

## Commuter Girl

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***Buona Raya Vilar***

*University of the Philippines Diliman*

*buona.vilar@yahoo.com*

"Is *that* what you're wearing, Lally?" Tita Sofia asked from the breakfast table.

I slowed down and nodded, still touchy from that morning's discussion. My stepmother looked me up and down and sighed, but didn't want an argument either. "At least bring a sweater."

Considering myself dismissed, I headed straight for the door.

Outside, Yaya Nora was waiting to see me off. "*Ang alaga ko, college na!* Here's a foldable umbrella. It's only from the *palengke* ha... *Baka bumaliktad.*"

"Thanks, Yaya." On an impulse, I reached out to hug her, feeling sentimental. As expected, she shrugged me away, but not before I caught a sheen of tears in her eyes. She stole a glance up at the glass window that looked out from the dining hall, a jumpiness that started when we moved in with Tita Sofia eight years ago, when I was ten years old. It wasn't that obvious, but Yaya became a little less punchy with her jokes, and stayed mostly in the kitchen. It was like there was an invisible line that she wasn't allowed to cross. She used to have leisurely *meriendas* with my mother.

"Ready? You have your jacket?"

It was forty degrees out. "It's here," I lied, tapping my crossbody bag, before hurrying out the gate.

Once settled inside the dust-covered UV Express, I stretched a crumpled twenty peso bill nervously towards the driver, assuming the air of someone

who knew what she was doing. A woman with tattooed eyebrows took my money and passed it on to the driver.

"Thank you," I said cheerily, thrilled to be rubbing elbows with the world. My thoughts returned to the awkwardness from that morning. Dad had asked Tita Sofia to give Manong Manny a month's advance on his salary. Dad brought it up as soon as she took her seat, still glowing prettily from her daily morning run at the treadmill.

"Again?" Her brow furrowed. "He hasn't fully paid us back for last time."

"His daughter is in the hospital."

"For what?" Her tone sounded more suspicious than concerned.

"Typhoid fever. Or dengue, was it? He told me but I can't remember. You know I had dengue before?" Dad had a disconcerting habit of drifting off into space, maybe to a day in the distant past, a legal issue to be solved in the office, news that he read earlier that day.

But Tita Sofia was an expert at bringing him back. "Don't change the topic. We just lent him money for tuition fees last week. It's always one thing or another. Last month, we gave him *abuloy* too, when he *claimed* his mother-in-law passed away. What should we worry about next, his neighbor's rent?" It was how she had used the word *claimed*, like it was a lie, that forced me to speak up on our family driver's behalf. "His mother-in-law really did die. Dad and I were at the wake," I muttered.

Tita Sofia looked over at me, probably surprised that I was even there.

"Manong Manny is not Abet," Dad said soothingly, touching her hand. Tita Sofia shook her head as though wanting to clear it of a mental image of a trusted employee who had disappeared after she had confronted him that the "sick" mother whom she had been financially assisting for years had been dead for twenty years.

Tita Sofia sighed, relenting. "Well. Whether he's telling the truth or not, we don't want to burden him with too much debt. We'll give him the money tomorrow... But I'll expect to see the hospital bill."

For all that I could understand that Tita Sofia had been burnt before, any discussion concerning money increasingly made me anxious. It started when I overheard her drunk brother talking with his wife last Christmas. I had been in the shadows outside the house, hiding with my cigarette, when they wondered out loud whether she would eventually leave the house to me.

Tita Sofia wasn't an evil stepmom, not by a long shot. I'd actually been enamored by her, back when she had still been Mom's mentor at the NGO where she and Dad had consulted as lawyers. When Mom had died in a car accident when I was eight, the dependable directress extraordinaire Tita Sofia had handled the arrangements. So young, she was only 36, people had whispered of Mom at the wake. I kept close to Tita Sofia while Dad accepted the guests' condolences. And after two years, Dad, Yaya Nora, and I had moved out of our rented two-bedroom condominium unit and into her mansion in Quezon City.

