm only after your well-being, Orang. It's enough that I had to go through what I did. I wouldn't wish it on any other man."

It had been the barrio's biggest scandal. Oscar had married a girl from a neighboring town. Hardly a year after Alberto was born he had caught her in a compromising situation with another man. He all but hacked both of them to death. The illicit lovers escaped but Oscar, with an infant son to rear, did not go to prison.

"I could have made you come back to help me raise Alberto, but I did not. You found your own good luck in the city. Do not ruin it."

When he was through she went upstairs, to sleep and the disturbing dreams that always came with it.

"You've changed so much, Laura."

She raised her head and saw that Daniel had placed the paddle on his lap and was looking at her curiously.

"Have I?"

"You're very quiet now. And you've hardly said a word about your husband."

"I gave your mother a detailed update, but you weren't there, so. What do you want to know?"

"I don't want to pry--"

"Good."

"How do you like what they did at Mantawihan?" he said. "Neat, don't you think?" He was referring to the spring which was the source of the rivulet they had come out of. Years ago a few former residents who had made good in the city had pooled their resources and constructed a ten-foot-high breakwater surrounding the tubod, turning the shallows into a fresh-water swimming pool at low tide, and a virtual aquarium when the tide came in.

"I think it's a great idea," she said, perking up. "But what about the mantágà?"

"No one's seen it for years," he said, not believing the myth himself.

It was Manang Amparo, Daniel's mother, who had told her about the mantágà when Laura was a fatherless girl of twelve. Laura's own mother had suffered what city people would call a nervous breakdown after her father was lost at sea. On moonlit nights after her mother had fallen asleep she would sit with Nang Paring who would tell her about the mountain denizens who were dili ingon nato, spirits that inhabited the forests and the river banks. It was from her that Laura learned about the mantágà and its notoriety.

"The mantágà is a sea creature that lives in a cave in Mantawihan, its head the size of a cow, and each of its three limbs as thick as the trunk of a tree. It comes out only on moonless nights, to stalk whatever prey is nearby. Although no one has actually seen it, it's held responsible for the disappearance of several animals pastured near its cave by the spring. It's also believed to have devoured a child who went swimming there alone."

"Whose child?" the young Laura asked.

"The infant son of a fisherman who had just moved there," Nang Paring replied. "He moved his family away after it happened. The owners of the animals that disappeared got together one day and poured a bottle of poison, an entire gallon of Malathion, by the entrance to the cave. A few days later, the mantágà abandoned the cave during a storm, and with its remaining strength swam out to sea to die. From then on there were no more disappearances. Still, you shouldn't bathe there alone."

"But why, Nang Paring?"

"Because some people believe that it merely retreated deeper into its cave and is slowly recuperating. Still other people believe it did go out with the tide, but that its mate is still in the cave and is just waiting for the right moment to come out."

It was an older Nang Paring that Laura saw that morning. The past ten years had not been kind to her. It seemed like most of the spirit and substance had been drained from her body and somehow transferred to her son, who had pressed her hand to his forehead before he left her and Laura as soon as the latter arrived. But her mind was alert as it had ever been, and she motioned Laura to sit beside her on the wooden sofa by the window.

"I have seen all the doctors," the old woman answered the question in her eyes. "They give me medicine to make me sleep. They give me medicine to make the pain go away. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't." Then she smiled, bent forward and took Laura's hand in hers. "But you see, I cannot die. Who will take care of my Daniel?"

Laura smiled back. "It is so good to see you again, Manang Paring."

"So tell me about this husband of yours. What does he look like? Where did you meet?"

Laura had gone to Cebu City to work and to send herself to school. When they met she was in her second year, and George Donnelly a widowed Irish-American businessman on vacation. He was a frequent customer in the coffee shop where Laura worked as a waitress for her tuition. She spoke good English, he noticed. The first time he asked her out for a date she almost laughed, he was twice her age and even more than that in size. He persisted, she relented. When he asked her to marry him she said "yes."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," she reasoned. "I didn't have to work anymore. George shouldered my school expenses, and as soon as it was possible we were married. I never lack for anything. The only thing that might make me happier is the one thing I can't have—a child."

"I wanted so much to work again," she said. "But George made it clear that it would be more to his liking if I stayed home and looked after him. He takes me wherever his job takes him, it's just that this time it was better that I stayed behind. And a good thing too because I got to see you."

"Your brother doesn't say much when we ask him about you, but that's Oscar for you."

"I write him, you know, at least once a month. But as you say, that's the way he is." Laura laughed as she remembered what Daniel had said the night before. "Daniel said he had a surprise for me this morning, but I have no idea what it might be."

"He is a good boy, my Daniel," Nang Paring said. "No matter what people might say, he is a good boy."

"What do you mean? What are people saying?"

"A friend of his asked for him and two other men to work on an inter-island ship. But he didn't want to leave me alone here, so he sent three of his co-workers instead. For a few months they sent no word to their families. Then much later we learned that two of them died when their ship caught fire. They said the third survived, but no one has heard from him since. Their families do not say anything to me, but I can tell from their eyes that they blame my son."

Laura bent forward and embraced the old woman. "Don't worry. We know he is not to blame. We know that it is so and that's what's important."

"If you two are done with your drama--" Daniel's voice came from the doorway "--I am ready with my surprise."

Laura kissed the old woman's cheek and wiped the tears from her own eyes before she turned to face him. He was smiling at her but when he saw the redness in her eyes he frowned.

"Tears so early in the morning," he said so only she could hear. "I hope my surprise clears your eyes."

And at first it did. He had whipped the tarpaulin off the Mantaga like a magician's cloak then stood back and watched her admire its sleek electric blue lines. She asked him how long it had taken to make. But when he offered her a ride she balked.

"No way."

"You scared?"

"You bet."

"The weather's fine! The sea is calm! I'm driving!"

"No."

"See the basket in there? It's got siakoy and butong and hot cocoa in a thermos. How long has it been since you had all three?"

"Ages." She smiled hesitantly. "We can picnic right here."

"Nonsense. Remember that uphill race we had in Dau when we were kids?"

"Clearly. I beat you by a mile."

"And you can't lift one foot to step into the handsomest fishing boat in all of Tuburan."

"My brother told me not to be seen alone with you. He said people might talk. You know."

"Prim and proper Laura. I miss the girl who used to beat me at anything. I'm going home."

She stood wide-eyed, distressed at his retreat.

"Daniel, wait!"

At noon, adrift on the Tañon, they opened the picnic basket. They talked about their high school capers, those times when Daniel was always at the head of the class and Laura at the tail end, and he would tutor her in exchange for guided hikes through the mountains. She always got into trouble with her brother for that, because Oscar thought it was unseemly for a girl her age to be traipsing around the mountains alone with a boy. Which was why he had gathered his meager resources and packed her off to the city to work. There had been just enough money to get her settled, and to alleviate her

restlessness she had enrolled herself at the state college. With school and her work she had no time to go home for vacations, and Oscar had preferred it that way. The owner of the ship he was working on had sent Daniel on a scholarship to Manila. Daniel always came directly home whenever he could.

They were passing by the cemetery now. The current had almost taken them past it when Daniel asked if she wanted to go there. She nodded.

She said a silent prayer as they stood in front of her mother's headstone. She wondered at the daisies that were in full bloom at the foot of the grave.

"Your brother comes here every Sunday morning after church," he explained.

"He never told me. I asked him in my letters but he'd always talk of other things." She started back towards the boat and he followed her. "You know I really don't remember her all that much. Manoy had been her favorite, maybe that's why I tried so much to be like him. Except when he snored," she laughed then. "But whenever I thought I needed a mother's attention I went to yours. I wish I'd come home more often then. I wish I'd come home sooner."

"So do I."

She looked at him when he said that, but he was getting inside the boat with his back to her.

"It's almost evening," she said.

"Hurry up," he snapped. "You should get home before dark."

