The Strangers of San-Something

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THE STRANGERS OF SAN-SOMETHING

by

Olivia Anne Lafferty

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Thank you,

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For Salud and Juana

who visit me
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“...and goodly Odysseus questioned her, saying:

‘My child, couldst thou not guide me to the house of him they call Alcinous, who is lord among the people here? For I am come hither a stranger sore-tried from afar, from a distant country; wherefore I know no one of the people who possess this city and land.’

Then the goddess, flashing-eyed Athena, answered him:

‘Then verily, Sir Stranger, I will shew thee the palace as thou dost bid me, for it lies hard by the house of my own noble father. Only go thou quietly, and I will lead the way. But turn not thine eyes upon any man nor question any, for the men here endure not stranger-folk, nor do they give kindly welcome to him who comes from another land.’

Homer, The Odyssey, Book 7
One Sunday morning over the Pacific Ocean, I wake from disquieting dreams with a single thought in mind: I do not believe in the family curse. My grandmother, Lola, told me the story a long time ago, about the line of women in our family who are called to be “babaylans”—priestess poets of their villages.

I listened well back then. I used to love hearing tales of my great, great grandmother Lualhati, the proud babaylan of her tribe. She was the healer of the living, seer of the dead, storykeeper and storyteller of her people.

But that was before the Spanish took their Visayan lands and Christianized the village. By the next generation, along with the land, the priestesses’ title and privilege were lost.

So Lualhati and her people fled. Sailing out of the Panay Gulf, across the Mindoro Strait, and into Manila Bay, my great, great grandmother and her kin became the dela Cruz family of Cavite City. Still, on the new island, in the new city, with the new family name, the babaylan “gift” endured.

Or so my Lola tells me.

The plane’s intercom crackles, and the pilot’s voice comes in. The message is first in English, then Mandarin, and last, Tagalog. “Hello, passengers, we’re experiencing some light turbulence. We ask you to please return to your seats...”

I check my watch and calculate that we’re seven hours into the flight from LAX. Another eight until the layover in Hong Kong, three more hours to Manila, and finally, an hour drive to Cavite City. I sit forward in my middle seat to stretch my back as best I can. The air conditioning system hasn’t worked for the last hour, and the entire plane smells like recirculated, pressurized air. I know I should try to fall
back asleep, but my mind is restless, the people around me too close, and the atmosphere practically suffocating. I feel the urge to escape.

Deep breath in, I tell myself. Inhale, exhale.

Rubbing my eyes, I remind myself why I’m taking this nineteen-hour trip to Cavite City: the San Juan house is in trouble.

The notice from the city commissioner came to Lola in the mail a few weeks ago. The deed to the old house was still under the dela Cruz name although she hadn’t lived there since 1975.

“They want to tear it down,” Lola had informed me over the phone. In the background, I recognized the gentle rush of water from the garden hose and knew she was tending to the gardenias. “That house has suffered too much flood damage over the years—it’s no good anymore. No one can live there.”

“What will they build?” I asked.

“Who knows? New officers’ quarters, most likely. You’ll find out when you get there.”

Someone needed to sign the papers and turnover the house to the developers in person. I wanted to protest; I couldn’t afford to sacrifice a week’s work at the office to give away the house and the land that didn’t belong to me.

But Lola sighed dramatically. “I cannot fly—you know, my heart will not handle it—and your mother will not go.”

Lola was right about that.

“Let them take the house,” my mother said when I called her. “Nobody’s using it anyway.”
And did my mother want to go with me?

“No,” was her definitive answer. “And neither should you, Mariposa. We’ll send Uncle Bebot to take care of things, okay? Call him, tonight, will you? I’ve got to go now.”

Mesa College had her teaching two night classes again, and she sounded frantic. I imagined her toting her laptop bag over one shoulder with a travel mug of coffee in one hand and her graded papers in another.

“There’s too much on my plate,” she said. I was silent. Even without seeing my face, my mother somehow knew what I was thinking. “Honey, you don’t want to go to the Philippines. It’s bad there right now. Your auntie doesn’t even want to do her Christmas drive for the kids there this year—that’s how bad it is.”

This is why I’ve never been to the Philippines. It’s always the same excuses with her:

“It’s dangerous.”

“You’ll get kidnapped.”

“Your Tagalog sucks. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Do you want to be the dumb, American tourist?”

“Okay—” I finally had to say to her. “Okay, I get it.”

But, here’s the thing: I never called Uncle Bebot. Something told me not to. Maybe it was the guilt-trip from Lola or the chance to not do everything my mother said—for once. Or maybe it was something else I couldn’t quite register—something tugging me back to the Islands—as if a string, twelve-thousand-miles long, were tied to me, and someone on the other side kept yanking me back.
So here I am, stuck sitting for the next twelve hours, and I don't want to sleep because I know that if I close my eyes, I'll have the dream again.

At least, I think it's just a dream. Sometimes it feels more like a memory, like I'm reaching back into some past—but it's a past that couldn't be my own. It's impossible; I was not alive when my great aunt Luzviminda died.

Yet, somehow, I know it's her I'm dreaming of.

The scene is always the same.

I'm watching her die in her bed in the San Juan House. Lying on top of white sheets, she wears a yellow housedress. She's young—no more than thirty years old—but she is pale and thinning.

Propped up against the headboard, with pillows behind her neck, she has a full vantage of everyone in the room. Her six brothers and six sisters stand in a half-circle around the bed. One of these sisters is my grandmother, Lola, and she is very pregnant.

My great aunt looks at her siblings, and slowly, her jaw drops open to speak. In a prophetic voice, like an ancient oracle's, she asks, *Who will take the gift?*

With her right hand, she takes off something from around her neck. It's a pendant: a hollow, bronze sphere hanging from a thin, leather string. I can look at it closely. The sphere is made up of swirling metal, in patterns like bits of language—something ancient and lost, yet it resonates as distantly familiar. I don't know what the symbols mean.

*It must go to someone,* my great aunt says, her voice rising. *I leave behind no children of my own. One of you must take it.*
Her siblings are silent. Finally, the eldest brother tries to comfort her.

_Luz, you are unwell_, he tells her. _We’ll keep the pendant safe. It will be stored with our mother’s things, the family things._

_No—one of you must take it from me, as I took it from our mother._

_Luz—_

Who? she asks, her voice shaking with power. _Who will take it?_

Silence.

And so, the dying woman’s fist raises high, green veins tensed up and down her arm. The pendant crests in the humid air and—_CRASH_—the impact shakes the room. The globe cracks open on the floor, like a bronze eggshell in two. The ancient script is interrupted, and Luz exhales, her arm falling, lifeless, to her side.

It is impossible—the brothers and sisters murmur amongst themselves after Luz’s death—that the metal orb could split the way it did—that it’s division would rattle the house.

But Lola says that she herself saw it break, for the pendant landed at her very feet. She claims that at the moment of collision, she felt her baby—my mother—kick for the first time.

This is the dream that has followed me of late, and I wish that I could see something, anything else when I close my eyes. What unsettles me most is the memory I pair with this dream—when, after waking, I inevitably recall Lola’s babaylan story.
“These women like your great, great grandmother Lualhati were strange,” she had said. “People did not always accept them. I think that was because the babaylans were caught in-between—existing on earth while belonging in the heavens.”

She fiddled with the leather string she wore around her wrist.

“A woman begins to become a babaylan when she receives the sacred call—a vision, a dream—”

Shaking my head, I recline into the seat and close my eyes, certain.

It is just story.
HALO-HALO
Anak ko, my child, come here. We’re going to make halo-halo.

Start with a tall glass. The best has a broad lip. It should be clear, not tinted, so what’s inside can show.

First: the green gulaman. It looks like Jello-O, doesn’t it? Well, Gulaman is better than Jell-O. Try it. See how the jelly squishes just a bit when you pinch it? This is the base of the dessert, the guts. We build up from here.

Then we add beans—

*But, Lola, why would you put beans in a dessert?*

That’s your gringo father’s side talking, Miss Mariposa Sullivan-Reyes. Because you are six and not sixty, like me, and because you have not been to the Philippines, you haven’t tasted a true, island dessert.

Here, let’s pop open this jar. Use the spoon to scoop the monggo beans. See that brown-red color of the skin? That means it’s sweet.

So, Miss Mariposa, you start a new school tomorrow. A school with a fancy name.

*Yes, The Delphi Academy for Gifted Youth. Mama says they’ll teach me a lot of new things.*

That’s good. You know, I was a teacher back in the Philippines. In Manila, I taught children about your age. You’ll see, anak ko, that there are things even this “Delphi Academy for Gifted Youth” cannot teach you.

Now, for the rest of the sweet beans. Oh, you will like this. One spoonful of the sweet white bean and one of yellow garbanzo. Our halo-halo is looking good already.
Will they put beans in the desserts at school?

I don’t think so, anak ko.

Now comes my favorite part: the red kaong. All we have to do is scoop it from the jar. But you know, kaong comes from the sugar palm. I can picture the boys climbing up the trees—fast, like monkeys—to get the hanging kaong nuts. There, beneath the fronds, they take a bolo knife and WHACK! The nuts fall in bunches to the ground. And still, they’re not done. They have to peel away the green skin, and finally, inside is the sweet fruit.

Our kaong will be even more sweet because it has been soaking in syrup. That is why it has turned this color—scarlet, like the band on the Philippine flag.

Now let’s use a fresh ingredient for a change. This is buko—the young coconut. You can hold it, here.

It’s kind of heavy.

Yes, it’s full of the coconut juice.

Now, I know you’re a strong girl and you could do this yourself, but I’ll show you how we open it. Your Lolo used to do this part for me. He’d take the bolo knife to the coconut in the back yard. One big hit, and it would split open.

Wow, that’s strong!

Yes—let’s see how we do. Be careful, I’m using the big kitchen knife, okay? I’ll split the coconut open just a crack, and you’ll catch the juice beneath it with this bowl. Are you ready?

Yes, Lola.

Okay, I’ll count to three. One, two, three!
Hmm, this one has a thick husk. It’s a little stubborn. No problem, we’ll try again. One, two, three! Hurry, here, anak ko!

*I got it!*

Good job, miss! You caught the juice. Let me get you a straw, so you can drink it.

*Mmm, it's good.*

Refreshing, right? *So* good.

Now, take this spoon and we'll scrape out pieces of buko. It’s easy, right? Because it is the young coconut and the meat is still soft.

That’s good—that much will do. Now put the pieces on top of the kaong.

*What's next, Lola?*

Next, we add the ice. Use the ice shaver to make it thin-thin-thin. Put the cubes in the top of the machine here, and turn the handle. There you go—look at you, strong girl! You’re making shaved ice! You can try a little bit, too. Don’t crunch it with your molars or you’ll hurt your teeth. Just place it on your tongue. See? So thin it melts right away.

On top of the ice, we put leche flan, the custard. Mmmm, it is *so* good. Look how the flan floats now, like a little raft. It wouldn’t be a Filipino dessert without a reminder of the Pacific.

Now, pour over the milk. See it trickle down the ice, past the beans, all the way to the green gulaman? Soon we can give all our ingredients a good stir.

But wait, Mariposa, we’re not done yet. This is important: a scoop of ice cream for the very top. You know, on special Sundays in Cavite, in the long
afternoons after church, my sister would take me to the Golden Star Ice Cream cart in the marketplace and we’d each get a cone. Two if I’d done very well in school that week. So now, let’s add a scoop to halo-halo. What would you like: vanilla or coconut or ube?

_That purple one—is that the ube?_

Yes, that’s ube. It’s sweet, purple yam.

_A vegetable in ice cream? That’s weird._

It’s good. You’ll like it. Try it on your halo-halo.

_I don’t know…_

It’s good. It’s special.

_It’s different._

Yes, that’s okay.

_Lola, do you think the other kids at school will like me?_

Why wouldn’t they like you? You are Miss Mariposa Sullivan-Reyes.

_What if...what if I don’t make friends at The Delphi Academy for Gifted Youth?_

Ah, you don’t need to worry, anak ko.

How good our halo-halo is looking! Look at all we’ve done already—the green gulaman, the red, white, and yellow beans, the scarlet kaong, the coconut, ice, and milk. There’s barely room for more! We’ve built quite a dessert.

You know this is not just for family but your friends and neighbors and any guests you welcome into the house. It’s good at all times of the year—especially here in San Diego, where it’s always springtime. It’s good for parties and play dates and watching the Pinoy telenovelas with your cousins down south. It’s even for Uncle
Bebot—who I don’t talk to—and for Auntie Dalisay—who talks enough for the rest of us—and for Nicole that white girl across the street who’s always jealous of your summer tan. It is for the teachers you will meet tomorrow—who may not know what a sugar palm even looks like—and for your new classmates and playmates. For all the good friends I know you’ll make tomorrow.

*I want to, Lola.*

Don’t worry, anak ko. You are polite and well spoken, so don’t be afraid to speak up. Diba?

*Right.*

Ah, anak ko, your mother stole Tagalog from you when you were very young. She snatched it from your lips and hid it away.

*Is that why I can’t understand it all the time—when you say things that sound like “taka taka taka” and “ng ng ng”?*

Yes. But if you keep listening, I can teach you.

*Okay. That sounds fun.*

That’s good, anak ko.

*But why would Mama steal it from me?*

Oh, you know. So that people wouldn’t look at you different when you talk.

*Oh.*

It’s no matter, anak ko.

You will do well tomorrow, Miss Mariposa Sullivan-Reyes. I know it.

So, did you decide what kind of ice cream you want?

*I can try the ube, Lola.*
Good choice, anak ko. There it goes—a purple scoop, right on top. Beautiful, see?

*Mhmm. What does it mean, halo-halo?*

“Mix-Mix.” Halo-halo.

*Mix-mix.*

Halo-Halo.
BY THE MANGO TREE
When I was eleven, the mangoes on our neighbor's tree ripened much too early in the season. A spring heat wave had wiped out Southern California's marine layer. So by May, when the mangoes should have been green, they lay in sticky heaps beneath the massive trunk at the edge of the Johnsons' yard. It was an ancient-looking tree, with twisting limbs and knots in the bark—perfect for climbing. Nearing the top of that tree, poking your head out of the shaggy bundles of leaves, you could catch a glimpse of the ocean, far, far off. It felt like the closest I'd ever be to the sun.

On Memorial Day, our first day of summer vacation, I was at Jessie Johnson's house, in her backyard with her and a boy from the cul-de-sac named Finn. During the school year, he lived with his dad in Seattle, but every summer, he flew down to San Diego to spend time with his mom. A lot of the neighborhood boys made fun of Finn, throwing fishy faces when they could.

The previous summer, when Finn and I met for the first time, I had given him my honest opinion of his name.

