

SPARRING

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"FASTER," DOY SAID, holding up both his padded hands in front of his face. Lee, the girl in front of him, let out a volley of jabs—left and right, left and right, left hook, uppercut—just as he had shown her earlier. He took two steps back and the girl took two steps forward, following his lead. She let out another flurry of punches which he expertly caught with his raised hands.

"Very good," he told her, his Cebuano accent thick. "You're getting better."

The girl smiled and lowered her raised fists an inch, exposing her face. In that split second, Doy threw in a quick tap with his left, which almost hit her. She doubled back, surprised. "Focus!" Doy said "You'll get hit if you don't."

Lee nodded, a serious look on her face. Doy nodded back and told her that their session was over. He didn't need to tell her what to do next, she held up her gloves and he helped her out of them. She thanked him and proceeded to her cooling down routine, starting with the weight machines.

Doy stepped off the matted floor, on to the cold concrete, and walked to the side benches. He picked up his water bottle, a promotional gift from the energy drink company whose name was written across bottle's cheap plastic body, and took a long drink. He watched the girl do her repetitions.

He felt proud that she had improved as much as she had. She had been one of his first clients at the gym and the most tenacious of lot. She had stuck with the program when everyone

else he had trained from the time that the gym first opened had already fallen off the wagon.

Lino, one of the older hands at the gym, had told him that this was the case when a new gym opened at a new location. First, people would flock to it like it was Mecca, devotees eager to worship at the altar of health. "They'll have a fire in them," Lino had said. "But then they'll start missing sessions because of this thing and that thing. Eventually, they just stop coming." Doy didn't really understand what Lino had meant until six months in, when his client list had shrunk almost by half. The girl had been one of those who had stuck, and for that he was grateful.

Doy put down his water bottle and was about to sit down when Anna, the receptionist, called him over. He sprinted to the reception area. Anna was talking to a tall white woman whom, to Doy, looked like she had stepped out of a Hollywood movie. She had red hair pulled back tightly in a ponytail, and freckles not only across her face but across her exposed shoulders.

"This is Doy, your coach. You like?" Anna told the woman, smiling widely. She looked like she was waiting for a word of approval from the white woman.

"He'll do," the woman said, an amused smile on her face. "Hi, I'm Jesse," she said, holding out her hand to Doy.

Doy looked at Jesse's hand tentatively, then at Anna, then back at Jesse who was staring at him openly. She was a lot taller than he was—she towered over him. By the looks of her, Doy knew that she had trained before. He assumed this, not only because she had proper work-out gear on, but because she had clear muscle definition on her arms and shoulders.

Anna coughed loudly, and Doy remembered the outstretched hand that he had ignored. He took her hand and

felt her grip it firmly. Jesse smiled and nodded at him. "Nice to meet you... Noy, right? Like the president?"

"No, no," Doy said, smiling a bit. He suddenly felt conscious of the way he was smiling and the way the words sounded coming out of his mouth. "Doy," he said. "Doy."

"Doy, right. Sorry."

"Is okay," he answered, sure that he was embarrassing himself some more. He felt like a school boy again, standing in front of a teacher making a fool of himself. He let go of her hand and motioned for her to follow him to the matted area.

In his best English, he tried to ask her what she wanted to do. Did she want to learn how to box or *muay thai*?

"You teach *muay thai*? That's great," the woman said. "Let's do that. I've been to Thailand, but I never tried that while I was there."

Doy told her haltingly that before they could do basic *muay thai*, she needed to know the fundamentals of boxing first. But Jesse said that she already knew the basics, that she trained regularly in the States.

"Good," Doy said. He didn't know what else to say to her. As it was, he was already struggling. His English, as they say, was running out. He told her to do warm-up exercises first, while he got her gloves.

"Oh, don't worry, sweetie," she said smiling, "I brought my own gloves." She handed him her gym bag and asked him what he wanted her to do first. He told her to stretch, waiting for her to ask him to show her how to do it. But she simply started on her own without another word.

He awoke, like most mornings, with the sun in his eyes. The whir of the industrial fan was faint from the other end of the room. The dream he had awoken from was fading fast in his

mind, but he could still make out the shape of Ms. Martinez walking away from him.