The way back to Mantawihan seemed to take longer, with neither of them saying anything. The moon had risen over the mountains when he beached the craft, but the last of the sun's rays still held the sky aglow. Almost violently, Daniel threw the tarpaulin over the Mantaga and started up the breakwater without her. Laura just stood there, confused by his behavior and his silence. She called out to him and he stopped and turned around.

"I don't want to go home yet," she said.

They sat on the breakwater and looked out over the nipa palms that the moon had turned into a field of silver fans.

"I tell myself I don't care what people think," Daniel was saying. "But whenever I see their parents or any of their relatives I feel their hatred. And I don't blame them. Feelings run deep in a small town."

"You ought to get away," she told him. "Take your mother and go to the city."

"She'd miss the life here. She'd be unhappy there, I just know it. And I can't leave her, not now."

"You should get married then. Give her a grandchild to make her happy."

"I wanted to, once."

"What happened?"

"I guess I waited too long."

She said, thinking of George, "And I didn't wait long enough."

"There's something--never mind."

"What? Tell me."

"Naah."

"Come on, tell me," she said, almost laughing.

"There's something," he began again, slowly this time, "that I've always wanted to ask of you. But I'm not sure if you'd agree."

"I'm your friend," she said to him quietly. "You can ask me for anything."

He smiled at her, and with a gesture so exaggerated that it failed to hide the honest plea behind it he said, "Then I ask for the moon."

She looked at the sky and spoke just as quietly as before. "You know I can't give you that."

And he saw the moon reflected in her eyes as she looked at him.

"You just did."

It was almost midnight when he brought her home. She found the front door locked. She went around and tried the back door, but it too refused to open.

"Manoy?" she knocked tentatively. " 'Noy Oscar." Harder this time. She closed her eyes and listened. She couldn't hear him snoring so she knew he was awake.

" 'Noy, please let me in."

Silence.

"Manoy Oscar, don't be like that," she begged.

She pounded on the door for a full minute before she gave up and walked back to the gate where Daniel had been waiting.

"He's locked me out," she said helplessly.

"So it seems."

"What am I going to do?"

"You could sleep at my house. I'm sure Mama wouldn't mind making room on her mat for you."

She looked up at him but his face was unreadable. She sighed and started up the road alongside him.

They walked to his house in complete silence. When they got inside Daniel knocked on his mother's door, but she was deep in a medicine-induced sleep.

"You'll have to sleep in my room," he told Laura. He took her hand and led her up the stairs. She looked around the room when he turned on the light. She'd seen it years ago, when she hid in it once to escape punishment for some misdeed. It looked exactly the same, except for a mounted picture on the wall of Daniel in his high school toga standing beside a girl similarly attired. She looked closer and realized that the girl was herself.

"Mama's told me several times to put that away. I just haven't got around to it yet." He unfolded his mat on the floor and arranged two pillows and a blanket on it. "Hope you don't mind using my bedding. Mama keeps the fresh ones in her room."

She wanted to say something, to thank him, but she held back her tongue.

"So, make yourself comfortable. I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

When he was gone she took off her shoes and lay down on the mat. She thought she would stay awake all night, but before she could sort out her emotions she fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

The sound of the wind rattling the shutters awakened her. She threw them open and saw the sky was ominously gray. When she went downstairs Daniel was gone. She found his mother in the kitchen cooking breakfast.

"He went to make sure the Mantaga was secure," Nang Paring told her.

She ran all the way to Mantawihan, oblivious to the light rain that had started to fall. When she got there the Mantaga was nowhere in sight. She pulled her coat tighter around herself and sat down on the breakwater to wait for him.



The Other End

A preposterous idea to begin with, something someone might come up with when drunk or high. They had just buried their grandmother that afternoon, and Hilda had suggested going to the Hard Rock Café. Hilda said the dead matriarch wouldn't mind, it was something Lola Rita would have done herself. Michaela agreed. They were on their fourth round of drinks when her cousin Ian suddenly turned to her and said,

"What would happen, Sarah, if you dialed your old phone number, the one you had in your old house, the one you had when you were a kid?"

She had to think about it, her fingers instinctively pressing the old series of numbers. Well-immersed in the digital revolution, Sarah used her phone like a calculator.

"Nothing," Ernie, beside her, said. "Six digits get you nothing today. You'll need one more for a connection." Ernie was a computer engineer. His modem did the dialing for him.

Ian said, not having heard him, "You talk to yourself. When you were a kid."

"Like a time warp through fiber optics," Sarah suggested.

"Exactly."

Sarah felt Ernie's hand on her shoulder. "Time to go, kid. Gotta work tomorrow." She looked up at him, unwilling to leave. "It's a long drive to your place," he added.

"Why don't you go on ahead, Ern. Ian can drive me home."

"Yeah, why don't you go on ahead, *Ern*, Ian can drive her home," Ian said.

"You're drunk."

"Sarah can drive Ian home, then," Ian said, "can't you, Sarah, there's a good girl."

Ernie let out a deep breath and stood up. He squeezed Sarah's shoulder, making her wince, and left without saying anything else. Sarah resisted the urge to massage the welt she felt reddening under her black blouse.

"Dunno why you had to bring him along, Sarah girl," Ian said to her. "I mean, he's not exactly family--"

"Not yet," Sarah replied.

"You mean you're really considering marrying that idiot?"

"He's not that bad," Hilda said before Sarah could say anything. "I think he's a hunk."

"But what does Sarah think?" Ian said, looking at Sarah with his bleary eyes.

"Sarah thinks we'd better go home," Sarah said.

"After coffee," said Michaela, who was actually their aunt, but being closer to their age, counted as a cousin. Michaela could drink a barrel but could sober up immediately with a demitasse.

They ordered coffee all around, talking about their dead grandmother and how the old lady had her burial clothes ready long before she died. Purificación Enríquez de Laperál had been a respected couturier among the society matrons of Manila. She spent her retirement years with her daughter Serena, Sarah's mother. It didn't seem like five years ago when they were cleaning out their closets and Sarah found a large white box, the kind wedding gowns were packed in. She opened it and found an ornate ecru eyelet terno, artfully beaded with rice pearls. In the same box were a purse and a pair of shoes that matched the gown.

Sarah had taken the gown out of the box, turned to her grandmother and said, "Lola, I'd look fantastic in this, wouldn't I? Akin na lang 'to."

Lola Rita had smiled benignly at her and replied, "No puwede, hija. Pamburo ko iyan."

She was buried in that gown, her fingers gracefully clutching the purse, beaded shoes on her feet. Almost as an afterthought Sarah's mother wound the old lady's olive stone rosary around her hands, over the purse, before the coffin was taken to a side chapel of the Malate Church for the week-long wake. Everyone commented on how beautiful Lola Rita was in death, as if she were merely napping before going off to a party.

After the coffee they all stood up to go. Michaela and Hilda flagged down a taxi and went off. Ian tossed his car keys over to Sarah, settled himself in the passenger side and promptly fell asleep. It was a full hour's drive to Sarah's apartment. When she pulled over in front of her gate, she shook him awake and he came to, wondering where he was.

"You can sleep in the spare room," she told him.

"Have to go home. I'm flying back to Melbourne early tomorrow." He looked at his watch. "That's today. 'Night, Sarah girl."

"You know what? I think I'll try out what you said."

"What I said?"

"About dialing my old phone number."

"What old phone number?"

"Remember? Like a time warp through fiber optics?"

"I think your mind's warped. Go to sleep."

She stared at his tail lights as he drove off. She went inside the apartment, locking the door behind her. For a moment she stood there, looking at the telephone on a corner table in her living room. She shook her head to loosen the cobwebs and headed for the kitchen to pour herself a glass of milk.

Sarah's apartment was her last refuge. Comfortable, although barely furnished, it had none of the useless trappings which her mother had adorned their old house. When she moved out five years ago her mother packed all of Sarah's things plus a thousand odds and ends into a box, but Sarah left it behind on the pretext that there wasn't enough room in the moving van. The walls were bare, except for one in the kitchen where a large monthly calendar hung, the kind that listed tides and phases of the moon. Kitchenware consisted of a kettle for boiling water and a rice cooker, which she seldom used. Sarah bought her lunch from a carinderia nearby, and supper from a fast food joint two blocks away. Breakfast was black coffee and rolls from the sari-sari store across the street.

