

IT IS IMPORTANT TO HAVE YOUR OWN VOICE in writing, but you don't need to force it. It will emerge naturally. It is a product of life—of your right and wrong beliefs, of your experiences whether good or bad, of your dreams and nightmares, of your wounds and scars. You don't have a voice yet because you are still hiding in the stories of others. What you must tell is your own story. After that, you will be able to tell the stories of others as well.

Listen to what others have to say but learn to walk alone. Observe the world and get involved.

There isn't just one story. There isn't just one way of storytelling. Not everything is just black or white. There is much in the middle, or on the edges. There is still so much we do not know, and you must be open to possibilities. To infinite possibilities.

If you want to be a writer, take care of your heart. Because everything comes from there. You cannot write if you do not feel anything.

You will never run out of material because there are so many stories. Go to places where you are not safe, because those are also the places where other people are not safe. When you face danger—for yourself and for others—in suffering, in darkness, that is where the true you will emerge. A you that is now ready to disappear from the lives of others, because in storytelling, in the end, what is always important is the life of the other person.

He didn't know why, but for the first time, he tried going alone to a bathhouse in Tomas Morato. Perhaps to prove to his father that it wasn't true he was naive to the world, perhaps to forget the Mystery Guy, perhaps because their professor said to go to places where you aren't safe. Or did he just not want to admit he wanted to end his virginity?

"What?" he imagined Mikee and the others would say. "If you're looking for sex, why didn't you just use Grindr?"

Just at the bathhouse door, he felt nervous that someone might recognize him. No one did. Most of the customers were older than him. They looked like they already had jobs. The receptionist asked him what he wanted. "Massage," he said, "and a steam bath."

After paying, he was given a scanner wristband for his locker. Then a towel and slippers were handed to him.

He undressed and put his clothes and cellphone in the locker. Then, wearing only a towel, he went to his cubicle.

After a few minutes, the masseur entered, carrying alcohol and lotion. The massage felt good, but it wasn't long before he was asked if he wanted "extra service." He was suddenly frightened. "Sorry, never mind," and he hurriedly got up and left.

Was he going to leave? No. He summoned his courage. He saw a man wearing only a towel, complaining because his belongings were allegedly stolen from his locker, forcing the staff to open other lockers. "Not allowed," the staff said. "That's a violation of the other clients' privacy."

Frightened, Joshua just went to the steam room. A man in a towel passed by, nearly bumping into him—full beard, muscular, like a weightlifter. *He could definitely lift me*, Joshua thought. Frontal bulge was prominent under the man's towel, pointed toward Joshua. Joshua quickly looked away. (*What's wrong with you*, he thought Mikee would say, *you go there and then you keep avoiding everyone!*)

"The towels are coded," the staff said, noticing his confusion. "There's top and there's bottom." Joshua panicked. The towel he got was for a "top." He didn't know what to do.

[The text continues discussing rumors of a ghost in the steam room.] Some said someone died there from heatstroke. Others said it was because of sex. Now, he wanders restlessly in the bathhouse.

Joshua didn't know if he would stay longer or leave. A man passed by, looking at him. Another one, also looking at him. He felt imprisoned by the stares. He couldn't escape the eyes that desired him. He quickly went to a corner and breathed deeply.

He went back to his locker, took his things, and used the wristband to open it. He took out his cellphone and, on impulse, went on Grindr. (*You went to a bathhouse just to use Grindr? Girl, you're crazy!*) Somehow, he felt a sense of security. A name popped up: Andre. The address was close to the bathhouse. Was that his real name? Maybe just an alter. He was asked, "What's your name?" "Joshua," Joshua said. Joshua thought for a moment, then tapped the album Andre had sent. Andre was handsome, fair-skinned, with bangs almost covering his eyes—looking like a Japanese lead in a BL [Boy's Love] series. 25 years old. Joshua took a chance and sent his photo.

Lust is fast, often without reason. Was it because of his desperate attempt to end his virginity? Or maybe because Mystery Guy's kiss served as a portal that opened other doors? If...

...before he couldn't do it, now Joshua just found himself at Andre's pad in Scout Limbaga near Morato.

Andre held Joshua's shoulders and pulled him close. Joshua felt a tickle when Andre's hair hit his face. Andre started to kiss Joshua. Joshua flinched when he felt Andre's lips wet his own. Andre pushed his tongue into Joshua's mouth. Joshua closed his eyes and no longer cared whether he saw Andre's eyes or not.

Joshua thought: at this hour in the whole world, how many want to end their virginity? How many are kissing? Are the "animals" Kring mentioned included?

Andre removed Joshua's clothes. He noticed Joshua was trembling. "Is this your first time?" Joshua nodded. Andre stopped, concerned.

But Joshua took Andre's trembling hand and placed it on his naked body.

Andre lowered his head and trailed his lips across Joshua's body. Every part of Joshua's body that Andre's mouth found was kissed and claimed, from the chest to the nipples to the thighs, like a colonial force, while Joshua writhed in pleasure and moaned. Until Andre's mouth found Joshua's member. While Andre was down there, Joshua thought...

...how if the world ended at this moment, would they die in this position?

Then Joshua saw the Mystery Guy, looking at him. Michael Kors returned, the rain at the waiting shed returned. That was the one he wanted to kiss. That was the one he wanted to possess his body.

Andre was reaching for the condom and lubricant in his side table drawer when Joshua held him and made him stop. Andre's eyes, almost hidden by his hair, were questioning. Joshua didn't know how to explain, but Andre understood. "You're not ready yet," Andre said. Joshua nodded, even though he knew there was another reason. He wanted someone else's kiss.

Holding hands, they just sat on the bed and talked. Only then did Joshua observe his surroundings. Everything was organized—the books on the shelves, the planner, the disk drives beside the desktop computer on the desk, the shoes lined up in the corner of the room. Not like his own messy unit.

Andre said he had only one past relationship, a man who worked with him at an advertising agency. They lasted for three years. But the man went abroad and now has a different partner. A foreigner. It was sad. He understood. For now, Andre was all about hookups, or friends with benefits. Fuck buddies. But he was getting tired of it. What he wanted now was a chest to lean on when falling asleep, someone who would still be there upon waking up the next morning. What he wanted was a real relationship.

Everything for Andre was planned. He planned his Graphic Arts course in college, moving out from his parents, and entering work as a graphic artist. He had a list of things to do every day, of goals for the year. This year, he planned to fall in love again.

"Can love be planned?" Joshua asked.

Yes, Andre replied. Then Andre mentioned he had a sister, Luchi, who was younger than him but more mature; she was his refuge even when they were children. She was like a constant ray

of sunshine. *A beautiful creature, my sister.* She always told him that she wanted him to be in love always. *Because when I am in love, I become a better person. And I believe her. Love makes one beautiful.*

Joshua nodded, wanting to believe.

"And when I find the person I will love," Andre said, "he's the one. For life, if possible. Even if I look at others, he is still the one I will see."

"But isn't it true that it usually doesn't last?"

"You have to work at it. 'I love you' isn't enough. You have to work at it. I admit I play around too, like now, while I'm not in a relationship. But the moment I love someone, I stick to one. To fall in love is to decide to stay in love. Loving is a decision," Andre repeated in Tagalog, "to remain loving."

Joshua looked at Andre with admiration.

Lately, Andre has been messaging Joshua often. *Lunch now, along with a meme of steaming rice. You worked hard again, tsk tsk tsk. Enjoy ur day.*

Sometimes he calls, usually at night. Just to check in. In their last conversation, he said he needed to sleep early because he had an early morning meeting at his office. "Where is your office?" "In BGC."

Joshua sat up from his bed. "You work in BGC?" he asked. His heart started to pound. "Yes," Andre said. "I'm a graphic artist for a company there."

Nervous for a moment, Joshua thought, then said, "Maybe you can help me, can we meet tomorrow?"

They were to meet at eight in the morning at Twinkle Café on 26th Street in BGC, but Andre was already there by seven-thirty. He couldn't explain his excitement. Why did Joshua want to meet so early? He doodled and doodled in his notebook while waiting, a habit he did when he was nervous, happy, sad, or feeling anything at all.

Joshua arrived exactly at eight. "Sorry, I'm early, I knew you had work," he said. "It's okay," Andre said. Joshua sat down and, despite feeling shy, told Andre everything about the Mystery Guy, including the several times he had returned to BGC hoping to see the man again.

Andre was smiling. "Are you laughing at me?" Joshua asked. "No," Andre answered. "I'm just jealous of your Mystery Guy."

Andre truly was jealous. He remembered his interrupted sex with Joshua—or was it lovemaking? There was no love involved. Or was there? Now he knew, it was because of this

Mystery Guy that they didn't continue. He felt a sting in his chest. He looked at Joshua's lips, wanting to kiss them again. He brushed the thought away.

"I'll help you find him," Andre said. "We need to have a strategy."

On paper, Andre drew a map of all the possible places the Mystery Guy could have come from before taking a Grab in front of Twinkle Café, and a map of where he might have gone from the waiting shed in Katipunan. Everything was very systematic. He was always good at planning; now he was planning the fate of someone else's heart. He wondered what Luchi would say.

They visited every place on the map one by one, hoping to chance upon the Mystery Guy. But an hour passed and they still hadn't found him.

Joshua sighed, blurting out that sometimes he just wanted to give up on everything. He wasn't sure about his writing, about his father, about the Mystery Guy—or if he even understood all the advice their teacher gave about writing; none of it was certain. Not like Andre, who seemed to always be sure.

Unintentionally, Joshua mentioned that he noticed the Mystery Guy wore a large pin on his collar. It had an image of a flying eagle, like an insignia.

"Bingo!" Andre said. (Sorry, Andre felt miserable inside.) "That's the insignia of Supersynergy Corp! Their office was in the Tower Building on 28th Street back then!"

Excitedly, they hurried to the Tower Building on 28th Street. It was a gray building with 40 floors. "Just right," Andre said, "9 a.m. is when those people start work. Let's wait for him."

Excitement and nerves mixed within Joshua. Suddenly, he didn't know what to do. He looked at the people walking around. There was a small woman pulling her chihuahua on a leash, while her other hand held onto a bonnet that might be blown away by the wind.

Andre's emotions were also mixed. He didn't know if he was truly happy or feeling defeated. All he knew was he wanted to hug Joshua because he looked so confused. Was he falling in love? Did he plan this love?

"Do you want me to stay with you?"

Joshua felt even more nervous, looked at Andre, and quickly smiled. "It's okay, just leave me here."

Andre felt rejected. (*What? Luchi would say to him later, you agreed not to stay with him?*) "Good luck," Andre said to Joshua. "Let me know what happens, okay?" (*I couldn't exactly force myself on him! Andre would say to Luchi.*)

Andre left Joshua. When he was a few meters away, he looked back. He saw Joshua still standing there, looking up at the Tower Building. Andre stopped himself from running back to Joshua. *Don't look for him anymore, it's just me, what is this pain I'm feeling?*

He couldn't understand himself. He, who was so good at planning and strategizing, he who believed you could...

...plan and control even love, why was he now so easily giving in to events, surrendering to the unexpected?

His face still stung as he started walking away. He passed a man and woman fighting. The woman threw her ring at the man. The ring rolled and fell into a sewer. Along with Andre's heart.

He called Luchi. "Do you want to meet up?" Luchi asked. "Some other time," Andre said. "I just want to hear your voice." "Don't neglect yourself," Luchi said. From the tone of her voice, she knew he was neglecting himself again.

Andre nodded, even though Luchi couldn't see him.

JOSHUA STOOD IN FRONT OF THE TOWER BUILDING. The morning sun hit the front of the building, struggling to brighten the dull gray color, but the day was not succeeding.

One by one, Joshua observed the people walking into the building. Those in suits like the Mystery Guy, with pins on their collars. Beside him, he could hear two men talking while walking; one said, "I'm always the third wheel, but I have my pride too. Let's form a third wheel society," the other joked. Across the street at the plaza, there was a large event. A famous Korean BL...

...actor was arriving to promote a skin-whitening product. Joshua was no longer interested. He was done with BL.

Suddenly, like a gust of strong wind that didn't even give a warning, the Mystery Guy passed in front of him, walking quickly, joining the crowd of people hurrying into the building.

The wind stopped moving. The people stopped moving. Joshua's heart leaped first before he quickly walked toward the building.

The man entered, swallowed by the building. Joshua entered quickly but was stopped by the guard at the lobby because he had no access card. Joshua watched as the man boarded the elevator. The elevator closed, pinching Joshua's heart.

When the guard was distracted, Joshua quickly slipped inside. He asked the front desk where Supersynergy Corp was. "The entire 2nd and 3rd floors," they said. Ha! He quickly boarded the elevator, looked at the 2nd floor, then the 3rd floor. Which floor? He asked the elevator girl.

Joshua breathed deeply. *Trust your heart*, he said to himself. "2nd floor," he said. The elevator stopped at the 2nd floor and he stepped out quickly. A very long row of doors appeared before him. Which one?

He walked down the hallway. What should he do, knock on every door? A door made a noise as it opened and he looked. A fat man came out, irritably cursing his boss. He looked...

...at Joshua, then continued walking quickly while complaining about his company, the entire neoliberal hegemony of capitalists who think of nothing but greed, greed.

Joshua approached a door and gathered the courage to open it. He looked at the people inside. They were like aliens from another planet who had suddenly seen a human. Joshua quickly looked around and, seeing that the Mystery Guy wasn't there, said sorry and left quickly.

Was he going to do this for every door? He tried a second one, then a third. Then he stopped. He needed to change strategy, like what Andre would think of if he were here now.

Outside the building, he ate a hotdog while sitting on a bench, watching the people coming out. This was better. If he went around inside looking for the Mystery Guy, the man might leave without him noticing.

So he waited, sitting on the bench, as hours passed, as the people passed in front of him—some in a hurry, some discussing a movie ("*Were we watching the same movie? Why did you see something different?*"), a woman holding a broken high heel, someone eating a thick sandwich, picking out the vegetables and throwing them in the trash. The day moved slowly. What if the man had already left earlier...

...and he didn't notice? It's up to fate. It's up to God. It's up to my heart.

Around five-thirty, in the middle of a noisy crowd of men and women in uniform, just as the sun was setting over the gray building, he saw the man, walking out quickly, wearing a suit and tie with a large pin on his collar, holding a briefcase. Just like then.

The wind stopped again. Everyone else stopped. Only the man was moving. He looked toward the setting sun for a moment, then at his watch, and continued walking.

As for Joshua, quickly—"don't block me, wait, sorry, just a moment, where is he"—he was panting. Joshua was panting when he finally faced the Mystery Guy. The man looked at him. Michael Kors. Joshua was sure, a flash of recognition passed over the man's face, as if he recognized him.

Hope came alive in Joshua's heart. "That's me, that's me."

Joshua was still panting. "You're panting," the man said. Joshua laughed slightly, catching his breath. He nodded. "Sorry," he said. "I'm the one..." "I know," the man said. Then he smiled. Dimples appeared on both cheeks.

"I remember you! What happened that noon..." the man said. Joshua nodded again. He didn't know...

...why he kept nodding. "You want to talk?" the man asked. "There's a coffee shop nearby." Joshua nodded again, along with his thumping heart.

Inside the coffee shop, after they ordered coffee, the man looked intently at Joshua. The kind of look that sees into your soul. Joshua was feeling that nervous-thrill again. Everything he felt, everything he was thinking, felt like a piece of delicate and fragile porcelain held by the man, which could be dropped at any time.

"I kept thinking about what happened," Joshua said, "it stayed in my mind for a long time."

Then Joshua flinched, because the man said something he didn't immediately understand. So Joshua said, not knowing why it came out of his mouth, "I am gay," he said.

The man smiled, nodded, and then said, "I am straight. I am happily married."

The porcelain fell to the floor and shattered within Joshua. Along with it, the pieces of his heart scattered.

"Are you alright?" the man asked. Joshua nodded. "You want to talk some more?" Joshua shook his head. The man looked at him for a moment, concerned, then took a deep breath. He paid the bill. "Should I leave you now? I still have a meeting." Joshua nodded. The man left a tip on the...

...tray. The coffee that the man hadn't touched. Joshua didn't know what kind of storm had just passed.

He was holding back the emotions that wanted to rise, the tears that wanted to fall. *It's just a heartbreak*, he told himself, *my first heartbreak. It happens in life and in stories.* Then he quickly stood up, went out, and hailed an Angkas. What is it with Angkas that you always want to cry when the wind hits your face?

When he reached his pad, he quickly went in, quickly sat down, and then his tears quickly poured down like rain. He was sobbing, making a loud noise in his crying, wailing for something that was lost but was never really his—so why did it hurt so much? He continued wailing while outside the pad, some tenants were passing noisily, saying they were going to do videoke,

indifferent to what he was going through, while in the sky, clouds were covering half of the moon, while across at the waiting shed in Katipunan the rain was pouring down again, continuing their *What If?* in the lives of people.

Joshua wiped his tears. He hardened his heart. He won't love for now. He'll just focus on writing. He doesn't need the approval of others, of his father, or of the Mystery Guy. He imagined Sally saying, as she always said...

...it's okay, child. No one has ever loved without getting hurt, but it's okay, it's part of it.

He smiled. Then he cried even more. Because it's not true, it's not okay.

Joshua woke up the next morning with a heavy heart upon seeing Andre's message: *how r u since yesterday, what happened?* Joshua ignored it and went back to sleep. When another notification arrived—just a questioning face emoji—Joshua finally replied but lied. *it was ok yesterday, he said. i didn't see him. i decided to just forget him.* He didn't answer Andre's subsequent messages.