"I like 'Finn.'" I told him. "It's a good name. It's what helps fish swim, so that makes you strong, I think."

"Thanks," he said, tugging at his blue shirt. "Mariposa' is a pretty name, too."

Then, I told him that I liked the color of his t-shirt. It was blue, same color of his eyes. Ever since then, he always wore blue tees.

In the deep shade of the mango tree, the three of us spread out a picnic blanket. The grass was still damp from the sprinklers that went off at midday, and that moisture made the air thick with mango sweetness. Jessie said we had to eat all the mangoes before they browned. So we reached into the piles of fruit, and I ignored my Mama's voice in my head scolding me, "Mariposa, wash the produce before you eat it." As a
compromise, I chose the ones on top of the piles, the furthest from the ground,
imagine Mama would be less disappointed in me.

I thought that my grandma, my Lola, probably wouldn’t care as much. Not that
she didn’t have rules, but Lola just liked this tree—so massive you could see it from our
kitchen window next-door. Sometimes when Lola cooked or washed the dishes, she
would just stare at the Johnsons’ tree. Once, I caught her looking at it, the scrub brush in
her hand forgotten. Her eyes glistened.

“Lola,” I asked. “Are you sad?”

She deftly swiped at her eyes and lifted her chin, still looking at the tree. “I’m
nostalgic,” she said.

“Nostalgic?” I repeated, sounding out the word.

“I’m remembering,” she said, looking at me, patting her right hand to her chest.
“We had a great mango tree like that one when I was a girl.” Her eyes were misty,
making them look grayer than usual. But she still smiled.

“I just can’t look at it for too long.” Then she went back to scrubbing a dish.

So as I picked a mango off the top of the piles, I thought that of anyone, Lola
would forgive me for not washing the fruit first. The yellow-orange strings stuck in our
teeth and juice dripped down our chins. When our forearms grew too sticky from
wiping our mouths, Jessie announced that she could grab us napkins from inside. She
ran off to fetch them from the kitchen.

Finn and I were left in the shade alone. The grass poked through the checkered
blanket and itched our legs. When I turned to him to say something, I was surprised to
find his head so near mine.

“Finn?”
Without looking at me, he planted a kiss on my collarbone. Then he ran away.

It happened so quickly I wasn’t sure it happened at all, but my skin tingled where his lips left a little rim of mango juice. I sat there dumbly in the shade of the tree just wondering what it meant, plucking grass and feeling the spot on my collarbone pulse, like a new heartbeat.

I wished Finn could have stuck around after.

“Boys are dumb,” Jessie said when I reported what she missed. “And Finn is even dumber for kissing you without the nerve to even speak to you after.”

I told her I agreed.

A week or so later, his mom took him on a road trip through the Southwest that lasted the whole summer. Finn and I didn’t get time to speak before he left. Peeking from behind the Johnsons’ fence, we watched the station wagon rumble out of Finn’s driveway.

“Boys are such cowards,” Jessie murmured.

“Yeah.”

My eyes tracked the station wagon down the cul-de-sac and out onto the main street until the very last moment, until I couldn’t see it anymore.

On July Fourth, the neighbors decided to throw a block party in the middle of the cul-de-sac. Something harmless to celebrate the holiday, pretty much your standard suburban gathering—potato salad, barbequed hot dogs, orange sodas for the kids, beers for the adults—but it was the hottest day on record since 1967. There was just something in the air that year. Lola said it was mga mucho, ghosts, playing with us. Mama reasoned it was climate change. Whatever the cause, the day just burned. No coastal
breeze to reach our neighborhood. No cloud to drift along the sky. Just the sun baking
the asphalt and pressing heavy on our shoulders.

“Hey—Finn call you yet?” Jessie asked when Lola and I arrived at the party. I was
wearing a white cotton dress with thin shoulder straps, the kind we weren’t allowed to
wear at school.

I tugged at the dress. “No...”

“Pfft—that coward.”

I shrugged and spotted Lola already herding neighbors toward the platter of
lumpia she’d brought. She said that lumpia was the kind of Filipino food that white
people could handle, the fried stuff. With Lola preoccupied and Mama still at work,
teaching a night class at Mesa College, I felt the nervous joy of being unsupervised. I
helped myself to an orange soda.

“Nicole says she’ll let us listen to her new Avril Lavigne CD,” Jessie whispered.

“Yeah?”

Mama said I wasn’t supposed to be around Nicole, that their family wasn’t a
positive influence. I thought the girl was nice enough; she was sixteen and blonde and
lived across the street with her mom who wasn’t around a lot.

“Come on.”

Jessie dragged me toward Nicole, who was alternately nibbling lumpia and
biting her fingernails. Some man I didn’t recognize stood next to her, watching us
approach.

“Nicole, you promised we could listen to your new CD,” Jessie said with her
hands on her hips.

“Nice to see you too,” Nicole smirked. “Don’t worry, Jessie, we’ll go in a sec.”
The man next to Nicole audibly gulped the last of his beer. In a thin voice, he asked, “Would you get me another, Nikky?”

“I don’t think you need one.”

“Come on,” he nudged her a bit with his elbow, chiding her.

“You’ve had a lot.”

“Nikky—”

“Whatever.” Nicole finished her lumpia, rubbed her hands on her jean shorts, and walked off towards the cooler.

The man peered at Jessie and me before giving us a wave. “Happy Fourth.”

I never knew quite what to say to some adults, but Jessie did.

“Same to you, mister. Who are you?” Jessie asked, crossing her arms.

“Nicole’s uncle. Chase. Very nice to meet you, young ladies.”

I noticed his earring glint as he looked down at me. A silver spike stuck through his left lobe. Mama said I couldn’t get my ears pierced, even though all the girls at school did. In fights, she said, girls yanked them out.

“What’s your name?” he asked me.

Something told me not to tell him.

“You speak English?” he tried again, smiling.

“Of course she—” Jessie began, but then Nicole returned.

“Here’s your drink,” she said, shoving the beer bottle against the man’s chest.

“Look at those eyes, Nikkie,” Chase put his hands on his knees and peered down at me the way you look at puppies through the glass of a pet store. “Those Chinky eyes.”

Nicole gripped his arm. “Come on, why don’t we get you back to the house?”

“Woah, okay.” Chase put his hands up in defense. “Didn’t mean anything.”
He looked back at Jessie and me. “Sorry, ladies, I'll excuse myself,” he said before stumbling backward a couple steps, steadying himself, and retreating to Nicole’s house across the street.

Eyes closed, Nicole ran her hands through her bleached hair before turning to us again. “Sorry, about that. He’s just...Chase.”

“That's okay,” I said.

At the food table, Lola was putting out a fresh platter of lumpia. Nicole zeroed in on the fried vegetable rolls and was already walking towards them when she motioned for us to follow. “Come on!”

When we had our fill of lumpia and chili sauce, Jessie pressed, “Okay, now can we go see your CD?”

Nicole licked her fingers. “Yeah sure, let's go.”

We followed Nicole towards her house, the one with the tire in the front lawn. The tire was supposed to be turned into a swing, but it had been there for a while now, forgotten among the dandelions and other weeds that cropped up around it.

A red Toyota pick-up truck was parked at a diagonal in the driveway, the fender almost touching the tire on the grass.

“Chase can't park worth shit.” Nicole grumbled.

_Not a positive influence,_ I kept hearing as we entered Nicole’s home.

“Don’t bother taking off your shoes,” Nicole said as we went through the front door. Everything inside was an aging yellow-white, like the underarms of an old t-shirt. Dust swam in the cracks of sunlight through plastic blinds, hovering over stacks of dirty dishes in the sink. Half-abandoned, might be the word for that house—like someone had given up caring for the place long ago.
Chase was lounging in an overstuffed reclining chair pointed towards a box TV. He was still swigging from the bottle in his hand and paused for air only when the front door slammed closed behind me.

“Sorry—”

“Nah, you’re fine,” Nicole said with a careless gesture of her hand. "My bedroom’s up here.”

Jessie and Nicole started climbing the stairs, but I paused on the first step, realizing I was still holding my orange soda. Mama said never to have food or drink besides water upstairs. Out of courtesy, I asked Nicole for her trashcan.

“Oh, we forgot to bring it in.” She paused to point down the hall before pounding back up the stairs. “There’s one in the bathroom.”

I felt proud of myself for practicing politeness, gulped down the rest of the soda on my way, and tossed the empty can into the plastic bin beside the sink. I was about to exit when I heard the door close.

Chase was there. The bathroom seemed a much tighter space.

His slurred words covered my murmur of excuses—“Sorry, excuse me.” The click of a lock. The space between us closed.

His hand covered my mouth. I inhaled the sourness of his palm, could taste it on the front of my teeth.

“Don't tell.”

My fingers and toes went cold. Blood pulsed in my ears. I felt the walls crash like waves, and I tried to breathe.

Last summer, when we went to the beach, I nearly drowned, pulled into a riptide and trapped in a sandbank, my hands over my head, grasping for something to pull me
up. I remember reaching for the sun, just a far-off blur beyond the surface of the saltwater.

The bitter smell of hops drenched the room. Sinking deeper, I stared up at the ceiling light, flickering fluorescent greenish-white far above me. A fly buzzed, trapped inside.

The muffled rock music of Nicole’s new CD filtered from above in electronic strokes, heavy bass, and words too quiet, too far off to recognize.

Near my face, his metal earring reflected the green light.

Lola said that in Cavite, the girls wore safety pins on the pleats of their uniform skirts. These pins served a double purpose, Lola said. On bus rides to school, boys would play with the girls’ hair or try to take their books. Lola would always shoot them a look first—one that made boys return quickly to their seats. But some were more persistent. Those boys got a sharp prick to the hand.

Suddenly there was blood on my hand and a yelp that wasn’t my own. I was scrambling on the tile, my feet gathering beneath me, and I ran.

Emerging from the dust and sickly yellow-white furnishings, I gasped in the shocking cold. I welcomed air into my lungs, stumbling past the tire in the grass, watching the figures in the middle of the cul-de-sac, obscured by heat waves rising off the asphalt. The wavering shapes of the partygoers were black against the setting sun. At the center of the celebration, a pillar of barbeque smoke billowed into the reddening sky. The heat from the day was waning, the night chill looming, and I just ached to get home. So I breathed and ran and kept telling myself to do so.
I crawled into my bed, swaddled myself in covers, and stared at the wall for what seemed a long time. I don't know how much time passed before I realized my right hand, stained with blood, was still clenched tight.

Opening my stained fingers, one by one, like petals, revealed an object in my palm. The silver earring.

A wave of nausea hit me. It needed to go down the garbage disposal—like all the other waste Lola and Mama rinsed away, all the fruit rinds, the ugly smears of dipping sauces and salad dressings. The earring was too hot in my palm and too red, and it needed to go down the kitchen sink.

I ran the water for a long time and climbed up onto the counter so that I could look down the drain and make sure it was gone. Picking up the brush, I scrubbed my hand until it felt raw. I blinked away tears and squinted out the window at the view.

The dusk cast a hazy light behind the Johnsons’ mango tree, silhouetted against the dying sky, leaves quivering in the wind. The sun had set in a colder world.

“There you are.”

I jumped and turned to see Lola gripping an empty aluminum tray.

“Jessie was looking for you—the fireworks are starting soon,” Lola said, setting the pan down by the sink, and I welcomed the smell of lumpia grease. “I tell you, these neighbors love their fried foods.”

She looked at me closer. “What's wrong, anak ko?” Lola held my face in her hands. I started to shake, and she took me into a locking embrace. I clutched her dress, trying to bury myself away, trying to get closer and closer to her.

Don't tell.
A deep embarrassment overcame me. I pushed away for a second and wiped my eyes. Trembling, my hand folded into a fist, as if protecting something precious.

“What’s wrong, anak ko?” she asked again.

I glanced at the outline of the mango tree. How far away it seemed.

“I’m nostalgic,” I answered before returning to her embrace.

The red pick-up was gone the next day and didn’t return. The July heat spell had passed, and end-of-summer winds took over the coast. The tremor in my hand stayed. It revved when Mama switched on the garbage disposal and when doors slammed and when someone put a hand on my shoulder.

I complained of nightmares, that I was afraid to go to bed.

“Nightmares at eleven years old?” Mama wondered at me, brushing hair away from my face at night as she tucked me in. “Honey, are you okay?”

My stomach dropped. What could I say? I had tried practicing: Mama, something bad happened over the summer. Mama, I am afraid to look men in the eye.

“Please tell me what’s wrong.”

Silence.

“Trouble with friends? With the neighborhood kids?”

Yes, that was it. I nodded.

Mama didn’t seem convinced, but she kept trying, always offering to talk. Suggesting we go on walks, to the movies, to the museum downtown together.

Late one night, when I should have been in bed, I overheard Mama talking to Lola in the kitchen. Their voices carried up the stairs, where I knelt at the banister, gripping the wooden bars, listening.
“What’s wrong, Nenita?” I heard Lola say.

“I’m worried,” my mother said. From her tone, I knew she was rubbing her temples, circling them with her fingertips, like she always did when something was troubling her. “Something’s different with her, Mom.”

Lola hummed in agreement. I heard the sound of dishes scraping against each other, like plates being stacked.

“She shouldn’t be spending the last of her summer up in her room, all alone,” my mother said.

The cupboard door opened and then shut closed.

“Something’s different,” Mama insisted. “She’s been having nightmares. You’ve noticed, Mom, haven’t you?”

“Of course, anak ko.”

There was a pause, and I imagined my mother pursing her lips, dissatisfied.

“Well?”

Lola took on her serious tone. “It’s mga mucho.”

I heard my mother scoff.

“Nenita dela Cruz Reyes, I told you—they’re all about this year. They’re restless.”

“Mom, please stop saying things like that,” Mama objected. “You’ll only scare her.”

“It’s not me she’s afraid of.”

“Well what then—what is she afraid of?”

Lola breathed deeply. “Be patient, anak ko. She’ll let us know.”

She turned to go up the stairs, and I rushed back down the hall to my bedroom, throwing the covers over myself and trying to breathe regularly.
A minute later, the door creaked open, and Lola peered into my room.

“Lola,” I whispered.

“Still awake, miss?” she said and sat at the edge of my bed. She took my hand and patted it for a while, humming. Then she said, “You were not given a spirit of fear. You know this, right?”

“Yes, Lola.”

“Tell it back to me now.”

“You were not given a spirit of fear.”

“That’s good, anak ko.”

“Lola...”

“Mmm?”

“I don’t want you or Mama to be worried.”

“Tell your Mama what’s troubling you. You can tell her, and she won’t worry.”

When she saw that I was starting to close my eyes, Lola rubbed my back and hummed softly. As I drifted off, I tried to practice again.