Most of the tables were bare, too, unless she was in a reading mood. Then the tables would gradually be covered with bargain bin paperbacks, computer graphics magazines, and back issues of the Reader's Digest, which at the end of her spell she would put into plastic bags and donate to the public library. There were no framed photographs of her family, or albums of any kind. Sarah wanted no memories of her childhood.

She had converted the spare room into a fully-equipped desktop publishing station. It was the realization of a dream she had had, after six years of working for an advertising agency, of putting up her own design studio. In contrast to the rest of the apartment, the "office" was in a state of perpetual chaos; books and catalogues were strewn everywhere, sample printouts of publication layouts she had designed were taped to the door, on the four walls, even on the louvers on her windows. Somewhere under all that was an extension phone with its ringer on the lowest volume setting.

She was halfway through her milk when the phone rang. Glass in hand, she went to the living room to answer it.

"It is I, your knight in shining spandex," said the voice on the other end. "Where have you been all night, princess? I missed you."

Sarah almost choked on her milk. "You're no knight. You're an anomaly."

"Nevertheless, a charming anomaly. Admit it."

Sarah smiled despite herself. Matt had been calling her for almost three months now, after that embarrassing episode in the gym Michaela had brought her to. For some reason Sarah suddenly slipped while on the treadmill, and only Matt's quick reflexes prevented her from hitting the floor. She never went back to that gym, or to any other for that matter, but he had called her two days afterward, inquiring about her health. She could not recall exactly what he looked like, but although he knew where she lived, he never asked to meet her again in person. He had a pleasant voice that put her at

ease despite their odd relationship. He called her "Princess" after the old Shirley Temple movie, and he had the knack for calling her at the most opportune moments, whenever she needed a diversion or a friend to bat the breeze with.

"All right, I'll grant you that. I was out my cousins. We buried my grandmother this afternoon."

"Yes, I read the obit. Grand old lady, wasn't she? Crispina paid her respects in her column. Did you read it?"

Sarah had not. She made a mental note to ask Hilda or Michaela.

"So how are you holding up?"

"I'm okay. Just something strange preying on my mind." She sat down and began telling him about what Ian had said while they were drinking, and how he seemed to have no memory of it when he drove off.

"It's an intriguing theory, but do you actually think it's possible?"

"Only one way to find out," Sarah replied. "Till next time, Matt."

"Whatever happens, tell me about it, okay? I mean, don't wait for me to call. You know my number."

"Thanks, I will."

She pressed the plunger and tapped out the series of numbers that she had never forgotten.

She had expected to get dead air, or a recorded message telling her the number she dialed was no longer in service as of this time, but the phone on the other end started to ring. The sound startled her so much that she clapped the receiver back on the cradle. She reached for her milk and realized her hand was shaking. She picked up the phone and dialed again.

"Matt, it's me."

"Princess, are you all right?"

"It rang."

"Did you talk to anyone?"

"No, I hung up before anyone could answer."

"You're sure you dialed the right number."

"Of course, I'm sure! I feel so strange, Matt. My hair's standing on end."

"Take it easy, princess. Lots of weird things happen on the phone. Like me, for instance."

Sarah laughed. "You're so right. I'm fine now, Matt. Thanks. Good night."

"Pleasant dreams, princess."

She stood up to take her empty glass back to the kitchen when the phone rang again. She picked it up.

"Hello?"

But no one answered.

She sat in front of her computer the next morning with a mug of coffee, trying to formulate new ideas for a company in-house magazine she was designing, and coming up blank. After moving some precariously stacked papers around she found the phone and dialed Matt's number. She let it ring five times before hanging up. She kept the phone on her lap and stared at her monitor, dragging a few things here and there with the mouse, but was dissatisfied with the results. It was a while before she realized that the phone was ringing.

"Hello?"

"Sarah?"

"Oh, hi, Ernie."

"You okay? You sound a bit distracted."

"I'm working."

"On a Sunday? I thought you might want to take the day off. Maybe we could go somewhere."

She told him she was rushing to meet a deadline and would it be all right if she called him back later. Then she heard a faint click on the line on the line and another voice said,

"Princess?"

"Who's that?" Ernie said.

"Matt?"

"Who's Matt? What's going on here?" Ernie said, his voice rising.

Realizing that their lines had crossed, Sarah took her eyes away from the monitor and tried to deal with the situation.

"Uh, Ernie, this is my friend Matt Caña," she said, as if they were all in the same room. "Matt, this is Ernie Veloso."

"Pleased to meet you, Ernie," she heard Matt say without skipping a beat.

"Why does he call you princess?"

"It's just a nickname, Ernie."

"I'm coming over."

There was a moment of silence after Ernie rang off, then Sarah heard Matt say, "I'm sorry, princess. Are you going to be all right?" When Sarah didn't answer, he added, "Would you like me to come over too?"

"No," Sarah sighed. "I'll be fine. Don't worry, Matt." She pressed the plunger before he could say anything else. Realizing the futility of working any further, she stood up and closed her office. She wanted to avoid the inevitable confrontation with Ernie; a jealous fit was more than she could stand at the moment. She dressed quickly, hoping she wouldn't run into him on the way out. But before she could open the front door the phone rang. Sarah thought of leaving without answering it, but she changed her mind and picked it up.

"Hello?"

She heard muffled sounds on the other end, and then a click as the line went dead. Sarah muttered an oath. Then she recalled the strange events of the previous night. Ian's theory still fascinated her, although she knew very well that the idea was mere folly.

Her fingers picked out the numbers instinctively. She sat through the ringing and it seemed like no one was going to answer until a woman's voice came on the line.

"Who's this?"

"Sarah," Sarah said, hesitantly.

"Sarah can't talk to you now. She's doing her homework."

The voice and the words bludgeoned her and Sarah remembered thinking before she ran out the door: "Ian, Ian, you were right."

She ducked blindly into a side street that branched off to a gravel path. She followed it not caring where it led, as long as Ernie couldn't find her. She couldn't bear his questions now because the memories were all flooding back and she needed a friend to help her stay afloat. She looked around for a pay phone but there was none. She wished she knew where Matt lived. Matt was all right, he would

know what to do. She could talk to him and he could help her make sense out of all the things she had tried her best to forget.

Sarah didn't like homework. As much as possible she did them in school, which gave her all the time at home to play. Mainly, she played with the telephone, which was new. She practiced her six-year-old fingers dialing numbers at random, hanging up immediately when someone answered. She would call her mother at the office, but more often than not she got a busy signal, and then she would call her Lola Rita, who was never too busy to talk to her.

Sarah loved her grandmother. On Sundays when she joined them for lunch, the old lady would teach her to make dresses by hand for her dolls with remnants from her shop. Being an only child, Sarah's dolls were her only playmates and she would spend a good deal of her weekday afternoons sewing all sorts of outfits for them until her mother came home from the office and asked if she had done her homework.

"Finished already," Sarah would say all the time. Serena, however, believed that homework should be done at home, and she insisted that Sarah spend at least one hour on her study table for that purpose. To make sure that she did, Serena hired a tutor.

At first Sarah didn't mind her new tutor. Until then she had spent her afternoons alone with the maids and they were always too busy for games. She welcomed the company her tutor provided, and sometimes the latter would bring a male friend to the house and they would tell her jokes and play games with her but then the games would take on another form and they would take Sarah to the bathroom to bathe her, like she was one of her dolls, they told her, and they would take off their clothes and touch her and afterwards they'd ask her not to tell her mother because they'd stop and Sarah, wouldn't want that, would she, because it was so much fun, wasn't it? Sarah didn't tell anyone, but then the bathroom games began to hurt her and she told her mother she didn't need a tutor anymore but Serena didn't think so.