When evening came, he still felt a heaviness in his body as he went to Mikee's place to invite her to Pop Up. Mikee had just finished dinner. After her mother, Aling Masing, offered Joshua dinner and he declined, Aling Masing went to the back of the house to do the laundry. Aside from her job at a slipper factory, she also took in laundry, which she did at night.

"Let's just not go out," Mikee said. "Kring and Hannah aren't here either. I think those two had a fight. And Lance is with his girlfriend again. Besides, I know you; you only come here when you have a problem. So, what is it this time?"

"I still don't have any material [for my writing]." "Is that really your problem?" Joshua didn't answer. "Did something happen with the Mystery Guy?" Joshua still didn't answer. "Did he reject you?" "He's straight, and he has a wife."

Mikee looked at Joshua. "It hurts," Joshua said. "And I feel ashamed of myself." "Why be ashamed? At least you found out early." Joshua didn't reply, looking like he was about to cry. His phone notification sounded. It was Andre. "Is he courting you?" Mikee asked. "I don't know." "Why don't you give him a chance?"

Joshua looked at Mikee. The truth was, he wanted to avoid Andre because Andre only reminded him of the Mystery Guy. Instead, he said, "This business of loving is so complicated." Then he asked Mikee, "How about you, how do you deal with heartbreaks?"

"Hey, you just assumed I've had a heartbreak! Well, yes, but only once. Before, I really avoided having a boyfriend. My priority was my mom. You see her, even at night, she's still working. I want to be the one to stop her from working someday. We'll rent a nicer place. I'll give her the comfortable life she's never experienced."

It was true, Joshua thought. In their group of friends, Mikee looked the most "high-end," but she was actually the most frugal. Her clothes were all recycled, yet she found ways to make them look beautiful. She worked incredibly hard—hiring herself out to do TikTok live selling for wigs, bras, and whatever else. Sometimes she even hired herself out as a reader of romance novels on the Internet.

Joshua looked around the small home. The dining area and kitchen were cramped, and only a few people could fit in the living room. But there was a scent of love in the stacked laundry waiting to be ironed, in the clean dish rack despite its small size, in the single fan in the living room, the few chairs, and the leftover food covered with a plate on the table.

Mikee began to tell her story. "I was twenty then, in my 'flirting' phase. I just tried it, on Grindr. I didn't know back then that on Grindr, trans women are at a disadvantage; few will go for them. But there was Rocky; he became interested in me right away. I put up with it at first, even when he would always walk ahead of us whenever we had a date at a restaurant because he was embarrassed to be seen with me. He was afraid people might notice. He said he wanted to love me but in secret. (How ridiculous, I fought so I could finally come out, and then once I'm in love, I'm supposed to hide again? But I still accepted him!)"

"Until one afternoon, he was early for our date at the mall. He heard his friends teasing him—'Rocky, we heard you're dating a transsexual; you're becoming a gay man now, pal.' 'No, man,' Rocky replied, 'it's just an experiment, because they said transsexuals feel good, like a buy-one-take-one, a man and a woman in one!'"

"While Mikee was walking out of the mall, blood was dripping from the wound in her heart; others might have slipped on it."

"I cried and cried. I didn't let my mom know. Do you know who gave me the best advice? Your mommy."

Joshua was slightly surprised to hear this, although he knew Mikee was his mother's favorite among his friends. It was probably because she saw her late Auntie Erich in her. Sally was always giving Mikee gifts, clothes, and beauty products, even when there was no occasion. Mikee even felt embarrassed sometimes.

Sally's advice to Mikee back then: "Love doesn't come easily to people like us, but don't measure your worth based on another person. You are the one who sets your own value. Just trust your heart. What's important is you know when to open your heart and when to close it."

So that's what she did. She cried over what happened all night, and the next day, she closed her heart—she only opened her body; she was going to get even with this judgmental world. She wore her most striking outfit—a very red skirt and high pumps, full red lips and sequins on her eyelashes—then went out. She went on dates with just about anyone (at their expense, of course), at the mall, bars, parties, even if she was scared there might be some fetishists among her dates, maybe a serial killer, many alters—oh my, I might have a 'trans-atlantic' experience!

Once a man tasted her, she would leave them begging for more. "Suffer," she thought. That was her peak "delulu" moment!

But who was she fooling? What she really wanted was a true love. So when she met David, she really wanted to open her heart again. At night, she imagined being held tight by him in bed, spooning her. Once, she even posted on Facebook about being ready to love; she spent the whole day waiting for David to like it. When he liked it, her heart opened wide with joy.

They had another date with David. This time she wasn't afraid to enter the restaurant with him. After eating, they walked in the park, and there, under the dim light of a lamppost, David asked if he could kiss her.

Mikee looked at David. As the light from the lamppost hit his face, he looked like Barbie's Ken. Mikee tried to restrain herself—*not yet, somersaulting heart, stay still, lustful self*. But how can one stop a rushing river of desire?

They ended up at David's condo unit. He had three Persian cats, which he immediately introduced: Mini, Mani, and Moni. Then he told a story—did you know, from the 13th to the 18th century, animals could be put on trial in France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and other countries? There were actual cases where pigs, horses, cows, and others were charged with harming a child or another animal, or other crimes. When found guilty, they were either hanged, strangled, or burned.

"That's crazy," Mikee said.

David also explained why his cats were named Mini, Mani, and Moni. It was because he was dyslexic; he used to struggle to distinguish letters and sounds. He challenged himself by naming the cats. At night, it was like a repeated exercise for him saying, "Mini, Mani, Moni."

After some passionate kissing, it wasn't long before they undressed. David undressed too. Mini, Mani, and Moni meowed. David wasn't surprised, and as for Mikee, when she saw David's body—a man's body even if she had boobs, since she was still a 'work in progress'—she stared at David's member hanging there. David stared at Mikee's member hanging there. "Mine is useless," Mikee thought. What if he doesn't like my body? But there was no hesitation on David's face; only desire was there.

Mikee didn't want her sex partner touching her genitals, let alone a blow job. David understood all of this. He was patient with her, as Kring once said... what did Kring say about life being like a wheel?... how could she remember that when she was moaning in pleasure with David on top of her... sometimes you're top, sometimes you're bottom... but the scent of a man, who said it, the scent of a man is fragrant...

Mikee was very happy after they made love, but she couldn't help thinking: does he really accept me, or is this just an adventure for him, an experiment to prove his fantasies?

"No," David said when she asked him. Then he admitted that this was his first time being attracted to someone like Mikee. He said his previous girlfriend was a cis woman.

Mikee couldn't help but be impressed by David's use of the term "cis woman." He knew a lot. "I did research after we met," David said. "I will always use the right pronoun with you. And I will always be proud of you."

And to prove he had studied a lot about gender, David told her about what he had read regarding Tamblot, a *babaylan* who led a revolt in Bohol against the Spaniards. Even back then, there was no indication in our language whether a person was "he" or "she"; we only used "siya," which is why many historians say the truth is Tamblot was transgender. Tamblot had many followers, especially when he said they were being protected by a goddess. In their last encounter with the Spanish soldiers, it rained heavily, and he said it was sent by the goddess to make it hard for the soldiers. But over a thousand soldiers attacked, and they had many weapons against Tamblot's small gun and stones. Before long, Tamblot and his group were defeated and killed.

Mikee could hardly believe that a dyslexic businessman like David would be so "in-the-know" about gender.

"So, are you together now?" Joshua asked. Mikee shook her head. She still needed to be sure she wouldn't be hurt again. As Sally had advised, her priority was to protect her "close-open" heart. Even if at night she couldn't sleep and just heard herself repeatedly whispering, *Mini, Mani, Moni*. She still needed to put David through three tests. David had only passed Test Number 1: to be accepted by him and not be ashamed of her both in private and in public.

"What's Test Number 2?" "To be liked by my mom."

As Joshua looked at Mikee, he was envious of Mikee's love for her mother. He also felt a surge of love for this friend whom he always ran to, a breathing space for his grievances, but in truth, it felt like he was only truly getting to know her now. He approached and suddenly hugged Mikee.

"Oh, what's this, bes!" Mikee said. "Nothing," Joshua said. "I just appreciate you." "Shush!" Mikee said.

Then Joshua had a thought. "What if I write about a trans woman like you? Maybe '24 Hours in the Life of a Trans Woman'?"

"That could work," Mikee said. "You know how hard it is to be a trans woman, right? People always misgender you. They always insist you're a man. Especially if you're not a 'cis-passing' trans. You really have to look like a woman. Otherwise, they'll mock you. Especially if you're muscular and have broad shoulders. What are you going to do, have your shoulders chopped off?"

"But even if you're 'passing,' it's still hard to find a date. If your date is Filipino, people will think it's for money. If it's a foreigner, they'll think it's for the 'exotic' factor or a green card. Or maybe you're a sex worker."

"Sometimes I just want to kill myself. Everything others get easily, we always have to work harder for. But then I think of Nanay. Why would I give up? I will fight. After all, being trans is naturally about being a fighter. Since birth, she has been fighting the sex assigned to her. As she grows up, she also fights the labels forced on her by society. My existence is a form of resistance."

Mikee was only a month old when Aling Masing found her under a tree beside a church. There was a safety-pinned note on the swaddle, which was very dirty from a mix of urine and feces. Under the hot sun, Aling Masing struggled to make out the letters. She hadn't been able to study and didn't know how to read well. A taho vendor approached and read what was written. "Michael," it said. "Michael," Aling Masing repeated. It was such a beautiful name. Then she took the baby home and raised him.

Michael loved to snuggle with his mother when he slept. He loved her scent; he loved touching her body. He watched her bathe naked with total wonder. He thought that as he grew up, he would be just like her. When he looked at his own body, he saw something different there; he didn't have breasts yet and had something hanging below, but he thought that someday as he grew up, he would be just like his mother and her body.

Once, when Mikee was 11, Aling Masing called him. There were piles of clothes that Aling Masing had just finished washing and was hanging at the back of the house. "Michael, come here and help me so we can finish this." Michael came out, wearing Aling Masing's red dress. Even her panties, which were almost falling off because they were too big. He had even put a little makeup on his face. Aling Masing gaped, as if seeing an apparition in the middle of the laundry. "It's still me, Nay, and from now on, please call me Mikee."

Aling Masing nodded, then took Mikee's hands, which were full of callouses and had hardened from working in the slipper factory and doing laundry. "Whoever you are, child, I know you're still mine. Come on, Mikee, help me here."

A week after that, Mikee's teacher sent for her at school. This was the teacher who went around the classroom to cut the long hair of the students. "Why did you write 'girl' on the form, Michael, when you're a boy?" "My child is a girl," Aling Masing said.

While walking home, Mikee hugged her mother so tightly they almost fell. Her mother was going to treat her to her favorite chicken feet using her saved lunch money. "If any of your classmates mock you because of the way you pee, tell me and I'll report them."

As Mikee grew up, she watched her body in the mirror. It wasn't like her mother's yet, or other women's, but someday, she knew, her body would soften and her breasts would grow. She

wasn't sure about the thing between her legs. It was like a stray stranger on her body. "Useless," it was just there. Her mother even spent money to have it circumcised. Sometimes she wanted to say, "Hey, what are you doing there?"

She would scowl, then shrug. Someday the time would come when she would tuck away that stranger, or maybe tape it when joining beauty pageants so it wouldn't be too bulging—"stay there for now, don't be restless."

Mikee started taking micropills (because they were cheaper) in college. She and Aling Masing watched the "magic" change in her body together. "Nay, notice the muscles are gradually lessening! My chest is starting to have little bumps. I'm having 'buging' [buds] now, Nay!" "What 'buging'?" "Breasts!" "So happy! Every day they joyfully poked her breasts. Hello, bugging! Hello, breast!" "Will they grow unevenly?" Aling Masing asked. "Oh, cringe!" "What do you mean?" "Cringe means 'kadiri' [gross], Nay!"

Now, when she looks in the mirror, she smiles. The child who only dreamed of buying a Barbie and playing Chinese Garter, the child who didn't have her own body, is now this; what she sees in the mirror is finally the real her.

But she looked at the stranger hanging below her. She didn't want it here (because of the pills, it was shrinking and her libido was decreasing; it was easier to tuck now) but she still needed to take care of it every day, clean it, avoid hurting it. Someday, she promised herself, she would part ways with it. The stranger below her twitched, maybe it was scared. She smiled as she dressed and tucked it between her thighs.

"I have a thought for what I could write," Joshua said, "but I won't do it." "What is it?" "A stage play, conversations between a trans woman and her penis." Mikee laughed. "Yeah. Why don't you do it?" "It would be better if it was a comedy. I can't do it yet."

Mikee had once complained to Joshua about her expenses for pills; she worked so hard selling wigs, bras, and whatever else online, but it still wasn't enough. "Maybe she should just take that source of pills that's questionable but cheap."

Joshua told Sally about this, so Sally offered help. Mikee refused. "She's right, Mom," Joshua said. "Don't meddle in other people's lives. She's your friend too, so she's not 'others,'" Sally replied.

Sally didn't tell Joshua. She went to Mikee's house one afternoon and told the story to her and Aling Masing—performance level, wholehearted and soulful—about how her late brother Erich's small hut was being taken over by a large body, so it was like Erich lived again in front of them, wearing the loose clothes Sally gave her; she was so beautiful, only it was a short-lived life, killed while defending someone else's life. While crying during the story, Mikee and Aling Masing accepted the "war gift" from Sally.

"You're lucky to have your mommy," Mikee told Joshua. Joshua thought about his shortcomings with his mother, then nodded. "You too," he told Mikee, "you're lucky to have your mom. We're not both lucky in the same way," Mikee said.

Mikee patiently explained things to her mother, like the time they and her orgmates from *Makulay* (a campus organization fighting for gender rights) would hold an AOM, because she didn't want her mother to be embarrassed by others, especially her neighbors. "What is AOM?" "Arouse, organize, mobilize, Nay. We go around to educate people to be sensitive to gender issues." "And what is this 'LGBTik'?" "Oh, Nay, LGBTQIA+, it means lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, and others. There are people who aren't just woman or man."

"You've just become letters?" "No, Nay! We're real people! For me, we're people." "Of course, Nay. But did you see the 'plus' sign? It means more letters will be added; we're evolving every day. Because human sexuality is complex, especially for us Filipinos. You can't just box it into this or that label. Unlike what we're being led to believe that if you're a man, your position is fixed and you're always higher than others. Everyone—gay, bakla, trans, educated or not, rich, ugly, beautiful (like me), all have equal rights."

She didn't tell her mother that at those very hours in other places, there was a trans woman who wasn't accepted at work, or was being harassed, insulted, or complaining to the police about being raped but being told by the police, "well, you wanted it, didn't you?" Or being killed. She didn't tell her mother that one day in their Gender Studies subject, they talked about Jennifer Laude, a trans woman killed by a US Marine in Olongapo on October 11, 2014. Jennifer was found slumped with her head in a toilet, having died of strangulation and drowning. The soldier was charged and imprisoned but after five years was allowed to return to America.

She didn't tell her mother that when she was twelve and already cross-dressing, she watched the news on TV about Jennifer Laude, and while looking at her face, she was terrified because they looked alike. "You could be killed just for being what you are!"

She didn't tell her mother that in the entire Philippines now, or in the whole world, there are still so many trans women afraid to come out, living in corners. There is still no law that truly protects them.

But she told her mother that before the Spaniards arrived in the Philippines, everyone was equal. There was power even for women, even for those men and *bakla* who cross-dressed then. Gender then was not based on your body but on your role in society. We Filipinos are more accepting, we don't box people. But the Spaniards changed all that. Even our names were changed; they made it so that for women the last letter should be "a," and for men "o." There was more power and privilege when you had "o" as your last letter.

"That's why I have trust in the letter 'e,'" Aling Masing said. "Cringe!" "Ha ha, love you, Nay!" One day, while helping her mother fold the ironed clothes, she asked, "Are you happy with your life, Nay?" "Of course, child. Why?" "I want to be happy too."

Mikee had Aling Masing use Tinder to find a boyfriend. "Or maybe what you want, Nay, is a girlfriend?" But she was reportedly content. She didn't even want to tell stories about whether she ever had a love life.

"You helped me, Nay, to become who I am, so I want to help you become who you want to be. You're not just a mother, you're a woman too."

But Aling Masing said she didn't need to be anyone else. Being Mikee's mother was enough. Touched, Mikee hugged her mother—"no read, no write," the most educated person she knew in the whole world.

"Didn't you ever have the desire to know your real parents?" Joshua asked Mikee. "Never," Mikee said. "Nanay is enough for me. Even when I grow old and get married, even when she's very, very old, I will never leave her."

"Maybe I can interview your mom?" "Oh, she'll be shy! But come with me to Divine's wake tomorrow; maybe you can interview Divine's mom." "Who is Divine?"

DIVINE'S BODY WAS FOUND, 24, IN THE RIVER at the end of Nagtahan Bridge in Sta. Mesa, face turned toward the sky as if her open eyes were still asking a question. Her long blonde hair waved in the dirty water along with bottles and rusty cans, entangled in water lilies. When Divine graduated from high school, she wrote in her slam book: *To be the best person I can be.*

Divine and Mikee used to join beauty pageants together. Only flowers covered Divine's chest (where there was nothing, truth be told) while smoky eye shadow shimmered on her eyelids and golden flecks dotted her thighs. Maria Makiling was her motif. Mikee, meanwhile, wore elegant brocades and clouds of tulle, then a headdress with red feathers. You wouldn't see even a tiny bump between their thighs. They sang Gloc-9's *Sirena* while dancing. They always lost, but Divine's fighting spirit was intense. Eventually, only she continued to compete.