I had been in that house before, with Mom. But where I had been enthusiastic and curious during that visit, I was suddenly cautious and unsure after we moved in permanently. If I broke something, would *tita* get mad then kiss me after, as my own mother had done? I never found out because I made sure I never broke anything at the mansion.

"Miss Anna thinks I'm really your daughter," I had confided to Tita Sofia once at a parent-teacher conference, tickled pink that I might look a little like my glamorous stepmom despite having inherited Mom's morena skin. I immediately wished that I had kept that tidbit to savor by myself, because Tita Sofia hadn't laughed as I had hoped she might. She and Dad never had a kid of their own, and she never asked me to call her mom.

Eventually, I decided that I was glad. It felt traitorous to Mom's memory somehow, to call someone else "Mom". Other things started to make me feel uncomfortable too.

What would my mother think of the flat screen TV in my room, the thick comforter that blanketed my bed, and the six fluffy pillows that I had all to myself? Mom would have scoffed at the air conditioning too. We had only used it on Sundays in our old home, and only because Dad insisted that not using it would make it fall into disrepair.

The "rich kid" label had chafed at me in high school, and I wanted to distance myself from it. I'd thought nothing of it at first, that my tardies magically never showed up on my report card, that I could make up vacation absences by turning in special projects.

"Rich kid *ka kasi*," our valedictorian had accused me scathingly, when I picked up my lone gold medal as subject proficiency awardee in Computer Programming. I'd worked hard for it, but when confronted, I wasn't sure anymore if it was, indeed, deserved.

*I'll show them. I'll show everyone that I could make it on my own.*

When I turned sixteen, Dad started his campaign for me to get into the university where he and Mom had met. Tita Sofia hadn't passed the entrance exam, he joked, but after a long night of fighting, with words like "starving", "idealism" and "activism" being bandied about, escalating to "credit card collectors" and "your dead wife's relatives," he never mentioned studying at his alma mater again.

When I passed, Dad had beamed proudly, and I felt close to him for the first time since Mom had died. Like he, Mom, and I shared something that Tita Sofia wasn't part of.

"You have to teach me which bus and jeepney to take," I told Dad.

"Manny can still take you to school," Tita Sofia had interjected.

"It's far, he'll have to wait for me or else he'll spend hours in heavy traffic. What about your errands?"

"Oh Lally, I'm perfectly capable of driving myself. And I'm always with your dad anyhow."

"Your mom and I used to take the jeepney together. You should check if the *isawan* is still there by the terminal." Dad's faraway look and the mention of Mom had ended the discussion, and I managed to keep it from coming up again.

I was so lost in thought that I missed my stop.

"*Para po,*" I said when I saw the row of parked tricycles fast approaching. But I must have said it too softly because the terminal whizzed past. "*Para po,*" I croaked again, trying to be heard above the roar of the engine and the loud OPM hip-hop.

"*Manong, para!*" cried the tattoo eyebrow lady, seeming surprised that we were near the *talipapa* already. She knocked on the Revo's ceiling for emphasis. I made a mental note to do that next time. The UV Express screeched to a halt, two blocks after my stop. I flung the back door open and scrambled out.

My tricycle driver was scaring me.

I had resisted the urge to shrink back after he greeted me with a friendly grin and a "Hi Sexy, *saan tayo?*"

I forced a smile. I wasn't sure why my impulse was to smile even if I didn't feel like smiling, as he languidly looked me up and down.

"Commonwealth *po?*" I asked the air in his general vicinity, where he and two others smoked by a wire fence. He smirked, taking a last long drag,

before stubbing his cigarette with his thin rubber slipper and swinging his leg over the motorcycle seat of the first trike. He gestured at me to hop in.