When she returned Sarah saw that she had left the phone off the hook. There was no sign of Ernie; she thought perhaps he'd been there and, finding her out, had gone away. She looked at her watch and saw that she'd wandered around for more than an hour. She sat down and stared at the blank walls and table tops. She saw just how bare her apartment was, as empty as her past purged of the memories of her childhood. She wished for a way that she could salvage that past, then slowly she realized that the answer was right in front of her.

She picked up the phone and checked for a dial tone. Then she hit the redial button. It would be just about the right moment, just before lunch, when everyone was busy preparing the meals and wanting her out of the way, she thought as she heard the ringing on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Sarah?"

"Yes."

"Sarah, I'm a friend."

"What's your name?"

"Same as yours. Sarah."

"That's funny," the girl giggled. "Another Sarah."

"Sarah, listen to me. Is your Lola Rita there?"

"Yes. She's in the kitchen with my mommy."

"Listen carefully, Sarah. You have to tell Lola Rita about your tutor." She strained her ears for the girl's reply. "Sarah, are you still there?"

"They told me not to tell," said the girl, her voice almost inaudible.

"Sarah, you have to tell--" Static filled the connection and she heard another voice take over the line--

"Hello, who is this?"

"Lola Rita--"

"Who are you? Why have you made my granddaughter cry?"

"It's rather difficult to explain--"

"Who is this?"

More static now, as if the link was slowly being severed.

Sarah was crying too, but she went on. "Lola Rita, please. Talk to Sarah, ask her about her tutor--"

Static slowly overwhelmed the connection but Sarah kept crying into the phone, not knowing if her grandmother had heard what she said.

When she woke up Sarah realized she had fallen asleep on the sofa with the phone in her ear. As soon as she replaced it, it began to ring. She picked up the receiver and leaned back, kneading her temples with her free hand.

"Princess, are you all right? I've been trying to reach you for hours."

Disoriented, Sarah asked, "Who is this?"

"It is I, Materno Caña, your knight in shining spandex, your faithful phone friend--"

Sarah started to laugh despite her headache.

"I can't talk right now, Matt. I have to get dressed for church. It's my grandmother's funeral today." She squinted at her wristwatch. "I'll be late if I don't hurry."

"Need a ride?"

Sitting up, she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. Then she stared at the daintily dressed dolls on the corner table, as if she were seeing them for the first time.

"Princess?"

"I was looking at my dolls. Lola Rita had taught me how to sew dresses for them." She sighed. "Could you do me a bigger favor, Matt?"

"Anything for you, princess."

"Come with me to the funeral. I could use a friend right now."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

Sarah put the phone down and began to straighten up the living room. She stacked all the photo albums in an orderly pile, thinking they would be good for a laugh when Matt went through them while she dressed. The dust on the bric-a-brac she ignored, but she arranged her dolls' dresses and positioned them in a circle, the way she used to when she was small.

She remembered one Sunday when her grandmother brought some exceptionally delicate fabric, and together they made the dresses that her dolls now wore. Lola Rita herself had cut the patterns and taught Sarah's small fingers to sew them together, at the same time telling her that from now on Sarah would have all the time she wanted to dress her dolls because her tutor wouldn't be coming back anymore. When she heard that, Sarah had leapt and hugged the old lady.

She went to her room to pick out something to wear. Not black, she thought, Lola Rita didn't care much for that color. She opted for a simple outfit in blue. She held it against her and looked at the mirror, knowing that her grandmother would approve of her choice.



Sophie and the Rainbow

Sophie was a little girl who lived in a house deep inside a forest.

It was always dark outside her window, because the forest was so dense, and the sunlight could never shine all the way through the canopy of leaves. But little Sophie didn't mind that at all. It was warm and cozy inside, especially when she would snuggle up to her mother while she sat in the rocking chair nursing Sophie's baby brother. There was always a fire in the hearth, which her father kept alive with old branches that had fallen off the trees in the forest.

Everyday Sophie would play quietly on the floor beside the hearth. Most of the time she would take her little pillow in her arms and rock it gently and softly sing to it. Whenever she did that her mother would smile down at her, and Sophie would smile back.

One day her father decided to take Sophie with him to the edge of the forest, where the road to the town lay. He was going to get a few things in town, and he asked Sophie's mother what he needed to bring back. Her mother gave Sophie's father a list of things to buy.

"I'll bring back something for you too," Sophie said, to both her mother and her little brother. As she didn't know yet what she would find in town Sophie added, "It will be a surprise."

Sophie and her father walked quietly on the path towards the town. It had just rained, but the sun was coming up from behind the mountains in the distance.

Then her father said, "Look, Sophie" as he pointed to the sky. Sophie looked up and saw, for the first time, a rainbow.

It began from one corner of the sky, a long, wide bridge of color that ended just beyond the road to the town.

"That's what I'll bring home to Mama," Sophie said to her father. Her father just smiled.

The store in town was filled with things Sophie had never seen before. There were shiny pots and pans piled up high on wooden shelves, thick blankets and clothes folded inside big brown boxes on the floor. Sophie walked quietly around the store looking at the things, until her father called her and said they were going home.

Then Sophie went to the counter where the storekeeper stood and said to him,

"I would like a jar, please."

The storekeeper smiled down at Sophie. "And what would you like me to put in it, little girl?"

"Oh, nothing, sir," Sophie replied. "I already have something to put in it."

"And what might that be?"

Sophie replied, "A rainbow."

The storekeeper smiled. "Ah, I have just the jar for you."

The storekeeper stooped behind the counter and came up with a jar which he placed carefully on the counter. It wasn't just an ordinary jar. It had many sides, and a glass cover that fit the top snugly..

The storekeeper said, "I had been saving this for the time when a little girl like you would come in here and ask for a jar to put a rainbow in."

He came out from behind the counter and gave Sophie the jar. It was big enough for Sophie to hold in the crook of her arm. Sophie was so happy with her jar that she didn't see her father put his hand on the counter, and the shopkeeper push it gently away.

Sophie and her father thanked the storekeeper and walked out into the street.

As Sophie and her father walked towards the end of the rainbow they passed other people on the street. All of them smiled down at Sophie and asked where she was going.

"I'm going to put the rainbow into this jar and take it home to my mother and baby brother."

The people laughed and shook their heads. Sophie wondered why they did that. It made her feel so bad that she wanted to cry, but then she felt her father's hand warm around her little hand.

A band of children, when they learned what Sophie wanted to do, had started following Sophie and her father as they walked to the end of the rainbow. The children were scruffy and mean, and they called out to Sophie in sing-song

*"Silly Sophie, silly Sophie
wants to put a rainbow
in a jar"*

The children laughed and pointed at her, and the tears that Sophie had been holding back finally fell.

Sophie's tears fell into the many-sided jar that she held under the rainbow's end. But through her tears she saw the band of colors creep into the jar and fasten themselves on to her teardrops.

And there they were, a hundred little rainbows bright in Sophie's jar!

Sophie smiled with joy. She held the jar in her arm and walked back home with her father.

As for the children who laughed at Sophie, they tried to put the rainbow in a jar too. But they were too mean to shed tears, and so the rainbow refused to come inside their jars. As the sun rose higher in the sky the rainbow disappeared altogether, and those children went back to their mean, scruffy games.

Sophie brought the jar of little rainbows into the house deep in the forest. Her mother was so happy with little Sophie's surprise. They put the jar of rainbows on the table beside the rocking chair, where Sophie and her mother and father, and yes, even her baby brother could gather around and look at its warm, bright colors.



Three Months

Three months ago they said goodbye to each other. She had taken an earlier flight because she wanted to do the leaving, for a change.

Now she waited for him patiently. He was late, but she knew he would be there. In her hand were photographs from the time they spent together. She was going to give them to him, because it pained her too much to look at them now. He had not taken any pictures then, because he had known they would be too painful to look at, after a while.