Among the first to arrive at the wake were Joshua and Mikee, along with Kring and some of Mikee's "orgmates" from Makulay. Lance wasn't there; he reportedly had a date with his girlfriend. Hannah wasn't there either; she and Kring were still in a fight.

"Forget it," Kring said when Mikee asked about Hannah, but she was visibly agitated. The world isn't right when a day passes without her seeing Hannah. Now she couldn't think of anything else but Hannah—removing the vegetables from her pizza because she knew Hannah hated vegetables; she was gifted ten kisses, they actually counted them, on Valentine's Day; "let's not buy flowers, that Valentine's thing is just commercialized nonsense."

She didn't like being dependent on other people, but this belief broke when she met Hannah. It had been two days since they had talked or seen each other, and she was fighting the temptation to call her.

Even as a child, Kring learned from her father not to be dependent on others. When her mother left her father to go with another man (when they woke up, everything in the house, including

the money, was gone), her father spoke to Kring and said from now on, child, it's just the two of us. We won't rely on others; we'll make it on our own.

The father and daughter slept hugging each other. Only once, that night, did Kring hear her father seemingly sob, but from then on she never heard him mention or even utter her mother's name again. And they managed.

DIVINE'S MOTHER WEPT AS SHE RECOUNTED at the morgue how she argued because the doctor insisted on putting Divine's birth name, Pascual. Even at the precinct, they recorded the name as Pascual and the sex as male.

"My child fought for the name Divine her whole life," her mother said, "but now they're just casually reverting it to the old one!"

"You've already been killed, and yet they're still erasing you," Mikee said.

"In this country where killing is so easy," Kring added. "They can just accuse you of being a pusher or an addict or a communist; if they just get mad at you because you're trans, you're dead!"

There were more than 50 recorded cases of killings of trans women just this past year, she added. Probably many more haven't been documented.

"Have we forgotten that women, cross-dressing gay men, and effeminate men were worshipped before the Spaniards arrived?" Kring continued. "Some of them even became *babaylans*. Who knows, there might have even been trans people in the Katipunan."

Joshua and Mikee didn't answer. Sometimes Kring wondered if they were just humoring her—Mikee, who always listened to her stories but was happy in her role as a mix of news patrol, trivia book, and gossip. There was so much information stored in her head, but of all this, the most important information was about her father and Hannah: five feet four, simple dresser, cute with a touch of shyness, adorable, and someone she always wanted to kiss.

Sally arrived. As usual, whenever she entered with her flowing flowery dresses and her bulk, her presence took over the whole place. Everyone looked, including Joshua. Following Sally were some of her colleagues from the NGO, carrying a streamer asking for justice for Divine.

Sally was surprised when she saw Joshua. While saying hi to those she passed, Sally approached Joshua and kissed him, squeezed Mikee's arm, nodded at Kring, then approached Divine's mother and handed her an envelope. Divine's mother expressed her thanks. Sally held her shoulder and assured her that her NGO would help with whatever was needed for Divine's case.

Mikee whispered to Joshua that maybe they could find time later to ask Divine's mother if it was okay to interview her. Sally approached and pulled Joshua to join her in getting food; she had been hungry for a while. Sally also told Joshua that Chef Lari and Ma'am Amor had just called

from Canada, sending their regards and repeating their thanks for when Erich saved Ma'am Amor.

In front of the food table, Sally couldn't decide whether to get *tokwa't baboy* or *arroz caldo*.

"Why don't you get both?" said a voice behind her.

Sally turned and was startled. Ping was there, smiling—fair-skinned and tall, seemingly unchanged in appearance since the last time they met. His certain movements were still there. Joshua also looked over at him.

Sally remembered, many years ago, one afternoon they accidentally met at the mall. Joshua was with Sally, who had been single for a year then. Ping was with his wife, who was introduced as Grace, and their child who was about three years old, Pol. They had just returned from Canada and were living here. Ping's dream of an organized life had finally come true. Grace looked like an organized woman—in her dress, in her movements; even her body structure looked organized.

"It's a good thing you backed out of our wedding," Ping said jokingly then. "I found Grace." Sally smiled, not knowing whether to feel insulted or to slap Grace, who was also smiling. On the spot, they decided and baptized Joshua and Pol at the same time; Sally would be Pol's godmother, and Ping would be Joshua's godfather.

Sally told Ping then that she had no regrets about what happened to them. For her, there were no failed relationships; whether it lasted a few months or a few years, it was still a relationship. You still loved each other and made magic. There was no requirement to last long. There's also no such thing as a "great love" for her. Everything is a great love. No one is superior.

"I didn't expect to see you here!" Sally said. "You too," Ping replied. "How are you? It's been a long time since we saw each other."

"I'm okay," Sally replied. Then she pointed to Joshua. "Joshua, your godson."

"Hi, Joshua, do you remember me?"

"Yes, Godfather. How are you?"

"Where's Pol, by the way?" Sally asked.

"He's just there, probably in the CR."

"So, why are you here?" Sally asked. "Do you know them?" She gestured toward Divine's mother.

"He's the lawyer helping with the case we're following up," Joshua replied. "He's the lawyer helping Divine's mother."

Sally nodded. "How is... what's your wife's name again?" Truth be told, what Sally really wanted to ask was, *how is your organized wife?*

"Grace? She's good. She didn't come because of work."

"How many kids do you have now?"

"Just Pol. We didn't follow him up with another. Even though Ping wanted many children."

Ping thought: Sally was the only woman he knew who was so comfortable in her own body. From then until now. And he admires that.

Sally thought: How strange life is. One time, you love a person so much, and then the next time you feel absolutely nothing for them.

Joshua thought: If this were like the stories that repeatedly appear in movies and TV, Sally and Ping would find out they still love each other—the wrong love at the wrong time. The love that died would be laid out in a coffin as well.

Pol approached and was introduced by Ping. "You were still a child, Pol, when I last saw you," Sally said.

"Hi," Pol said to Joshua.

"Hi," Joshua said to Pol.

"You're godbrothers," Ping said. "Sally is Pol's godmother. And I'm Joshua's godfather," Ping said. Then Ping and Sally laughed.

Joshua noticed that Pol seemed restless—fidgety, his eyes constantly darting around, as if he wasn't sure if he was in the right place.

But he also noticed how loving and attentive Ping was to Pol. Occasionally he would touch Pol's shoulder or whisper something to him. Joshua felt a pang of envy and quickly looked away.

He looked for Divine's mother. He wasn't sure if she still wanted to be interviewed. He really wanted to talk to Aling Masing. But truth be told, he wasn't sure if it was still about trans women that he would write. He sighed; he wanted to kick himself for being so fickle.

Carrying the food they got, Sally and Ping went to a corner. Pol and Joshua were left behind.

"So," Sally said to Ping, "what's the case you said you're helping the lawyer of Divine's mother with?"

Ping thought for a moment before answering. "We're helping the family of Pol's boyfriend."

"Boyfriend..." Sally said. She immediately thought they both had gay children.

"Tonyo is missing, Pol's boyfriend. We suspect he was taken by the military."

Sally didn't immediately respond to what she heard. "Sorry, I didn't know..."

"It's alright," Ping said. "We're doing everything to find him."

Sally and Ping looked toward Joshua and Pol. They were at the other end of the hall. "I think," Pol said, "I told Daddy about Tonyo."

Joshua's gaze shifted to Pol. "Tonyo is the boyfriend, right?" Pol said. "He was taken by the military. They still can't trace where he is."

Joshua was surprised by what he heard. He looked closely at Pol. There was a strange sadness in his eyes.

"But..." Pol said, "actually it's more than that." Then Pol went silent, as if weighing whether to continue what he was going to say. Joshua waited.

Pol looked at a large streamer that had just arrived, brought by a group of trans people, with *Justice For Divine* written on it. Mikee and Kring were helping to hang it.

Pol turned to Joshua. He was gauging what Joshua's reaction would be to what he was about to say. "Tonyo and I met," Pol said.

Joshua wasn't sure if he heard correctly. "I thought he was missing?" Mikee and Kring were in a commotion, arguing about where to hang the streamer. Mikee pulled Divine's mother to help them decide.

"It's a bit complicated," Pol answered. "No one believes me." Then he looked at Joshua. Joshua could tell Pol wanted to tell the story. "If you want," Pol said, "let's meet tomorrow, I'll tell you everything."

Joshua nodded without hesitation.

Here is the translation for the next set of pages. As before, I have omitted all headers and page numbers to focus solely on the narrative content.

AT A SMALL COFFEE SHOP IN KATIPUNAN, Joshua and Pol met the next afternoon. Not far from them, someone entered, dressed simply but obviously a trans woman. A few people dining looked over briefly. A few feet away, her male date followed subtly. Before long, they were seated across from each other.

"She's shy about them entering together," Joshua said, referring to the trans woman's companion. Pol nodded slightly. He still couldn't settle down. He gulped some coffee and looked

around again. That "lost look" was still in his eyes, Joshua thought. There really are people like that. They are there, and yet not there.

"Dad said you're a writer," Pol said.

"Just trying to be," Joshua said. "I'm taking Creative Writing at UP."

"Maybe you have a better chance of believing me," Pol said. "Dad and Mom don't want to believe. Even Tonyo's parents. When I tell them the story, Tonyo's mother just cries."

"Why, what happened?" Joshua asked.

Pol looked at Joshua, as if gauging him. Then he began to tell the story.

BACK THEN, TONYO ARRIVED AT NIGHT, suddenly knocking on Pol's bedroom window at their house in Sta. Mesa. Lately, Ping had talked to him about it, saying he shouldn't pass through the window anymore because it was dangerous, and that Tonyo was welcome in their home.

Tonyo always brought a bag of dirty laundry. Pol noticed that some of his underwear had holes; sometimes Pol would buy him new ones. Tonyo would shower while Pol prepared food. He was always starving, as if he hadn't eaten for days. Once he had eaten and they were ready for bed, he would kiss Pol, thank him for always being there, and then tell stories—stories of the oppression of the poor and stories of their struggle to achieve a free tomorrow. Our history of struggle is lush, and we need to look back at it if we want to reach our destination. The present is rooted in the past.

Pol would listen all night, being teased as "petite-bourgeois" by Tonyo because his involvement only went as far as the rallies at their school back then.

The oppression and repression of an unjust system, Tonyo continued, is not just a fight for workers, farmers, and women, but also for us gay people. It is not separate from the feudal system and gender rights. So sacrifices are needed. That's why, Tonyo said while pointing to Pol's chest, you need to strengthen that.

Even when they were children, Tonyo was Pol's protector—against class bullies, against a teacher who humiliated Pol, even against a stray dog that almost bit him.

They were thirteen when they first kissed, in the CR behind the school. An innocent kiss, seemingly just a brush and unintentional. But in college, after a rally at school where many students lay on the road to protest the entry of military mobiles, while the two of them were the only ones still intentionally lying on the side of the road, Tonyo turned and kissed him.

From then on, the two of them protected Tonyo, who in turn protected the nation. In the subsequent snake rally, protesting random mandatory drug testing, dress codes, and other campus issues, while they were banging on classroom doors for students to walk out, Tonyo

made sure they were always side-by-side so he could protect him. While they were going around and other students were on the stairs circling down the floors like a snake, he would smile lovingly at him and hold his hand; until they all reached the ground floor where the crowd grew; they threw off their clothes and blocked the south wing of the building. They were showered with water cannons and beaten with batons, but Tonyo shielded Pol so he wouldn't get hurt. He was always safe as long as Tonyo was there. Tonyo loved him, and he loved the nation, and if that was the case, he loved the nation too.

Before long, Tonyo dropped out of school, became even more active in community organizing, deleted his social media, was swallowed by the movement, swallowed by the underground, swallowed by the darkness, swallowed by places Pol didn't know where, what, or when, until one night he would arrive—a hug, a kiss, tears, Tonyo, don't leave first, Tonyo, when will you return—Tonyo's eyes whenever he returned had witnessed blood, sorrow, violence; eyes that were aging, eyes that were angry, eyes that he felt in Tonyo's hug, as if Tonyo wanted to squeeze him, to fight the force squeezing him. He wanted to be Tonyo's protector but he couldn't. All he could do was accept him wholeheartedly every time he arrived in the darkness of night, bringing his dirty clothes and stories of struggle.

In their rare meetings, he always expressed his regret that they weren't both active in the movement. His dream was for them to get married in the movement, and that would only happen if they were both involved. But Pol wasn't ready to embrace Tonyo's beliefs. When Tonyo said that the rising price of *galunggong* had an effect on their love, he didn't believe it. When Tonyo said their love for each other was important, but the welfare of the nation was more important, he didn't believe it. He thought, when we're together in bed, will you still remember the nation?

Whenever they made love, Pol saw Tonyo's body hardened by a life of poverty, and further hardened by an underground life. In the rhythm of their naked bodies and while the dangerous hours moved forward, Pol heard Tonyo whispering in his ear—I love you, Pol, you are my nation, my family, my everything.

After they made love, while Tonyo was sound asleep, Pol made it a habit to use a flashlight to illuminate his face. Once, Tonyo woke up and asked him why he was doing it. He didn't know, he just wanted to.

Maybe it was because he was watching over Tonyo, any moment he might lose him, swallowed by the danger outside.

But he would also fall asleep from exhaustion, and upon waking in the morning, Tonyo would be gone. Only to return on another night. Stay here, don't leave, what is this "struggle" thing. Tonyo wanted to leave while Pol was asleep. He didn't want goodbyes.

One day Ping told Pol that he heard from a soldier friend that they had an intensifying anti-insurgency campaign now, and Tonyo was on the wanted list. Tell Tonyo that maybe it's

better if you don't see each other for a while. Tonyo, too, in a coded message to him on his cell phone, hinted that they should let some time pass first.

But Pol's desire to see Tonyo prevailed. Just for now, and then not for a while. Just endure until everything cools down. So they met again that night. It was one thing he regretted to this day.

IT WAS STILL EARLY MORNING WHEN TONYO WOKE UP that day. Pol pretended to be asleep. Tonyo took his bag, kissed Pol's forehead, and then left quietly. He didn't know Pol followed him—through narrow streets, crossing to the other side, turning into an alley, until they reached the mountain of trash in front of a dim lamppost; on the wall was graffiti saying *dako ang akin, gusto mong tsupain?* (mine is big, want to suck it?) Two men in civilian clothes snatched Tonyo. Tonyo fought back. A gun was pointed at him. He ran to help Pol but he was too late. The two men dragged Tonyo into the darkness. Even after several turns Pol made frantically in the area, he never saw Tonyo or the two men again.

That was the beginning of Pol's endless search for Tonyo, night after night, in those streets, near the trash dump and under the flickering lamppost, beside the wall with graffiti saying *dako ang akin, gusto mong tsupain?* while he repeatedly replayed what happened in his mind. He also went to the headquarters of Tonyo's comrades, certain that it wasn't the military in civilian clothes who took him, because he was on the list. He was terrified for Pol's father who worked at a military camp. Pol's parents also looked there. The soldiers said there was no record of an Antonio Tuazon being arrested. Pol kept going back, as did Tonyo's parents, even though they always received the same answer. A lawyer friend of Ping's helped. Still, nothing happened. But there was a theory that Tonyo might be imprisoned in some secret place, hidden by the military. They needed to find it.

But what if Tonyo's comrades were right, that he might have been killed already? There were cases of activists being "salvaged," or becoming *desaparecidos*. For many, many years, the families left behind still hoped that one day they would see their missing loved ones again. Even if the truth was they had been dead for a long time.

That was also the beginning of Pol's endless self-blame. If only he hadn't given in to the desire to see Tonyo. If only he hadn't asked him to come that night. Maybe everything would have been different.

Night after night, he wouldn't sleep; he would kiss Tonyo's leftover clothes, illuminating the part of the bed he usually slept on with a flashlight. With the rapid clicking and flickering of the flashlight, Tonyo's image would appear in the circle of light, smiling at him, telling him: I love you, you are my nation, my family, my everything. He wouldn't blink, just staring there. If he blinked, he might immediately vanish.

One night he couldn't sleep again, tossing and turning in bed for a long time. When early morning came, he decided to go to the place again.

He walked through the narrow streets, crossed to the other side, turned into an alley, until he reached... why was there no mountain of trash in front of the dim lamppost? Why was the image

of Christ drawn as graffiti on the wall? He was sure this was the place, and he wasn't dreaming. What was happening?

He heard some noise, people talking and laughing. He followed the noise and his wonder grew even more because it was coming from a bar on the other side of the street. There used to be no bar there. "Snorky's Bar" flickered in the electric lights on the marquee.

There were some men smoking outside the bar. He watched them for a moment and then they returned to their conversation. There was a guard watching the door.

Pol was still puzzled as he crossed. Suddenly he felt a chill, even though there was no wind. Outside the bar, a woman in a very short dress came out and shouted, calling for a taxi.

Pol entered the bar. There were a few people drinking there. Two or three waitresses were busy. One customer was paying to leave.

Then Pol saw, there at the counter, under the name of the bar "Snorky's Bar," wearing a bartender's uniform and busy attending to two female customers, was Tonyo. He was showing off as he shook a mini-mix of liquor. Pol was even more puzzled. Tonyo was angry at alcohol, and besides, he didn't know how to mix alcohol.