Doy stretched his back, which ached slightly from sleeping on the uneven, lumpy mattress. The mattress was something the gym had provided; it was already used, probably by another trainer from one of the other branches. He had tried flipping the thing over and over to find an agreeable spot to sleep on, but the exercise was futile. He'd have slept directly on the floor, but it was too cold in the evenings and that wasn't good either.

Doy had accepted that so long as he was living a floor above the gym that he would have to endure it. When he had started, it seemed like a good deal; getting a roof over his head and three-square meals a day. He could save money that way, he thought.

He had started boxing when he was just fifteen. His father had pushed him to take it up after a boy from their hometown had made it big, becoming the world lightweight champion. Doy was the oldest boy in the family and, ever since he could remember, had been working the odd job here and there to help with expenses. It wasn't out of the kindness of his heart or anything: he had seven brothers and sisters, and his parents were eking out a living as it was.

Boxing was something that he didn't want to do. His younger brother was the one eager to do it. Doy wanted to work in an office, like those people saw on the TV who wore nice, clean clothes and who never seemed to sweat. But Doy's father had told him that they were not like those people, because those kinds of people were weak. They were made of stronger stuff, they were not cut for that kind of work. It was his father who made the deal with one of the local boxing gyms—they would train his two sons in exchange for their labor. Doy and his

brother maintained the gym, cleaned it up, put away equipment, and in exchange, the owner showed them the ropes.

Doy didn't like the fact that he was working in exchange for boxing lessons, when he could just be doing honest-to-goodness work and helping put food on the table. But his father told him that, as soon as he was fighting, Doy and his brother would do more than put food on the table, they'd be buying the family a new house and a car. So Doy took the training to heart, and soon enough he was fighting in the amateur league, racking up wins and a reputation.

That was how he caught Ms. Martinez's eye, finally.

But here he was now, sleeping on a hand-me-down mattress, teaching boxing to the kind of people his father called weak. His brother was doing the same, at the other end of Metro Manila, at another branch. His sisters were all married now, with families of their own. He rarely talked to any of them, not since their mother died, which was just shortly after their father was gunned down, supposedly mistaken for a drug dealer.

"Hey, Doy. How about that American lady?" Bryan asked him, jolting him out of his morning daze.

"What about her?" Doy said, grumpily sitting up.

Bryan sneered and said that the woman was a babe, that she reminded him of a girl he saw in porn video once—tall, red hair, freckles. Doy shrugged and said that Bryan was better off with a video and his hand than trying anything with a client. Doy remembered how, at the end of the session yesterday, the American woman had smiled at him sweetly and thanked him.

"What are you going to do? Just stare at her?" Doy teased Bryan. "You can't even fill out your SSS form without someone helping you."

Bryan said that he didn't need to talk at all, and started thrusting and grinding his hips lewdly, moaning, *More! More! More!* Doy threw a pillow at him and reminded him that he wasn't working at a gay bar anymore. The other trainer gave him the finger and told Doy that he should get off his lazy ass and start cooking breakfast because everyone was getting hungry.

Jesse came in shortly after the gym opened. Doy had just put away the mop and the broom in the supply closet when Anna called for him. "Hey," Jesse said, smiling at him, "I thought I'd get an early start on things."

Doy nodded and the woman followed him on to the exercise area. He was still in the clothes he had slept in and had hoped to at least get a shower before his day started. He told her to stretch and warm up first while he got changed.

When he got back the woman was already doing cardio exercises. He stretched and soon after was doing cardio himself. He ran a few times around the gym then did squats and push-ups.

"Are you always this serious?" the woman asked him when he finished. She had taken a break and was sitting on one of the benches, her gear laid out next to her. The gym was empty save for the two of them. Doy didn't know how to answer the question, nor what the woman, Jesse, meant by it.

So instead of answering her, Doy motioned for her to get her wraps. Jesse smiled and tossed them at him. He was surprised by the move, but managed to catch them. He was used to chatty and nosy clients, and he was used to silent and serious clients, too. But Jesse made Doy uncomfortable. Unlike his other clients, who looked at him with a kind of awe, Jesse seemed to be toying with him, like he was a small animal, a puppy.

Ms. Martinez had treated him the same way, when they were together.