*Mama, I’m afraid to fall asleep. I can still feel the bathroom tiles. They’re cold against my back. I can still see the ceiling lamp and the fly, its wings melting.*

*I am afraid I am not the girl you wanted me to be.*

I was twelve and it was May again. I had my picnic blanket tucked under my arm and a carton of lemonade to share with Jessie. She’d been so understanding that past year, not asking many questions. We shared school lunches, went to the frozen yogurt shop, tried on her mother’s make-up, almost like nothing had changed.
Letting myself through the Johnsons’ back gate, I stepped onto the green grass and thought of Memorial Day last year, how fruit lay strewn about the trunk, how sticky-sweet the air smelled. But this year’s tree was bare—the same shaggy leaves, same knots in the trunk, but no fruit yet. I thought of what Lola would say, that it just needed time and a little more sunshine.

“Mariposa.”

I turned around.

“Finn.”

He’d grown an inch, but I’d grown nearly three since I’d seen him. His face flushed when I said his name. I was suddenly anxious about my appearance—my hair in a careless ponytail, the pilled green dress, a bit too short now. I started tucking stray wisps of hair behind my ears. “Where’s Jessie?”

“Kitchen. Grabbing some snacks or sandwiches or something.”

“Oh.”

He tugged at his shirt. Still blue.

“How was your school year?” I asked. Part of me wanted to give him a big hug, but I stayed where I was, a few feet away.

“Oh, the same. You know. It’s always rainy in Seattle.”

When I didn’t reply, Finn took a deep breath. “Look I—” He took a step forward, towards me, and I couldn’t help it: I flinched.

His face fell, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment.

I closed my eyes, shaking my head. Finn. Memorial Day. The kiss by the mango tree. These were the things to hold onto.

*Mariposa, you were not given a spirit of fear.*
“Hey, you both made it!” Jessie came from inside the house, carrying a plate stacked with sandwiches. She looked back and forth between me and Finn.

I finally spoke up. “I brought the blanket.”

“Perfect.”

There was so much to say over lemonade and ham sandwiches, while sitting on the scratchy blanket, but I didn’t say much at all. Jessie told us about how much she missed volleyball season and Finn talked about Seattle, how his dad started letting him have coffee this year. Every now and then, the midafternoon sun peeked out from behind the passing clouds, and when we had each had our share of picnic food, Jessie wanted to climb the mango tree.

“We’re getting kind of old to climb trees,” I said.

Jessie scoffed, her leg already swinging over the lowest branch. “No such thing.”

Finn and I looked up at her from below.

“Come on, you chickens,” she called down to us.

I folded my hands over my chest. “Jessie, I’m wearing a dress.”

Finn looked at me. “I can go up first, if you want.”

The spring winds had scattered leaves around the base of the tree. I spread a few around with my shoe before looking back up at the branches from where they fell.

“Mariposa?”

I searched the tree warily. Jessie neared the top, her hand reaching for the last branch, and that’s when I noticed the pink and yellow bristle by her grip. Mango blossoms.
SAN DIEGO, 1981

SUICIDE HILL STRETCH OF PALM AVE. AWAITS IMPROVEMENTS
Adjacent property owners say they can't afford to share costs

Suicide Hill residents don't want to
San Diego, 1981

A dry, Santa Ana wind kicked up dust from the path behind Pájaro River High. Squinting against the breeze, Nenita leaned against the wall of the main academic building—a concrete eyesore that could have been a penitentiary if not for the white banner with “Welcome Back, Students!” in black letters across the front gate. The bell for fourth period hadn’t rung yet, and Nenita and her cousin Marcela sought relief from the late-August heat in the shade. The cement wall felt cool against Nenita’s bare shoulders. The school dress code banned tube tops, but Nenita knew it made her look tougher, like a true chola. The top, in combination with her stare—the mal de ojo she was famous for—was a warning sign that said: “No te metas conmigo.”

“Hey,” Nenita said, looking over her shoulder at her cousin. “Do you wanna go to the movies after the Suicide Hill race tonight? Rodrigo has a cousin who can sneak us in.”

Marcela took a long draw from her cigarette and breathed out the smoke. The gray-white cloud lingered in the dry air as she replied, “Yeah, sure.”

Nenita tried to read her cousin’s expression, but Marcela remained inscrutable behind her pair of oversized sunglasses with white frames. Nenita noticed that Marcela wasn’t wearing Angel’s jacket today. Her cousin was always so proud of it—the black, nylon bomber that marked her as the novia of a Pájaro. Even in ninety-degree weather, Marcela would have worn that jacket, at least slung over her shoulder.
“Yeah, it’ll be fun,” Nenita said. “We’ll celebrate the win. No one can beat the Monte Carlo.”

Over the summer, Angel had fixed up the ’78 to give it even more speed. He stole two Recaro racing seats from a North County junkyard to replace the front bench. Then, after removing the heater matrix and AC compressor, it could go zero-to-sixty in under seven seconds, Angel claimed. It probably could have been even faster, but he refused to sacrifice the stereo.

“Angel will show them,” Nenita said, watching her cousin.

Marcela took a deep breath in. “He always does.”

From the shade, the two girls could see their novios, Rodrigo and Angel, and some of the other Pájaros on the field playing soccer in their ribbed wife-beaters. Shouts of “Vamos, vamos!” echoed to them from across the green. No one but the Pájaro gang hung out near this side of the school. Everyone—even some of the teachers—knew better than to step into Pájaro territory, marked distinctly by the gang’s graffiti on that East wall. At lunch, the rest of the students were in the cafeteria or the front lawn. But the Pájaros chose the side of the school farthest from the teachers’ lounge. They ate saladitos suckers and Wonderbread sandwiches from brown paper bags, leaned against the shaded wall, and watched the heat rise in curls off the concrete.

Today, the sun was fixed at high noon and roasted everything under its rays. Too far south and east to feel the mercy of the Pacific Ocean’s breeze, Pájaro River County seemed to burn.

Nenita gave Marcela a nudge. “Our boys look good out there, huh?”
Nenita eyed her novio, Rodrigo, who had grown to six feet over the summer and plowed down any opponents in his way. Nenita first liked Rodrigo, she remembered, because she thought he looked like John Stamos—if John Stamos were a vato, that is. Yeah—she smiled to herself—Rodrigo had movie star looks. But it was only after the reports of him getting caught with a knife in summer school that she let him take her for a burger and chocolate malt. It was a fact: Rodrigo could wield a butterfly knife like nobody. She wore his black Pájaro jacket whenever he jumped someone.

“Hm?” Marcela hummed. Then she nodded toward the guys. “Yeah, they look good.”

Nenita looked for Angel on the field. He was easy to spot—the stocky, eighteen-year-old who was all muscle, his brow permanently fixed with anger. He wiped his upper lip with the back of his hand. Everyone had heard of his relatives down in Mexico—the Dantes family. We knew that Angel’s uncle was a government official, high up in the chain of command with a personal connection to the Chief of Police. No te metas con él.

Marcela was lucky to be with the Angel Dantes, the Pájaro General himself. Sure, they were that couple that always argued—usually over whether or not Marcela had been hitting on someone else at a party—or whether or not Angel was cheating with that puta down south. Rumor was he saw that other girl on holidays spent with his family. Just a month ago, he came back from Tijuana with the hint of a lipstick stain on his t-shirt sleeve. Angel was a pretty cool-headed guy, but when Sela
confronted him, it was explosive. Took them three whole days to make up—a new record, longest yet.

Marcela certainly had put her fiery temper to good use, earning her rank over the years. But it was Nenita who had gotten Marcela into the Pájaros in the first place.

Marcela came late to the neighborhood. Nenita and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. dela Cruz Reyes, had moved to San Diego, California when Nenita was ten. They were the first of the dela Cruz family to leave the Philippines. They left behind the big, family house on Calle de San Juan in Cavite City when Nenita’s father ranked top of his class and joined the American Navy, taking his wife and ten-year-old Nenita with him.

Good thing Nenita was a fast learner. Her first lesson in America: trade Tagalog for English.

On her first day in the fifth grade, Nenita tried to ask for the bathroom.

“Excuse me. Banyo? Nasaan ang banyo?” The response? Snickers and pointed fingers from her classmates. The teacher, familiar with children like Nenita, fresh off the boat, folded her hands in her lap and explained, “No, no, Nenita, here, you say, ‘Where is the bathroom, please?’”

After school, Nenita and her mother were walking the eight blocks together from Pájaro River Elementary back to their new home. Before Mrs. Juana dela Cruz Reyes could ask Nenita how her first day went, a red pick-up truck revved by them.
A teen threw a half-empty soda can out of his window that struck the sidewalk in front of Nenita and her mother. “Go back and eat your fish heads, Flips!”

Another lesson Nenita learned: to hold her pee until she got home from school. Rosa Gonzalez used to kick open Nenita’s bathroom stall. Sitting there, staring down at her lace socks, her knees together, Nenita felt herself shrink. “This bathroom isn’t for chinas,” Rosa said. The word rang in Nenita’s ears. *Chee-nas.* It was a name she’d never been called before.

Rosa Gonzalez had ratty hair and mismatched clothing, but what Nenita remembered most of all was the way she stood—with her head high and shoulders back, like not you or anyone else could touch her. It was only later that Nenita found out Rosa’s dad was an alcoholic and her mom wasn’t around.

Nenita wasn’t used to being picked on. She’d always been the tallest girl in class in Cavite. It was Marcela—a head shorter than the other girls—who had been an easy target. Back in the Philippines, the scruffy, neighborhood boy Renny used to hold Marcela’s head underwater when the children went swimming along the bay. Nenita would knee him in the back until he let her cousin go.

Rosa Gonzalez was a new kind of threat, and Nenita barely spoke that first year at Pájaro River Elementary. But in that quiet time, Nenita did a lot of listening. She listened to how the people around her spoke, watched how they acted, and Nenita decided that she needed to join that crew—the Latinas.

Quicker than she could say rápido, Nenita traded English for Spanglish. Slowly, she began to talk like them and dress like them. She learned how to narrow her eyes and tilt her chin up, the way she imagined an Aztec warrior held a stance.
San Diego, 1981

She caught onto this idea: to look like you were above everyone, to show only apathy and anger. She wore her hair long and parted in the middle, just like they did, and swore a bit and watched the Pájaros and Valle del Sol gangs face off in the first race down Suicide Hill every school year. Then, after years of watching and listening and getting the Spanish to roll off her tongue just right, she became a Pájaro. By high school, Nenita had fully distinguished the worlds she designated for her tongue—English for the classroom, Spanglish for her cholas, and Tagalog for the Islands and the Islands alone.

Nenita even outlasted Rosa, who got caught for dealing mota after school. Police got involved—turned out she was growing a stash on the gym rooftop—and she didn’t come back to school. Just like that—a Pájaro erased.

When Marcela arrived their freshman year of high school, she looked very different than when Nenita had left her. Sela had grown even taller than Neni, first of all. And then there were las tetas. Nenita had never been more aware of her own flat chest. Not to mention that her cousin had become head-turning hermosa—high cheekbones, light brown skin, silky hair—everyone noticed her.

No doubt Marcela was beyond guapa, but the question was: could she hang with Los Pájaros? Lucky for Sela, Nenita kept good rank and was already dating Rodrigo. With Nenita’s help, the gang took Marcela in like family in no time. They discovered that Sela had a talent for tagging; give the girl a spray can, and she could draw anything you asked. Then, on her first run through the Sears mall, chica shoplifted a pair of black high-tops. The next week, she flipped off a cop doing rounds in his car and—no joke—out-biked him by cutting through the San Antonio
neighborhood. “No manches!” the gang exclaimed in disbelief. But Nenita could testify. “That’s my prima, and she’s fierce.” She’d been there through it all.

“Las chicas have each other’s backs. Somos familia.” Nenita always said to Marcela.

“Para siempre. Todos.” Marcela said back.

Even when Marcela picked a fight with a Del Sol gringa named Laura, Nenita was there to braid back Marcela’s hair, hold her earrings, and slather Vaseline on her face to help the punches slide.

“Puta! Te voy a matar—!”

Marcela struck Laura in the teeth before she could finish her sentence.

After word got out about how Marcela put a Del Sol in her place, none other than the Pájaro General himself, Angel, got a little crush.

It took another couple weeks for Sela to really notice him. Vato polished his car and offered to drive her home after school. He made some schoolboy do her math homework and another girl forge an English paper in Sela’s handwriting. But it wasn’t enough. She gave Angel casual nods, brushed up against his shoulder every now and then, but chica wasn’t sold.

Then one day, Marcela watched Angel fight Iosefa Solomon—the number two of the Del Sol gang—in the Sears mall parking lot. Marcela and Nenita stood at a distance, looking tough as the three other Pájaros trash-talked the Del Sols. But Angel didn’t say a word—and Iosefa mocked him for it.

“You mute, Pájaro?”
Angel stood there, cool, as Iosefa talked a big game. Then, without warning, *WHACK*, he took that cabrón down.

With her eyes narrowed, Sela grabbed Nenita’s arm and nodded at Angel.

“Quiero ése.”

Then, after the Del Sols had backed down, she walked up to Angel and claimed him: “Mi ‘mor.”

Marcela and Angel had been an item ever since.

When the girls were with their novios, everything seemed easier. They didn’t think to look over their shoulders. Angel and Rodrigo did that for them. They didn’t carry Mace or a blade up their jacket sleeves. Especially with Angel—with his build and his stare and the intimidante family—Marcela had it easy, as far as Nenita was concerned.

But, Marcela wasn’t wearing the jacket. Why was she so checked out? Nenita began to think about the past few days. When Nenita went to the 7Eleven to steal a couple BIC lighters to show her loyalty to the gang, Marcela didn’t want to come with—and problem was, chica needed to do *something*. She was overdue. The last class she cut was during summer school. Nothing tagged. Nothing stolen. No one beaten.

Nenita started to grind her teeth. Los Pájaros didn’t need this kind of attitude—not today. Not with the race tonight. If the Valle del Sol gang sensed any kind of cobarde behavior—ovídalo! No weakness. Not today. Nenita set her jaw.
“Sela,” Nenita said, standing up straight and facing her cousin. She tilted her head back a little and crossed her arms. Nenita was a few inches shorter than Marcela, but Nenita had a way of making herself look bigger. Every day, Nenita wore sneakers with black-rubber soles that added an extra inch. “Look at me.”

Marcela lowered her sunglasses and chewed her bottom lip. You could guess that the girls were related. Like Nenita, Marcela could pass for Latina despite her Filipina blood and birth. Both girls had full lips and tall noses. The only thing that betrayed them was their eyes—distinctly “almond-shaped.” The mark that had dubbed Nenita a china before she learned to hang with her cholas.