Pol stopped talking for a moment. This was the part his parents didn't want to believe and others he had told, even though Tonyo's mother just cried and cried. "What happened?" Joshua asked. "I want to repeat," Pol said, "that I wasn't dreaming. And I'm not crazy, or just making things up. And especially not for attention."

Joshua nodded, puzzled but ready to listen.

After giving the drinks to the two women, Tonyo looked in Pol's direction. And he saw him. Pol's heart leaped with joy. They looked at each other, him and Tonyo. Then Tonyo went back to what he was doing as if he didn't know him.

Pol was puzzled but happily approached. Tonyo smiled at him. "Drinks?" he asked. He didn't really recognize him. Pol nodded sadly. He wanted to cry. Tonyo wasn't moving yet, waiting to hear what drinks he wanted. "Vodka, neat," Pol said.

Tonyo prepared the vodka and handed it to Pol. Pol held Tonyo's hand. He was startled and looked. Then he withdrew his hand but wasn't offended. He smiled. Then he turned to a new customer who arrived.

Pol sat at the counter for a long time, watching Tonyo who was so used to serving other customers, occasionally looking at him and smiling slightly. He wanted to hug him, pull him away—come on, Tonyo, let's go home, to our all-night lovemaking and your stories of struggle.

Pol waited. After the bar closed, he saw Tonyo come out and smoke on the side of the bar, in the dark part. The moon was round and a cold wind was blowing slightly.

He approached him. He didn't look but he felt his approach.

"Hi."

He looked at this, then went back to smoking. Tonyo didn't smoke. He was angry at those who smoked. If they wanted to kill themselves, they shouldn't involve others, he used to say.

"I just happened to come to this bar," Pol said. "Watch your words," he seemed to say, "if I say something wrong, the moon might suddenly vanish and the wind might stop."

Tonyo glanced at him. "Where are you from?"

"On the other side of the street, at Arcada St. I'm Pol."

"Tonyo," Tonyo replied. "I know," Pol thought.

Tonyo offered him a cigarette. "I don't smoke," Pol said, "but I'll try." He took the cigarette from Pol.

Tonyo laughed slightly, then lit Pol's cigarette. Pol inhaled. He finished it.

Tonyo laughed slightly again. "Here," he said as he took the cigarette from Pol and threw it there. Tonyo's tone was more relaxed now. "Sorry," Tonyo said, as he also inhaled the cigarette. They both had cigarettes in their mouths. He inhaled again and then removed the cigarettes.

He noticed Pol was looking at the scar on his left thumb.

"What happened there?" Pol asked.

"I don't know," Tonyo replied, with a shrug, then inhaled from both cigarettes. "I just woke up and saw it bleeding. Good thing it didn't scar too much."

"Can opener," Pol said.

"What?"

"That's from a can opener. You were in a hurry then to open the canned corned beef because you were so hungry."

Tonyo's brow furrowed. "How did you know? Are you a psychic or something?"

"You don't smoke. You're angry at those who smoke."

"What...?"

"You're not a bartender, you're an activist."

"Damn..."

Tonyo threw the cigarettes to the ground and stepped on them to put them out.

"We used to join rallies. We would lie on the street."

"I don't care about rallies!"

Then Tonyo walked away. Pol approached. "You sleep at our house. You always say to me, you are my nation, my family, my everything!"

Tonyo stopped. As if he remembered something. Or did he think of it? He looked at Pol. Pol's heart hoped.

"That night you vanished, you were taken by two men in civilian clothes..."

Tonyo was also looking at Pol. He was starting to remember.

"We love each other. We're boyfriends. I love you. You love me."

A loud roar suddenly rose beside them.

The back of the bar cracked. Pol quickly held Tonyo's hand—don't let go, we won't separate anymore—he tightened his grip on Tonyo, but the ground they were standing on cracked and was pulled by a strong force that roared in front of Tonyo, and Pol let go of him, until Pol soared into the infinite rusted space, and fell to the road, in the darkness, at the old place beside the mountain of trash where Tonyo vanished. He was the only one there. But the moon returned to being round, the lamppost flickered, and the graffiti was on the wall.

JOSHUA WATCHED POL CLOSELY, who had just finished telling the story. Did he believe him? He could see Pol's desperation for him to believe it.

"You're a writer," Pol continued. "You should believe in all possibilities."

"I did research," Pol continued. "I even talked to a Physics professor. He said, there could be universes running parallel to ours where different outcomes of events happen. There is no end to the vastness of the universe, and we don't even know how far it goes. So it's possible we don't know everything there is. Other regions beyond our horizon. Parallel universes. It's explained by string theory and quantum mechanics."

"He said there are many recorded cases of people going to another universe," Pol continued.

"A world where Tonyo is alive," Joshua thought—Divine wasn't killed, the Mystery Guy wasn't straight, the *kapre* was accepted. If you couldn't take the pain caused by this world, would you just cross over? It's as if when you don't like a version of a story, you just replace it with another version?

"He's there," Pol said, "I don't know how it happened but he's there, in the other world. He's not dead. And I'll be able to go back there."

"But," Joshua said, "pardon what I'm going to say, but isn't it like you're giving up on Tonyo in this world?"

"No. I'll still look for him in this world. I'll look for him in every world. Even in hell."

Then Joshua realized, while looking at Pol, that he was envious. He wanted to have that same kind of love, a love that would cross heaven and hell, or a parallel universe, hurt a person, lose a person, yet still not be lost.

"Do you believe?" Pol asked, desperation in his voice.

The truth was Joshua still didn't believe. He didn't believe there was a parallel universe. But he believed in Pol's love.

Joshua nodded. "Yes, I believe," he said. Pol's face brightened. A sob escaped from him, and his tears fell. He suddenly hugged Joshua. "Thanks, friend, thanks. You're the only one who believed me."

Joshua also wanted to cry, for the Pols and Tonyos, for those who are missing.

THAT NIGHT JOSHUA DREAMED OF the Mystery Guy. They were facing each other inside Twinkle Café on 16th Street.

"Hi," said Mystery Guy.

"Hi," said Joshua.

"I can't forget what happened," he said.

"Me too," Joshua replied. Then he smiled.

But before the Mystery Guy could answer again, his appearance changed, as did his identity.

"I am non-binary," he said.

"Huh?" Joshua was surprised.

But suddenly the Mystery Guy changed again.

"I am polyamorous."

"I am asexual."

"I was sexually abused."

"I am an alien from a planet where there is no gender."

"I am a ghost from another time."

"I am a gay character censored from a 1950s movie."

"I was once a *kapre*, who became human."

Joshua woke up doused in sweat. He looked at his laptop which he had left open. Would he still write Mikee and Divine's story? Or Pol's story? Or the one about the Mystery Guy? He didn't know. He was still unsure of what he wanted to write.

They met at a small coffee shop in Katipunan. Andre was wearing cream-colored pants and a checkered long-sleeved shirt. He explained why he had requested to meet. He said he was just in a sentimental mood, having just come from his grandparents' golden wedding anniversary and renewal of vows in Tagaytay. He said that was his dream—a lifelong relationship.

But the truth was, now that he knew Joshua was "Mystery Guy," he was hoping there might be a chance for him with Joshua. That's why he requested to meet again. During these past few days, he had been constantly drawing Joshua's face. Drawings were piling up in his room.

Andre handed something to Joshua. He said he bought it at a second-hand bookstore in Tagaytay, thinking Joshua might like it. *A Book of Gay Lists*. Joshua flipped through the pages while thanking Andre. There were lists of gay actors: Rock Hudson, Cary Grant, Montgomery Clift, Sal Mineo, James Dean, and others. None were familiar to Joshua.

"Why do they need a list?" he asked. "Why not make a list of straight actors too?"

"You're right about that," Andre said laughing, then asked about what Joshua was writing.

"I'm getting confused," Joshua admitted.

"I don't know anything about writing, but I think you should just listen to your heart." (Just listen to my heart, Andre wanted to say. And it wasn't true that he knew nothing, because for several days he had been reading about writers and writing to get to know Joshua better.)

"That's what my mommy told me too. But even though that seems right, I don't know how to do it."

They laughed. The waitress approached. Andre ordered milk. There was none, so just water.

Andre saw the look of surprise on Joshua's face.

"I don't drink coffee," Andre said.

"As in ever?" Joshua asked.

"Ever," Andre said. "There's no dramatic reason, no trauma or anything that happened when I was a child, like in stories. I just haven't drunk coffee ever since."

Joshua was still looking at Andre. "I don't have any vices," he said. "I don't drink, I don't smoke. My only...

vices, I guess, are looking for old movies on the internet, foreign or Filipino, and watching at night when I can't sleep."

"So how's that?" Andre joked. "Maybe you'll like me even less now. My life has no angst. I'm not interesting material. I have no deep-seated pain like the heroes in the movies I watch. I have no story. I'm just an ordinary human being."

Joshua laughed. "Unlike my family, it's nothing but angst from my grandparents down to me."

"Why don't you just write about your family's story?" Andre asked. "Instead of other people."

Joshua looked at Andre. He remembered what his professor said—that he had no voice yet because he was hiding behind other people's stories. Real stories should be told about your own story.

"But what if it's too heavy and complex to turn into a short story?"

"Maybe you should learn about your family's story first?" Andre said. "Then maybe you'll find something there, which part you want to make into a short story."

Joshua thought about it. How? He would ask his Grandpa Luis and his mommy? His Grandpa Luis, yes, but his mommy? Until now, he still didn't understand the relationship between his mother and his grandmother. He felt like there was always a barrier between them that couldn't be removed. But maybe it was time to reach out...

to her. Even though he was nervous, he was also excited, and in his joy, he held Andre's hand. Andre was thrilled but didn't show it. He just let his right hand be covered by Joshua's left hand.

Joshua was drinking coffee, thinking, so he didn't see the full love in the way Andre was looking at him.

AT THE MEMORIAL PARK, JOSHUA WATCHED HIS GRANDPA LUIS INTENTLY, as he meticulously cleaned with a rag the tops of the adjacent graves of Grandpa Jim and Sam. He had grown up with this. It wouldn't be long before he would also be cleaning the grave of Grandpa Luis and Auntie Erich not far away.

He remembered that Grandpa Luis was the first one who believed he could be a writer. "Go on, grandson," he had said, "you can do it." Then he bought him a laptop, which was now old and prone to overheating and crashing. The battery was also acting up. It was so unpredictable. If a deadline was approaching, it would suddenly force a shutdown; several times he cried just to make it cooperate, "please, please," but it seemed like it was intentionally acting up and heating up along with Joshua's head.

But he loved it dearly. Even though Sally had offered many times to replace it, he refused.

Most often, he stayed with Grandpa Luis to take care of him. (I can take care of myself, what are you doing, but I'm happy you're here!) He would massage...

him from head to toe, using Efficascent oil, careful not to use too much because he didn't like the stickiness.

Various pains were appearing in Luis's body, as if soldiers from a camp were just waiting to attack every part of his body like Martial Law was happening inside him. His knees, especially his knees. He wanted to scream in pain but feared waking Joshua (who had his own room whenever he stayed over but still preferred to sleep on a mattress on the floor).

Luis didn't want a cell phone. He watched old movies on TV. Your Grandpa Jim, he would often tell Joshua, was also fond of old movies. What is it about old movies, Joshua thought, even Andre is fond of them?

Luis and Marina never married because they eventually separated. "You've had enough of Sally," he would often say. "When I found out he accepted Joshua's father, I told him, you don't need a father, we have your mommy."

When Joshua was still a teenager, one afternoon Luis took him to a school for the deaf, where he occasionally gave donations. There was a student there, a deaf person who moved very femininely, and through sign language was saying something to two fellow teenagers.

Luis watched them silently, as if remembering something. He closed his eyes. He was startled...

when Joshua approached. "Grandpa? I just remembered Grandpa Jim."

When they got home that afternoon, Joshua said he had something to confess.

"What is it, what?" Luis asked. "Apo" (Grandchild) was what Luis always called Joshua. When he was angry or serious, he used "Joshua."

"I'm gay."

Luis watched Joshua intently. He remembered the deaf student they saw earlier. He remembered the things he used to do with Jim when he knew he was gay, and with Erich when he knew she was a woman.

He immediately hugged Joshua. "Yes, grandson, yes," he said. It took years, many years, before he accepted the gay people he loved in his life.

"What do you want, grandson," he asked then, "what are the needs of a gay person?" "Nothing, Grandpa, just understanding. And a hug."

He hugged Joshua tightly, and then said he wanted to understand the meaning of LGBTQIA+ and other things connected to it, and Joshua patiently explained. So that's how it was, he thought over and over, so that's how it was.

And now he was facing Joshua, asking. "What kind of gay was Grandpa Jim, Grandpa?"

"He moved more softly. You, you don't notice it as much. Another Grandpa," Joshua said, and then laughed. They talked...

more about him. "I want to know everything. I want to know everything about our family."

Luis thought about it. Maybe it was time to let it all out, the weight he carried in his chest. He told stories of Marina's strictness with Jim, Oscar's abuses, the machete Jim kept by the door, Marina's interference that prevented Jim and Sam from ending up together, Sam's suicide that Dale told him about, the act of disowning Jim, how they hadn't spoken until he died.

He also told how they kicked out the child who was Eric, but wanted to be called Erich. How Sally loathed her. The pregnancy of Sally's girlfriend, Talia. How he only found out one afternoon that Erich had already died, without even seeing her. But it wasn't true that he had forgotten her. He searched for her many times. He went to places he used to despise—the parlors where hairstylists gathered, the gay bars where those like Erich were noisy, the flirtatious ones performing on stage; once he was even mistaken for a gay person looking for a rent boy. He left quickly.

When he learned that Erich was dead, he blamed himself for a long time, he grieved for a long time. That grief he still carries with him until now.

He had so many sins. In telling stories and confessing like this, could forgiveness be achieved? Or should one forgive oneself first? It's a good thing Sally has already forgiven him. Even if they are in the afterlife, he hoped Jim, Sam, and Erich would forgive him too.

Luis showed Joshua a box, where everything Dale had left them was kept: Jim's old hearing aids; his old clothes, even those he no longer wore because they were too tight; Sam's diary and a white box containing old napkins and whatever else Sam had collected to remember Jim by. And the old portraits. Jim, Luis, and Marina. Jim, Dale, and Egay. Sally and Erich. What caught Joshua's attention was the Polaroid picture taken by Jim and Sam at the lagoon in UP. He looked at it for a long time. He also looked at the portrait of Jim and Dale, wearing matching t-shirts; it wasn't clear in the picture where the place was. Then he copied everything onto his cell phone.

The last thing he looked at was an old large jar. He remembered, when he was a child, how he used to crave the candies and Chicklets inside it and whatever else. He touched it with full love.

"I reached Grandpa Jim and Grandpa Dale," Joshua said. "They were so kind to me. Is Grandpa Dale still in Davao?"

"Yes. Every once in a while he asks about you." "Please tell him I'm also asking about him," Joshua said. "I'll call him sometime."

Luis showed Joshua Jim's record collection. "These are his favorite records," Luis said. He played *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, which says that those who love, those who are loved, are always there. Joshua imagined Jim and Sam, happily listening and laughing together. Maybe if they had lived in this time, their love wouldn't have been cut short. But what about his Grandpa Dale?

He also saw the collection of Betamax tapes belonging to Jim and Dale. A special one for Jim was *Rebel Without a Cause*. Joshua promised himself he would watch it. But days passed and he forgot, so he didn't get to.

Before going to class, Joshua passed by the lagoon. He sat under two sworn acacia trees, and imagined Jim and Sam, taking a Polaroid picture. But he also imagined Dale, picking up Jim. His feeling was as if he was being sucked into a long-passed time.

"YOU'RE GOING TO REVEAL OUR LIVES? THIS WAS SALLY'S FIRST reaction. "There are so many other things you could write about, why our family?"

Joshua's nervousness returned in talking to his mother, but he steeled himself.

"I won't really tell everything, Mommy. I will just extract something from it to make a short story. I just don't know what yet. Also, I want to know everything, to get to know myself better."

"Mommy, I thought you were an open book? Aren't you hiding anything?"

Sally looked at Joshua as if she were thinking.

"Grandpa told stories."

Sally also looked at Joshua.

"Trust me, Mommy. I'll let you read it afterward."

What she didn't tell her mother was that she would also write for her father. She would do it to prove herself to her father.

Sally thought for a long time. Maybe it was time for the cloud blocking the middle of her and Joshua to be removed.

Sally began to tell stories, and before long she was carried away by the stories she was telling—it was a performance level again—and in front of Joshua, she brought back everything from then, her conflict with Marina in their house, the loose clothes she made Erich wear, she breathed...

deeply and told him not to be afraid; she always talked about the parents' expulsion of Erich, her long search for her and her sheltering with Chef Lari and Ma'am Amor, the death of Erich whom she never got to talk to again, the tragic death of Talia, her running away from them, her various relationships until Ping, that asshole Abelardo, her pregnancy with Joshua, her sheltering with Uncle Jim and Uncle Dale, their raising Joshua as a trio, her life now.

After she finished telling stories, Sally realized there was one thing she hadn't told, should she admit everything for forgiveness to be achieved? But that event, she just couldn't tell. It was too painful. She erased it from her memory.