She sat on the mall bench with her legs crossed, unmoving but for her hands flipping the plastic pages of the album. Then he was there in front of her. The first thing she noticed was that he had lost a considerable amount of weight. The other thing she observed was his hesitance. He took her hand as if to shake it, then relented and embraced her. Not as tightly as the last time, and she kissed that same spot under his ear but not with the desperation of three months ago.

They sat on the bench as he looked at the pictures, while she unfolded the kerchief that he had brought her as a present. He talked about how he had been sick, some debilitating virus that had turned his guts inside out. She told him about her new job. They updated each other on old friends who had kept in touch. They talked about places the other had yet to see.

They did not talk about three months ago. Not about the first time he saw her, reading his poetry, unaware that he was in the audience. They did not talk about the meals they shared in the days that followed, the walks they took around the city. They did not talk about that night when they went to a folk house where she sang with the singer in the band and he just looked at her, mesmerized by the sheer joy on her face.

They did not talk about that night when she got rip-roaring drunk and he had to escort her home, to be rewarded by her throwing up on his best shirt, the one his wife had given him last Christmas. They did not talk about how embarrassed she had been, despite her headache. She did not remind him that she had asked him in to her cottage to wash up, and that she didn't have a shirt large enough that he could change into. They did not talk about how she had a coughing fit, and to relieve her he gave her the most sensuous shiatsu massage she had ever experienced. They certainly did not talk about how his wife had found the letter she wrote him a week after they parted, where she said how much she missed him and couldn't wait for the chance to see him again.

She did not look at him the way she did three months ago, while they spoke of things other than those they could not talk about. Neither did he. She did not wonder why they were here, together if only for a couple of hours. He was merely on an errand, and had to leave soon. She had to go back to the office. When they had to say goodbye again their eyes finally met, but they chose to ignore the longing that they first saw in each other's eyes three months ago.

They shook hands.



Wishing for Rain

The young vendor served me with a smile as I sat on a plastic stool in front of her makeshift counter. I was halfway through my coffee and cheese roll when a gurgling sound came from behind the table. Still smiling, the girl reached down and cooed.

"So, my precious, you're awake already."

I leaned across the table and saw a baby lying in a small wicker basket, the threads ringing her earlobes still red with merthiolate. She squealed happily and her tiny toes curled as the girl tickled her belly. The half-swallowed bread caught in my throat.

"Yours?" I asked the girl and she answered with a nod. "How old is she?"

"Six months."

I paid her and, without finishing the coffee, went to board my bus. It moved out of the terminal with less than ten people aboard, and I had the seat across the driver all to myself. I was slowly getting used to traveling alone, but every time we passed a landmark or an interesting place I would turn my head and speak, then I'd stop short as I realized Paul wasn't there to listen.

I arrived at the pension house in Tibangâ late in the evening. Everyone had finished supper, and the cooks had gone home. The kitchen aide had offered to prepare something, if I didn't mind waiting, but I was too exhausted to eat. I went straight to the room that had been assigned to me. I dropped my knapsack, fell on the mattress, and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

It was still dark when I awoke to sounds that I had not heard in a long time. A rooster was crowing, crickets chirping in counterpoint to his summons. I remembered waking up like that, a lifetime ago, when Paul and I had slept in a makeshift hut up in the mountains in Tuburan. I got up, opened the window, and found the rooster perched on a clothesline post. It was still too dark to get my bearings, but the slight breeze told me that it was all right to stay there, safe in that friendly darkness.

When the night sky had dissipated into a pale orange haze I knew something was amiss. From my window I could see Iligan Bay in the distance, flanked by tall coconut trees, and as I watched the waters turn blue I realized why I felt rather disoriented. Here the sun rose from behind the mountains and set in the sea.

The college administrator, Mr. Galvez, was waiting for me when I came down for breakfast. He apologized for not having been there to greet me when I arrived. He led me to the dining room, saying he hoped I would not have any difficulty adjusting to the environment. As we sat down he gave me an outline of what was expected of me, which was mainly to orient the resident instructors with the new networking system, and make whatever recommendations necessary for improvement. In my spare time I could tour the city, as long as I left word with the front desk on my way out. Then he took note of my clothes.

"Are you comfortable in those?" he asked, indicating my long-sleeved shirt, which was buttoned at the cuffs. "It can get very warm in the afternoons, but I do recommend you dress modestly, especially if you plan to visit Marawi during your stay here."

I assured him that I had brought appropriate clothing, and that he need not worry about me on that point. I always wore long-sleeved shirts, but I didn't see the need to tell him why.

In the next two weeks I became too busy to remember that there were other places to see besides the hallways of ACE Computer College. In the dusty afternoons I wished for rain as the walk back to the pension house sapped whatever energy I had left. A couple of instructors at the college dropped a few hints, but ever since Paul died I had no desire to go out with anyone.

But then Mr. Galvez told me they were donating old computers to the Agus National High School, and since they could not spare anyone to set the units up would I mind going instead? The Agus school principal promised a tour for whoever was bringing the units there, he said, and wouldn't it be like hitting two birds and so on.

I smiled at the hopefulness in his voice and said, yes, I would like the opportunity to represent the college.

The following morning I found the service L300 in front of the college, loaded with hardware we were taking to Agus, which was roughly thirty kilometers out of Tibangâ. Mr. Galvez handed me a brown envelope full of papers which, he emphasized, the Agus school principal had to sign. The whole operation might take a good part of a day, and he promised us a nice dinner when we got back. He sent the driver and me off with a wave.

Along the way, Nong Bob the driver regaled me with stories of ambushes he'd been witness to, bombings that he'd survived. Occupational hazards. As he was relating an especially harrowing experience complete with sound effects, I heard a knocking sound coming from the underside of the van. For a minute I thought we were going into one of his adventures, but Nong Bob calmly told me that there was nothing to worry about, the van made noises like that every now and then.

When we arrived at the Agus National High School we were met by the teacher-in-charge.

"Michael Fortich," he introduced himself with a firm handshake.

At first glance he looked like one of the high school students, but his presence was all the more pronounced because of his quietness, as opposed to the raucous delight of some of the teenagers who had gathered around to watch. He drafted a few boys to help unload the hardware the driver and I had brought, and said I had better supervise the operation.

We spent the whole afternoon assembling the units, and while the sweat rolled off my chin and onto my collar I noticed him looking at me every now and then. Once I challenged his eyes, and with his brows slightly raised he looked from my collar to my buttoned sleeves. I stared him down.

"There'll be some sort of ceremony tomorrow," he said as he stood up after the last unit had been put together.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. You've come a day early, you see. Tomorrow the principal and most of the other teachers will be here. Maybe even a photographer."

I turned to Nong Bob, who was still sweating after his crash course on computer assembly, and asked him if he could ferry me back here tomorrow. He said he wasn't sure, because he had a strict schedule of deliveries to follow. Then he excused himself to go check on the van.

"Can't we dispense with the formalities?" I said to Fortich.

"The principal will have to sign your receipts. Besides, she would be greatly disappointed if she couldn't formally thank your school."

I wasn't at all sure if I saw a hint of a smile on his mouth when he said that.

"Well, it's out of the question, I wasn't told that I'd have to spend the night, I don't have a change of clothes and-" Then I saw Nong Bob coming towards us, scratching and shaking his head. In his other hand he held a grease-stained object, and when I looked at it my heart sank.

"I have to get a replacement for this. The van won't run without it."

"But it was running just an hour ago!" I protested.

"I don't want to risk a breakdown on the way back."

"I'm going with you."

"It's a long walk," Fortich said to Nong Bob.

"You better stay here, Miss," Nong Bob said to me, "it's getting dark. It's not safe for you to be out in the street. Stay with the van so I can tell Mr. Galvez it's in safe hands. If I hurry I can be back here in the morning."

"In the morning?"

"There's a room the principal uses when she sleeps over," Fortich said. "It's in the other building. If she were here I'm sure she would insist that you use it."

I booted up the nearest computer and watched it go through its startup sequence without a hitch. I did the same with the other units and they all behaved normally. I took that as a good omen.