He slid one of the wraps into his trouser pocket and unfurled the other one. He began to stretch and smoothen it out. When he was done, Jesse held out her right hand and Doy slipped her thumb into the loop at the end of the wrap. He told her to tell him if it was too tight as he began wrapping her hand. Jesse winked at him, which he tried ignored.

“Not tight?” he asked after finishing both of her hands.

“Tight enough,” she answered, a sly smile on her face.

They did four rounds without a break. Doy was happy that Jesse shut up while they were working. He showed her the basic kicks again, and this time had her run through combinations of it. After the rounds, Doy told her to catch her breath and start cooling down.

“You’re really good,” Jesse said, drinking from her water bottle. “Like, you really know your stuff.” Doy nodded and said okay. She asked him if he’d ever been in a real fight, a professional one.

He thought a while before he told her that he had. Then he motioned for her to get on with it. “Maybe next time, you’ll tell me about it,” she said.

The next day, Jesse arrived later, just after Doy had come back from lunch. There were a few people around and Doy was already working with Lee. He was helping her put on her wraps, when Jesse came up to them. “Think you can handle two girls at once?” Jesse asked, her voice playful.

Doy looked at her, recognition on his face. He told her yes.

Lee frowned at Jesse, annoyed at the innuendo that went completely over her coach’s head. Jesse said that she’d get

warmed up for him. Doy said that it was good, then turned back his attention to Lee's wraps.

"Tell me when it's too tight," Doy told her, mindlessly. His thoughts were elsewhere, somewhere in the country of the past, in Ms. Martinez's classroom. He didn't hear when Lee told him to stop.

"Too tight," Lee said loudly, finally snapping Doy out of his thoughts. He apologized and loosened it up a bit.

"I can see why," Lee said, annoyed.

"What do you mean?"

Lee scoffed and told him that the American woman had been shamelessly flirting with him. "She's gross," Lee added, explaining what the woman had really meant when she asked if he could handle two girls at same time. Doy shook his head at Lee, the look on his face seemed to say: *not like that*.

"My English isn't good," Doy told her, as he proceeded to rewrap her other hand. "I don't understand her half the time."

Lee nodded and asked him about Jesse; where she was from and what was she doing in the country. Doy could only give her the woman's name, and that she was from America. "You and I talk when we train," Lee said, "what do you two talk about?"

Doy said that he let Jesse talk and talk, and that he'd nod once in a while to acknowledge her, but that he didn't really get most of it because she spoke too fast. After helping her with the wraps, Doy directed Lee to the speed ball and told her to do a couple of minutes on it.

He watched Lee intently as Jesse came up behind him, too close. He could feel the heat coming off of her body, she had already finished her warm up.

"She's good," Jesse said, "You trained her well."

Doy turned and looked up at Jesse, he met her eye to eye. He recognized the smile on her face, the glint in her eye. He recognized it, not from having been around girls with loose morals and looser waistbands, but from Ms. Martinez.

Jesse was a head taller than him, and her body a much wider than his. Doy imagined what it would be like to be in her arms. Like a little kid, he thought. For a moment, the mental image he had of Jesse crossed with his memory of being mounted by Ms. Martinez.

“Can we start now?”

Doy said okay and gave her instructions on what to do. His voice quivered as he spoke. Jesse nodded at every word he said, like she was tickled by the way he said the words “crunches” and “lifts.”

When Lee finished with the speed ball, Jesse immediately took her place. She walked up to Doy who was putting on his sparring gear.

“She’s very interested in you,” Lee finally said, unable to stop herself. “Are you going to do anything about that?”

“No,” Doy answered curtly.

The subject of Jesse was something that haunted Doy’s day. At night, it was still the image of Ms. Martinez that haunted his dreams. Everyone, clients and co-workers, men and women, asked him about the American. Doy didn’t know what to tell them, and why they were so damn interested in her being into him. The men, he could guess why, vicarious experience and all that. But the women, he didn’t know why they cared so much about what he was going to do with Jesse.

Not that he was going to do anything. Doy knew that while there was no written rule against trainers and clients

having a relationship outside of the gym, management frowned upon it. He didn't want to do that because he needed the job badly. He didn't know anything else except being a boxer. He was too old to start learning to become anything else.