Meanwhile, Joshua was looking at Sally in awe after hearing her stories. Surely he often didn't appreciate his mother, who was like those other single parents, Aling Masing, the mother of Divine, and the father of Kring, and other people he read about and got to know, who worked like carabaos (water buffaloes) late into the night to earn for their child's schooling, absorbing all the problems of the child even if they forgot their own problems, acting as mother, father, grandmother, teacher, friend, doctor—all the roles played for a child. Why hasn't anyone thought to propose a "Single Parents' Day"?

"Among your relationships, Mommy, who did you truly love?" Joshua asked.

Sally seemed surprised, because she was still thinking about her unshared secret. Then she answered, "I loved all of them, in varying degrees, except for your asshole father!"

"You loved so many, don't you run out of love?"

"Love is like that, as it's given, it grows more. What's important, whether you have one or two or more relationships, is that they are all your true love."

JOSHUA'S CLASSMATE LIKED WHAT SHE READ in the first few pages he wrote of a short story based on his family's life.

They were in front of the main library at UP, both working on their respective laptops. Joshua decided to make an effort to befriend his classmates in writing. He decided to trust them with what he was writing, even if it wasn't finished.

"One thing I noticed," Joshua's classmate said, "you removed the quotation marks. Often sentences are connected, with only commas as punctuation, instead of periods, so capital letters are reduced."

"I want it to be as much as possible, even in sentences, that there are no barriers," Joshua said. "To make it more inclusive. Everything is equal."

The classmate nodded. She also noticed, she said, that the trees, the moon, the lamppost, the wall, and other things around were important, allies of Joshua's characters.

Joshua nodded.

The classmate told Joshua that the plan for this was to be a "kuwentula" (story-poem), a mix of story and poem, about a local election in the Philippines, from the perspective of an ant. He still needed to research about ants. What he was sure of was that it was very easy to end an ant's life. A life that is always being killed.

This classmate of Joshua's kept submitting entries to literary contests. She had never won but was very prolific. She believed persistence was important for a writer. No matter how talented you are, if you give up at the first failure, nothing will happen. Rejection is part of writing.

"I already reject myself first," Joshua wanted to say.

He sighed and went back to his notes on the laptop. He reviewed them again. Suddenly he stopped. Something didn't seem to match.

The classmate said goodbye because she had another class. Joshua just nodded, still focused on his laptop, because what he was reading wasn't right.

In Sally's storytelling, she said they met Abelardo in 2001. Now he remembered, when he asked Abelardo earlier, he also said they met Sally in 2001. If that's the case, Joshua thought, he should be 23 now, not 21.

Joshua stopped, stunned by the discovery. What secret was his mother hiding from him? Could it be that Abelardo isn't really his father?

"IS ABELARDO REALLY MY FATHER?" Joshua asked Sally, who was already prepared to leave, wearing a polka-dot dress and carrying a lunch box. Sally was exhausted from her NGO work, clearly just having woken up, but she had a meeting to get to immediately. It was about a non-binary person who was sued because of their performance in a bar, allegedly mocking Jesus Christ because they claimed the Christ in our hearts has no gender.

Sally glanced at him quickly. "What are you talking about?"

"Who is my real father?" Joshua asked. He wanted to scream. He felt like a character in an old soap opera.

"Stop it, Joshua, I'm already late for my meeting."

"You said you and Abelardo met in 2001, so I should only be 23!"

"I made a mistake in what I said," Sally answered quickly, but she was nervous.

"But why is that also what Abelardo told me, that you met in 2001?"

Sally was stunned, unable to answer.

"Who is my real father?"

"What's wrong with you? Is this an interrogation? Why would you have another father? Abelardo just made a mistake in what he said."

Sally turned her back and went to her car. Joshua followed her with his eyes. From the car window, Sally looked back at Joshua nervously. She knew, they both knew, it was like a grenade sat between them that could explode at any moment.

Joshua went back to his unit but couldn't stay quiet. He kept going back to the notes on his laptop. He kept calling Sally's cell phone. She wouldn't answer. The next morning, still restless, he went to his Grandpa Luis.

He hadn't even put the key in the door when he heard Luis and Sally talking inside. "Let's just tell him everything," Luis said. "I don't want to," Sally replied. "Joshua is old enough," Luis said, "he can handle it." "He doesn't need to know," Sally replied. "I've had so many sins," Luis said. "I need to lift the weight from my chest. I don't want to keep secrets from my grandson anymore."

Then Luis stopped. Because Joshua was there, having entered the house, looking at the two of them.

Sally. Sally sighed in despair. Defeat was visible on her face. "Come here," she said to Joshua, devoid of emotion. "Sit down."

SEND HER BACK, THAT IS LUIS'S CONSTANT PLEA to Marina. Make her come home here again.

2002. Sally had left them then and was living in a small room in Sampaloc. She wasn't getting in touch anymore. Sally was 17 then.

"Why don't you be the one to go?" Marina asked. "You're her favorite. She'll be happy if she sees you." "No," Luis answered. "She'll be happier if you're the one who goes."

"Just come with me," Marina said. "She'll think we just forced her," Luis replied. "I want to think she's the one who wants to come back."

Heavy-hearted, Marina dressed up, all in white, though she couldn't hide her thinness; she applied a bit of makeup. Don't forget the face powder, the kind bought from Chinese drugstores. Then she went to see Sally.

Sally was eating in their office canteen, wearing loose men's clothes. There were two women with her.

Sally's colleague pointed Marina out to her. Sally looked and frowned. Marina walked closer. Sally looked at her as if she were dirt. "Go back home, Luis says so," Marina said.

Sally didn't answer. She faced her colleagues. "Sally..."

Annoyed, Sally stood up. She took her tray and noisily threw the contents into the trash. Other diners looked on.

Marina didn't move immediately. Sally's colleagues watched her as if she were dirt, too. They stood up and left with Sally. Marina held back her surging anger. *This woman, she's just my daughter!*

"Forget about her," she told Luis when she got home. Then she turned her anger toward the beef she was chopping, "She's forgotten us!" Luis didn't say a word but stayed in their room all day, talking to no one. When night fell, he still didn't come out to eat even though Marina had intentionally prepared his favorite, mechado.

Marina just sat in front of the mechado. She couldn't get Sally's hard face out of her mind, looking at her as if she were dirt. That face of Sally's was still on her mind the next morning when Oscar came to see her. Luis wasn't there then. Oscar was asking for money. He didn't want their father to send money from abroad; Oscar would just use it all on his vices.

One could see in Oscar's haggard face that he was using drugs. He was only a little over fifty but looked much older. His life was ruined and no one trusted him anymore. Except Marina. Who else would help them but siblings?

"Shouldn't you stop that?"

Then came the lecture, Marina said to Oscar. Marina gave Oscar money. He looked at the money, that look that says *is this all?* Marina added more. Then she said, "Kuya, Sally, your niece, she doesn't respect me. Discipline her. Make her come back to us."

One afternoon while walking on the street from work, Sally stopped in front of Oscar's old van. "Get in," Oscar said to Sally, looking out the window.

Sally ignored him. She continued walking, plump, in denim shorts and a yellow loose t-shirt, swaying with an earring hanging from her left ear.

The van followed. It blocked Sally again. Irritably, Sally got in. The van smelled of drugs. It also smelled of leftover food, maybe an unfinished hamburger. "Why do you treat your mother like that?" Oscar snapped at her.

"What do you care?" Sally answered.

"I was ordered to discipline you. Go back to your house!"

"Well, why don't you just be the one to go back there?"

"Don't you answer me like that, I'm your uncle!"

Sally looked at him mockingly. In Oscar's eyes, she looked like one of those addicts wandering the streets.

"And how are you, Uncle?" Sally asked, sneering. "Are you still a lapdog of Arroyo's soldiers?"

Something inside Oscar was triggered. He had long been dismissed as a soldier.

"Are you still licking 'Hello Garci's' feet?"

"Shut your mouth!"

"It's true, isn't it? 'The President, a punishment to the nation!'"

"Why, are you an activist now? Fight along with your tomboy friends? You tomboys, you're looking for a dick too!"

Sally spat on Oscar. Then she turned away. Oscar grabbed her and hugged her to stop her. He felt her healthy breasts.

"Aha, this girl!" Oscar said. Sally struggled but Oscar forcibly fondled her breasts. Then he threw her onto the seat. And began to rape her. Sally screamed and cried as she resisted, her hair sticking to the bubble gum on the seat, her feet kicking the back of the van, but she could do nothing, Oscar was used to what he was doing.

Sally was dazed after everything. She dressed quietly. She got out of the van. She walked. Oscar watched her, spat out the window, then drove the van away. When he saw an earring that had come off on the seat, he pocketed it, thinking it could still be sold.

Sally walked and walked until she grew weak and collapsed. When she regained consciousness, she was asked...

by two women passing by if she wanted to be taken to the hospital. She smiled, then in a weakening voice gave the address of Lovely Cakes.

Chef Lari and Ma'am Amor were shocked to see Sally, assisted by the two women. It had been more than eight years since they last saw her. Anxious, Chef Lari almost carried Sally inside, after Ma'am Amor thanked the two women. When Sally regained consciousness and they learned that like Erich before, she had no place to stay, they offered her Erich's old room.

Sally didn't leave the room for the following days, just lying there, looking at the portraits of Erich, Chef Lari, and Ma'am Amor on the wall. Sometimes her gaze would turn to the ceiling, and there she would see Oscar's waking face; she would scream but only inside her, though it felt louder and more intense. Until she fell asleep again, and upon waking would see Oscar on the ceiling once more.

She was like that for almost a week, not eating, refusing to bathe; sometimes she would urinate in bed, sometimes she would vomit, vomiting out Oscar and what she had experienced. Chef Lari and Ma'am Amor said nothing, patiently taking care of her, serving her. And when she was somewhat returning to her old self, they told her, over and over, about what they used to do with Erich, while feeding her the cakes they made as a tribute to Erich, and then Ma'am Amor could not help but...

cry at the memory of Erich, and Sally would cry too, at last letting out the tears she had long hidden in anger, her tears and icing mixing on top of the cake.

After another week, one morning Sally bathed for over an hour. Then she dressed. She saw Erich's loose clothes in the closet. She put them on. Then she went down. And ate. She ate a lot. Pork. Rice. Cake. Just like before. As if she wanted to eat the whole world.

Then she went to see Oscar at his house. She felt the sharpness of the blade she carried between her breasts. Her breathing quickened. But she was too late. According to the gardener, Oscar was found dead the other night on the side of the road. His throat and face were slashed. And his penis was almost cut off. Until now, they are still investigating who the culprit is.

Sally wanted to berate the heavens and curse, unable to breathe—why was she robbed of the right? For several weeks she was restless in her anger, pacing in the room, kicking the bed

frame, making Ma'am Amor look up from the shop. Until one day she realized, she was actually saved by whoever from the sin.

Not long after, she heard that her father and mother had separated. Marina was said to be living alone now, staying in a small rented room in España.

Sally wanted to celebrate but she had lost the reason for many things.

Chef Lari and Ma'am Amor were ready to leave, migrating to Canada to live with Ma'am Amor's siblings there. They just waited for Sally to get well. "I can handle myself now," Sally said, "thank you very much."

They left a little money for Sally despite her firm refusal. Sally found a new job and a place to stay. Until she found out she was pregnant.

For a long time, she stared at her belly, thinking about the unwanted seed from Oscar—the child they would have. She started looking for a midwife to abort the child in her womb, but every time she found one, her courage failed. She wanted to remove Oscar from her body so she punched her stomach, she threw herself down the stairs, she didn't eat—*starve, die!* But the baby was strong; in her womb, it was like a carabao growing stronger, clinging tighter to her, her own blood and flesh against her, until her life became a mess, she lost her job, her home, and eventually found herself at Uncle Jim's.

When the baby came out, she watched it while she cried, a cry of victory over her attempts to defeat it. How could she hold it without holding Oscar?

How could she learn to love it, as if she also loved what that beast Oscar did to her? While Joshua grew, Sally watched him, and a thick cloud also grew between them.

IS THE TRUTH BREATHLESS? AFTER telling the story, Sally seemed out of breath, tired and just staring blankly.

"Your uncle," Joshua said, disgusted to say it, "my father? It was clear on his face, the sting of shame."

Sally couldn't answer, tears began to flow. Luis squeezed her hand.

"That's why," Joshua said crying, "that's why I never felt that you truly loved me!"

"That's not true," Sally protested, also crying.

"You're disgusted by me!"

"I'm disgusted by myself!"

"Because I'm his child... bad blood! That's why you immediately agreed to separate, so you wouldn't always see me. That's why I always had a feeling that something was missing, and it wasn't my father that was missing—it was you!"

"Child..."

"I was fooled!" Joshua almost screamed at Sally. Then in anger, he turned to Luis. "And you, Grandpa? Did you know?"

Luis nodded. Pain on his face, pain in the whole house, pain in their lives. When...

you were brought by Sally to Dale's then, when you were only three years old and Sally made an agreement with me, that night she confessed everything to me.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Grandson, it wasn't your mommy's fault. She didn't want what happened."

"But why did you hide it from me? Why did you conspire to fool me!"

"We didn't fool you," Luis said.

"You lied!"

Sally was the one who answered. "It wasn't that easy," she said. "I thought it would be hard for you to accept, you were just a child."

"And when would I find out, when I'm as old as you? When you're dead?"

Joshua was shocked by what he said, and stopped. A brief silence mediated between them.

"That... Oscar... he's been dead a long time."

Joshua looked at Luis.

"He died before you were born."

Now everything was clear to him, Joshua thought. That's why that name was rarely mentioned in their house, that's why there was no grave being visited.

"I don't know what to believe," Joshua said after a few moments. "Even Abelardo," he turned to Sally, "did he know you were just using him?"

Sally nodded. "We talked about it."

"You talked about it? I can't believe it," Joshua said.

"We thought, if he rejected you, you would be silenced. But you didn't stop."

"It's my fault."

"I was happy to tell you in the end. You can forget him now."

"You thought of all that?" Joshua asked. "You should have been a writer."

Sally was about to speak but Joshua had already turned his back and walked toward the door. "Grandson..." Luis tried to follow, followed by Sally who had also stood up, but the door closed.

He was crying as he hugged Sally's father. "My child's heart might distance itself from me forever!"

"Give him time," Luis said. "He was deeply hurt by what he learned. He will understand too."

Where Joshua went was Abelardo's house in Pandacan. He was furious as he knocked. Abelardo opened the door. Before he could speak, Joshua entered and almost shouting, asked. "What happened? Why did you allow yourselves to play with me and Mommy?"

Abelardo went to the kitchen and brewed coffee. He was calm. He had long expected this kind of occasion to come.

"Sally already told you everything," he said gently before taking a sip of coffee, "what else do you need to know from me?"

"Why did you agree to fool me about Mommy?"

"I was the one who suggested it."

Joshua looked at Abelardo in disbelief. He sat down and took a sip of coffee.

"I accidentally met your mommy again. We drank, and got drunk. She told me her problem, that you wouldn't stop questioning who your father was. I asked her why she couldn't tell you. She said she just couldn't. So I suggested it. Tell him it's me, I said."

Joshua was still looking at Abelardo, shocked.

"It was a 'What if?' situation," Abelardo continued, we could see the satisfaction on his face as he thought. "What if we pretended? Would he reject us? Would he be suspicious? Would it continue? Or worse, would he find out the truth? Would he confront us all, like now?"

A smile emerged again on Abelardo's face, savoring every bit of what he was saying.

"The situation was 'bardagulyo' (chaotic), at any time it could explode inside and out. When we got back together, even if she didn't stop with the subsequent lies, I got fascinated with the possibilities. When I shamed you that noon at the book launch, I was looking at what your reaction would be. To me, it was like I was making a story, unfolding in real life, and I didn't know how it would end. I was controlling not just my characters, but life itself. I was waiting for the truth to eventually explode."

Joshua was still looking at Abelardo in disbelief. The light coming from the dim lamp made half a shadow on him. Joshua also watched this.

"You're still young, you have much to learn, whether you become a writer or not!"

"You used me as material!"

"You should be flattered."

"You're a bad person!"

"Do you think you already know the meaning of bad? For us writers, we who create lives, where is the barrier between what is bad and what is good? What can be done and what is an excess? Who knows? We just have to keep on writing."

Abelardo moved his face closer to Joshua, then said almost in a whisper, "Do you even know why we didn't end up getting married to the woman I loved? Why she left me? Because when she got pregnant, I forced her to abort the child. I didn't want a child, noisy dirty incomplete beings! She was still bleeding when she came back from the abortion, but I wanted us to sleep together, she didn't want to, she said she was weak, I went through with it anyway. She protested but I loved her, and love gives you the right to do anything."

Is what he's saying true, Joshua thought, or is he testing me again, to see what my reaction would be, if I would explode? Is he still playing with me...

just like material? What kind of monster is he? How can a bad person create that kind of beauty in his works? Or is he great because of his evil?

"Were you shocked?" Abelardo asked, a smile still hanging on his lips. "We all have secrets. If you don't have one yet, don't worry, you will."

"I won't be like you!" Joshua shouted at Abelardo, the veins in his neck bulging. "I will write but I won't be like you!"

Then he turned his back and left Abelardo.