“Ay, mierda—” Marcela swore, dropping the cigarette fast and withdrawing her hand. The cigarette had burned down to the filter and singed her fingertips. She sucked on her thumb while Nenita stomped out the cigarette in the dirt. After searching her pockets, Marcela cursed again. Nenita rolled her eyes. Marcela had a tendency to overreact.

“Ay, Neni, I’m out,” she said, still digging into her jean pockets. She had a frantic look in her eye.

“You usually keep them in the jacket,” Nenita said.

“It’s in my locker...You got a smoke?”

“No, sorry.”

Marcela took off her sunglasses and pushed back her hair, closing her eyes. Then the bell gave a shrill ring, and Marcela straightened. “Let’s just get to class.”

“Wait—wait—” Nenita said, stopping her cousin with a hand on her shoulder. “Let’s ditch. What do you have next...Algebra? Ms. Perez won’t notice.”
“No, Neni, I don’t feel good. Let’s just go.”

“Sela—qué pasa? Tell me.”

“I’m late—okay?” Marcela shouted before quickly looking at the ground.

“We’re not late—the bell just—”

“No,” Marcela groaned. Then in a harsh whisper, she enunciated, “I’m Late.”

Nenita let her arms drop to her sides. “Oh.”

Marcela shrugged.

“How...” Nenita began. “How late are you?”

“More than a week.”

Nenita opened her mouth to say something, but Marcela started walking quickly towards the classrooms. From the shade of the school building, Nenita saw the boys running towards them off the field, some with their black, nylon jackets in hand.

Nenita caught up with her cousin. “Does Angel know?”

“Look,” Marcela said. She had reached the backdoor that had NO ENTRY painted in big black letters on the double-paned glass panel. Los Pájaros had busted the lock a year ago. “I’ll see you after school, okay?”

She hurried inside and bolted down the hallway before Nenita could answer. The door shut with a thud in front of Nenita’s face. Looking at her own reflection in the glass, Nenita wiped away the beads of sweat that dotted her brow. It was just like Sela, to run off and leave her hanging like that. Nenita blamed it on the dramatic dela Cruz blood.

Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned to see Angel and Rodrigo.
“Ay, guapa, you want to walk me to class?” Rodrigo said, smiling.

Nenita nudged his shoulder. “Yeah, for your protection.”

Angel nodded at her, “Ay, chola.”

Nenita gave him a slight nod back and didn’t let her face show the swell of pride she felt upon hearing that term: chola. Within that word was what she’d worked for all these years—the chola who’s down for her barrio and her gang, who’s ruthless and tough and it even looks good on her. Her response, “Cholo,” was her Pledge of Allegiance to this esé and his homies, Los Pájaros.

No matter what Marcela was going through, Nenita was determined not to let them lose that name. It was cholas or nothing.

“Where’s Sela?” Angel asked, looking around the building to the shaded wall.

“Oh,” Nenita shrugged. “She went ahead. Ms. Perez is on her case again.”

Angel’s brow furrowed, and for a moment, Nenita thought he was going to ask more questions. But he dropped it. “Well, then I’ll catch her at your place tonight, Neni. Bueno?”

“Bueno,” Nenita said.

“Bueno,” Rodrigo said. “Let’s go.”

She took a deep breath in. *Las chicas have each others back*, she thought, before Rodrigo pulled open the NO ENTRY door and she walked between the two boys with her head tilted back and fierce eyes looking straight ahead.
Nenita had never been blessed with the virtue of patience. For a good ten minutes after the last bell rang, she drummed her fingers nervously on her forearm while waiting for Marcela on the back steps. They had walked the same eight blocks from school to their houses on Calle San Antonio since freshman year. The route seemed easy—turn right from the school, head straight down Barbados, then hang a left at Calle San Antonio—but Nenita constantly looked over her shoulder. Last year, their Pájaro chola, Estrella Gomez, walked home alone and got jumped. She was just passing through Ocaso Park when the Del Sol girls messed with her. Next day, she woke up in the hospital with a concussion.

After Nenita’s father died, her mother picked up a teller job at the bank. Juana didn’t walk Nenita home after school anymore. So Nenita was grateful to have Marcela with her. The girls only lived five houses apart.

More often, Angel would drive Marcela home, and Rodrigo would drive Nenita. That was another thing she liked about her novio: he had the nerve to drive her home and introduce himself to Mama Juana—as she was known to everyone in the Pájaro District. Even blood relatives knew not to get on Mama Juana’s bad side. People thought Nenita’s mal de ojo was bad. Although she’d never admit it, Nenita knew her mother was made of even tougher stuff. When Mama Juana caught migrants drinking from the garden hose or stealing the plum tomatoes from her vegetable garden, she went outside—curlers, bathrobe, and all. Mama Juana could go loca. She ran at them with Nenita’s old BB gun, loaded and hoisted on her shoulder, shouting, “Vete! Vete! No wetbacks in my yard! SusMariaJosef!” The migrants scampered off.
So when Rodrigo showed the guts to drive Nenita home, step out onto the sidewalk, and introduce himself, Mama Juana gave him an earful.

“If you get my daughter into trouble, I will cut off your bayag and feed it to the dogs.”

“An honor, Señora,” he said before winking, getting quickly back into the car, and driving away.

“Satanas!” she yelled after him. Then she addressed Nenita. “Anak ko, why would you date a boy like that, huh?”

“At least he has a car,” Neni retorted.

Juana considered this, her lips pursed. “Well, he’s not getting past my driveway.”

From that day on, Mama Juana allowed Rodrigo the privilege of giving her daughter a ride from school. But he never made it through the door when Juana was home.

Today, that didn’t matter. Rodrigo and Angel and a few other Pájaros were driving downtown to hunt down supplies for that night. Coronas. Marlboros. Rolling papers for mota. So, the girls walked home by themselves.

Marcela finally came out the back entrance, her white sunglasses already masking her face.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”
The girls couldn’t say much else. Normally, they couldn’t stop talking—Marcela especially. Chica was always telling Nenita about Laura the Del Sol gringa she couldn’t stand.

“It’s just the way she looks at me, you know?” Marcela usually complained, running her hands through her long hair. “She thinks she’s better. Puta.”

“You already showed her once, Sela,” Nenita advised. “She won’t mess with you again.”

But Marcela was quiet today, walking a few paces behind Nenita as the sidewalk narrowed. They passed by the stretch of tall wooden fences on Barbados that blocked houses from street view.

Suddenly, Nenita felt a tingling that electrified her spine, from her lower back to the nape of her neck. She didn’t hear Marcela’s footsteps on the pavement anymore.

Nenita turned around, but her cousin was still there, now on alert.

“Estas bien?” Marcela said, her eyes darting to her surroundings.

“Yeah, sorry, I thought I heard something,” Nenita said, walking forward again.

“So,” Nenita continued, eager for their regular conversation. “Rodrigo and Angel said we’re meeting at my place before the race tonight.” She was proud that they asked to come over. Part of Nenita knew that they only chose her house because it was the closest to Suicide Hill and because Mama Juana would be out doing seamstress work for Mrs. Chang. Yet Nenita couldn’t help but walk even taller,
with her chin held higher and eyes fiercer because Angel and Rodrigo had asked her
to host for the first time.

She could tell by the stubborn tufts of yellow grass sticking out of the
sidewalk cracks that they were nearing the turn onto Calle San Antonio. Bent orange
signs with black letters that read, “NEIGHBORHOOD UNDER SURVEILLANCE,” were
posted on the streetlamps over their heads. Pictured above the words was a pair of
eyes—vigilantly open, sleepless—meant to intimidate hombres malvados. The smell
of burning asphalt invaded Nenita’s nose, and not a single cloud blocked the sun’s
rays. Lifting up her hair, Nenita fanned the back of her neck.

“Ay, hace calor,” she complained.

“No se puede ni respirar,” Marcela replied. She was right. They were at the
mercy of the stifling Santa Ana winds. The dry, San Diego heat was the kind that
made you dizzy and tired until all you could do was sit down and sip water to clear
your mind. A vague memory of a different kind of heat gathered in a distant corner
of Nenita’s mind. For a brief moment, she traveled back to the San Juan house in
Cavite. She felt the moisture hanging in the air that made her clothes cling to her
body. She remembered pulling at her dress, hoping that some breeze would find the
space between the skin on her back and the damp, linen fabric. She could smell the
dark soil of her grandmother’s garden and the salt of the lapping sea and the peel
from the fresh calamansi her mother squeezed into glasses of ice water. But

Marcela’s voice brought Nenita back to Calle San Antonio.

“I bought a test,” she said.

“What?”
“I did what you said. I ditched Algebra—and then I went to Long’s and bought a test,” Marcela looked straight ahead. “You know, one of those at-home, EPT’s.”

“So they work?”

“I don’t know. I read their ad in Ladies’ Home Journal—my mom’s copy. It said, ‘Thousands of American women have used it for the past two years, safely and accurately’—or something like that.”

“So you won’t really know for sure.”

“Well, I can’t just go to the doctor’s. My parents will know.”

Police sirens wailed in the distance, and the girls walked a little slower to listen. The wailing seemed to get farther and farther away, and Nenita released her breath. When the sirens had faded, she spoke. “When are you going to take it?”

“Well, I was going to take it when I got home,” Marcela started before biting her lip. It was a bad habit, Nenita thought. One day, her prima was going to have no more lip left to chew. “But my parents will be around all night. And if I find out—they’ll just know something’s up—I was thinking maybe...”

“Yeah,” Nenita finished. “You can come over. My mom’s used to you raiding our fridge anyway.”

“Yeah, cool. Thanks.”

They reached Nenita’s house: 11008 Calle San Antonio. It was small, a one-story built about a decade earlier for the Navy families around the Pájaro district. A few months before he died, Nenita’s father had painted the front door, all the shutters, and even the garage scarlet. Nenita didn’t like the color at all—they were the only house on the whole street that didn’t have sandy, off-white walls and light
brown shutters. The other houses camouflaged easily into the desert landscape of Coyote Bush and Manzanita. Nenita had often told her mother that they should repaint, and Juana replied, “We will.” But she never got around to it.

Nenita fished her key out of her pocket to open the rusting, wrought iron gate. This time of year, their front lawn looked uglier than ever. The grass was yellow and dry. The stout palm tree—the only plant in sight—squatted in the front lawn. The entirety of it—the scarlet house, the dying lawn, the stunted palm—Nenita thought, made for an ugly picture.

It only got worse during Christmastime when her mother insisted on hanging the homemade parol out on the front window. The thing was monstrous—a flashing, red, white, and green star, encircled by a hula-hoop wrapped in not just tinsel but twinkle lights. “That is the Star of Bethlehem, anak ko,” her mother always said. “It lights your way through this season. Maybe my good daughter will see it and return to me in place of this masama one.” On top of that, the parol was an excuse for Los Pájaros to tease Nenita more often that time of year.

“What’s that thing hanging in your window, Reyes?”

“A Christmas decoration, tonto.”

“Ay, china, china…”

“My father’s grandparents were from Spain,” Nenita reminded the gang. “Soy hispana, idiotas.” If they gave her any more trouble, el mal de ojo shut them up quick.

Now, Nenita came to the front door and was about to put the house key in the lock when she felt it again—an uneasy current jolting her spine. She turned around
to face the street. In the middle of the two traffic lanes stood a woman—barefoot, wearing a yellow housedress, her hair pinned up in an older style. She looked as if she’d come straight out of the family photo albums they took with them from Cavite.

“Neni?” Marcela had been saying her name. “What are you looking at?”

A gust of wind rippled the grass and shook the fronds of the stout palm in their yard and Nenita’s long hair whipped into her face, but the woman’s yellow dress did not billow. The fabric and its lengths hung flat against her legs. Stepping toward the house, the woman in the street opened her mouth wide, as if ready to scream.

Nenita turned around and hurriedly turned the lock and key. She was breathing hard when she swung open the front door to find her mother there waiting for her. “Mom?”

Arms sternly akimbo and lips pursed, Mrs. Juana dela Cruz Reyes was ready for battle. “What took you so long to get home, masama daughter of mine?”

Nenita turned around to look at the street—now, empty, except for a passing car.

“What is that dumb look on your face?” her mother asked. “You look pale.”

The insult brought Nenita back to reality. “I thought you’d be at work by now,” she said, straightening up and facing her opponent.

“I wanted to check up on you before I left,” Juana said. Well, Mama Juana picked the perfect day, Nenita realized; she had the advantage of Marcela—both a guest and a blood relative. There was no weapon more powerful.
“Marcela’s here.” Nenita said before walking straight past her mother and into the kitchen that smelled of fish and frying oil. Disgusted, Nenita threw down her bag and jacket on a wicker-backed dining chair before cranking open the window. Hopefully, by the time everyone arrived, the stifling smell would be gone.

Running her hands through her hair, Nenita tried not to think about the disappearing woman in the street. It had been a long time since she had seen mga multo. Juana had told her many years ago that mga multo came in all sorts, but most often, they were ancestors, watching over you.

Nenita shook her head to clear it, certain that the heat was getting to her brain. They had enough to deal with today—with Suicide Hill tonight and Marcela avoiding the gang, acting all cobardemente. From the kitchen radio, Nenita could hear a telenovela playing. A woman was crying again—that’s all people did on these shows.

“Hi, Mama Juana,” came Marcela’s voice from the entrance. Nenita could imagine the sweet expression on her cousin’s face. In front of the family, Marcela always played the “good girl.”

Instantly, Juana gave her niece a tight hug. “Hello, Miss Marcela! How are your parents? Before you leave, make sure you take some cassava cake for your mom, okay? It’s her favorite.”

“Okay, Auntie,” Marcela gave Mama Juana mano, pressing her aunt’s hand to her forehead. Nenita rolled her eyes when Sela said, “Salamat po.”

“You are welcome, Marcela,” Juana said. Then she shouted towards the kitchen. “Do you hear that, anak ko? My good niece said ‘salamat po’—with respect.”
Nenita rolled her eyes and went to turn on the fan above the stove. She noticed that digital clock read 3:34. “I’m only four minutes late,” Nenita shouted before opening the pantry door, rustling through packages of snacks, and settling on a couple Twinkies.

Juana entered the kitchen, followed by Marcela, who clutched her school bag to her chest. “You are still late,” Juana said. Then she gestured to her niece. “Come eat, Marcela. Are you hungry?”

“No, that’s okay—thanks, Mama Juana.”

“I’ll make you Twinkies,” Juana said, grabbing them out of Nenita’s hands. When Nenita began to protest, Juana cut her off. “Matigas ang ulo! I’m just going to fry them for you.”

She lit the stove and scooped two spoonfuls of Crisco into a pan. Without looking up from the frying pan Juana asked, “So…have you girls been staying out of trouble?”

Nenita looked at Marcela, who looked away. “Yes,” Nenita answered. “We’re fine.”