"*Kuya, Commonwealth po?*" I yelled when my he made a right turn. As far as I knew, he would have needed only to traverse the main road that we were already on. He ignored me and took a sharp left, to a street with quiet houses and empty lots. From the corner of my eye, I saw that he was no longer looking ahead but was hunched over, looking inside the cab, at me. He wore dark sunglasses and I couldn't see his eyes. I kept my gaze down, staring at his yellow, overgrown nails and the brown skin of his foot.

It was then that Tita Sofia's and Yaya Nora's insistence that I bring a jacket in this heat started to make sense. Feeling stupid, I fumbled with my pony tail, releasing my long hair to help cover my chest that had started to bounce with every pothole that we hit.

You're imagining things, I chanted in my head, a string of prayers on my lips. I noticed a small altar in the interior of the cab, a laminated photo card of Jesus in a white robe, beams of red and white light emanating from his heart. *He believes in God!* I prayed even harder. Beside the photo of Jesus was a sticker. He believed in God almost as much he believed that drivers were sweet lovers.

The houses thinned.

What should I do if he stopped in the middle of nowhere? Should I run? Should I beg? Could I scream loud enough for anyone to hear?

But the tricycle didn't stop. It kept going until the next cluster of houses appeared, and then we turned left and we were back on the busy road from where we came. Had I imagined it all? After what seemed like forever, at last, he hit the brakes.

My hands trembled violently as I reached into my bag for money, and in my eagerness to escape I didn't wait for my change.

Yaya Nora had taught me many things over the summer in preparation for today. We had gone over the map several times, and she didn't stop quizzing me until I knew it like the back of my hand. She had advised me not to use a backpack, because it would be easy to slash without me noticing. She had warned me not to wear a necklace, which would be easy to snatch. But she had not thought to alert me about lecherous men.

Should I go back to the house? But what eighteen-year-old would go back home, tail between her legs, after less than thirty minutes of trying to commute

for the first time? A sheltered, privileged one, my inner princess-voice whimpered.

I weighed my stepmom's smug amusement and my father's wavering pride against my fear. Nothing had happened. I was fine. I squared my shoulders, wrestled my fear into a box, to be tackled later or never. Then I forced my shaky, trembling knees to steady themselves and march forward to find my bus.

There was a lot that our tinted, air-conditioned family car had been protecting me from, I realized when I reached the highway. A gray cloud of dust hovered over everything. It sanded my eyes, and molten asphalt licked at my feet. Sweat trickled down my neck. I hadn't known the breadth of Commonwealth Avenue until I stood on its edge and it threatened to drown me, nine weaving southbound lanes of buses and trucks racing to their destinations, motorcycles whizzing past, private cars with blaring horns. I inched my way to the second lane where the other commuters bravely stood, squinting against the glare, to make out the small hand-painted signs on the buses that careened our way.

After the third bus to Quiapo had left without me, unimpressed by my timid attempts to approach, I scratched and clawed and elbowed my way through, until a wave caught me and I was being carried inside the next bus by the throng, my feet barely touching the ground.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the inside of the bus. Dingy windows and checkered curtains shrouded us from the burning sun, and we were in our own little fluorescent-lit, air-conditioned bubble. I let the mosh pit carry me to the middle in a cloud of dust.

The conductor handed me a ticket with a rubber-covered thumb, and I handed him one hundred pesos in return. He motioned something like, wait. I observed him do the same with the other passengers, and I held onto my ticket instead of pocketing it to remind myself to collect my change. Someone tapped my shoulder. It was a boy, standing up from his window seat, who looked about my age.

"You can take my seat," he said. He had an open, friendly face.

A blonde-haired guy to my left side-eyed me and the empty seat enviously. "I—I'm okay. Thank you."

But the boy was already stepping aside and ushering me in. As we switched places, I caught a scent of soap, sweat and cigarettes. I wanted to catch another glimpse of his face, but he stood with his back to me and so I pretended to scan the bus, with carefully timed peeks in his direction. He hadn't bothered to put his backpack in front of his chest and it slung casually, coolly over his shoulder. I observed the people behind him, but finally decided that no one was plotting to steal from him.