As a professional boxer, the farthest Doy had gone was an undercard match for an international welterweight fight. The fight was in Macau, and it was televised by one of the big TV stations on a Sunday morning. Elsewhere, where it mattered, it was primetime. He had been a good amateur fighter, and he was doing well in the professional circuit.

He had hoped that the match would make him a household name. By then, his father and mother were both gone, and he was already barely speaking to his siblings, he was doing it so that Ms. Martinez would see him, wherever she was. But he had lost badly in the first round of the match. He didn't see the left straight that his opponent, a young Mexican, threw at him. It should have been the easiest punch to catch, but the jitters got to him. He was knocked-out cold and it took him a full minute to come to, and five more grueling minutes to get things straight, and finally clear the ring.

Though that wasn't the end of his professional boxing career, it was the beginning of his decline. It was his shot, he knew, and that was gone now. He really didn't have anything else.

Doy had stepped out of the gym to buy ingredients for dinner when he bumped into Jesse. They were at the small grocery near the gym. It was his turn to prepare the meal for everyone that evening, and he was going to cook the same thing he always did, *ginisang monggo* and fried fish. They were the only things he knew how to cook reasonably well, outside of frying an egg or boiling water for instant noodles.

"What have you got there?" Jesse asked him, peering into his shopping basket. She was wearing a sundress and her hair, which was not tied in a ponytail, seemed longer and lusher. Doy almost didn't recognize her.

She stood so close to him that he could smell her perfume, which surprised him. He had grown accustomed to the smell of her sweat. She looked like a completely different person outside of the gym.

"Fish," he said, looking into his basket to remind himself of what he already got, "For dinner."

"That's a lot of fish," she said playfully. "You really like fish, huh?"

Doy smiled at her, not quite sure what Jesse meant by that, and what he was supposed to say. He tried to find a way to tell her that he had to go and get the *monggo*, but the words were failing him, so he simply nodded and pointed in the direction of the dry goods section.

"Oh sure," Jesse said, smiling sweetly at him.

He walked in a daze, past the rice and eggs, to the small island where the dried beans were displayed. No one was manning the station.

"Look," Jesse said, suddenly appearing beside him. Doy looked up at her, startled that she was still there. "I don't know if you understand me or anything. But I find you completely fascinating."

Doy wasn't certain what she had said but knew what she meant to say. He could tell by the way she smiled at him, the way she was flushed when she said it. The scent of her overwhelmed him, the way Ms. Martinez's scent did, all those years ago.

"Thank you," Doy answered, not certain what to say. He had become used to being the one to ask women out. He had a

routine, he had lines. He had learned how to be in control the whole time.

"Is that all you're going to say?" she asked him. Jesse laughed. At him, Doy knew. She was laughing at him because he couldn't understand what she was saying. But he knew what she wanted. He knew how to give it to her.

Doy nodded, embarrassed. He brushed past her, heading to the nearest register. Jesse didn't follow him there. When he arrived at the gym, and he made his way up the second floor to cook, Doy finally realized that he had forgotten to get the monggo.

Jesse showed up the next day at the gym in another sundress, not her usual workout gear. There was a pause in the gym when she entered as everyone's gaze fixed on her. Doy saw her and figured that he was losing another client. Not the first time it would happen to him, but certainly the first time he was at fault.

He excused himself from the client he was working with and stepped off the matted floor to meet her. Before he could say anything, Jesse took out a small package from her shoulder bag. She handed it to him with both hands, as if in offering, the way he'd seen samurai and ninja do it in the movies.

"I'm sorry," she told him, bowing her head as though in reverence.

Doy found it strange, but took the package from her. "It's okay," was all he could say. Doy knew that everyone was watching them. "Come," he told her, motioning her to follow him. He walked out of the gym to the cramped hallway. On one end of the hallway was the stairway, at the other end was a

massage parlor, which was the only other business that shared the floor with them.

"I'm really sorry, Doy," she said, reaching out and touching his arm. Her hand was rough, calloused, which shouldn't have surprised him, but did. He looked at her hand for a long time and said finally that he forgave her. He didn't know if he really meant it, or if there was anything to forgive.