Joshua was alone in his unit that afternoon, a conflict of emotions rising as he looked at the photos of Sally, Luis, and Oscar on his cell phone. He stared at Oscar's face for a long time—he was in a military uniform and scowling, looking angry. Meanwhile, in her apartment room, Sally was looking at a framed photo of her and Joshua. They were both smiling, Joshua's hands even making a heart sign. In his house, Luis was quietly cleaning up after a meal where he had barely eaten anything. Sally kissed the photo. Angrily, Joshua threw his cell phone. Luis couldn't breathe. A housemate assisted him and made him drink medicine, then water. I won't cry anymore, Joshua promised himself. He just wanted to go far away, to never show his face to anyone again. He felt like the filthiest person in the world. He wished there really was another world, just like Pol believed.

If he stayed in his unit, Sally might come for him. Sally and Luis had been calling for a while now. But where would he go? If he went to Mikee's, Sally would surely find him.

Carrying his laptop and a few clothes in a small bag, he eventually found himself at Andre's pad that night. Andre was surprised but couldn't hide his joy. "Can I stay here for a bit?"

Andre let him in. Joshua entered looking as if he had lost every battle in the world. He sat down, staring blankly ahead, not knowing what to do or say. Andre approached and sat beside him. He held him. Joshua finally broke down, crying and crying while Andre rubbed his back. After Joshua's crying subsided, Andre gave him water to drink. Joshua spoke only briefly, saying he was okay, just tired, and just wanted to sleep.

Andre brought him a change of clothes—a shirt and boxer shorts—but Joshua didn't move them. After giving him a blanket, Andre asked if he needed anything else, but Joshua had already turned on his side, still in his clothes, and fallen asleep. Andre watched him for a long time, then changed his clothes and lay down too, facing Joshua, watching him all night. It was a long time before sleep took him.

When he woke up the next morning, Joshua was still asleep. All day, Joshua refused to get up, eat, or answer calls from Sally and Luis, or even from Mikee. "They might be worried," Andre said. "Let them be," Joshua replied. Andre took a day off from work because he knew Joshua needed him.

All afternoon, Joshua continued to sleep. Andre prepared food in case Joshua woke up, but he kept sleeping. Andre looked for things to do—he doodled, watched old movies on YouTube (*Rebel Without a Cause*, which he'd seen; *Biyaya ng Lupa*, which he'd also seen); he called Luchi (who was in a meeting), and watched the sleeping Joshua once more.

It wasn't true what he told Joshua once—that he had only been in a relationship once. It had happened twice, but he was too ashamed to admit that in both relationships, he was the one left behind. In the first one, his boyfriend found someone else to love abroad. (For months, he

walked around feeling as if there were a hole in his chest.) In the second one, the person didn't want anything long-term, so they found someone else before a year had even passed. He cast aside his shame and pleaded, but he wasn't granted another chance. ("You're drinking too much," Luchi told him one night while they were at a bar. He wasn't used to drinking.) It wasn't true that he was always good at planning. In some things, yes, but when he falls in love, all plans vanish. Luchi was right that he becomes a better person when he is in love, but he is also always afraid, because when he's in love, he neglects himself. Why is it that when you love someone else, you always forget to love yourself? ("Do you want to talk about it?" Luchi asked, concerned. "No, I just want you to stay with me." Then he drank again.) Inside him, there was a confusing swirl of uncontrollable emotions. He truly planned to love again this year, but he promised himself that this time he wouldn't lose control; he would love without neglecting himself. But here he was again—when Joshua entered his life, everything else was pushed aside, and all that mattered were his face, his smiles, even his tears, and his well-being. ("Luchi, let's go home. I told you not to get wasted! You're not used to being wasted!")

Joshua groaned in his sleep. Andre wanted to touch him, hug him, repeat what they had done before. But he didn't want Joshua to notice, fearing he might get scared and pull away.

Throughout that afternoon, Joshua spoke only once. When he woke up, he said, "I can no longer write the story of my family." Then, tears began to fall one after another. Andre wanted to wipe them away. "Don't cry, I'm here," but Joshua quickly wiped them himself.

"Why can't you write the story of your family anymore?" Andre wanted to ask, but he didn't go through with it. What mattered was feeling that Joshua knew he was there for him.

Then the call came. From Mikee. They should meet at Pop Up. They were caught at a rally a few hours ago but have been released.

"If I go, I might forget everything," Joshua thought. "Maybe everything will go back to the way it was." So he decided to go.

Andre asked if Joshua wanted him to come along. He said no. Three times—Andre counted it to himself—three times he was rejected that day. He looked at his organized room, wondering what else was out of place.

JOSHUA STOOD AT THE ENTRANCE OF POP UP at nine in the evening. He watched Mikee, Kring, and Hannah drinking at a bar. He entered quietly, his chest tight with nervousness. He almost turned back to leave. But Kring called him, and immediately she approached him, pulled him to their table, and began telling him what happened.

That afternoon, students had rallied at UP along with other sectors, especially jeepney drivers, to protest the jeepney phaseout. Kring's father, a jeepney driver, was among them. Mikee, Kring, and Hannah joined too, having reconciled after a few days apart.

UP security personnel, police, and soldiers arrived. They were carrying guns, batons, and shields. An army car also entered. They were just observing at first, but then suddenly there was a loud bang—it was unclear where it came from—and chaos broke out, leading to arrests.

Among those caught were Mikee and Kring's father. Kring screamed at a policeman while she was being held back, but her father calmed her down. As soon as the police saw that Mikee was a transwoman, they began harassing her, asking to see what she had "down there"; they poked her front with a baton, and she cried in shame. An NGO belonging to Sally's group helped get them all out. There was also good news. The person who killed Divine had reportedly been caught. An American soldier who had dated her that night in Poblacion. The soldier was charged. And this time, they wouldn't let what happened in Jennifer Laude's case repeat, where the soldier was released after a few years.

Joshua fell silent upon hearing his mother's name. "Why haven't you been showing up?" Mikee asked him. "Do you have a problem?"

Joshua shrugged, saying he was just okay. Mikee watched him closely, then said, "Okay."

But Joshua was thinking: was it unfair of him to be angry at his mother, while the one truly at fault for everything was his father? That the reason his mommy couldn't give him the love he was looking for was because of the demonic things his father did to her? But if he hadn't done those demonic things, Joshua wouldn't exist. He felt disgusted. He should be angry at himself.

To push these thoughts away, he turned his attention to a transwoman at the open mic, who was belt-singing a Regine song about love in the rain. "Doesn't she know any other songs?" Mikee asked.

Then she added, "Let's forget what happened, I have good news!" "What?" "David passed Test Number 2 the other day!" "What was Test Number 2 again?" "That my mother would like him."

David had given Aling Masing flowers and a bag of chicken feet. He told her about his experience being dyslexic as a child—how his classmates laughed at him and his teacher got annoyed because he couldn't read the words on the whiteboard correctly for the longest time; he would get confused because the letters would mix up their shapes and forms. They didn't know he had dyslexia. "I should have punched your teacher," Aling Masing said, "and your classmates too." He patiently taught himself, reading books aloud along with audio recordings, writing words over and over again. Until, by the time he was about twelve, he went to a corner of the library and read a book, and like magic, the letters and shapes on the pages began to form into understandable meanings. Then, all at once, the letters embraced him as if saying, *Don't worry, we're just letters, your friends, we understand each other now.*

When Mikee returned from the restroom, she saw her mother laughing and laughing—a sound she rarely heard. David had just finished saying that he used to have a hard time reading and saying "LGBTQIA+" because he would mix up the letters. Aling Masing playfully tapped him, saying she also struggled with those letters, but she just didn't want Mikee to notice. They all

shared a laugh. Then David stopped and said, "From now on, I will take care of Mikee, and you too." Aling Masing stopped laughing and was moved to tears.

"That guy is so perfect," Hannah said. "Correct!" Mikee agreed. "What's Test Number 3?" Hannah asked. "I don't know yet." "What?" "I'll think about it." "What if those tests of yours boomerang on you?" Kring said. "What if he's the one who tests you?" Hannah chimed in.

Mikee fell silent and drank beer. Truth be told, she still had many doubts; she just didn't want her friends to notice. When she and David made love, and afterwards David fell asleep, instead of being happy, she felt worried. Did David really want her, even though her body wasn't "complete," with a stranger's part attached? And if one day, just because she wasn't sure he truly wanted her, she decided to get gender reassignment surgery, would he like the changes he would see in her body?

"Hey, what are you thinking about now?" Kring asked Mikee. She looked at Joshua. "You too," Kring said to Joshua. "Why do you both look so troubled?"

"Nothing," Mikee said. Hannah squeezed Mikee's hand and smiled. Mikee smiled back. Kring nudged Joshua to drink again. Joshua drank in silence. Kring put her arm around Hannah and they watched a person singing at a nearby table.

KRING AND HANNAH WERE HAPPY. JUST A FEW DAYS AGO, they were fighting, and Kring was having a very hard time because Hannah didn't want to talk to her and wasn't replying to her messages.

On the night of Divine's wake, Kring couldn't take it anymore. She begged Joshua to help her. They left the wake early, leaving Mikee there, who couldn't even say goodbye.

Kring wrote a handwritten love letter. (*Forgive me, Lab, sorry if I always disregard your worries, sorry if I'm always saying 'don't worry, let it be,' from now on, I will worry, just please talk to me again.*) While she was sneaking it onto Hannah's window, Joshua was keeping watch below.

But before Kring could climb down, she was caught hanging by Hannah's mother. "Who are you?" she asked. "Are you a thief?" "Oho," Kring answered, "the thief of your child's heart." Kring didn't know why she gave such a corny answer. Then, while still hanging from the window, she added, "I'm your child's girlfriend. We've been together for almost a year. She's afraid to come out to you."

Kring was about to give some trivia she read on the internet about statistics of mothers who oppose lesbian children, but she was interrupted by Hannah's mother and Joshua, who was keeping watch below.

"And you, are you courting my child too?" "No po, I'm gay (bakla) po."

They were all called inside by Hannah's mother and father. "You," Hannah's father asked Kring, "do you love my child?" "Opo," Kring answered. "You," the father asked Hannah, "do you love

this person?" "Opo," Hannah answered. "You," he asked Hannah's mother, "do you love our child?" "Yes," Hannah's mother replied. "Then that's that," Hannah's mother said, "I should also love whoever my child loves. Then she added jokingly to Kring and Hannah, "Just don't get pregnant yet."

"And why," Hannah's mother said, "what can you say? Because you're a man? I have one too."

They were stunned. Kring and Hannah were nervous, and so was Joshua. "Fine," Hannah's mother said, "I agree."

Everyone was happy. But later that night, after Hannah entered her room, she found her mother sitting on the bed, quietly crying. Then Hannah realized that it was also painful for a mother to have a lesbian child, but she accepted it because she loved her child. Hannah promised herself that whenever she had the chance, she would hug her mother more, to show her her love.

JOSHUA WAS THINKING, WHILE LOOKING AT HIS FRIENDS, that Abelardo was right: all of us, sooner or later, will have a secret. If his friends found out about his true identity, would they still accept him?

"What's your problem?" Kring asked Joshua. "Why have you been so quiet? You haven't been in touch with us for days."

But before Joshua could answer, Lance arrived. He was wearing a green polo shirt. Tucked in. "Sorry," he said immediately, and ordered a beer. Mikee turned to him, annoyed. "Oh, you're going to say you're late again because of that girlfriend you can't introduce to us!" "Why won't you introduce her?" Hannah asked.

"Maybe she's non-existent?" Kring said. "I watched a series once where the character kept saying they had a girlfriend because they were so insecure and no one actually liked them. It turned out the girlfriend was non-existent; they were just pretending." "Yes, that's sad," Lance said. "What 'yes'?" Mikee asked. Joshua, Kring, and Hannah also looked at him. "Yes," Lance repeated. "Nothing."

They were all stunned. Mikee drank beer, seemingly deep in thought. Kring and Hannah looked at each other. Joshua watched Lance.

"You guys are so annoying," Lance said. His voice was steady but slightly trembling. "You're pressuring me to have a boyfriend, then a girlfriend. What if there's no one? What if no matter what I do, there's really no one? I try, I look for people I don't even really like just so I have someone to introduce to you. But they really don't like me. Does there really have to be someone?"

Lance stood there, looking sad under the dim light. He wasn't ugly, just very ordinary-looking, like everyone else. His beer order arrived and Lance took a gulp. "Maybe I'm just unlucky. Maybe there's a list. I'm not on the list, so I'm always at zero."

None of them could look at Lance, except for Joshua, who watched him sadly. Kring looked at Hannah while holding her tightly, as if wanting to protect her from anything. Mikee looked at her clothes for any spots or stains. But Joshua kept looking at Lance, thinking they were both the same—both unaccepted.

At a far table across the hall, a slightly drunk gay man was singing Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," while his companions joined in noisily.

No matter gay, straight, or bi Lesbian, transgender life I'm on the right track, baby I was born to survive

Joshua was the first one. He approached and hugged Lance. Lance was surprised. Mikee, Kring, and Hannah also hugged him. Lance had no words as he was hugged tightly by his friends, almost falling over.

They stayed that way for a long time, embracing, while Lance was still unable to speak. "Don't let go," Kring said. Others looked at them, wondering what this group hug was about; it had been many minutes, while the drunk gay men continued singing and other customers arrived, blocking those passing by, but they didn't care.

Joshua thought: what was this group of his? Sometimes they had nowhere to go, sometimes each had a problem, like him, or two of them, like Lance; sometimes they didn't all know what each other was going through; sometimes they couldn't even hug like this, but when they were together in one space, feeling and smelling each other's bad breath—wasn't that enough? Wasn't that what a group was?

JOSHUA TOOK A GRAB HOME TO ANDRE'S. He turned down Mikee's offer to drive him. He felt lighter. When he got out of the car in front of Andre's apartment, it suddenly started raining hard. He was about to run inside when he remembered what he had discovered about his own identity. He suddenly lost strength, lost the reason to protect himself; he stopped and just stood under the heavy rain, letting the water strike and cleanse him repeatedly—his name, the filth in his heart. Couldn't he choose his own story, his own blood? Couldn't he choose a different world, like Pol? His tears fell along with the rain. Crying Joshua—that was Andre's loving thought as he rushed out to pull Joshua inside, wipe him down, and assist him to a seat in the living room while he continued to cry uncontrollably.

When Joshua calmed down, Andre gave him hot tea to drink. "Sorry," Joshua said, "I woke you up." "I was still awake," Andre said, "I finished some work. I was just about to shower."

Joshua ended up showering in the rain, he said. He laughed slightly. *Friend*—that was the only way he saw me, Andre thought.

They let a few hours pass. "I'll go to class again tomorrow," Joshua said. "Yes," Andre said. "You've been absent for two days." "I still haven't thought of anything to write," Joshua said, "for our assignment."

Andre wanted to say that it was okay, but he thought Joshua might say it wasn't okay, so he just didn't say it. They laughed a bit again. After a few more moments, they went to the bedroom. Joshua changed into pajamas. "I'll shower first," Andre said. Joshua didn't answer; he lay down immediately, his back to Andre.

Andre watched him. Andre's chest wanted to explode. One word, one look, one sigh from Joshua and Andre would have rushed to hold him. But Joshua didn't move as he lay there, even though he was still awake.

Andre went to the bathroom to shower. Joshua just lay there, his eyes wide open. Inside the bathroom, Andre just stood there, catching his breath in the dark. Then he turned on the light.

On the bed, Joshua started when he heard Andre's cell phone alarm on the side table. He just watched it, glowing. The cell phone kept alarming. Joshua kept watching it as if it were a creature. Then he reached out his hand and took it. He saw a piece of paper with Andre's doodles on the phone's stand, and a piece of paper torn from a notepad with Andre's sketch of Joshua's face. Joshua watched the sketch of his face for a few moments, when the cell phone in his hand alarmed again. He looked at it. He opened it.

Then Joshua saw his picture as the wallpaper on Andre's cell phone. In the picture, he was looking up at the sky at something. Joshua frowned for a moment. The cell phone alarmed again so he turned off the alarm. He was about to put the cell phone back on the side table but hesitated. He looked at the wallpaper picture again, then opened the photo gallery of the cell phone. There was a folder there full of pictures of him, shots taken in BGC while he was looking for the *Mystery Guy* all day. There he was, just sitting in front of Tower Building, full of patient hope. There he was, walking frantically into the building, passing those coming out. There he was, coming out of the building frantically again. There he was, just sitting in front of the building again, sadly eating a hotdog while watching those coming out. There was one of him facing the *Mystery Guy* on the street. There they were talking with the *Mystery Guy* inside the cafe, shots taken from behind the glass outside. There he was, getting on an Angkas, wiping his tears.

Andre didn't leave! Andre watched over me!

He looked at the photos with wonder, like the wonder he felt when he first read Abelardo's novel, as if for the first time he saw himself in a novel. Now, like then, it was as if he saw himself again with wonder—that he was important, that he wasn't worthless even though he was always insecure and confused and unsure and lacked self-confidence and was a "virgin" in many things and a product of "filthy blood." He was still worthy of being loved.

He stood up and went to the bathroom, still holding the cell phone. He looked at the closed bathroom door, the light turning off inside and the door opening. Andre was surprised to see him. Joshua showed him the cell phone and the photos there. Andre was about to explain, frantic, "Sorry, I didn't mean to..." but Joshua approached and pushed aside the wet hair hanging over Andre's eyes, looked into Andre's eyes, held his breath, stood on his tiptoes, and kissed Andre on the lips. Andre felt like he was going to die.

Andre held Joshua's shoulders. He was more experienced than Joshua; he was the one feeling nervous. It was as if he didn't know what to do. Joshua opened his mouth and pressed the kiss onto Andre. Andre couldn't control the pounding of his heart. Joshua put his tongue into Andre's mouth. He was excited to find Andre's tongue. Joshua's hug around Andre tightened until his towel came untied. They both held it so it wouldn't fall. They both let go of it.