Later, as I stood on the landing and watched Nong Bob disappear down the road, I began to doubt my own judgment. Then I turned around and saw for the first time where I really was.

The school buildings stood on a landscaped hillside, plants with the most colorful leaves bordering the balconies. Gigantic river stones stood here and there like obelisks. Around them were shrubs a handspan's height, dotted with flowers just about to bloom.

This is a school, I thought as I stood there in the afternoon light, not some three-storey building on a dusty city street. I looked down and saw Fortich waiting for me.

"Let me show you to your room," he said. He helped me down and at the touch of his hand I immediately felt a spark. Static from all that assembly, I thought. I let go as soon as I was on steady ground.

The principal's sleeping room was spare and snug. It reminded me of another place that seemed so far away, a place where I thought nothing could harm me. It had a white metal hospital bed with a mattress on it, and a little cabinet that was also a side table. The bed was high enough for me to get a clear view of the school yard and the verdant slopes beyond it.

"There's a washroom out in the back," Fortich said as he stood in the doorway, "if you'd like to freshen up. I'll have one of the boys stock up some water."

"Thank you."

"If you don't mind wearing borrowed clothes I think I can get you something to change into."

"That might be too much of a bother."

"It won't. I know these people. They'll be eager to help."

"I leave everything in your hands, then."

Again that hint of a smile, as he nodded and turned to go.

Shortly after he left I heard the sound of pouring water outside. I stepped out and found one of the boys who had helped us emptying a container full of water into a large earthen jar. On a makeshift bamboo table beside it were a soap dish and a clean, neatly-folded hand towel.

"What's your name?" I asked the boy.

"Chris, Ma'am."

"Where do you get your water, Chris?"

"There's a water pump behind those classrooms," he said, pointing to a building about fifty meters away.

"Kind of a long way for hauling, isn't it? I'll help you."

"No! I mean, no, Ma'am. I do this at home all the time. I'm used to it."

I was not at all used to having anyone serving me, but he was so earnest that I let it go.

"Thank you very much for helping me, Chris."

He blushed and smiled shyly. "I go now, fetch more water." He went off with his container before I could say anything else. He came back three more times, until the earthen jar was full.

I stood by the jar and washed my hands. I still found it difficult to look at my arms after rolling up my sleeves. Undressing before a bath was easier, when I could step into the shower and cover myself with soapsuds and pretend that each inch of skin was the same as the rest. But seeing the scars stark against the fabric of my shirt always brought back all the memories.

They had made it seem so easy. A forged signature, paid testimonies-even before the bruises had faded and the scabs on my arms hardened as I lay in a hospital charity ward-they had taken my child away from me. When I had recovered, I had gone to the old house where they had taken my daughter. I was stopped cold at the gate by a blue-shirted security guard who told me I could not go inside.

I must have stood there, lost in remembering, before realizing that I was not alone. Michael Fortich was standing a few feet away from me, cradling a small bundle of cloth, his eyes fastened on my bare forearms. I quickly rolled down my sleeves and felt them stick to my wet skin.

You're a long way from your pineapple plantation, I wanted to say to him. His kind was one of the reasons why my daughter would grow up without a father, conditioned by her grandparents to believe that her mother was no good, if not dead.

"I thought you might want to change into these," he said quietly. He handed me the bundle after I had dried my hands with the towel. "I've invaded your privacy. Please forgive me." Without waiting for an answer he went away.

I carried the bundle inside the room and unraveled the knot. The colorful cloth wrapping turned out to be a malong, and inside it was a necklace of beads with tinkling brass bells. There were also two cotton shirts, one navy blue and the other brown, that smelled faintly of flowers. I held the blue one up against my body and smoothed its long sleeves down my arms.

I turned around and looked through the window. Michael was standing on the same spot where I had stood relishing the sight of the school yard for the first time. As I looked at him I thought I must have had that same look on my face. Then he looked in my direction, and though I knew he couldn't see me through the curtains I smiled at him in thanks. I thought I saw him smile back.

After I had bathed and changed into my borrowed finery I heard a knock on the door. It was Chris, asking me if I was ready for supper. He led me through the school grounds to a foot path that took us

uphill past several huts along either side. I wanted to ask him where we were going but before I could he stopped in front of a house whose walls were made of coco lumber louvers.

"Sir Michael!" Chris called out, and soon enough he appeared, dressed as I was minus the adornments, the smile on his face as reserved as this afternoon's. A table stood against the wall behind him. A modest supper had been laid out for four. Before I could even wonder who the fourth place was for, a teenaged girl entered the room carrying a steaming soup tureen. Then I knew who had lent me my clothes.

"This is Tina," Michael said. "She's Chris' sister. They help me out every now and then in exchange for tutoring. Although I must admit I need their help more than they need my tutoring."

I fell into furtive observation of these people who were sharing their meal with me, touched by the kindness that they had shown on such short notice. We ate the sautéed greens and stewed fish with our hands. I could not help looking at Michael's as he scooped up the food from his plate with his right hand. It was lean and lined with veins so blue they showed up despite his dark skin.

Chris ate his supper with an appetite typical of a boy of his age, and he would look up in protest at his sister when she nudged him with her elbow to make him eat more slowly. Tina had such small fair hands they were like a child's, and I wondered if my daughter's hands would be like hers, and if I would ever hold them again. We ate in silence, a silence which I refused to break because of its serenity, and I was thankful that none of them felt the need for simple chatter.

Michael walked me back to my room. As we followed the same path I was extremely aware of the tinkling of the bells on the necklace I wore. On impulse I stopped and looked up at the night sky, and was amazed by the multitude of stars that were visible. I thought, these are not the same stars that I see at night where I live.

But there's Orion! I pointed out to myself, tracing the three bright stars of his belt and the three smaller stars that formed his sword. But here Orion wore a flowing cape, his dog Sirius nipping at its hem. From Orion's right hand I deduced which direction was east, so I knew where to expect the sunrise.

"We all find what we're looking for, eventually," I heard Michael say, "if we know what it is we're looking for."

I know what I'm looking for, I thought. Do you?

When we arrived at my door I said to Michael, "I didn't get to thank Tina for lending me her clothes. Please tell her I appreciate it." I fingered the brass bells of the necklace. "I really must get something like this before I leave."

"That's mine, actually. But you can have it if you wish."

"I wish."

For the first time, I heard him laugh. "It doesn't take much to make you happy, does it?" he said. "A kind gesture, warm food. I remember the look on your face when you saw our garden."

It's going to take more than a landscaped garden to make me really happy, I thought. But as soon as I go home . . .

". . . didn't look like this at the time we built the school five years ago," Michael was saying. He had sat down on the stone steps by the door, facing the school yard. "We erected the buildings around the trees and rocks-"

"You speak as if you've held saw and hammer yourself."

"I have. I can even say I'm a better carpenter than teacher."

I sat down beside him. "You built that house you live in."

He nodded. "It's a long way from Malaybalay, but it's home."

For a second I was embarrassed that he'd read my mind earlier this afternoon. But when he looked at me his eyes seemed to say, It's all right, we're even now.

"I wish it would rain, though," he said. "It takes a lot of effort to water all this. Sometimes the ground is so dry the wind just lifts the dust off the road and blows it all the way to here. The leaves need their bath."

Right after he spoke the air around us suddenly changed. I looked up at the sky and it was as if the stars had heard him and had gone to fetch the clouds, thick gray clouds streaked with white lightning, thunder chasing them toward us. We sat there, dumbfounded, as the first drops of rain fell on the hillside.

It fell quietly, smoothing a blanket of solace over the school yard. I held out my hand to catch the droplets falling from the roof, forming a warm pool in my palm. As the rain intensified I pushed up my sleeves and held my arms out under the steady stream.

"I didn't do this to myself, you know."

"I didn't think you did."

"We were full of anger then. We were very young. There was this settlement in my hometown that was going to be torn down to make way for a shipbuilding facility. I went there to join the protest, took the baby along so my relatives there could see her. I'd convinced Paul to come with us. We'd leave Miranda with my aunts then go to the town plaza where the settlers had gathered. We were there for three days. On the third day the landowners brought in reinforcements. That's when things got out of hand."