"That's great," Jesse said, finally letting go of him. "Look, why don't I make you dinner?" She was smiling again, the twinkle in her eyes were back. "I make a mean *pad thai*," she told him. "You like spicy food, right?"

"Yes," Doy said, answering the last question. He did like spicy food.

"Great," Jesse clasped her hands excitedly. She took out a folded piece of paper from her bag and handed it to him. "Here's my address. I'm just down Maginhawa, near that cheap pizza place everyone is crazy about. You won't miss it. See you at seven?" But she didn't wait for Doy to answer and just headed off, leaving him standing there with her address in his hand.

He watched her walk away, almost skipping, like a little child satisfied. She turned back and saw that he was looking at him. She winked and then disappeared down the stairs.

Doy arrived past 7:30, he had to finish training with Lee, who arrived just when he was about to call it a day. They went about the work quickly—warm-up exercises, speedball, shadowboxing, sparring, cool-down. That was why he liked having Lee as a client, there was no fuss and no drama.

While Lee was cooling down, Doy asked her if she had ever gone out with someone who wasn't Filipino. Lee, laughed and said she hadn't, but said that he shouldn't be afraid of trying

it. "Just let yourself experience it," she had told him. "You'll figure it out."

Doy had been in a situation like that before, but the figuring out part had been all Ms. Martinez. He was just along for the ride. It had begun when he was fifteen, just as he was starting training, and it ended after just a few months. It was she who began and ended it.

He had never told anyone about it, not even now, when it was years and years in the past. But he also never forgot Ms. Martinez, and for a long time, it was the hope of seeing her again, running into her that had sustained him.

"Are you thinking about going out with that American lady?"

Doy shook his head and said that Lee should just forget about it.

After Lee left, he showered quickly and walked briskly to the address Jesse gave him. He knocked on the apartment door. Jesse was staying in a single-level apartment complex, which hadn't been visible on the street. Jesse opened the door and smiled brightly at him.

"I thought you wouldn't show up," she said. "I wouldn't be able to finish all the food myself." She stepped aside and let him into the small apartment. It was almost bare, save for the dining table and chairs. There was a small personal fridge and water dispenser, as well as a microwave oven on the counter.

Doy turned to her and waited for her to tell him to sit down. But she just stood there looking at him. She was wearing shorts and a t-shirt with the name of a university on it. He knew it was a prestigious university in America. He saw that one in a movie.

"Thank you," Doy said, not knowing what else to say. "We will eat?"

"Oh, you bet we will," Jesse smirked, coming up to him.

Doy swallowed hard, not sure what to expect and then what to do. *Just let yourself experience this*, he told himself. He watched Jesse come up to him and put her hands on his arms. She was smirking at him.

"Don't tell me you haven't been with a girl before?" Jesse asked.

Doy understood enough to know that she was questioning his manhood. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her close to him. He looked up at her and didn't need to say anything else.

"I like what I feel," Jesse smirked. She was about to put her hand at the front of Doy's pants, but he stopped her. He shook his head. "What's wrong?" she asked, her voice now in a sing-song. "Do you want to take it slow?"

Doy looked away from her and took a step back. "Yes," he finally said.

Jesse smiled at him again. That smile again seemed to tell Doy that he was so little and so small, so insignificant. "Why don't we have dinner? Is that slow enough for you?"

Doy wanted to go, but he knew that he wouldn't live it down if the guys at the gym knew that he had gotten so close and ran away. Like a sissy. Doy took a seat at the dining table and watched as Jesse heated up the pad thai, which she didn't cook. She had bought it at Southeast Asian food stall just down the street.

Doy had never had it before and didn't really like eating things that he wasn't familiar with, but he was surprised that he liked it a lot. Jesse looked at him joyfully as he wolfed down his share of the pad thai and offered some of hers to him.

"Boy, they don't feed you enough. Do they?" she said, reaching across the table to touch his face. Doy nodded and smiled back, innocently.

As they ate, Jesse told him stories about herself. Where she'd been, where she wanted to go next. She told him that she had just gotten divorced the month before, and that the research fellowship to the Philippines had come just at the right time for her. She said that she had always wanted to go back to Asia ever since she toured it, way back in college. "I found myself while I was travelling in Asia. Now I want to find myself again."