This was stalkerish behavior, so I trained my eyes on the back of the seat before me. Pentel pen doodles covered it, mostly hearts with names inside, curses, a song lyric. Under a hand-lettered "Fuck you" was the sketch of a finger with a happy face and a floppy hat, and balls on either side – Oh god. I felt my cheeks get prissily hot at the realization that the crude drawing *wasn't* a finger. It took all my willpower, but still I managed to look resolutely on.

Maybe the man sitting on the aisle seat would have left me alone, had I not shivered from the cold, had I not leaned over to his side and stretched my bare arm up to close the offending vent.

He had been minding his own business when I accidentally bumped his shoulder, and he turned his gaze to me.

His gentle eyes and the wrinkles around them reminded me of Lolo Dario, who we used to visit every year on our outreach program at school. His sparse hair was combed forward to cover a receding hairline.

"Sorry *po*," I apologized.

"Are you cold?" he rasped, a finger grazing my shoulder.

"I'm okay *po*." *He didn't mean to*, I told myself, and scooted closer to the window. His body followed suit, his leg pressing persistently against mine. On his breath, I caught the stench of a hangover.

"*Bukas ang zipper ko*." His hot breath was in my ear, mumbling unintelligible things about his desires and my wants.

*Stand up*, I commanded myself, but my legs remained frozen.

It was only when a lady across us called out "*Hoy*" that I came to, and I was up like a rocket, tripping past the man, lurching forward and back as I made it down the aisle, grabbing at the seats, until I finally reach the driver.

The people on the bus had dwindled in number. As though in a haze, I stumbled down some steps and rattled at the bus doors. I pulled at it repeatedly even though it wouldn't budge, vaguely aware that I was causing

a commotion. The moment the driver hit the brakes and pulled on something to open the door, I hit the ground and ran.

A light rain had started to fall as I picked up speed, my strappy sandals threatening to slide off my feet with every step.

Manila felt claustrophobic after the vastness of Quezon City. It was even grayer, like the air after an ash fall, and overhead, a massive railway blocked the sky. On the sidewalk grew stunted trees, tangled with electric wires and crooked traffic signs. I fought my way forward, the edge of my long skirt gathering mud and dirt, as I wove my way through carts clumped with people huddled under tarps. They slurped hot noodles out of plastic bag-covered bowls. I smelled fried chicken.

It seemed to me that I was one of the few people who had a destination in mind. Like most people were just parked around the city, idling under the shade of advertisements draped haphazardly over branches. Women squatted on monobloc stools, breastfeeding their infants and ignoring their half-dressed children. Only when I reached the tall gates of the university did I finally slow down.

There were still a few minutes left before the freshman assembly started and I needed time to compose myself.

"*Kuya*, where's the smoking area?" I asked the guard manning the gates.

"Smoking's not allowed on campus, sorry."

"I know a place." I turned to find the boy who had given up his seat on the bus. He was panting a little, as though he had chased after me. I didn't mind. After my harrowing commute, I found myself questioning whether I trusted this boy enough to follow, but he appeared to be a student too and I really wanted a smoke. My battered sandals sank into the soft earth as soon as I stepped off the pavement onto an empty lot, and I could feel mud oozing between my toes, but at this point, I thought *it figures*. It wasn't even 9 am, but it felt like a lifetime had passed since I opened my eyes that morning.

"You're a freshman, aren't you?"

"You're not?"

"Sophomore. Hey, the assembly doesn't matter. It's okay to be late."

Cigarette butts littered the green-brown grass, but no one else was around. I produced the umbrella that Yaya Nora had gifted me with, and shuffled a little closer to share my umbrella. Our arms brushed. He took out a pack of reds and offered it to me along with his name, Luis. I took one, even though



I had menthol cigarettes in my bag. We stayed silent through the first few puffs, me not wanting to talk about what had happened back at the bus. But after a few more beats of uncompanionable silence, I gave in to the pressure to be social and thanked him for giving me his seat.