I will love you for life, Andre thought as they hugged passionately, kissing on the bed. *I will love you in ways planned and unplanned. I will love you and I promise to remain me while loving.*

I will love you for life, Joshua thought as Andre's tongue traveled from his chest down to between his thighs. *I will love you even until the time I don't know who I am and who you are. I will love you in any world.*

Andre laid Joshua down, stroked both his cheeks and then opened them; he took the lubricant and the condom from the side table drawer, and began to merge their worlds.

THE NEXT MORNING ANDRE PREPARED THEIR BREAKFAST. "Sorry," he said, "there's no coffee here, just milk." "It's okay," Joshua said, even though he hated milk, while thinking that if he could find the courage to tell Andre everything about himself, Andre would understand; in his opinion, Andre would still accept him. But he wasn't ready to say everything yet, so he just said, "Come on, let's eat." But Andre probably noticed that inside Joshua there were still many unresolved emotions, so he put his arm around him and said, "Give it time."

Then the call came. Joshua looked at his cell phone. Sally. He wasn't going to answer but Andre told him to. Sally was crying on the phone. "Joshua, your grandfather...!"

Here is the translation of the remaining pages you uploaded. I have followed your instructions to exclude all headers and page numbers, focusing solely on the body text.

Luis's final days were restless. Because of his illness, he was always lying down, often dreaming of the woman with her back turned and long hair. He wanted to touch her hair again, but she never turned around.

He knew, he could feel, that he was close to death. So even though he was weak, he went with Sally to the graves of Jim and Sam. Sadly, he stroked the headstones. After that, they visited the grave of Erich, the child he had disowned. He bowed his head and stroked the headstone again; it had been a long time since he had moved.

While Sally was looking at Luis, she thought about what she had done that morning. She had spoken to a colleague at the NGO who had a friend at the precinct. She asked for help. Her friend pulled the files on Oscar. There she saw that after so many years, there had been no progress on his case; no one even knew who had killed him. There was another case in Oscar's files. In 1997, a rape case was filed against him by a student activist. But the case was dismissed, and in fact, after that, Oscar was even given honors as a soldier. Sally took a deep

breath; for a long time, she hadn't been able to look at Oscar's photo in the files. For a long time, it was as if she always saw it in her mind. Now she was looking at Oscar's face without blinking. The arrogance, the mole under his left nose, the slight sneer on his face. She spat on the photo. Her control over him was over. She was free.

She invited Luis to go home; he was tired. Before starting the car, Sally held Luis's hand and leaned on him. She couldn't remember the last time she had leaned on him since she was a child.

LUIS WAS LYING IN BED, GROWING WEAK, when he saw Joshua return, called by Sally. "Grandchild, I didn't mean to hurt you, your grandfather loved you very much—" but Joshua shushed her, covered her mouth, then knelt and kissed his hand. Joshua's face came close to his and asked, "Grandpa, are you in any pain? What do you want me to do? Do you want a drink? Are you comfortable? Do you want me to add another pillow?"

Joshua kept kissing Luis's hand, as if his kisses could stop his breath from weakening. "I love you, Grandpa, I love you so much," he whispered over and over, like a prayer. "Don't leave me, Grandpa."

His vision was blurring but his hearing was still clear. They were right, hearing is the last to go. Except for Jim, whose hearing was the first to go. Jim, his most beloved brother. His blood and his brother's blood were one. Blood from Pancho and Lita. Blood also from Erich, blood from his child whom he cast away, whom he never saw alive again. What evil had he done to him and to Sally? Sally fought, left, returned, and was forgiven. And the atrocity Oscar did here. Oscar, who was the father of his grandson and the brother of his wife. Joshua, two bloodlines merged into one. Did Marina know this? He didn't know where Marina was now. Was she going to die soon too? Why did she still refuse to face the woman in his dreams? Would she face her if she knew the sin no one knew, a secret she would carry to her grave?

At the house, Oscar and his two fellow soldiers were drinking. Marina had gone to sleep early because she wasn't feeling well. Oscar and his two companions were ceaselessly boasting about the women they had raped—how many they were, too many to count, mostly stubborn-headed activists. Ah, it was good to be a soldier during those times, when they could do anything without consequence!

Then one of the two companions turned to Oscar and teased, "Hey, buddy, I didn't think you'd even do a tomboy!"

Oscar kicked him under the table to shut him up, but the drunk man continued, "Wasn't her name Sally? What was her name again?" His face slumped on the table, but he repeated, "Was it Sally, buddy?"

Shocked by what he heard, Luis looked at Oscar, who was drinking silently, pretending to hear nothing. The one who spoke stopped and fell asleep in a drunken stupor, while the other companion continued drinking.

The following night, Luis waited for Oscar to come out of the bar he frequent visited to get his supply of drugs. He followed Oscar. Before he could reach his van, Luis pointed a knife at his neck. Oscar was startled, then laughed when he saw Luis. "You startled me, buddy," then he realized Luis's intent and his smile vanished. Luis dragged him to a dark corner of the road, against a wall that smelled of urine, and forced him to confess. "What did you do to my child, what?"

Trembling with fear, Oscar immediately confessed, not like the brave activists Oscar and his group had struggled to make talk. "Brother-in-law, brother-in-law, yes, I did it; I was just lustful because that tomboy daughter of yours finally got a taste of a man." When Luis pressed the knife into Oscar's neck, the words came faster out of his mouth, even though Marina was angry at their child. "Buddy, don't, brother-in-law, let's talk about this!" When Luis slashed Oscar's neck, his mouth continued to open even without saying anything; blood spurted and his mouth refused to close. Luis repeated the slashing of the neck until it finally closed. Then Luis slashed Oscar's face. His cheeks, his eyes, his mouth. There was no life left in the slumped body, but Luis still slashed and slashed his face until it was unrecognizable. Then he cut off his penis. Until there was only blood on the person, and blood on his hands.

Oscar's body was found the next morning. Activists were suspected. Or maybe the people he dealt drugs with. He had many enemies. His father came home briefly from America to attend the wake but left immediately after entrusting everything to Marina. This family abroad was new. Not much inheritance was left to Marina and Oscar, except for the house they lived in, which Oscar had apparently already sold.

For a few days, Marina mourned her brother. The silence in her and Luis's house served as a barrier between them. After a few days, one afternoon in their room, while they were sitting on the bed, Luis told Marina they were separating. Marina couldn't understand why. Luis didn't explain.

After that afternoon, Luis looked for Sally. He saw her at Lovely Cakes, happy with the couple who owned it. He watched her for a long time. She and the couple were laughing. He didn't approach her.

"GRANDPA," JOSHUA WHISPERED TO HIM. He could see almost nothing. He felt the drip of tears on his face. He wanted to wipe them away but had no strength left.

"Tay," Sally whispered. She squeezed his hand. She was also crying. "Don't cry," he wanted to say. "So many tears have already fallen from our family."

After a while, Joshua and Sally hugged him, both whispering something. But even his hearing was gone now. He could no longer hear anything, and he could see nothing.

Except for the woman. He saw the woman with the long hair again; she was there once more. He wanted to call her name but he had no voice. In the slight darkness, she slowly turned around, and now he could see her face, and he wanted to cry because it was Erich, the child he had disowned. Does this mean he is forgiven? Erich approached and hugged him with his thick

arms. He closed his eyes and, in the scent of his long hair, he whispered, though he had no voice, "Son, son."

DALE ARRIVED FROM DAVAO ON THE MORNING OF THE BURIAL. He was over seventy, and the little hair left on his head was white. In the living room, he and Sally hugged tightly; Sally almost didn't want to let go. Dale had never married; he lived quietly with his family in Davao, taking care of his nieces and nephews.

Not long after, Dale went to Joshua's room. Joshua's eyes were swollen, and he cried again when he saw Dale. They hugged tightly. Joshua remembered what Jim and Dale always told him: when you grow up, you will be whatever you want to be. He cried even more. He thanked Dale for the money he and Jim had left, which was used for his studies and other expenses. "If you ever need anything else, just tell me," Dale said. "Just let me know."

LUIS WAS BURIED BESIDE THE GRAVES OF JIM AND SAM. Simple ceremonies and a few people, just as he wanted. Joshua's eyes were swollen, standing beside Andre.

Sally, Mikee, Kring, Hannah, Lance, Pol, Ping, and Dale were also there. When Sally gave Joshua a flower to throw into the grave, he silently took it. Sally wanted to hug her son but was afraid he might reject her, or that she might hurt him more. Maybe he hadn't forgiven her yet. Luis was right; they needed the gift of time.

After throwing the flower into the grave, Joshua turned to his mother and hugged her. He didn't have to. Maybe he was still angry because of what she had said. There was some kind of weakness felt in his body too. Maybe Andre was right, give it time.

Mikee noticed what was happening between Joshua and Sally. She approached and held Joshua's arm. Joshua smiled sadly at Mikee. He didn't tell Mikee that he, too, was going through something. His fears were coming true. For three days, David hadn't contacted him; he didn't even answer his messages, even though they had been seen. Was he ghosting him? Maybe Kring was right—why did he have to test him anyway?

Joshua probably noticed she was sad. "Are you okay?" he whispered. How could friends be friends if they didn't know what each other was going through? But she nodded; she was okay.

Dale approached and put his arm around Joshua. "Are you okay?" he asked. They were all asking if he was okay. Even Andre, looking at him with concern, was asking with his eyes, "Are you okay?" Kring and Hannah, and Lance were also okay. Was his mommy okay, silently looking at the grave? Was Pol okay, who in the middle of the burial ceremonies, he saw looking far away, to a place he hadn't reached yet? At a funeral, with a mother and child at odds, with friends going through their own struggles, on occasions of secrets suddenly exposed and love suddenly found, on occasions of life and death, was everything okay? Joshua didn't know.

After the funeral, Joshua and Sally looked at Luis's old house, which would now be vacant, unless Sally decided to live there, along with the memories of everything that had happened there. Would she be okay with that?

They cleaned the house and put away Luis's remaining belongings—a few clothes, most of them faded and mended, unused medicine, a glucometer for monitoring blood sugar, an old camera no longer used, some photos, a butterfly hair clip, a soldier's helmet (a gift to him from Oscar, a reminder of a failed dream). And a knife, already rusted; they didn't know why it was there.

Marina fought with a gay man whom she knew had stolen her Chinese powder. He refused to admit it, so in return, one afternoon while the man was secretly singing karaoke in the recreation hall, she used a knife to puncture the old suitcase he cherished and always kept by his bed.

Marina was living in a nursing home in Marikina; at over 70 years old, her hair was cut very short, right down to the scalp. She paid double for a private room. (There was only a little left of the large sum of money her father had sent back then when she threatened to disrupt his new family if he didn't support her.) Usually, she just stayed in her room, crocheting or watching cooking shows on the TV in the lounge. No one dared to change the channel. She never socialized with the others there. She looked down on them, especially the two old gay men who were boyfriends; she was always lecturing the one whose boyfriend had stolen from her: "Hey, Madame Marina, it's not just gays and tomboys anymore, there are other letters now! Don't you know LGBTQIA+?"

What did she care about those letters?

That one man, the one whose old suitcase she had stabbed, died of pneumonia two weeks later. That was when they discovered the contents of the old suitcase were old letters—letters to his children asking for forgiveness because, when the children were small, he had left them to go with a boyfriend to Palawan. When he returned to the children after many years, they refused to accept him. He was never able to send the letters. They were buried with him. While his boyfriend wailed in grief—"How can I live, I can't live without you, my love!"

"Idiots!" Marina said.

One afternoon, a nurse visited Marina in her room; she had a visitor. Marina was crocheting then, her lines straight and square. Black and white. She wanted to finish it before her birthday arrived, which she celebrated alone as usual since no one knew.

"Who?" she asked.

"It wasn't said. You'll have to ask."

When the nurse returned, she said the visitor was Sally. And her son.

Marina's face hardened, as it always did. "Tell them I'm not here. Tell them to leave."

Sally and Joshua were sitting in the lobby, waiting patiently, both quiet and unable to look at each other. Joshua wanted to hold his mother's hand but couldn't. Sally wanted to hold her child but couldn't. Does the right time ever arrive?

"She's not here, she went out," the nurse said upon returning to Sally and Joshua.

"Are we allowed to go out where the residents live?"

"If there's a permit, yes."

"We'll wait."

The nurse went back to Marina. "They say they'll wait."

"Tell them I'm never going home there, we're gone, we've vanished, we've become smoke."

An hour passed and the nurse returned to Marina; irritation was visible on her face. Sally and Joshua were still there.

Marina peeked. Sally was sitting in the lounge with a young man. She had last seen her when she was only 27, wearing loose clothes as she used to; in a canteen, she had turned her back on her as if she were something disgusting.

Unintentionally, while looking at Sally, memories seemed to knock like unexpected guests and enter Marina's mind. When Sally was a child, she broke a plate. She looked up at Marina, terrified. "Why did you break it?" Marina screamed. "I didn't mean to," Sally said, her voice trembling. "The food was so delicious." Marina watched the spilled food. *Mechado*, Sally's favorite. "I just took too much because it was so good, Ma," Sally said, crying. Marina leaned down and hugged Sally. That was the only time in her entire life she remembered hugging Sally. Sally continued to cry and cling to her then, holding her hair—the long hair she remembered her mother always touching when she was younger. Was this the only part of her body she wasn't afraid of? "Hush now," she said then, "hush."

Her rebellious child, Marina thought, then she touched her short hair. Annoyed, she pushed the door open and went out.

That was the first time Joshua saw Marina. Her face was hard, her body thin like a cane. He watched her for a long time. She looked at him, then she smirked, as if saying *Who are you?*

Joshua reached for Marina's hand to perform *magmano*, and he felt the wrinkles on her skin—"I am Joshua, your grandson"—but Marina pulled her hand back as if in disgust. Her "gay-dar" went off and she immediately sensed that Joshua was gay. Won't these gay people ever leave her alone? It suddenly occurred to Joshua: "She's not just my grandmother, she's also my aunt." Joshua shuddered.

"Dad is gone," Sally said to Marina. It was only then Sally saw Marina's short hair. She fought the urge to touch that short hair.

Marina watched Sally with an expressionless face.

"Dad's dying wish, Sally said, was for us to find you." Then she added—"If it were up to me, I wouldn't bother."

Not a single muscle moved in Marina's face. She looked at Sally coldly, then turned her back and walked away.

Sally and Joshua were speechless. At one side, an old woman was happily hugging her visitors whom she hadn't seen in a long time, crying as she hugged them. Sally quickly stood up and chased after Marina. Joshua followed, also surprised.

They caught up with Marina at the doorway of the dining area. Sally grabbed Marina's arm and whispered into it, loud enough for Joshua to hear—"Your grandson is gay, Erich is a trans woman, I am queer, it's in our blood, everything you hated about your demon brother. May you live a long time so you can suffer for a long time."

Marina felt as if she had been stabbed by what she heard, but even if it were a real stab, she wouldn't show a reaction. She yanked her hand away from Sally, turned her back, and pushed the screen door of the dining room. She immediately avoided an old man with a cane who was walking toward her.

Sally stood there as if she had run out of breath. She wanted to cry but held it back. She wouldn't give her mother even a single tear. But she was trembling. She just felt Joshua's hand on her shoulder. She looked at him. He was looking at her, and in his eyes was a first: love. Joshua suddenly pulled her into a tight hug. "Forgive me, Mommy," Joshua said. "I love you very much!"

Sally's tears finally fell. They flowed and she couldn't stop them. "Forgive me too, my child!"

After a short while, Sally and Joshua were holding hands as they walked out. "We're going to an eat-all-you-can," Sally said, "let's sally-brate!"

Back in her room, Marina combed her short hair. She applied powder. Then she sat down for a long time, silent, looking at her few belongings—a Bible, Chinese powder, crochet, a wedding photo of her and Luis, paper and a ballpoint pen, and a glass with a toothbrush. Memories knocked again, persistent visitors. She remembered when she gave birth to Sally. 1975. Long hours of crying in pain. When the baby came out of her womb, she looked at it. She felt nothing.

It was the same when she gave birth to Eric two years later. Eric was fat and difficult to deliver; she only felt relief after the long struggle. She told Luis then that she wouldn't have any more children, even if he wanted to. She was done with the blood and the pain.

It was her mother's blood and tears that she remembered instead. She was only five years old then. Her mother's hair was long and she didn't want her mother to have it cut. She always tied it in a bun with jasmine flowers on top. She loved her mother so much; she loved her very much. The smell of the delicious *adobo* and *mechado* she cooked always filled the whole house. But she was crying. She was wailing while slitting her own wrists with a knife, cursing her soldier

husband who was always bringing women to their house, into their room, into their bed; underneath the large framed painting of President Magsaysay's face, she was also cursing her gay pimp brother who was always bringing women to her husband—those women who would flick their fingers more flirtatiously than the seductive women being offered to her husband. With her remaining strength, her mother tightly gripped Marina's arm to not let go, and in the struggle, Marina was stained with the mixture of her mother's blood and tears, who soon after lost her breath but still wouldn't let go of Marina. To Marina, who couldn't cry out of fear.

She only cried out of joy once in her whole life, tears without any blood. That was when her often-thwarted wedding with Luis finally took place. She was 23 then, and Luis was 22. 1972. She was so beautiful in her white gown and the long hair she tied in a bun with jasmine flowers on top, with the help of a butterfly clip that was a gift from Luis. The wedding was simple. There were barely ten people in the congregation they invited. Her father wasn't there; he disapproved. Only Oscar was there.