Doy finished the food and helped Jesse clear the table. She told him more stories about herself, about her marriage, about her ex-husband. He was a good man, she said, but they just weren't soulmates. They were travelling down different paths. He listened to all of this in a daze. He felt like a high school kid again, listening to Ms. Martinez talk and talk, all the while worried that she might find him inadequate.

After they had cleaned up, Jesse took Doy by the hand and led him to the bedroom, which was sparse save for the queen-sized mattress on the floor, a vanity mirror on one corner and her bags on another. She told Doy to sit down on the bed as she turned on the air-conditioning unit. "Don't be afraid," she suddenly said out of nowhere, as if she had read his mind. "I'll be gentle."

Jesse was gentle, like she promised, like Ms. Martinez had promised. But Doy was nervous and it took a while for anything to happen. Jesse took him in her mouth and worked on him for a while, caressing his body as she did. Eventually he relaxed and things took their natural course. Doy was surprised that Jesse made no comment about his size, the way Ms. Martinez used to do. The specter of his old high school teacher hung around Jesse's room that night, so much so that Doy called out her name when he came the first time. But Jesse ignored him and said nothing about it.

Doy spent the night at Jesse's, leaving only in the early morning to head back to the gym to get ready for the day. She didn't wake up when he left, and he wondered for a while if he should wake her up. But he ended up leaving without doing so. Outside the gate of the apartment complex, the guy in the makeshift guard house gave him a knowing nod.

The other trainers at the gym didn't ask him questions but grinned at him knowingly. Doy didn't return the grin, though he'd nod at them with a smile simply to acknowledge that they knew something. When Jesse stopped showing up at the gym, no one wondered why. Lee didn't ask him what had happened with Jesse, but he told her anyway that he took her advice. She congratulated him, and then they got down to business.

Sometimes, Doy would have dinner at the gym with everyone, other nights he would head over to Jesse's apartment and have dinner there. Because he liked the pad thai so much, she started buying him food that she knew he never had before. One night, she bought him stinky cheese and some expensive ham, which they had with wine. They finished all of it, but afterwards, after their lovemaking, Doy went out and got a *tapsilog* at the nearby carinderia because he missed rice.

In bed with her, he grew more comfortable. Her weight on top of him became a familiar feeling. He let Jesse talk and talk, which she liked doing. He listened as best he could. Sometimes, while listening to her, the specter of Ms. Martinez would return because she too liked to talk to him when she was with him. He would often wonder while listening to Jesse, where his old high school teacher was, what she was doing, where it was she landed.

The last time Doy heard anything about his high school teacher, it was that she was in the newspaper, having won some

kind of teaching award. He was already an amateur boxer then, and he imagined that someday, when he became a professional, she would read about him, too.

"Where do you live?" he asked Jesse, interrupting her story about what she had done in the library that day.

"In the States?"

"Yes."

"Lots of places. My father was in the military. We moved a lot."

"Las Vegas?"

"Nearby," she nodded. "Why?"

Doy held up his closed fists and threw soft punches in the air. Jesse laughed, as though he made a great joke.

Left-right-left. Doy braced his arms and shoulder. The punches came in a swift volley. They moved around in a half-arc. He barked out another combination and Lee followed swiftly. He was impressed that her footwork had improved, she was keeping pace with him now.

"How're things with the American girl?" Lee finally asked. It had been a month since he had taken her advice.

Doy answered with an order for a longer combination.

"Good," he said as she threw punches at him.

"I heard from Kuya Bryan that you're training for a fight next month."

Doy nodded. Another long combination of moves.

"I thought you said you were done fighting professionally," Lee said.

"I changed my mind," Doy said. The combination was short now. *Right-right-left hook.*

"Good luck," Lee said, her breathing heavy.

Doy knew that he was at a disadvantage, coming back into the ring. Guys his age were usually on their way to farm, and those who stayed behind became punching bags. He had heard that some boxers made money throwing every fight because they had already turned thirty, and there was nowhere else for them to go but down. Doy knew the odds, but for the first time in a long time he felt good about what he was doing, about what he was about to do.

After training with Lee, Doy showered and headed out. He had become a regular visitor that the guard posted outside the gate had become friendly with him, telling him the comings and goings of the people in the units.