"Don't get used to it. I usually pretend I'm asleep."

I didn't expect him to crack a joke, and it felt good to laugh. I felt myself relax a little, the tension that I had been holding in my neck for the past two hours easing. "It can't be fun, always being expected to offer your seat on a crowded bus like a gentleman."

"I don't think anyone really expects it anymore. That guy beside you would've taken the seat, if you'd hesitated a second longer."

"I wish I had," I blurted out without thinking.

He turned serious. He hesitated. "Hey, don't take this the wrong way, but... never mind."

"Say it." I suspected that I already knew what he was going to say. I blew smoke rings in the air, willing myself not to cry.

Why would wearing a tank top mean that I was asking for it? Why was I being asked for things that I never offered? "Next, he'll ask us for his neighbor's rent," Tita Sofia had said that morning. I shook my head to clear it. That didn't have to do with anything. I was confused, my thoughts were muddy.

He regarded me quietly, taking another drag. "You shouldn't wear make-up until you get to school," he finally said. I knew that that wasn't what he was going to say at all, but he had a point. I could feel fine dust particles clinging to my face, making a paste with my BB cream. I probably looked a fright.

"Excellent advice. Anything else?"

"We could... get the bus back to Quezon City together. I get out at 4 pm."

"I think I have class until 5." My heart sank at the thought of being out alone on the streets, in the dark. He lit another cigarette, and in that space, I felt an urgent need to address his unspoken reprimand.

"Earlier, you were thinking something about my clothes. Isn't it unfair? It's... It's 'victim-blaming'." I signaled an air quote for the term, like I had no business using it because I hadn't been victim enough. "But if I had understood what the rules were, I would have worn a jacket. I was just really... stupid enough not to know." Not for the first time that day, I wanted to kick myself.

He was quiet then. I liked the way that his hair fell over his eyes, and I realized I didn't know exactly how my parents had met. I wondered if it meant anything, that we were unbothered by the rain. I could feel the warmth emanating off him.

"I thought we had laws against harassment," I added.

He held the umbrella for me and gazed pointedly at the second cigarette that I was about to light. A law-breaker demanding her rights when it was convenient.

"Am I harming anybody?" I demanded, waving my cigarette.

"COPD sufferers. Mother Earth," he deadpanned.

The rain came down harder, and I didn't think it was possible, but my sandals sank farther down. My skirt felt like they were embellished with hollow blocks by now, holding so much water. He ruffled around in his bag and fished a jacket out. I thought he might offer it to me but he shrugged it on, and covered his head with the hood. He waited for me to finish my second stick, but didn't light another one. Then he started to lead the way back to the school grounds and I limped after him, muddy hollow-block skirt and all. My first day of college suddenly seemed very bleak and sad.

I followed him until we reached the doors of the building where the assembly was being held. He turned around to face me. "So, 5 pm. I'll wait for you here."

I found Luis slouched on the steps when I emerged at 4:47pm. I had sprinted out of class as soon as our professor said that he was letting us out early, cursing myself for an onslaught of shyness that stopped me from asking Luis for his number that morning. I worried all day that he wouldn't be there.

"Hey." My heart pounded in my chest.

"Hey. How was your first day?"

"Feels strange, having boys in class. My blockmates seem nice."

The rain had let up, and his smile felt like the sun.

"Lally!"

I started at the familiar voice. I looked around, confused, until I spotted Manong Manny waving at me from the student parking lot. He stood by Tita Sofia's white Fortuner, gleaming in the midst of decade-old sedans with windshields begging to be washed. Our driver, in his pristine polo barong and smart black pants stood to attention by the open passenger door, as was his custom.