The wedding almost didn't happen because Luis didn't want Jim to be there. Jim was throwing a tantrum because he didn't want Luis to get married right away—"That flirtatious gay brother of yours," Marina said, "why would I want to talk to him?" But Jim eventually left the room, and the wedding proceeded. When the pastor said they were married and Luis kissed her, Marina's tears fell sweetly.

Now she realized Luis was gone too. She had no more allies.

There was a knock on the door. Annoyed, she stood up and opened it. It was the gay man whose boyfriend had died. His eyes were still puffy. He just wanted to say goodbye. He said he couldn't bear to live there anymore now that his boyfriend was gone.

"Then leave," Marina wanted to say. Why say goodbye to her when they weren't even friends? Instead, she just nodded and then closed the door. She went back to the bed and just sat there. She didn't want to think that they were both gay, having just lost a loved one.

Why did it seem like it was the mission of gay people to always follow her? Her whole life—from her father's pimp brother to Jim, Sam, Dale, Eric, Sally, Talia, and even her grandson—why was it that no matter where she went, there were always gays and tomboys attached to her life, as if fate had intentionally sent them to rub something in her face—what? What did it want to rub in her face? She didn't know. Only one thing she knew. Even if her life became a failure, even if nothing happened in her life, she had no one else to blame but the gays and tomboys and whatever other nonsense letters those were!

WE ARE NOT JUST A FETISH FOR THE FULFILLMENT OF OTHER PEOPLE'S FANTASIES. We are not freaks or accidents or mistakes or defects that need to be repaired. We are not just entertainers, or comic relief, or a pastime that can be hidden in a closet when not needed, or else erased. We didn't just wake up and decide to be trans. We are people just like you.

Mikee was speaking on stage, wearing a t-shirt that said **I AM DIVINE**, trying to focus on what she was saying even though she could think of nothing but David.

Joshua looked at Mikee with concern. He knew what she was going through. The other day, she had suddenly come to his unit. She said David still hadn't made contact. So Mikee began to wonder if she was just fooling herself. All this time she told herself she accepted who she was, that she was accepted by others, but when facing the mirror, the real her was still hiding in a body that was not yet fully hers. She was suppressing the truth.

"That's not true," Joshua said.

"What is the truth then? That something was wrong with me when I was born? That I wasn't content being who I was born as? Whose mistake was it? I thought I had answered all these questions, but why are they coming out again now?"

"You don't need to be perfect when you're born," Joshua said. "You don't need to be complete right away. We are the ones who complete ourselves."

"It's so hard though. Why couldn't we just be complete upon coming out?"

"Then we wouldn't learn anything. The process of completing ourselves is painful but beautiful."

Mikee looked at Joshua. "What has gotten into you?" she asked. "It's like you're not the one speaking! I used to be the one giving comforting words!"

Then Mikee hugged Joshua.

Joshua turned his gaze to the thousands of people around them, different colors, different genders. They were marching from different parts of Manila and were now gathered here at the Quezon Memorial Circle to celebrate Pride Month. Some of them were in black with rainbow paint on their faces. Others wore t-shirts saying *I Am Out-Standing*, or *Pride against Hate*. Various types of headdresses, scarves, fans, and flags were scattered about, but all bore the design of the rainbow. *Building a World That is Free and Equal*, said one streamer. *Fight for the SOGIE bill*, said a placard. *Come out, come out! It's happy out here!* said a placard held by a teenager. Some youths were dancing to the sound of a band's drums. Occasionally, someone would suddenly shout, "Love, Laban! Love, Laban!"

It was only afternoon but the sky was already turning dark, threatening rain. More were still arriving, including a sector of workers expressing solidarity for an ongoing strike at a factory, and the jeepney drivers including Kring's father. There were also several women's groups, teachers, students, lawyers, and doctors—all sectors of society expressing their participation.

On stage, Mikee continued.

"Every time we are forced into the ladies' room, every time we are insulted, you cannot pretend to see nothing. Every time we are bullied, killed, you cannot pretend to see nothing. When there

is an American soldier who ruthlessly kills our fellow citizen Divine, we cannot pretend to see nothing; we must hold them accountable. We need to fight."

The people began to chant.

"Down with Imperialism!" "Down with Feudalism!" "Down with Bureaucratic-capitalism!"

Mikee finished and stepped down from the stage. She was high-fived by Joshua and his friends. Mikee smiled, forced. Joshua squeezed Mikee's shoulder.

A gay man dressed as a crab approached and swayed in front of them. "Even the crabs are joining," Kring said. Then he shared his usual trivia.

"Did you know that we held the very first LGBT Pride March in all of Asia? That happened on June 26, 1994, in commemoration of the 25th Anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in New York. It was also held here at the Quezon Memorial Circle."

Joshua remembered the stories of Jim and Dale when he was a child, that Jim and Dale supposedly went to the very first Gay Pride March in the country, here at the Quezon Memorial Circle. He thought there were only about thirty of them marching. On this very ground where Lolo Jim and Lolo Dale once stepped, Joshua thought. The ground I am stepping on now.

He saw Sally at the other end with her companions at their NGO booth, which had a streamer saying *Justice For Divine*. Sally was wearing a loose rainbow-colored dress. She had a rainbow on her head. she and her companions were handing out free lubes in sachets, condoms, and mini vibrators.

Upon seeing Joshua, Sally waved happily. Joshua waved back happily too.

"How is your material?" Kring asked Joshua.

"I still don't know what I'm going to write," Joshua said. "But my classmates and I are meeting tomorrow. They are helping me."

Then Joshua pointed; on the other side were his classmates and some of their professors. They had waved to him earlier.

"When I finish again, Mikee," Joshua said, "can I let you and the others read it?"

"I don't know anything about writing," Kring said.

"Just for a reaction," Joshua said. "Just your impressions."

"Okay," Kring said. "You said it." Then they said goodbye briefly to go to Hannah and her father and the driver's group. Hannah and Kring's father high-fived.

Andre, who had just arrived, was walking while talking on the phone to Luchi while searching for Joshua with his eyes. "Do you want to come here?" he asked Luchi. "I have work," Luchi replied. "Just say hello to your Joshua for me. Okay," Andre said, "bye. I see him!"

He saw Joshua. He was standing there smiling in front of a young man holding a placard that said, *Mama, Papa, I'm Gay!*

Andre approached and put his arm around Joshua. Joshua hugged Andre, briefly but tightly, savoring the love. Then he happily pulled Andre toward Mikee. "Sorry, we weren't able to talk during the funeral," Mikee said. "So you're the one who's always hiding Joshua here, that's why we can't find him," Kring teased.

Joshua brought Andre to Sally. "Mom, this is Andre."

"Hi, Andre!" Sally said. Sally gave Andre free condoms and lubes. "Visit our house, I have many things I want to ask you about my son. In exchange, I'll tell you many stories about him."

"Oh Mommy," Joshua said, then— "Mommy, I'm moving out of my unit."

Sally looked at him. "Why?"

"When you move into Lolo Luis's house, I'll join you. We'll live there."

Sally's smile was very sweet.

Suddenly, it began to rain, a sudden downpour. People ran for cover, but most remained, bringing out umbrellas or using placards as umbrellas or taking shelter wherever they could. Mikee, Kring, and Hannah ran to the side. Sally watched Joshua, who was being covered by Andre's jacket. She looked up at Joshua in the rain, smiling.

Before long, the rain stopped. Everyone cheered and those who had left happily returned. The rallyists began to chant again while raising their fists. Mikee, Kring, Hannah, Joshua, and Andre also chanted.

"Gays of the nation, fight now!" "Lesbians of the nation, fight now!" "Transgender of the nation, fight now!"

Mikee was still pale, looking at the chanters. Then she was about to turn her gaze back to Joshua, but she stopped. In the middle of the crowd, she saw David walking toward her, his height immediately recognizable, smiling but looking worriedly at her.

Mikee's brow furrowed, then she quickly turned away to avoid him, almost slipping on the wet road. David immediately approached and held her. "Can we talk?"

Joshua and the others looked at them, curious about what was happening. "Please," David said.

Mikee glanced briefly at Joshua and the others, then went with him. They went to the side, where it wasn't too noisy. But it was still noisy because David almost shouted. Mikee couldn't hear him. David spoke louder. Mikee still couldn't hear.

David pulled Mikee and took her inside a portalet. There he said, "I'm sorry for what I did, I intentionally distanced myself because I wanted to test myself, if what my family was saying was true—that I was just being carried away by a whim, that what I felt for you might not be real, that I might just be leading you on and then later leave and hurt you. It's my first time being like this, and I wanted to be sure, because I didn't want to hurt you."

"But yesterday, I was just surprised, your mother came to my office."

"My mother?" Mikee was surprised by the question.

David told her how Aling Masing had tracked down his office. Aling Masing had shown the address she found in Mikee's bag to anyone she could, and she had a hard time with the transfers, but eventually found his office. She would do anything for her child. No one was going to fool Mikee's boyfriend again and get away with it. That wasn't going to happen again.

"Why did you hurt my child?" she asked David.

David explained that he didn't want to hurt Mikee if ever, so he was making sure of his own feelings first.

Aling Masing didn't let David finish. "You're afraid you might hurt Mikee tomorrow, but you're not afraid of hurting her now? You're an idiot!"

David stood there stunned, looking at Aling Masing.

"If you don't love my child, then don't show your face again. She will be hurt, she will cry so much, but before long, the two of us will be able to handle it. But if you love my child, you're an idiot if you walk away."

"Your mother is right," David said to Mikee. "I kept worrying about what might happen in the future, I didn't think that what is right now is what I shouldn't worry about tomorrow. And what is right now is that I love you."

"The past four days have been torment. Sorry for everything. I love you."

Mikee didn't want to cry so she just cursed David, "you son of a bitch!" then she asked about Mini, Mani, and Moni, and hugged David. She thought that as soon as she got home, she would tell her mother that of all mothers, she was the ultimate champion.

When Mikee and David came out of the portalet, Joshua, Kring, and Hannah were looking at them happily. Even Lance, who had just arrived, wearing a rainbow-colored t-shirt but tucked in. "Oh, his waist is so slim," Kring said, "don't tell me that's from your girlfriend."

"Yes," Lance said, obviously joking, then winked at Joshua. Joshua nodded at him, smiling. Lance was happy, content with whatever, no pressure, love will come when it comes. Who knows, maybe one of the thousands of people here today is the one.

"Join the struggle! Don't be afraid!" the people chanted.

While holding Andre's hand, Joshua spotted Pol. He had last seen him at the mall the other day, buying something for his work. He felt guilty because he had been absent so often.

Joshua asked about Pol's search for Tonyo. He said he had gone back to the old place, by the garbage dump, hoping the mountain of trash would suddenly disappear again and he would arrive back in the other world. But it didn't happen again.

That afternoon, when Pol returned home from the mall, he saw Ping in the garden, smoking. Ping was surprised because Pol didn't usually smoke. He was angry at those who smoked; if they wanted to endanger their bodies, they shouldn't involve others!

Ping approached Pol. He looked at him, cigarette in hand, looking guilty. Ping suddenly realized—Pol had told him before about the supposedly parallel universe and a different Tonyo he saw, smoking, with two cigarettes in his mouth, a gay man who smoked. That Tonyo was also angry at those who smoked.

Ping felt pity and love for his son. He held Pol's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said, "we will find Tonyo, no matter where, even in that other world you're talking about."

Pol's tears fell; he hugged his father. "Thank you, Daddy, thank you."

Now Pol was waving at Joshua. And Joshua waved back.

And Joshua thought, Pol is right, and his teacher, and the rallyists today saying there is a "plus," there are things not yet certain now that will be added. Change is continuous. Not everything is written in stone. Tomorrow is still a box. There are things not yet seen in the middle of spaces, mysteries not yet grasped, ears that have no names yet, places that aren't yet whatever a thing or person is. We are in a world of infinite mystery and possibility.

On stage, a group of youths of various genders had just finished singing. Their lead singer was now speaking.

"It's not just us members of the LGBTQIA+ community raising our voices. All the workers and students and farmers and urban poor and indigenous groups are with us, all the oppressed, all whose voices are being stifled. Let us all fight! Pride is protest!"

On stage, a line of people representing the LGBTQIA+ stood. A trans woman spoke first. "I never felt like a boy," she said. "I always felt like a girl. But I had to live as a boy for the first 19 years of my life. I had no voice inside for 19 years. Now I have a voice."

The people shouted, cheering.

A gay man spoke next. "Now that I'm out," he said, "I'm finally in."

More shouting.

A lesbian spoke. "How many of you are lesbians like me and aren't ashamed to shout, I am a lesbian?"

Many in the audience shouted, "I am a lesbian!" Even those who weren't lesbians. Even Lance, David, and Andre.

The speakers on stage spoke one after another. "I am bisexual. I am asexual. I am intersexual. I am queer."

"I am the plus," the last one said. The crowd laughed. He continued speaking.

"What we are fighting for is the coming of a time when we will no longer be called gay or lesbian or trans or non-binary or whatever else, but simply human. No labels, no boxes, equal and without any more privilege, united even if not all the same."

Everyone cheered.

"True," Joshua thought while watching everyone with amazement. "Every one of us on this planet is unique, no two people, whether gay or trans or lesbian or cis man or cis woman or whatever, are exactly the same in personhood and experience."

From the stage, someone wearing a rainbow costume descended; it was hard to tell what their sexuality or gender was, they were just a rainbow. The Rainbow circled the people while holding a banner that said **LOVE NOT HATE**.

Joshua's gaze followed the Rainbow. The Rainbow went past Mikee, David, and Lance, past Sally and her companions who were handing out free condoms and other things, past Pol, past a TV reporter who was being interviewed, past Kring and Hannah and Kring's father and the other jeepney driver, past the other rallyists. Joshua's eyes continued to follow the Rainbow until it reached the side of the stage, and there Joshua's gaze stopped, no longer following the running Rainbow. Joshua's gaze stopped because there, by the side of the stage, under a rainbow arch, he saw Jim standing, happily watching everything that was happening. Beside him was Sam, who was also smiling. They were holding hands.

He wasn't daydreaming, he wasn't imagining, Jim and Sam were really there.

Before he could react, Joshua was surprised to also see Divine, wearing a gown she used to wear in beauty pageants, also watching the happenings, looking at the streamer of Sally and the others that said *Justice For Divine*. And Erich, Erich was also there, wearing a loose floral dress,

smiling and watching everything, especially Sally, her most beloved sibling, who was still handing things out.

Joshua shuddered. There was another look of total love directed at Sally. It was Talia. Joshua already knew that was Talia. Beside her was Egay, the teacher friend of his Lolo Jim who was killed, whom he remembered seeing in a photo of his Lolo Jim and Lolo Dale. Egay was looking at Remus, who was also one of the rallyists.

And beside a group of screaming gay men waving small Philippine flags, he saw Tonyo, in a white t-shirt and jeans; he knew it was Tonyo because he was looking at Pol with total love, standing there listening to the speakers on stage.

Tonyo continued to look at Pol. Pol continued to just look at the stage. On occasions like this, the wind makes a way. It blew beside Pol and in Pol's hug of himself because of the cold, he turned to the left, until he was looking at where Tonyo was. He saw nothing but he felt a hug, a whisper of love. A slight smile emerged on him as he continued to look at what he couldn't see. While Tonyo continued to watch him with total love.

And Joshua, also watching, watching with amazement, because he now knew what he would write; he would write about Jim and Sam and Erich and Divine and Talia and Egay and Tonyo, who after attending the Gay Pride Parade gathered at the base of the Quezon monument to talk about their lives that weren't allowed to be lived, lives that were cut short, your story, my story, his story, the stories of other people that Joshua will turn into the story of us all. He, in his power as a writer, will allow their lives to be.

While happily watching Jim, Joshua wouldn't see them, but others who had died were also there, participating. A gay man who committed suicide because he was outed by his best friend and classmate. One who remained a virgin until old age and never experienced loving and being loved. One who was cursed and abandoned by parents and friends until dying of AIDS in a hidden place. A lesbian who was raped and whose body was dumped in front of their house. A *babaylan* who led a revolt and when killed by Spanish soldiers was stripped naked to supposedly expose the truth, in the name of God, and in the name of Spain. One who lived and died during a time when they didn't know what polyamorous, or fluid, was, and so was condemned and called a nymphomaniac. An intersex youth who was disowned by family until dying on the street, eyes wide open, holding hands with incomprehensible dual genitals between their thighs. Lives that were cut short, stifled and strangled. Destroyed.

In the midst of so many people at the Quezon Memorial Circle, Joshua walked between those he could see and those he couldn't see, until they vanished but were still there, they are us and they are themselves, and we are also them, and they are us, in a wide sea of gender celebrating, proclaiming, saying here we are, centuries here and still here, whatever you do to us, loving, will love no matter who you are, we are here for all those who are afraid, hiding, being erased, being lost, being covered; we are here to embrace you of different colors but one rainbow while in the wind streamers, banners, bandanas are dancing, seen on the street, everything seen in the rain, seen in the letters of the words, seen in the trees and the lampposts

and the round moon and the wall with graffiti that says *pride*, seen in the young gay boy and lesbian and queer and proud of it, seen in the flags of different colors, seen in those present who are seen and not seen, not half, not punctured, not destroyed, whole.