"Ma'am Jess is not here yet," the guard told him as he walked up to the gate. Doy nodded and approached the guard's makeshift station. They talked about the basketball game the day before, how the series was tied up now.

Jesse arrived while the guard was talking about the couple in unit M. He said that they looked so much alike that he thought they were siblings, at first.

"Hey," Jesse said, a bit surprised. "I was just wondering how to tell you I can't tonight."

"No?" Doy asked walking up to her.

"You might as well come in, and get this over with," she said, visibly annoyed.

They were silent as they walked to Jesse's door, Doy trailing a bit behind her. She was carrying her knapsack which seemed lighter now than it had been before.

"Look," Jesse started after closing the door behind her. "I have to go home. To the States. My flight leaves tomorrow evening."

Doy leaned against the kitchen counter, dumbfounded by the news. He watched as Jesse dropped her bag on the floor and

go inside the bedroom. He followed her inside. "Why?" he asked.

"My funding got cut," she told him. "You know how it is, the humanities and the liberal arts are always the first to get cut." Jesse looked at him and saw a man uncomprehending, a man distraught. "Never mind," she sighed. "I can't stay because I have no more money."

Doy was about to say that he could take care of her but stopped himself. He couldn't even take care of himself, let alone an American who liked expensive rotten cheese and wine. He wanted to tell Jesse that he would be going back to the ring soon. He wanted to tell her that if it worked out, he'd be able to take care of her if she chose to stay. But there was something cold and dismissive in the way she talked to him.

He remembered that last time with Ms. Martinez, she had been cold, too. They were in the classroom after dismissal. She had told the class out of the blue that that she was leaving for Manila after the school year ended.

When everyone left and Doy stayed behind, she told him that they could no longer see each other outside of the classroom, even if it was still a month away. Doy wanted to say something, but she said that it was easier that way. He didn't ask why it would be easy, but simply followed. He was his teacher, after all.

But he would be able to do that for Jesse, though, if he made it big.

Doy walked up to Jesse, looked up at her and said okay. Jesse's face softened. "You're such a sweet little thing."

They made love that evening and then Jesse had to pack up her things. She asked Doy to take the appliances and furniture she left behind for himself. Doy told her that he didn't have a space for it at the gym. She suggested that he sell it off

instead and keep the profit. "I will use the money to visit you," he told her, half-seriously. Jesse laughed at him wholeheartedly.

Doy didn't stay for the evening and walked home. The restaurants along Maginhawa were starting to close for the night. Doy stopped at the 24-hour convenience store on the way to the gym and got himself two bottles of beer and a bag of peanuts. On the wall behind the counter, a poster bearing the picture of the boxer from his hometown asked him to try out a new energy drink. Doy wondered what it would be like to have everything he ever wanted and more.

The next morning, Doy woke up later than usual. He was the last one on the floor and he found that Lee had already started training with one of the new trainers. Lee nodded at him and mouthed, *Sorry*.

Anna called out to him from the desk. He turned and saw Jesse standing there. She looked like she was ready to go off into the mountain or something. She had a big backpack on, and a duffel bag that she had dropped on the floor beside her.

She held out his hand and told Doy to take it. It was the keys to her apartment. She said that she had paid for the rent until the end of the month, and that Doy could sleep there if we wanted to until then. She said that she had cleared it with the landlord and that she also said that Doy would be selling off what was left there.

Doy nodded and said that he wished her a safe flight. "See you soon," he added.

Jesse laughed. "Message me when you're coming over." She kissed him lightly on the lips, allowed herself to linger for just a second and then she pulled away. "Goodbye, Doy," she said. "It was interesting."

"Bye," Doy said as she slipped away from him. He watched her form disappear through the door. He wondered then if he would see her again, wondered if she'd ever see him fight his first professional fight in America. She did say that she had lived in Las Vegas. Maybe she had relatives there that she still visited. Maybe she'll move back there someday.

He wondered if he'll ever make it there. He wondered if he'll ever stand in the middle of a ring, the crowd cheering at him in a language he could barely understand.

He had to, he told himself. He had to. He looked around and saw Bryan giving him the thumbs-up. Doy went off to start on his training anew.