“Mhmm,” her mother said, turning around to scrutinize Nenita. The scar on Nenita’s left eyebrow from a couple weeks ago was healing nicely. There were no other signs of new nicks or bruises.

“Were you with that boy today? What’s his name?”

“Rodrigo,” Nenita said, arms crossed. Quickly, Marcela chimed in, “Rodrigo ditched today. He wasn’t around.”

Marcela’s eyes darted to Nenita, who nodded. “It’s true.”
“Hm,” Juana said, satisfied. She turned back to her frying pan. “Good.”

Marcela let out a quiet sigh of relief and shot Nenita an impatient look. Los Pájaros were probably on their way.

“Mom, don’t you have to go to work?” Nenita asked.

Juana lifted the Twinkies out of the frying pan with a pair of metal tongs and set the golden-brown treats on paper towels to soak up the excess grease. In Juana’s kitchen, Twinkies were a pantry staple—what she considered “the best American food.” Twinkies were just about the only thing Juana and Nenita agreed upon, but right now, she just wanted her mother out of the house.

“Yes, I do,” Juana said, picking her purse up off the table and patting down her hair to tame any flyaways. “I just wanted to make sure you ate.” Juana picked up Nenita’s skinny wrist and shook it. “So payat!”

“Mom, I’m fine,” Nenita said, snatching her hand away.

“If you ate more, you would look fuller. Like your cousin—look how healthy she looks.”

Marcela blushed and exclaimed, “Auntie!”

Nenita knew her mother wasn’t the kind that said, “I love you.” It wasn’t even a dela Cruz issue, the lack of affection. For the longest time, Marcela’s mother sent her notes in her lunchbox or her wallet with “Mahal kita!” scribbled on them. Nenita couldn’t remember if her mother had ever written those words to her.

“Anyway…” Juana straightened. “You have your key?”

“Of course,” Nenita said.

“Good.”
Juana blew a kiss to Marcela, who wished her goodbye.

“Nenita—” Juana said, pausing in the doorway. The color of the door and the afternoon light threw scarlet hues on her face. “There’s milkfish and rice in the fridge.”

“Okay.”

Juana shut the door behind her.

The girls retreated to the back of the house to begin their ritual of getting ready. While Nenita shuffled through the shirts in her closet, Marcela excused herself and returned to the bedroom a few minutes later with the EPT in hand.

Nenita stared at the contraption: a test tube of clear liquid held up by a plastic stand.

“When do we get the results?” she asked, determined to keep the conversation light thereafter.

“According to the box,” Marcela sighed. “Two hours.”

“Here—” Nenita said. Taking the stand out of Marcela’s hand, she placed it inside her closet on the floor, wedged next to her old skateboard. “Don’t think about it. We’ve got to get ready.”

There wasn’t supposed to be a fight tonight—but just in case, the girls prepared. The outfits first. Nenita chose a black tube top and wrapped a double belt around her waist. She slipped on her canvas sneakers, a pair that was worn enough to feel the contact of the kicks. The girls removed their earrings and took turns
brazing each other’s hair in tight, French braids, and slicked them back with gel.

She swung Rodrigo’s Pájaro jacket over her shoulders and held her head high.

Then, the finishing touch: double the eyeliner. Nenita pulled a Maybelline eye pencil from out of her top drawer. She warmed the tip with her newly-acquired BIC lighter and tested its temperature against the back of her hand. She began to rim her eyes. After a few years of practice, Nenita knew just how to round out her eye, to draw new corners and retrace them, creating an almost natural effect. She packed on the liner until she hardly recognized herself in the mirror—at which point, satisfied, she put the pencil down.

Nenita looked at Marcela, who was puckering as she put on her cherry red lipstick. Chica sure did have a talent for makeup—for drawing or painting on anything, really. Didn’t matter whether it was spray paint on a concrete wall or Bonne Bell lip-gloss—whatever she did, it caught people’s attention. Sela never bragged about it, but she received high praise in their sixth period Art class last year. Once, she made a self-portrait that their teacher Mrs. Valdez called “brilliant”—but honestly, Nenita didn’t really get it. It was a picture of a dark room with a vase and a couch, and there was a girl who looked out at you with her mouth hanging open, like she wanted to say something. But Nenita didn’t really know what.

Point was, Sela looked beautiful. She would have looked perfect with Angel’s jacket.

“Did you remember to bring the Pájaro jacket?” Nenita asked, keeping her tone casual.
“Yeah, it’s in my bag,” Marcela said, not looking away from the mirror. She capped the lipstick and looked down at it before tossing it back into her bag.

“Neni…”

Marcela sighed deeply, with her head in her hands. In the mirror, Nenita watched her cousin sink into the bed.

“You know what’s going to happen—don’t you?” Marcela said. She began to fiddle with a loose, pink thread from the quilt, winding and unwinding it around her finger. “If...if the test is positive.”

Nenita cleared her throat, addressing her cousin’s reflection. “There’s nothing to tell yet—”

“She’ll send me away,” Marcela interrupted, talking faster now. “My mom’s going to find out and then she’s going to send me away. She’s going to send me back to Cavite. Like what happened to Flor—”

Cousin Flor. Nenita had almost forgotten about her. She was the oldest and the smartest of all Nenita’s cousins. A few Christmases ago, Auntie Dalisay said that Flor had gone back to the Philippines to study medicine at the University of Manila. But Mama Juana, who had ears on everyone, couldn’t keep family drama to herself. A week after Flor left, she told Nenita the truth: Flor had an “oops”—with a car thief! Dios—her prima really got herself in trouble.

Nine months after Flor went back to the Philippines, Auntie Dalisay “adopted” a baby girl. Nenita imagined Marcela’s mother “adopting” a baby—but she shooed the idea from her head. They didn’t know anything yet.
Nenita almost felt guilty for not thinking of her eldest cousin more often. They had been close when they were little, when all the dela Cruz cousins lived on Calle de San Juan. Flor taught them how to play pirates in the yard. After school, Nenita, Sela, and the other children sat beneath their grandmother’s great, Carabao mango tree. The mangoes were gold, and one team defended the tree while the other team—the pirates—tried to steal the mangoes. While Flor explained the rules, Nenita looked enviously at her bright white tennis shoes in the grass. They were Flor’s prized possession, the shoes her ninong brought back from the States. Nenita and Sela always wanted to play the pirates and were good at it too. Marcela was always first to the top of the tree.

Holding onto that memory, Nenita realized that Flor seemed to have disappeared from their lives. She couldn’t remember the last time they spoke. It must have been the Thanksgiving before Flor left San Diego, but Nenita couldn’t recall any words they might have exchanged. In fact, Nenita had barely any memories of Flor in America. It was as if she hadn’t truly lived there at all. The only thing Nenita could picture were the white shoes in the grass by the San Juan house.

“That’s what’ll happen,” Marcela was saying, her hands on her head.

Nenita didn’t know what to say, but she’d never let her cousin suspect it.

“Sela,” she said, confidently. “It won’t be like Flor.”

“Neni, you don’t know—”

“It won’t, so stop saying things like that.”
Marcela rubbed her lips together cautiously. “What do you think he’d do?” she asked, looking at Nenita in the mirror. There was lipstick on her teeth. “What do you think he’d say to me? How could I—”

“Sela,” Nenita said, gesturing at the red smudge on her cousin’s front teeth. Quickly, Marcela rubbed it away.

Nenita tried to find the right words. “Look,” she settled on. “There’s nothing yet.

“Nothing,” Marcela repeated. “You’re right, nothing.”

Finally! Nenita was relieved to have finished that conversation. They had bigger things to think about. Ocaso Park was at stake tonight. Angel was driving, and Sela needed to represent.

“But if I tell him...” Marcela said, and Nenita tried not to groan. But then she turned to face her, and in her cousin’s expression, Nenita saw something brightening. “I might not lose him. Maybe he’ll be mad at me at first, but he’ll come around. Just think, Neni. Maybe he’ll ask my parents for permission and then we’ll get married in St. Mary’s Church. Or we’ll run away—up north to San Jose. We’ll find a little house somewhere by the beach. A house with my own easel, facing a big window. Maybe we could—”

The distinct revving of a car engine in the driveway interrupted her. The Monte Carlo announced its arrival.

“I should get that,” Nenita said, rushing for the bedroom door. She paused to tell her cousin, “No te procupes, okay?”

Marcela was smoothing out her hair in in the mirror.
“Sela—bueno?”

“Bueno,” Marcela said finally. “Just give me a minute to finish up.”

“Okay,” Nenita said, exiting the room. “Be out here soon!”

There were four knocks at the door.

“I’m coming!” Nenita said before securing the jacket over her shoulders and double-checking the peephole before opening the door.

“Ay, guapa.”

Rodrigo, Angel, and the others, six guys and two girls, swarmed into the house, throwing down jackets over the furniture. A couple of the guys heaved some 12-bottle packs of Coronas off their shoulders and onto the kitchen counter.

“What you got to eat around here?” Rodrigo asked, already opening the pantry. When Mama Juana wasn’t around, he acted like the house was his, lounging on the couch and eating from their fridge as if to show Nenita he didn’t fear her mother’s wrath. Nenita liked that—his confidence. Over the summer, he had bragged to her about his future. It had been just the four of them—Rodrigo and Neni, Angel and Sela—washing the Monte Carlo in Angel’s driveway on a ninety-degree day. Something about the smell of Wash & Wax and wet pavement and the relief from the heat felt simple. Normal. Rodrigo reported that Coach told him he was smart—smart enough to become a lawyer. “Sí, claro?” Angel snorted, and Rodrigo threw a wet sponge that hit Angel’s back with a SMACK—“Sí!” Vato was more supportive of Sela, who leaned on him, called him “’mor,” and said she’d do something with her paintings someday—maybe work in advertising or design—and Angel smiled—actually smiled—at her. At times like this, when Sela wasn't worried
about that girl down south and Angel didn’t have to take out anyone who looked at
his novia too long, Angel could be—dare they say—amoroso.

But today was different.

“Hey, chola,” Angel called. After taking a look around, he squinted at Nenita,
as if testing her. “Where’s your cousin at?”

“Oh,” Nenita said, pushing past Rodrigo, who was still rummaging through
the pantry. “Just finishing her makeup. She’ll be right out.”

Angel looked reassured, for now at least, and Nenita set out family-sized bags
of potato chips and chicharrones that would be gone within the hour. Out of the
corner of her eye, she caught Teresa and her novio Miguel lighting up in the living
room next to the table with Mama Juana’s potted bromeliads.

“Hey—” Nenita snapped at them. “No smoking in the house.”

“Cálmese...” Teresa muttered, rolling her eyes before Nenita shuffled them
through the sliding door and into the backyard. Then, Nenita attended to the others.

“Neni, would you turn on the some music?” Angel asked her as Rodrigo
offered her a beer. Nenita took it in her hand and walked to the kitchen counter to
switch on the radio. Turning the knob, she finally settled on a station that was
playing Kurtis Blow.

“Sit down, Neni.” Rodrigo said, making space for her on the floral-printed
couch in the living room. The plastic cover complained with a squeak when she
joined him.

Talk was all about the Valle del Sol gang. One of the newer Pájaros, Oscar,
who was eager to prove himself, shared some news.
He waited until Angel finished talking to ask the group, "Did you hear that Jason has new wheels?"

Jason Matua was Angel’s counterpart, the General of the Del Sol gang, and just as intimidante. Everybody who knew about Jason Matua knew about his scar—a long furrow on his left cheek. One night, his father drank too much, and BANG, pulled a nail gun on the kid. He’d earned street cred ever since.

“What, he fixed up the Celica?” Rodrigo asked, reclining into his seat next to Nenita. “Still can’t beat the Monte Carlo.”

“No,” Oscar said, shaking his head. “They say he’s got the new Camaro.”

Angel put his beer down.

“Hijo de puta,” Rodrigo muttered. “You sure?”

Angel stood up, his face cool, and towered over Oscar, who looked up at him from his seat. Vato could intimidate effortlessly. “Where’d you get this information?”

Oscar didn’t look him in the eye as he explained, “Miguel and I were playing pool at the Mira Mesa Bowl and some Del Sol kids started bragging to us. Said that Jason’s got the new Camaro—blue with white stripes.”

“Hijo de puta,” Rodrigo said again, rubbing his neck. “Angel, we got a problem?”

Angel ran his hand across his face before shrugging. “Nah, nah, homes. We’ve got no problem. I fixed up the Monte Carlo last weekend. Found a new V-8 all the way in La Jolla…”

By "found," Nenita knew, he meant stole.

“Estamos bien,” Angel said.
Rodrigo smiled. “Bien.”

While the others relaxed, Angel glanced towards Nenita’s bedroom again. Marcela still hadn’t come out, and Angel kept an eye on the hallway, expecting her. No one else seemed to notice his behavior. Some Pájaros were out in the backyard still, and the coughs and laughter mingled with The Sugarhill Gang hit blasting on the radio. In between swigs of beer and handfuls of chips, the guys exchanged Del Sol stories and talked about the freshmen who looked like they could hang with Los Pájaros.

As Nenita made her rounds with a trash bag, scooping up empty bottles and mopping up a spill on the coffee table, she realized that the whole house felt different—good, different. It felt full—crowded even—and warm and loud in a way it never had before. It was close to something Nenita had felt a long time ago, at the San Juan house the summer they threw Auntie Dalisay a birthday party. All the cousins gathered together. Flor and Neni and Sela and the other children kept themselves busy running around the yard, and the parents were watching and talking and the uncles smoked and the aunties gossiped about who was dressed too promiscuously at Sunday service. Then they had a meal together—pancit, for a long life—and for dessert, cassava cake and biko. When they were full and the talk got quiet, Uncle Raul played ukulele while some of the aunties danced and everyone sang along: *I’ll remember you, long after this endless summer is gone...*

Somos familia, Nenita thought, as the electric guitar on the radio brought her back to Los Pájaros and Angel, who stood up from his seat. Everyone’s gaze was shifting to the hallway entrance.
San Diego, 1981

Marcela had walked into the living room, looking fierce with her cherry lipstick and braided hair. Angel put his arm around her. “Ahí está ella,” he said, and she smiled up at him. With her neck hooked under his arm, Angel took her aside, away from the living room. There was a stillness behind his eyes that Nenita didn’t like—that same restraint he showed before he snapped and beat Iosefa Solomon.

Nenita took her seat back on the couch next to Rodrigo, so that Angel and Sela were within earshot.

“Didn’t see you at lunch today,” Angel said.

“Aw, yeah, sorry,” Marcela said. Nenita tensed, sensing some uncertainty in her cousin’s voice. “I didn’t feel good.”

“Mm, Nenita said you had to hurry to class.”