I crept towards him self-consciously, my mind working furiously for excuses to send him away. Homework, first day of school block party, something. A boy. A nice, kind boy who waited for me. "What are you doing here?"

"Your Tita asked me to pick you up." He scrutinized Luis, who followed me to the car. "Or...I can tell her that I was caught in traffic and didn't catch you?" Manong Manny added, offering me an out.

The air conditioning from inside the car beckoned, and I faltered at the familiarity of it, my excuses giving way. Turning around, I faced Luis, and the next words that spilled out of my mouth was me retreating to my tower before the adventure even began.

"Do you want a ride?" I asked him hopefully.

He didn't say anything, but a small smile played on his lips, as though he understood everything about me in that instant, that I had been a day-tourist in this city, and was about to cut the trip short because a refund had become available. Something in his face closed. In the set of his jaw, I recognized the pride that I usually wore when dealing with my stepmother. He shook his head, already backing away, making it abundantly clear that he couldn't be convinced.

I climbed into the back seat, Manong Manny shutting the door after me with finality. Behind the anonymity of the heavily-tinted glass, I watched Luis' retreating figure. I remembered his eyes and felt a sharp stab of regret in my chest.

But battling with my regret was an unbidden image of my dad when he had still been with my mother—the worried crease that permanently marked his forehead, and how often they stayed up through the night, piles of paper and coffee mugs between them. I pictured him from the morning that we talked of college and he dreamily romanticized the past and this city, while his healthy, well-fed fingers daintily cradled a buttered croissant.

"Your Tita Sofia left something in the back seat," Manong Manny said. The something was a pink hoodie that she and I had bought together on our trip to Hong Kong two months before. It was freezing in the car, and I felt cold even on the inside. I draped the hoodie over me like a blanket, rubbing my fingers over the soft material, wishing that I had brought it with me that morning.

My head fell back on my neck pillow. Sinking deep in the leather seat and closing my eyes, I traced the outline of my mounting resentment. *Hi, Sexy.*

The alcohol breath in my hair. I couldn't wait to get home and scrub my mud-crusted feet.

Manong Manny cleared his throat. "My daughter Grace is in the hospital." The passion that I had that morning to speak on his behalf felt like it belonged to someone else, a softer version of myself. I deliberately kept my eyes closed and shifted to find a more comfortable position, but I couldn't quite seem to find it. I could taste a bitterness in my mouth. Gone was the delicious anticipation that I had floated in the whole day.

What *had* I been looking forward to? I replayed the morning and landed on the moment that I turned around and realized that a thoughtful stranger had bothered to follow a silly girl and saw to it that she got to school in one piece. I had felt safe. I had felt human and hopeful and alive.

*Tomorrow, I will find him tomorrow*, I thought.

I imagined what it would have been like, walking beside Luis as darkness fell. I could have delighted in the city lights, stopped jumping at every shadow, ceased clutching my bag as though everyone was out to get me. Weeks later, I might have discovered the sidewalk cracks becoming familiar, that I belonged to this city too, and that I didn't have to be afraid after all. It felt like was on the verge of losing something important, that I was letting something slip away.

"Dad spoke to Tita Sofia this morning," I finally said. "I'll pray for Grace." I began to wonder if our trust in Manong Manny was indeed misplaced, and the bitterness coated my tongue once more. Meanwhile, he thanked me profusely, more than I deserved.

As I berated myself for my doubts, the car pulled up at a traffic light, and there, up ahead, under a blinking street lamp was an *isaw* stand. Was it the one where Dad and Mom used to go? Was that Luis in the shadows?

In the tinted window of my car, I could see the line that Yaya Nora carefully treaded all these years more clearly.

"I'll... I'll see you at home," I told Manong Manny, my heart slamming in my chest. I squared my shoulders once more, stepped down from the car and into the warm air, my sweater securely wrapped around me.

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**Buona Raya Vilar** is an MA Creative Writing student at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Her short stories have been published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Ecocriticism and Tomás*.