I took a deep breath and told him about the shields and truncheons and the bullets, and the firemen's hoses that washed away the blood on the plaza. I told him how I had sat on the ground with Paul's head on my lap and how I had tried to smooth his hair, and failing because of the dark hole in his skull. I remembered the sound of his head hitting the pavement when the soldiers pulled me up and dragged me off. I told him about the intense light when they yanked off my blindfold, about the nodes that had been taped to my body, about how I had prayed that my inquisitors would turn the current on the highest setting right away so I could faint and not feel the other things that they did to me.

I stopped, cupped my hands under the rain and splashed the water on my face. It eased the sting in my eyes and I felt the flush on my cheeks subside.

"Paul's mother came to me later, when I was in hospital. She said she was taking Miranda away, in exchange for her son's life. Two days later I got a restraining order. I haven't seen my daughter since."

"How old is she?"

"Almost four. I'm trying to get her back, but I need money to do that so I came here. The company is paying me a lot for this assignment. I want to bring her somewhere peaceful, where she can grow up, go to school, have friends. Where I don't have to worry over where we're going to be the next day."

I turned to him and saw him looking strangely at me. I said, "I'd been wondering, you know, what someone with a name like yours is doing here." He grinned. "You hiding from the law or something?"

"No, not the law. And I'm not hiding. At least, not anymore," Michael said, looking out at the rain. "I had a girl back in Bukidnon. She was very pretty. And kind. I used to get up very early in the morning so I could go out in the fields with her at harvest time. We were going to marry." He sighed. "She caught a fever--just a mild one, her sister had told me. Then my parents sent me off on business deal in Manila and when I came back, she was dead. I'd always thought she could have lived, but her family had been too proud to ask for help. I realized I couldn't live there anymore, not with her memory, so I went away. I stopped at a few places, moved on. Then I found this place. I like it here. The people are friendly, and the kids are great. Didn't take long for me to decide to stay."

I breathed deeply and smiled.

"I love the way the ground smells when it rains."

"I like the frogs singing afterwards," Michael said, "like all the fields lifting their voices to heaven in thanks. Think I'll join them."

He stood up and walked into the rain, back to that landing where earlier today we had both stood in turn. I watched him, sentinel barely discernable through the curtain of rain. Then he stretched his arms to his sides, threw his head back and let the rain fall on his face. He stood there, for an eternity it seemed, until he slowly let one arm down and turned to me. I reached out through the rain until I felt his hand, warm and sheltering, on my palm.

At dawn, in my own clothes, I took a long walk and caught a jeepney back to Tibangâ. I stopped by the college to tell them I'd left the papers behind in Agus for them to pick up, then on to the pension house to pack. It was a ninety minute ride back to Agora, and another six hours by hovercraft to the place I called home.

An empty house, which I hoped to fill with the laughter of my daughter, when at last we would be reunited. It was a place where the sun rose over the sea, and quietly set behind the mountains leaving a bright orange glow in the sky as a promise to return the next day.

I showed up at our main office, got paid for my troubles and was granted a day of rest.

I went to the beach, to one of the last places in Marigondon where I could sit on the sand and feel the sun warm on my back. I stayed there all afternoon with my sleeves rolled up, planning my course for the following days, offices to visit, people to consult. But every now and then my thoughts returned to the south, where the sky had once given me a reprieve.

A peaceful place, where perhaps my daughter can grow up, go to school, have friends. Where I wouldn't have to worry over where we're going to be the next day. A place like this beach, where we can sit on the sand and write indecipherable wishes for the tide to read. Where we can get to know each other again, where I could hold her hand to my cheek, and kiss her hair.

When it rains she might sit with me by the window, and follow my eyes as I look through the downpour. When I look at her she would smile, and I would smile back. Perhaps on one of those days I will tell her about that place where the sun rises from behind the mountains and melts away into the sea. I will tell her, as we bathe in the afterglow of a hundred sunsets, where the necklace that I wear comes from, about the man who once sat beside me under the stars, wishing for rain.



Chapter One

1944

I was awake before the lamplight hit my eyes. My sister Amanda put the alcohol lamp noiselessly down on my bedside table. It was past midnight then, but she seemed not at all surprised to find me awake.

"Are we going away?" I asked her. Amanda put a finger to her lips even before I had finished my question. She nodded once and pulled me up gently.

"Put some warm clothes on, and your shoes. I'll help you pack your belongings."

I obeyed her immediately. So this was it, I thought to myself. I had pieced together bits of information I had overheard from my parents as they spoke about the war that was upon us. My father was a ship's captain, one of the very few who knew the waters around our islands, like the back of his hand. He had managed to make it home shortly after the war began, and from then on lived in relative obscurity tending my mother's gardens. Late in the afternoons he and my mother would talk quietly between themselves, and as the war progressed he would disappear for days. When once I asked my mother why my father would leave us like that, it was my brother Abel who told me to be silent, that my father did that to protect the rest of us.

Three days ago, unobserved by the rest of the family, I had watched from an upstairs window when my father went away at dawn with two men who were strangers to me. When he did not return that same day all my mother would say to me was not to worry, that my father was safe.

I was the runt of the family. The butt of all jokes. My eldest brother Abel always said I was named Renato to truncate what otherwise would have been a longer line of siblings, a tendency everyone believed, when parents gave their children names that began with the same letter. Being the youngest, I was the most protected, the first to be called at mealtimes, the last to know everything.

By the time I had finished dressing, Amanda was lacing up the brown canvas knapsack I had inherited from my brother Alex. She helped me put it on, and told me to wait in the kitchen for the rest of the family.

"Can we take Abucay with us?" I asked her. Abucay was my pet cockatoo, a present from an uncle in Davao when he visited us a few months ago.

"You'll have to set Abucay free," she replied, quietly. "There'll be no one here to take care of him."

I held back the tears that suddenly stung my eyes. I was eight years old, and I wanted my eldest sister to be proud of me. I nodded once and walked quietly through the house towards the backyard. As I passed my brother Alex's room I saw no light under his door, which was out of the ordinary. Alex

always had a light in his room because he wrote in his notebook all the time. Whatever he wrote he showed no one, except for one time when he was feeling generous, and allowed me to peek at a page that he had written. When I realized that I could not understand the words he had written, he had laughed and told me that was because the words were in Latin.

It was dark in the backyard. When I opened the door to Abucay's cage I startled him awake. For a moment, he seemed confused, then he pecked hesitantly at the space where the door should have been. He looked at me expectantly. I put my arm into the cage and he hopped on, as he usually did, walked gingerly all the way to my shoulder and rested there. I walked him to the banana grove ten yards away, found a tree stump and put him down. I yanked off a nearly ripe cardaba from a nearby tree, peeled it and placed it by Abucay's feet. He pecked at it once, and then again, this time with more enthusiasm. While he was occupied with the fruit I started walking back towards the house. I hadn't gone in through the door when I felt a familiar draft of air and found Abucay on my shoulder again.

"No," I whispered to him, "go back to the trees, you'll be safer there." I transferred him to my other arm, raised it swiftly and watched in dismay as he flew back to his cage. I thought of going back to take him out again, but I also knew that his instinct of self-preservation would eventually drive him back to the grove. I went inside and closed the door behind me.

Inside the house I found the rest of the family assembled in the sala. For the first time I saw both my mother and Amanda wearing trousers. It almost made me smile. I looked at Amanda and Abel and realized that they were almost identical, their brown khakis and their faces blurred in the half-light emphasizing their twinhood. Amelia, who was a year older than me, was holding mama's hand while she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes with her other hand. Abel and Alex hitched their olive green knapsacks, presents from Papa's last trip from Hongkong, on their backs. There was a tartanilla waiting outside the front door, on which our servants Beloy and Sening had piled our provisions. Mama told us to get on. She and Amanda blew out the remaining lamps and the house fell into darkness.