“Yeah, I’m failing English—”

“She said it was Algebra.”

“That, too.”

Marcela was off her game today. She normally didn’t let things slide. Angel took his arm off her cousin.

“Thing is,” he started, his voice lowered so that Nenita had to strain to hear. “Gordo and Estrella said they didn’t see you there today.”

Marcela cleared her throat and crossed her arms. “All right. I ditched.”

“Where’d you go?” Angel said a little louder. The other Pájaros began to lower their conversations. A few put down their drinks and stopped rustling through bags of vinegar chicharrones.

“I can't say, ‘mor.”
He took a step back, shaking his head. “Come on, Sela. What’s that mean?”

“It means what it means: I can’t say,” Marcela said close to his face before turning away from him. The couple had the room’s attention now, and Los Pájaros stole furtive glances at the feud.

Rodrigo stuffed chips into his mouth like it was popcorn at a movie theater. “Here we go…” he mumbled.

“Who was it? Quién es este chico?” Angel asked, his hands in his pockets. “Who’d you sneak off to see?”

“No one, pinche imbécil.” Marcela spat—resulting in some gasps and snide laughs from the gang. Nenita felt Rodrigo tense, his smile straightening into a firm line.

“Hey—” Angel grabbed her shoulder to turn her back around. Nenita was ready to stand, shifting to the edge of the couch, her hands by her sides.

“Don’t lie to me, Sela,” he warned.

“I don’t report to you, Angel.”

“Lo sabes, everybody here does,” Angel said, looking broader than before. “If you don’t think so…”

“What are you telling me?”

Angel shifted his body so that he leaned over Marcela ever so slightly, his face calm and jaw set. Marcela looked right at him, defiant.

“Don’t mess this up, Sela,” Angel said. His voice was level. “You’re only part of Los Pájaros ‘cause I let you be. Entendido?”
Marcela was ready to speak, but Angel knew exactly how to hurt her. He turned to the guys, chuckling. Gesturing at Marcela, he said, “Esta chica no entiende Español, eh?”

Marcela had no words. She turned abruptly and stormed off towards Nenita’s room. The slam of the door rattled the house. Nenita stood up from her seat and began to follow her, but Rodrigo held her hand. “Orale—” he said. His face was serious. “You better take care of this.”

Nenita pulled her hand away. She hated when Rodrigo told her what to do, but she knew he was right. Marcela was out of line.


She walked briskly down the hall and opened her bedroom door to see Marcela pacing on the gray shag carpet. Angry, hot tears beaded the corners of her eyes. After closing the door behind her, Nenita leaned against the back of it.

“God, he’s so—!” Marcela seethed. “Throwing that in my face—who does he—”

“Cálmase…”

“I bet he’s thinking of that puta down south!”

Finally, she collapsed on the bed. Staring up at the popcorn ceiling, she asked, “What am I going to do?”

Nenita was quiet, and the muffled sounds from the living room carried over—the male voices, the music, and the rattle of a bottle against the counter. Nenita knew that they shouldn’t stay long here, shut up in her bedroom—not after Marcela embarrassed them like that in front of everyone. The two of them should
have been out there right now, showing a little grit and shaking the whole thing off and flirting with their novios like usual.

There was a knock on the door. Nenita opened it halfway to find Rodrigo.

“Guapa, sun’s setting. Angel will drive us,” he said before looking over Nenita’s shoulder to Marcela on the bed. “And Sela, too.”

“We’ll be there. Hold on a sec,” Nenita said, closing the door.

When she turned around, Nenita found that Marcela had opened the closet door. She was staring down at the plastic test tube. The solution was still clear.

“There’s just ten minutes left until the results,” her cousin said.

“Sela, we’ve got to go. Come on, it’s Del Sol. If we don’t show—”

“But...”

Nenita had had enough. They didn’t have time for this.

“You know what—who cares?” Nenita exploded.

Marcela whipped around. “What?”

“A couple hours won’t change anything.” Nenita stood her ground. “You’re stronger than this, prima.”

Marcela took a couple steps toward her. “Don’t boss me around.”

“I have to.”

Marcela was biting her lip again.

“Stop that—you’ll get lipstick on your teeth,” Nenita said. She unzipped Marcela’s schoolbag, took out Angel’s jacket, and threw it down on the bed. “Wear it. Andale.”
Marcela stared at the black, nylon bomber as if it didn’t belong to her anymore.

Then, quiet but fierce, Nenita said, “Let’s show ‘em who we are. Let’s go, and you won’t lose him—not Angel, not anyone.”

Marcela looked up at her, and Nenita saw that she was tired—exhausted from all the events of the day. For a moment, her cousin looked very young. Despite the perfect eyeliner and cherry lipstick, she looked like she might have at the San Juan house, just before falling asleep after a long day in the heat.

But quickly, a familiar fire lit her eyes.

“Ohay,” Sela said. “Let’s show him.”

Marcela exited the bedroom with Angel’s jacket swung over her left shoulder.

The drive to Suicide Hill felt longer than Nenita remembered. The sun had disappeared beyond the horizon, leaving red claw marks at the edge of the sky. For now, Pájaro River County hung suspended in pale evening and cast little light on the passengers in the Monte Carlo. No one ever bothered with seatbelts. Marcela sat up front, her arms crossed, her fingers digging into the jacket around her shoulders. She leaned ever so slightly towards the window. Across from her, Angel had a firm hand on the steering wheel. That was Angel. Always calm when he was el comandante—no sweat when he was in control. The General drove with his window rolled halfway down, and Nenita was grateful for the fresh air.
A few minutes into the ride, Marcela asked over her shoulder, “Neni, I forgot the Vaseline. You got some?”

Angel replied for her. “You won’t need it.”

Nenita glimpsed at him in the rearview mirror. He stared straight ahead, not bothering to look at Marcela. “Jason and I agreed,” he said. “We’re keeping it clean tonight. Solamente la carrera.”

“Well, you know how these things go...” Marcela tried to explain.

“Don’t pick a fight tonight,” he said. Nenita saw him tighten his grip on the wheel. “I don’t need you pounding on Jason’s gringa for no reason—again.”

“Fine.” Marcela looked out her window.

Soon they reached the old access road that led to Suicide Hill. The road cut through the nature reserve that lay between Pájaro and Valle del Sol territory. The area had been deemed neutral ground a long time ago.

Suicide Hill itself was a dusty slope, over a football field in length and at a steep, nervous angle. The tricky part was the extra kick in the middle—a sudden swell in the run that would flip the car if you went too fast. Lucky for Los Pájaros, this was Angel’s second race. Vato had it covered.

When Angel and two other Pájaro cars pulled up to the access road, the Del Sol gang was already waiting for them. Further down the road, in ready position at the top of the hill, were Jason Matua and his new Camaro—just as Oscar said—blue with white stripes.

“Hijo de puta,” Rodrigo mumbled from the backseat next to Nenita.

“Be cool, homes,” Angel said.
The other Pájaros got out of their cars while Angel pulled up to the edge of the hill, parallel to Jason.

The boys got out of the car first. Nenita gripped her cousin’s arm before she could exit.

“Sela—have you got this?”

“Let go of me, Neni, I’m fine,” Marcela said, shrugging off Nenita’s hand.

“Okay, okay, I’m just checking,” Nenita said. “Somos familia.”

Marcela got out of the car. “Whatever.”

By this time, the other members had formed ranks behind each car. The next part was all familiar. The girls strode up with their Pájaros jackets on their shoulders, each chica looking tough as she stood behind her novio and glared at the Del Sol homegirls across from them. Laura eyed Marcela from a distance and chica noticed. Marcela swept her thumb across her neck and upwards, her upper lip curled.

Good thing Angel didn’t see it. He stood in front of her and nodded at Iosefa Solomon. This time, the Del Sol homeboy kept quiet.

“Stakes are clear,” Jason said.

Angel nodded. “Winner gets Ocaso Park.”

Nenita began to tune out of the exchange when suddenly, she felt watched. A cold shudder ran up her spine. Nenita already knew what she’d see, yet she still took in a sharp breath when she peered over the edge. The barefoot woman in the yellow dress stood at the bottom of the hill. Her intent eyes locked with Nenita’s.

“Wait—” Nenita said. A few Pájaros turned their heads.
Rodrigo leaned over to her and whispered, “Neni, what are you doing?”

“I don’t know...something’s wrong...” she mumbled. Nenita looked beyond the woman to the dark access road that extended past the hill. Just barely, she could make out headlights in the distance.

“Rodrigo—” Nenita said, pointing. He looked, and soon everyone followed his gaze. Three pairs of headlights were visible now, at the other end of the access road, approaching slowly. They’d be blocking the bottom of the hill in just minutes.

Rodrigo flipped open his knife and stepped toward Jason. “You got more guys coming?”

“We didn’t agree to that,” Angel said, standing beside Rodrigo.

Jason reached into his pocket. “They’re not with us.”

“Could be cops,” Nenita said.

Just like that, people started to sweat. Last summer, someone leaked the time and place of a meet up to a cop—an ex-Del Sol himself—and five Del Sols and two Pájaros spent the night in prison. Two Del Sols were given six months.

“Wait—someone called the pigs?”

“Wasn’t us.”

“Ay, let’s get out of here...”

Jason shouted, “Enough of this—”

He opened the car door and took his seat at the wheel. “We came here to beat Pájaro trash,” Jason said, turning the engine over. “That’s what we’re going to do.”

Nenita urged Rodrigo. “I have a bad feeling.”
“Not the time to be cobarde, Neni.” Marcela said, shooting her a sideways glance.

Nenita felt her face get hot. “I’m not scared. I’m just trying to be smart about this—”

“How do we know those are cops?” Angel asked.

“Who else would be out here?” Nenita persisted. “They know.”

Jason was honking the horn. “Let’s just go, let’s just go—”

“Angel—” Marcela ordered, grabbing his arm. “Get in the car already.”

He looked ready to explode. Without looking at her, Angel fired his words:

“No me digas qué hacer—china.”

Marcela looked like she’d been slapped. For a split second, Marcela’s eyes betrayed a brokenness, and Nenita watched everything within her unravel—the entirety of her American life—her maybe-home with Angel in San Jose—extinto! Just like that.

But by the time Nenita stepped towards her cousin, a hand ready to steady her, Marcela didn’t need it. Chica was burning with pure, magnífica rage.

“Sela—” Nenita started, but her cousin was already striding to the left side of the Monte Carlo. “Sela!”

Rodrigo whirled Nenita around to face him. “I told you to get her under control—”

“She’s not my responsibility,” Nenita protested.

The Del Sol side was shouting, “Let’s go! Let’s go!”
The Monte Carlo roared to life. Nenita and Rodrigo looked at each other before bolting towards the driver’s side, with Angel close behind them, yelling, “Ay, haces?”

Jason was already counting down. “Three—two—”

The Monte Carlo took off, kicking back a cloud of dust onto the Pájaros. Shouts rose from the Del Sol side, and Jason punched the accelerator. The two cars surged down the hill.

Panic began to rise in Nenita’s chest, but she breathed deeply to try and push it down. Everyone was running to the edge of the hill and lining up to see the race. Nenita felt herself following them, pushing past the others, blinking through the clouds of settling dust until she stumbled forward slightly and caught herself on the decline of the hill. She had a full view of what happened next.

The Monte Carlo was going too fast, the tires leaving wakes in the sand. The car shot downwards, and it looked for a moment like the Pájaros would win—a victory they’d talk about for weeks—Viste eso?—Maravilla!

But when the car reached the halfway point where the hill swelled again, the car didn’t slow down when it was supposed to, like Angel always did. Instead, the Monte Carlo launched itself off the second slope before tumbling nose-first into the dust, flipping over, and skidding down the rest of the hill on its roof.

There were sounds all around Nenita that she couldn’t separate—shouts and curses and roars and her own heartbeat in her ears—and she was running down the hill with the others to the Monte Carlo, flipped over in the sand.
Angel got there first, skidding to his knees and bending to look into the car before trying to wrench open the door that had jammed upon the crash. Glass from the shattered windshield crunched beneath their feet. Rodrigo was behind Angel, and Nenita could only see their backs as she ran towards the car.

“Neni, stay back,” Rodrigo told her. He was grabbing her arms and walking her away from the crash, and Nenita was fighting him.

“Let me help!” she demanded.

Rodrigo held her fast, and she pounded her fists against him.

“Let me help!”

“Come on—”

It was the last minutes of twilight, when there was enough blue left in the sky that when Nenita leaned forward and Angel moved away from the car door for just a moment, she caught a glimpse of the driver.

The body was still. The neck bent unnaturally towards the chest, and the head tilted just enough for Nenita to see it: Marcela’s mouth was blooming, red and open, like a cut.

Nenita felt the world swallow her. She swayed. A wave of nausea washed over her, and she wanted to vomit but her stomach would not let her.

“Neni—” someone was saying.

Nenita’s mind screamed, but she could not make a sound. She was kneeling in the dust and looking at the car and the wreckage and that body in the driver’s seat, and her cheeks were wet and stained but she still could not make a sound.
That was when the sirens cried, and the blue and red lights got closer. People all around her began to scatter, while the Camaro sped away in a flash of blue and white, still looking like new.

“Nenita, we need to go,” Rodrigo was telling her.

“No—” she said, still kneeling on the ground. “No—aking pinsan—” Angel had her other arm, and they lifted her, dragging her away, back up the hill.

“Aking pinsan—” she screamed.

Nenita was kicking and fighting as she watched the black and white vehicles pull up to the wreckage in the dust. She heard their radio calls about an accident at the Pájaro nature reserve and Rodrigo was talking too—something about getting her home—before Nenita shut it all out.

“Guapa,” Rodrigo probably said.

“Chola,” Angel might have called her.

But she couldn't hear them at all.
Milkfish
Ruth did not always choose the best fish. She was blind in her left eye—from some accident that happened during her birth, I think. It was all discolored—a soupy brownish-blue that seeped into the white of her eye. How my younger brothers and sisters snickered at it when Nanay wasn’t around to shake her finger and remind them of how Ruth’s family was poor, how her parents couldn’t afford to feed her, so they sent her away to look for work when she was twelve, how my family took her in, how dutifully she prepared our meals and washed and ironed our clothes. Ruth was sixteen, the same age as my eldest sister, Luz, in nineteen-fifty-something.

One Saturday that summer, Ruth’s eye leaked all morning. It had been doing this more often since the rainy season began. Ruth dabbed a kerchief at it while she washed the dishes until Nanay saw her and told her to stop—she should not wash the dishes until her eye got better.

“Tomorrow is the first Sunday, Miss,” Ruth said, putting down a soapy plate. “I can still go to the palengke for you.”

“That is all right, Ruth,” she said. “Luzviminda will get the fish for tomorrow night’s dinner. At least eight to feed us all, diba?”

Luz straightened as Nanay folded money into her palm. “Opo, Nanay.”

“Salamat po, Miss,” Ruth said, swiping the kerchief under her eye as she left the kitchen.

“Yuck!” I whispered to Luz after Ruth retreated to her room in the back of the house. “That girl washed our dishes with the same hands that wiped her eye!”
Luz was ready to hush me, but it was too late—my Nanay was all ear. “Juana Salud! You will go with your Ah-te to the palengke.”

“No, no—why?” She knew how I hated the marketplace, but already she handed me the striped, turquoise Mercado bag.

She sighed, “Anak ko, beloved,” and then recited the phrase she often addressed to me and my siblings: “You should treat Ruth like family.”

I held my chin high but couldn’t argue; we did not always treat Ruth like family, and we trusted Luz’s eye for milkfish instead of hers.

The rains were pouring so hard we thought we’d be wiped clean off the land. Holding tented newspaper over our heads, Luz and I tread carefully down the hill from our neighborhood. We lived on Calle de San Juan, a street with fresh-paved roads and white mailboxes and wrought-iron fences that overlooked the rest of Cavite City. San Juan led us all the way down past the row of nipa huts and overgrowth that seemed to swallow the main road. Out of the thick palms and jessamine, we reached the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption. Luz made the sign of the cross, and I quickly did the same.

In front of the church stood the statue of Mary herself, about my size and height. Her arms were outstretched, her pale face turned upward into the rain. Often, while waiting for Nanay to stop making small talk after Mass, I would talk to Mary as if she were my schoolmate. She didn’t interrupt me like my brothers did or boss me around like Luz, so I gossiped to Mary about them instead. Vergel was gaining weight and it showed in his neck. Dalisay had a secret American boy who lived on the base in Manila. Ruth’s soppy eye was getting worse and worse each day.
As we passed the statue now, though, Mary seemed indifferent to me, more concerned with the rain and the rising water at her feet hidden by folds of blue robes.

It was pouring-pouring down even harder in the City. The streets flooded and Jeepneys waded tire-deep in the gray water, looking like square boats floating down canals. Soon our newspapers were soaked through, and we had to discard them. The rain in the city got into your nose, carrying that foul cigarette smoke mixed with odors of the palengke, the fresh market. I never liked the palengke. It was a place for the alila like Ruth or the houseboy, Albert, I was convinced. I did not like how the rain trapped its smells in every droplet and soaked them into your skin until you smelled of fish guts and stale water. That day, I held onto the hope of getting ice cream. Sometimes, when it was just Luz and I, we’d sneak the vanilla ice cream together. She’d let me buy the treat that Tatay said was only for Sundays.

“Please, Ah-te,” I asked Luz in the palenkge, as she carefully examined the milkfish. Luz inspected either side of the flat, pale fish. She could tell just by looking whether it was fresh from the ocean or the ponds where the fish could only eat algae—yuck! I never liked the look of them. Something about the way they were splayed in half so you could see the greasy, black belly fat—the prized portion—spill out. Spread open like a butterfly, with all the white bones protruding from the stomach. The dead eyes too purple and too humanlike.

My mother insisted on these milkfish for dinners on the first Sunday of the month. “Juana Salud,” Nanay said. “That is our national fish, and you’ll at least try it.” I’d pretend to taste it, make a face, and push the plate away.
“Ah-te, Ah-te, please,” I begged as she selected the last fish. “Can we stop for ice cream?”

The Golden Star Ice Cream cart sloshed past us, the cake cones stacked too high, just asking to be bought so they wouldn’t topple over. But to my disappointment, Luz said, “No time,” her voice firm. “We have got to get out of this downpour.”

“But, Aaah-te—”

“Juana Salud, your hair will turn green if you stay in the rain! Do you want your hair to turn green?”

“No!”

“Then let’s go home. Where’s the Mercado bag?”

I looked at the busy corner near the milkfish stand where I had set it down. The striped bag was gone. “But I only left it for a second...”

Luz groaned. “You know how people are—they are desperate. It’s like Nanay always says: ‘Don’t put your purse on the ground or your money will run away.’ Now our Mercado bag has run away. How will we keep the fish dry?”

So we trekked back home from the market with the fish wrapped in butcher paper under our untucked shirts, much to my disgust. By the time we passed Mary again, the wet paper had begun to stick to my skin. I imagined the greasy scales soaking through and pressing up against my stomach, and I gagged.

“Oh, Juana, it is not that bad,” Luz scoffed.

“I’ll smell like fish dumi for weeks.”
On top of it all, the mud got into our ballet flats and the water weighed down our long skirts. We ruined our outfits, the clothes that distinguished us from the lower-class girls. We even had our own tailor, Mrs. de los Santos. Now she knew how to sew. You didn’t even have to give her a pattern. You could just say, “Mrs. de los Santos, I need a new dress,” and Ruth would get the fabric for her right away. I always got the blue dress to complement my fair skin. “Skin like cream, miss,” Mrs. de los Santos told me. We wanted to look like Debbie Reynolds, copying everything down to her “electric pleats.”

Sometimes, we gave Ruth our old dresses, and she’d accept them after pressing Nanay’s hand to her brown forehead for long moments. “Straighten-up!” I always wanted to tell her. “Hold your chin higher!” Her groveling was even worse when we gave her extra salt or rice or money when there was some. She’d take the items, bundled in handkerchiefs, and her eyes would water. She’d thank my mother—“Salamat po, salamat po”—for the things she could bring to her parents in Tondo, her nanay and tatay.

“They wait for me,” Ruth always said.

Every year in early November when the air was cool, Ruth took the bus all the way back to Tondo. She brought the salt or rice or extra money to her waiting nanay and tatay.

I looked up at the sky at the rain that clung to the coconut oil in my hair, and then I looked at Luz, her gaze far ahead.

“Ang seksi mo,” I joked, pointing at the bundle of fish bulging out from under her shirt.
“Bobo,” she snorted before pushing her stomach out even further to make me laugh. Nanay would have scolded us for acting so bastos.

As Calle de San Juan bent away from the Church into the thick overgrowth, we passed the time singing, as Luz always wanted to do.

In our humble town of San Roque
Four beggars from deep sleep were stirred,
The crippled man danced, the mute sang,
The blind man watched, the deaf man heard.

My eldest sister had the best voice of all of us. It was so controlled. Some nights, I would get scared of mga mucho and have to run and get Luz. She could tell me if they were present and then sing any lingering ancestors away.

“They are only spirits who are awake,” Luz would remind me. As eldest daughter, the gift of sight had passed from Nanay to her. Luz always wore Nanay’s bronze pendant around her neck—a symbol of the gift.

“They just want to watch over you,” Luz said, was always calm, always patient with me. I’d crawl back into bed as she sprinkled rice and salt on my windowsill.

“Do you see anything, Luz?” I’d ask, the covers up to my chin, my eyes on her hands. She’d look around the room, in the closet, outside the window, under my bed. Sometimes, Luz’s hands would shake and she’d say, “It’s just Tita Benilda. She’s visiting you. She’s wondering why there are no flowers in your room and wants to visit Nanay’s garden next.” Tita Benilda was Tatay’s sister. When I was five, we buried her in a churchyard in Manila. On All Soul’s Day each November, Tatay took the bus up just to decorate her grave with her favorite flower, the Sampaguita gardenia, the flower of our nation.
Often, Luz knew, our aunts and great grandmothers would visit us at night, when it felt safer to walk the earth. On most nights, though, her hands were steady. “No, I see nothing,” she’d say. Then she would sing, perched at the edge of my bed. In that soft timbre, with the floating, high notes, she sang the folksong, San Roque:

In the humble town we called our own,
Men slaughtered insects called gnats,
From the fat of these bugs when cooked and drained
Came the oil that filled up nine vats.

On Calle de San Juan, in the rain, we finished the last verse together, and I smiled as I imagined the mythical town.

In our town of Malabon City,
An old man’s fire could boil.
In a paper pot on a paper stove,
He fueled fire with water, not oil.

We were nearing the nipa huts and ending the song and the rain was still pouring-pouring down when we heard them: the sounds, just leaking out from behind the rain. Hammering, clanging, thudding, flapping. Then, we saw: something shining brilliantly white in the clearing beyond the huts.

“What is that, Ah-te?” I asked.

She didn’t know, but she didn’t say so because just then we saw Ruth. We could see that she was wearing her floral smock, but she did not see us. With a quick gait, Ruth walked off the main road and through the brush and behind the nipa huts toward the clearing.

“Ah-te, what is she doing? Why is she going up there?”
This was quiet Ruth. Quiet Ruth who didn’t meet our eyes. Ruth who said, “Salamat po, salamat po,” to everyone even when she doesn’t have anything to thank me or my sisters or brothers for.

“What is she doing,” I asked Luz again, elbowing her this time.

“Juana Salud de los Reyes dela Cruz! Hush!” my sister scolded me. I closed my mouth because Luz used my full name. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Luz’s eyes were set far in the distance where the massive thing was white and shining. Her breath was calm and steady.

“Let’s go,” she told me.

I huffed in response. I wanted to go home instead, to scrub the fish smell out of my skin and change into dry clothes. I wanted to call out to Ruth and have her go make me hot milk and arroz caldo. My stomach rumbled at the thought of the soup—cooked in chicken broth and ginger, the smell that would hang in the house until morning. But when your Ah-te tells you to go, you go.

The milkfish was still clinging to our skin beneath our shirts when Luz led me off the main street and up to the clearing. We sought refuge from the rain beneath the Mendozas’ hut. They were our poorer neighbors, the ones my mother always gave food to every Sunday. I can still see the bundles of rice, wrapped in handkerchiefs with the corners tied together, the fresh pan de sal in newspaper, and a round tin of Velveeta cheese. The family always thanked us—Salamat, po!—and the children gave mano to my mother.

Luz held onto the front stilt of the house, the wood damp and shining. I grew wary as we hunched under the floorboards just low enough to make us bend our
shoulders. Peering up, I saw the hole in the bamboo boards above our heads; we were beneath the Mendozas’ latrine. If Danny or his sister Susanna May needed to relieve themselves, we would be in range of the waste. I pulled on my sister’s arm.

“Luz—”

“Hush—look!”

Luz pointed with wide eyes to the clearing. The rain lightened, falling softly in almost a mist. From here, separated by just the house stilts and a single row of palms, I could see it all clearly.

A white tent, only half-pitched. It was gigantic—like a great whale beached behind the thatched homes and green palms. Groups of men, some white, some Filipino, were staking tall metal poles into the earth; and women, some white, some Filipina, stood on ladders, draping the plastic-coated canvas over the structure. The canopy was not the sallow brown color of the nipa huts. No, this one shone, reflecting what little sunlight escaped the clouds.

“Oh-te?” I asked my sister. “What’s that?”

The plastic walls flapped in the wind until they were rolled up and fastened tight to the roof’s edge. Nearly fifty people were there, people of all sorts. Those who were not setting up the tent looked like newcomers, people drawn like me and Luz by the noise and the strange sight. They gathered in front of tables where white women handed out pamphlets.

Watching all this from beneath the house, my heart raced, feeling the same rush I felt when Luz and I snuck ice cream on not-Sundays. I pulled myself closer to her and wrapped my arms around my stomach so not to drop the milkfish.
I recognized a few of the gatherers: there was the young woman down the street, from the Bernales family who owned a great plot of land by the shore; there was the man from the flower shop, who planted the Sampaguita gardenias in my mother’s garden next to her great mango tree; there was the older woman, who begged on the corner for work—“Trabaho? Trabaho?”—next to them.

Then, like tilting fishing boats, heaping baskets full of pan de sal rode the sea of their grasping hands. The bread passed from neighbor to neighbor, and I watched the Trabaho? Trabaho? woman reach her bony, brown fingers out for more than just one roll. I straightened at her rudeness, at least, as far as the Mendoza’s floorboards would let me.

“Did you see that, Ah-te?” I nudged her. But Luz paid me no mind.

A lull fell over the crowd, and I saw Ruth partaking with the others, their mouths full of the warm pan de sal. The wind carried the smell of the mist mixed with fresh bread, and the noise of soft smacking—many not even caring to pull apart the bread and tear off pieces—mingled with the water drumming on the tarp.

Then, a great wind came in from the west, whipping the trees, and the thousand white pamphlets blew in a torrent towards the huts where we stood. Like gulls, the papers flew past the palms and the grass, and the women left the tables to chase after them. One pamphlet fluttered towards our feet until it caught flat against Luz’s ankles, quivering.

Luz peeled it off her skin. The heading, in Tagalog, read, “WELCOME, from the First Baptist Church.”

Luz whispered to me, “This must be the group that Tatay told us about.”
“Who?” I asked.

“The Baptists,” she said, identifying them in English. “We’re not to go near them.”

“Why not?”

“Tatay says they baptize people in rivers.”

“Yuck—why?”

“I don’t know. And they don’t believe in saints either.”

Before I could ask more questions, I saw Ruth helping run after the pamphlets, collecting a stack of them against her chest. She headed straight for the Mendozas’ and would have reached the hut in seconds if she had not stopped mid-distance between the tent and us. She seemed to be staring straight at me and Luz, her arms crossed in front of herself, looking like she’d been caught stealing rice from the bin, as if she waited for a scolding or a swat on the hand.

Luz ducked her head and turned away.

“We should go,” she said firmly.

Luz was already treading back to the main road, but I had barely moved, still facing Ruth, who clutched the pamphlets tight.

“Juana Salud!”

When your Ah-te tells you to go, you go.

As I caught up to Luz, I turned back to look at the white tent on the hill. Two men on ladders were hanging a sign, pulling the canvas taught as they could. It stretched across the whole frontside of the tent. In big, red letters, it read: GOD IS LOVE John 3:16.
When Ruth got home, Luz and I did not speak to her about what we had witnessed. We gave Ruth the milkfish—quite soggier than normal—to be marinated in vinegar and salt and garlic and pepper overnight.

“Here, Ruth,” Luz said, handing her the damp bundles. “Para bukas. For tomorrow night’s dinner.”

As Ruth took the fish, I felt that I should have said something. I could see it in Luz’s face too. We wanted to say that we saw her. We wanted to ask her why she had been there. But we didn’t say anything.

“Salamat po, Manang Luz,” and Ruth retreated to kitchen with her head down.

We brushed our teeth and washed our hair and prayed the Rosary before we went to bed under the tented mosquito nets, and I thought that was the end of thinking about the white canopy in the clearing.

But that night when the house went to sleep at 8:30 pm to ensure an early wake-up for morning Mass, my sister whispered in my ear.

“Wake up, little sister. Wake up.”

I stirred but did not want to move.