While Amanda waited by the carriage my mother stood by the front door, gazing at the empty house. Here she had lived since she and Papa were married. Here all her children had first seen the light. She closed the front door quietly, then, without another backward glance, climbed into the tartanilla beside Abel, who held the reins.

As we rode away I looked back at the house that I had known since I was born. It had been the venue of many joyous celebrations. I recalled colored paper lanterns hanging from the branches of the trees that surrounded it, rattan chairs around tables topped with pristine white linen, laden with food from my mother's gardens and animal pens. Then the war came. Now it stood in the middle of the mango grove, stark against the dark windows and the moonless sky, like a skull.

I asked my mother quietly if we were going to return here. "Soon," she answered. But as we rode off, I looked back at the house that was slowly obscured by the darkness, and I knew in my heart that I would never see it again.

(to be continued)

Poetry

Awit sa Mandaragat

Halika't sisirin
ang aking mga mata
pagmasdan ang mga isdang
bahaghari sa pagitan
ng korales.

Hulihin ang bahaghari
isilid sa garapon
takpan, iuwi, itago
sa dilim ng makitid mong
silid.

Kay gandang pagmasdan
kulay ng liwanag
lalo na't bumabagyo
at hindi maaaring
pumalaot.

Matalim ang korales
mailap ang isda.

Hamunin ang sarili
masugatan man, o malunod
O amining hindi ka marunong
lumangoy.

Birthright

(for Sir Leo D.)

My forehead bears the imprint of knuckles
of hands that smell of rose water,
Custom when I present myself, his wife,
To pews of aunts and uncles once removed.

As one they take my father's name,
roll it round their dentures like gum,
then politely turn away to spit out
the strange morsel so alien to the tongue.

Alien, indeed. Their hair fair as their speech
lispings affectations at which I smile:
What is white skin after all, but
a mere lack of imagination?

I retrieve my prized possession, the
one seed that remains of my birthright,
wear it around my neck in defiance,
talisman, armor, shield.

The Last Betrayal

There's nothing different in the way
she moves about so efficiently,
catering to his every whim.

In fact, she has bloomed much the way
he thought, seeing her then so callow,
now graceful as shadows should be.

It's only proper that she dress
lissome as a dancer for his eyes,
baring skin enticing, sultry
hints to unfold; she cleaves to him,
painted lips inviting touches where
violently she shivers in a breath.

She is as fate decrees, radiance
to his sun, burning all senses save
the one moment when she cries out
the name of a star.

Malong

"Ituring mo itong kaibigan."

Puwedeng itapis
pag ahon sa dagat
(patuyuing nakadikit sa balat)

Maaaring ipalupot ng maka-ilang ulit
iputong ng parang korona
(panangga sa init ng tanghali)

Tiklupin ng makalawa
isuot bilang palda, maikli o mahaba
(sing-ikli ng panahon, sing-haba ng gabi)

Ibalabal kung maginaw
Italukbong kung umuulan
(ingatang kuwag sumayad sa lupa)

Itali sa balikat
na parang saya
(kaunting sipag lang ng daliri)

Gamiting kumot
sa pagtulog
(para huwag pagpiyestahan ng lamok)

Hanapin sa loob
ang nakawalang panaginip
(magising ka man sa katotohanan)

Kinaumagahan.

Mobius

A mundane haven is all
this small world immeasurable

bound by time
so scarce angels cry
with each passing
second of your absence

locked by space
so dense screams die
under whispered
touches of your voice

obscured by meaning
so gray memory leaps
at the mere
snap of your fingers

caged by music
so haunting birds mourn
the unlatching of
the grilled gate

Immeasurably mundane is all
the world, to this small haven.

Panamilit

Kung ang adlaw sa kabuntagon
dili sama kadan-ag
sa imong pahiyum

Ug ang kaudtohon
dili sama kainit sa
panaad nga gibaton

Ug ang hapuhap sa hangin sa kahaponon
dili mga kamot nga sa makausa
misuroy sa akong bukobuko

Ug mga anino sa kangitngit
dili hunghong nga mabati
bisa'g nag-inusara

Ug ang tun-og sa kaadlawon
dili bukton nga hugot
migakus usa mibiya

Kasayon ra unta nimo
hikalimtan.

Sanayan lang yan

Sabi ng doktor
bawal daw
ang maalat
bawal
ang matamis
ang kumain ng maasim
ang walang humpay na paghithit
ng marlboro kahit na lights pa.
Sabi ng tatay
mahirap daw
ang masanay ng may kasama
mahirap
ang mag-isa
pagkatapos
ng ilang taong
buhay may-asawa.
Sagot ko kay doc
mahirap nga
magpakabusog
sa pagkaing
matabang,
ang matutong
kumain
para mabuhay.
Sagot ko kay tatay
bawal sa akin
ang masanay
sa lambing
mamihasa
sa masarap
na init
ng may kasiping.
Kung tutuusin
sanayan lang yan,
mabuhay
sa matabang
kumain
ng malamig
pumikit, matulog
ng mahimbing.

Sa ma-anad lang

Ingon ang doktor
guinadili kuno
ang parat
guinadili
ang tam-is
ang mokaon ug aslom
ang walay undang nga paghithit
ug marlboro bisan lights pa.
Ingon si tatay
lisod kuno
ang maanad nga naay kauban
lisod
ang mag-inusara
human
sa pipila ka tuig
nga kinabuhing minyo.
Tubag nakong doc
lisod tuod
mabusog
sa pagkaon nga
tab-ang
ang makat-on
ug kaon
aron mabuhi.
Tubag nakong tatay
ginadili kanako
ang maanad
sa parayeg
mahigalam
sa lami
nga init
sa pagdulog.
Hinuon
sa maanad ra mana
mabuhi
sa tab-ang
mokaon
ug bugnaw
mopiyong, matulog
ug mahinanok.

Sins of Omission

You sit at the table
with the red umbrella,
with no one to hear you belch
right after you lick the last
drop from the mouth of
your beer bottle.

You go home to your chair
at the dining table,
except there's no one there to
make you cups of coffee and
watch you sit and read
your newspaper.

You'd like to go out, see
a movie with someone,
but you cannot find a shirt
in the pile that she had left
behind unironed
the day she left.

You want to lie down, sleep
corners of your blanket
creeping around your arms and
legs as you embrace the soft
pillow that she used
to cry on.

Seaside, Dusk

(for CMG)

your hands are waves
my body undulates
to your touch

your embrace carries
me in its undertow
engulf me in your
ebbs and flows

your voice the flood
flash from the mountains
obliterates all but
my name on your lips

consume me

flood flow and meet
the sea, cover me
kiss the salt spray on
my lips, lick the
foam the tide drew
on the sand

rising again
your eyes the full moon
warns of another flood

drown me.

About the Author

Born Maria Marina Victoria Kapauan in 1963, Victoria Kapauan-Gaerlan started writing at the age where most girls were in high school, going out to parties and meeting boys. She even gave up high school so that she could attend the Silliman National Summer Writers Workshop in 1982. It did not seem to be a difficult choice to her at the time.

Primarily into fiction writing, she had a short spell of poetic inspiration, which produced most of the poems in this volume. More poems and short stories exist in the heaven where all good computer hard disks go when they die. They have yet to prove that there is such a thing as reincarnation.

She was a fellow to the UP National Writers Workshop in Diliman two years later. She believes that having been to the Dumaguete workshop steeled her for the butcher's shop that the UP workshop figuratively resembled.

In between I.T. work and family, she managed to show up at the MSU-IIT National Writers Workshop and Literature Conference in Iligan City in 1997, and then the UP Mindanao Workshop held in Davao a year after that.

In a brilliant display of delayed reaction, she has finally decided to gather her work in an e-book volume.

Co-workers know her as Vikki, family and friends know her as Bambit. She is married to Cris Gaerlan. They have a daughter, Himaya Amarantha, who adores her big brothers Xavier Lourenço and Athelstan Emil.