“Hurry, come see,” she urged me. When I still did not move, she swept open the mosquito net and turned on the lamp on my nightstand. “Look—” she said, holding out a page from the soggy pamphlet. It read: REVIVAL SERVICE. 9 PM. Experience His Miracles!

“I saw Ruth sneak out just minutes ago,” Luz urged. “Let’s go.”
“Okey lang. Do I have a choice?” I mumbled as Luz pushed my socks and shoes into my hands.

The rains had stopped and it was deep night, the kind where only moonlight should have cast blue shadows on the ground. I do not remember looking at the stars because a stronger light consumed the evening. Even as we descended the hill, you could see the great bonfire outside the tent glowing hot in the clearing, projecting a red halo upon the encircling palms.

“Hurry,” Luz said, and we snuck out along Calle de San Juan. There was a lonely stillness in Cavite at this time of night. We passed quiet houses that didn’t seem to care about the music. No lamps were lit; no feet shuffled along the bamboo floorboards. Instead, we heard the faint striking of some instrument—a tambourine? Then the strings—the guitars, the violin—and the voices. Faint, faint voices.

We followed the fire and the sound until we reached the Mendozas’ hut. Luz clung to the stilt that held up the house. Anchoring herself, she listened, eyes narrowed and brow knit. From here, we had a perfect view of it all. A congregation of a hundred was gathered beneath the canopy, all the tent poles in place. At the front of the assembly, a group of white men in button-down shirts and women in plain dresses stepped onto the wooden stage. The music began: a chorus of instruments and singing. They were singing in Tagalog.

I laughed out loud.

“Ay, hush—”

“I can't help it,” I said, suppressing my giggles. “Their accent!”
They sounded so American—with funny twangs and drawn out vowels. But still they sang in Tagalog. It was a hymn I hadn’t heard before.

When the shadows of this life have gone,
I’ll fly away!

The Americans on the stage sang with wide mouths. They were swaying and stretched their hands high. I imagined my Ah-te singing with this group, how wonderful she’d sound. She could sing with the proper sounds and give these booming voices something steadier. These leaders on the stage were not always in unison. Some held notes for longer or for shorter, and some sang so loud I thought the canopy might burst. Luz would be good for them, strong and powerful and steady.

The crowd became even louder as the song went on, following along with the lyrics in their pamphlets.

Like a bird from prison bars has flown,
I’ll fly away!

“Who do these people think they are? There will be many complaints from the neighbors tomorrow,” Luz said. Yet, as she spoke, I detected a change in her voice, an uncertainty. Softly, to herself, she asked, “How can they sing out in the open like this?”

I searched for Ruth among the crowd and saw more strangers than neighbors. I found her in the back row. I could only see her profile—a very flat one, with her wide nose just sloping out of above her lips. Her eyes were closed and her hands clasped in front of her chest, like she was holding something precious to her
heart. More to my surprise—she was doing something I’d never seen her do before. She was swaying. The music moved her side to side.

Her motion struck me then, and I did not know why.

“Luz—” I pointed to Ruth in the back row.

Luz followed my hand. And as she watched Ruth, she shook her head with a sadness I did not understand. “Yes, I see. I see her.”

For some reason, I felt tears prickle my eyes.

My siblings and I had not cared to know much about Ruth. We knew she worked hard and that she could not see in one eye and that made her jump sometimes when we approached her from the left and that her hands were always clenched from carrying heavy pails of water back and forth from the house to the pump, being so careful not to spill the water. We knew she pressed my mother’s hand to her forehead for too long and her nanay and tatay in Tondo were grateful for the salt or rice or money.

We didn’t know her favorite food, the meal to cook if she were ever upset, or that she really paid attention in Mass because she always looked down so dutifully to conceal the ugly purple smear of her left eye.

But now she seemed happy. She seemed peaceful, and it made me ache because I had not seen her peaceful before.

The song ended, and Ruth applauded with the rest of them. I could imagine the feel of her hands—their calluses and roughness from washing the laundry and dishes. I had never known them to do anything else, let alone applaud. Then one of the white singers on the stage told people to greet and welcome one another.
Someone next to Ruth embraced her and she embraced him back before a new song started up.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind
Sight, riches, healing of the mind

As they sang, people cried out intermittent praise—“Yes, Lord!” and “Amen!” and “Hallelujah, praise Him!” The whole sound was so loud I could feel the vibrations in my chest.

Just as I am, Thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down

I felt we had come upon something Tatay wouldn’t want us to see, something bastos. But it pulled at my gut. In the haze of the firelight, brown and white faces burned red. I knew that Luz and I were behind the palms—just onlookers, hiding in the bush—but right then, I felt among these people burning red under the canopy.

Now to be Thine, yea, Thine alone
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

All the sounds—the strings and tambourine and voices of all the members of the congregation—came to a final swell before the applause. Then a man with the broadest shoulders I’d ever seen stepped forward. I’m telling you—you could have balanced the whole world upon those shoulders. He looked out at the crowd through a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses and dressed in a white shirt and tailored khaki pants. With an outstretched arm, he made emphatic gestures, and with the other, he held a Bible. “Amen, amen,” he said.

“How true are those words?” He spoke in effortful Tagalog, his American accent better hidden than the other singers. “Who here wants to come before the Lord tonight? Who wants to praise the Lamb of God?”

In a booming voice, he said, “And He takes us just as we are—what a blessing! Hallelujah!”

“Hallelujah, praise Him!”

Standing tall, looking out over the crowd, he seemed to meet everyone’s eyes. He could have looked straight into mine if I were in the tent too. “We’re gathered here tonight to worship our gracious Father. We’re here to exalt Him, to praise His name forever and ever.”

I liked the way he said “we”—kami. I liked the way he kept repeating it in every sentence, how his lips hummed together to form the second syllable.

“I am Reverend Homer M. Hayes,” he said. “And I bring the good news from the First Baptist Church.”

Then he opened his Bible and read something about a fish and a snake.

“God is our good Father!” he thundered. “We need only to ask. He will not trick us. Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. What will you ask Him tonight, brothers and sisters?”

The crowd hushed as the question hung in the air, and my heart beat faster.

“Our God is a God of miracles,” Homer M. Hayes continued. “Is there one among us today in need of healing? In need of a miracle?”

A wave of murmurs swept the gathering. A stray “Yes, Jesus,” floated up to the ceiling and into the night.
“We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. He heals the sick. Raises the dead. Lets the deaf hear. Makes the unclean clean. The lame walk. The blind see. All we need, brothers and sisters, is to ask in faith.”

Oh how my heart was pounding then—like it was trying to escape my chest and join the strangers on the stage. I imagined myself running up there, shouting, “Me! Choose me!” Luz, ever so careful and protective of me, would yell and try to keep me back, but I would go anyway. Yet I was unsure of what I would ask for—what did I need? What did I have that was broken?

“Is there someone here in need of a miracle today?” the reverend boomed again. For a while the crowd mumbled encouragements, waiting for a voice, eager for a reason to cheer again.

Then suddenly, a “Yes!” pierced through the congregation, and my heart leaped. It was Ruth. Luz gripped my hand tight. At this moment, the rain began to fall again, tapping on the palm fronds and making them shudder.

Ruth stood, and in a voice I’d never heard her use before—brave and strong—she cried, “Have mercy! Have mercy!”

The crowd erupted in cheers and within moments, Ruth—looking even smaller next to Homer M. Hayes—stood on the wooden stage.

“My child, welcome. God has blessed you for your boldness today!”

“Salamat po, sir.”

“What is your name, child? Where are you from?”

“I am Ruth Bautista. I am from Tondo, Manila.”
“Ruth—faithful and courageous Ruth. What are you placing at the feet of the Lord today? What do you need?”

“Sir, I cannot see in this eye,” she gestured. “It happened when I was born.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Sixteen, sir.”

“Sixteen! You show great faith in your young age. You are blessed, Ruth. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The “Amens” rose on cue from the crowd as the reverend turned to the congregation.

“Friends,” he commanded. “Let’s extend our hands. Lay a hand upon Ruth here.”

In a fluid motion, the members of the crowd raised their hands, palms flat, and those who did not know what to do at first soon followed suit until the whole crowd reached out towards the front of the stage where Ruth stood, her hands clasped together. Then, bending down, Reverend Homer M. Hayes met Ruth face-to-face.

“Daughter,” he asked her. “Do you believe that Christ is able to do this?”

Even past the now pouring-pouring rain, we heard Ruth cry out, “Yes, Lord!”

Then I heard another, closer sound: the floorboards of the Mendozas’ hut creaked above us. Peering up, I saw that the hole in the bamboo floor was directly above Luz’s head.
“Ah-te—” I started, already knowing what was happening. But it was too late. Urine that should have soaked the earth below us trickled down onto my sister, wetting her across her shoulders and her head.

“Luz—” I said. But she remained still. Her gaze did not waver from Reverend Homer M. Hayes. The yellow liquid went down her forehead and nose before she finally wiped it off so that she could point and tell me: “Little sister, look.”

Homer M. Hayes had his hand over Ruth’s eyes. “According to your faith, let it be done to you,” he said, and immediately Ruth began to cry.

“Susmaryosep!” Luz whispered.

“She is healed! She is healed!” Amidst the praises, we could hear Ruth saying over and over, through tears, “Salamat po, salamat po, salamat po,” until all the words from all the people beneath the white canopy were lost and the space filled with simple, joyous sound.

I blinked and blinked and finally looked at Luz. Her hands were shaking against the stilt of the house.

“Luz?”

Her eyes were frozen on the stage, looking just above Ruth. I reached for her trembling hand.

“What do you see?”

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind
Sight, riches, healing of the mind...

“I—” she started, not looking away.

“Ah-te?”
“Mga molto,” she said, swallowing. “Two of them. They’re standing behind Ruth.”

The rain came in gusts through the stilts and the palms and made our unkempt hair whip about our faces. I waited for Luz to sing San Roque. About dancing men and gnats and paper pots. To tell me she was mistaken, and the usual, “No, I see nothing.”

Instead, Luz repeated, “Mga molto.”

“Ah-te?”

Luz blinked fast and tilted her face up to the rain before letting go of the stilt.

“Let’s go.”

Yes, all I need, in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

When your Ah-te tells you to go, you go.

Ruth’s left eye retained its new whiteness, the bluish-brown glaze gone for good. Nanay and Tatay listened to her story with wide eyes and sometimes murmured to each other about this “First Baptist Church” and “Mr. Homer M. Hayes.” My brothers and sisters were amazed, too—although they only gossiped amongst themselves and did not talk to Ruth any more than usual. Luz hadn’t spoken up about that night yet, so I kept quiet, too.

Word from the attendants of the revival service got out soon—spreading from Cavite City to Manila. Reporters from The Cavite Independent and even The
Manila Morning Sun came to the house to interview this once half-blind Alila. They caught her one morning as she carried water from the pump.

“Miss Ruth—how did this happen?” they badgered her.

Still walking with buckets of water in each hand, she answered, “I asked to be healed, and God said, ‘Yes, anak ko.’”

“And what will you do now?” they demanded.

Ruth explained, “After I bring the water into the house, I will wash the dishes for Miss dela Cruz and tomorrow, I will choose good fish in the palengke.”

By this time, Nanay came to Ruth’s defense and shuffled the reporters away.

Her story made The Independent’s front page. “Alila: Miracle Girl of Our Time!” the heading read above a picture of Ruth and her water buckets in front of the house. But just a week after the articles came out, a Dasmariñas boy who suffered a head injury was receiving his Last Rites when someone placed a “heavenly rose petal” on his forehead. He sat up from bed and took the bus to school the same day. Cavite City’s Miracle Girl was soon forgotten.

Although things on Calle de San Juan went back to normal, I was not done asking Luz about what she’d seen that night. More extraordinary to me than Ruth’s cries of “Salamat po, salamat po” was how Luz had looked beneath the Mendozas’ hut: a sheen of urine, glossing her forehead; her face turned upward, looking out into the rain; her arms outstretched for just a moment.

For weeks after, I nagged her: “But, Ah-te, what did you see? What did you really see? Was it really mga multo?”

At first, she dismissed me with a “Hush!”
When I persisted, she fed me pieces of the sighting.

“They were a man and a woman,” she told me one week.

“They were thin, and I could see their bones,” she said the next.

It turned out that Luz thought of mga multo as much as I did because one Saturday morning she relented. “We’ll have to see for ourselves.”

Luz approached my mother, who knelt in her garden, and said, “Juana and I would like to visit Pinsan Raul in the city.”

“Oh, we haven’t seen him and the family for a long time now…” Nanay thought, pursing her lips. She leaned over to her Sampaguita vine and plucked a small bouquet of gardenias. “Give this to your Pinsan. For remembrance.”

We did not get to give Pinsan Raul the flowers. Instead, Luz and I snuck off to Tondo. All we knew was the name of Ruth’s street—San Pedro—and her family name—Bautista.

Nanay would never have approved of the journey. “It is not a place for young girls,” she once said. After Luz and I took the bus up to the district, I understood what Nanay meant. We drove along the Ilog Pasig—a green-brown river that slithered through Tondo—and I had to hold my nose the whole way. The Pasig was worse than the palengke—and people even lived right alongside it. Slouching on the muddy slopes were things almost like houses, made of cardboard and cloth and sheets of iron with ridges and grooves. I couldn’t imagine smelling fish dumi all day.

We got off the bus when we reached the end of the river—salamat sa Diyos! This was the stop for San Pedro, the driver reassured us, looking at the gardenias Luz carried. The bus departed in a cloud of exhaust, and as we walked along the
main road, weaving through the crowds of people, Luz held my hand tight. “San Pedro?” she asked a woman selling guavas from a crate. After accepting a piso from my sister, the guava woman pointed right across the street.

San Pedro Cemetery was not like the church site in Manila where Tita Benilda was buried. Here, concrete walls fenced in the overstuffed plot. Children played tag among the stacks of tombs and below clotheslines. Dogs yapped and knocked over offerings of atang—food and drink for the dead. A woman leaned against a stone marker and fed her baby a bottle. “Bautista?” Luz asked her.

“There are dozens of Bautistas here,” the woman replied, hoisting the babbling child. It reached with eager hands for the bottle. I watched the last of the milk dribble into its lips before it wailed for more. I had to look away.

Luz described Ruth—the girl who visited often, who used to have the soupy, bluish-brown eye, “The Miracle Girl.” For three piso, the woman showed us the way. She took us to a Balete tree on the far west corner, where Ruth’s nanay and tatay rested.

For a long time, Luz and I stared at their tomb—a bone box, the size of the guava crate—inscribed with two names. Luz placed the Sampaguita gardenias at the base of it, next to the other atang. The money had gone, run away. But, in half-open handkerchiefs, the scattered bits of salt and rice—ruined by the rains—remained.