

# SKIN FLICK

JOHN BENGAN

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At 3 a.m., they shoot the first scene on the beach. Two grips, a lighting technician, and a clapper follow the actors into the open sea. The cameraman positions the plastic-sheathed camera above the water. The director, who has never before made a movie, waits with the rest of the crew on the shore.

Selina Lacson is wearing a dress so thin it almost disappears when she slips into the water. Carlos Cuenca, her costar, treads behind her. When they get to their spot, Carlos puts his arms around Selina and presses his lips on her throat. She thinks of TV executives calling about a possible sitcom, or perhaps a role in a soap opera. Her idol, Ana Maceda, has crossed over to mainstream projects; after doing mostly *pito-pito* movies—low budget soft-core porn shot in seven days—Ana landed a supporting role in a drama that won her an award from a group of film critics.

“Feel light, inday. Feel light,” Direk Nonong interrupts. “Relax the shoulders.”

Selina bites her tongue, a habit she does when uneasy. She bit her tongue when their grade two adviser had caught her playing Chinese garter with grade four kids instead of helping her fellow assigned “cleaners.” Years later at a regional beauty pageant, she bit her tongue so hard that it bled. Nobody knew, not even Lilet, her friend and talent manager, who had consoled her when it was over.

“Let’s get this done quick,” Pax, the cameraman, tells them. His voice has the cracking urgency of someone who hasn’t slept in weeks. During a pit stop the other day, Selina saw Pax outside his van, talking to a man who was probably his dealer.

The actors show them another kiss and Direk Nonong finally approves. But he tells Carlos to slightly rub Selina’s arms and not let his large hands cover her neck. The actress playing Selina’s mother—a veteran who often played a gossipy neighbor in melodramas back in the ’70s—waits on the shore for her signal, her shoulders swaddled in a pink shawl. They start again from the top. Take five.

Selina is fishing near the mangroves with a wicker catch. At the bay Carlos longingly watches her. They meet at the shore. They embrace. They kiss. Then the mother arrives, wailing. A piercing sound rips through the air before Selina gets to say her line.

“Cut!” shouts Pax. Carlos and Selina let go of each other. Everyone stares at Direk Nonong fumbling for a switch he accidentally flipped on the megaphone. “My bad,” says Direk Nonong. “My bad.”

The grip holding a reflector giggles. The lighting technician, much older, stares at the water.

“No need to start from the top,” Pax tells Direk Nonong, who is now too embarrassed to disagree. They begin again with the actors kissing.

The old woman playing her mother flings herself onto the sand. She tells them that a group of armed men has taken the young woman’s father. The town’s governor sent them to take her father after the family stopped paying their debt. Half a million pesos or her father’s life, not unless she agrees to become the governor’s mistress. Selina gapes at the old woman and then

buries her face in Carlos's arms. As the sky slowly fills out with light, casting on the water a luminous sheen, they hold each other tight.

Day of filming begins with the crew swarming around Direk Nonong who seems to be wilting from the assault. Someone is asking him where to pitch the tent for equipment. Others are trying to get his approval on lighting. The script supervisor insists that two more scenes should be taken out. They can't find the cameraman. Pax's roommate, the lighting technician, doesn't know where he is. They're in the woods somewhere in Batangas, which took them about an hour to find.

Between a tree stump and a dry patch of dirt, Selina sits beside Lilet. It was Lilet who told her that she got the part, calling Selina while she was on a date with a city councilor. Lilet and Selina have been friends since they met in a polytechnic college in Davao del Sur.

"Pax is going to get this production broke if he doesn't show up," says Lilet. The production's makeup artist and property custodian, Lilet is wearing a red Astroboy T-shirt, light khaki shorts, and bangs. He fell into the line of work years ago after a makeup artist friend dragged him to an after-party for a movie called *Showing Live*.

"Do you have updates?" Selina says. "The scene I want them to replace?"

"I haven't heard from Direk yet," Lilet says.

Before filming began, Selina asked the producers to remove a scene in which her character gets raped. Although her contract doesn't contain such a clause, she refuses to play another victim of assault. In her first film, she played a village fool who wasn't given a line of dialogue. After that, she played a farmer's daughter attacked one moonless night in the paddies her father

tilled; then, a woman selling lotto tickets who made the mistake of passing into an alley frequented by neighborhood addicts; and finally, a deaf-mute sweeper who caught the eyes of a priest enduring a midlife crisis. After three years in this business, Selina is ready for a change, and the producers have told her that they're considering her request.

"Maybe Pax went back to the city to replenish his stash," says Lilet.

"I saw him talking to his dealer earlier. Maybe he's just incompetent."

"If they revised the script," says Lilet, "if they turn it into a love scene instead, would you do it?"

"The villain and the lead can't have a love scene. It doesn't make sense."

"You don't like that? It will make you a pioneer."

Selina glowers at him.

"I'm just saying that you can show how good you are even if you're doing headstands," says Lilet. "Or breathing fire, or eating glass. It's the performance that counts."

A shirtless Carlos Cuenca steps out of a newly erected tent. The young actor stands under the full blast of sunlight, yawning and stretching his arms.

"Holy-Mama-Mary-Walter," Lilet purrs.

Selina considers Carlos's athletic build. She was through with his type ages ago: good-looking men who don't even guarantee a decent lay.

Carlos notices them and smirks. He runs his hand across his chest, lowers it slowly to his flat hairy stomach, hooking a thumb into his waistband.

Lilet pivots, planting both hands on his waist. He gazes at Selina. “It is on. May the best whore win!”

“He’s all yours,” Selina says.

Carlos walks over to Marina Arguelles, the other starlet. Marina is sitting on a foldable chair that she herself brought to the set.

“Tell me he is not going for that.” Lilet nudges Selina’s forearm.

Marina laughs at something Carlos has said. She gets up from her seat and lightly slaps him on the arm. She’s wearing a sundress ringed with tiny flowers at the hem, her hair untidily bunched up under a straw hat, her eyes hidden behind white-rimmed wayfarers.

“Before long, she’s borrowing money from him,” says Lilet.

Lugging what appears to be her makeup kit, Marina smiles wanly at them. She leaves Carlos by the tent and follows a utility man carrying two large boxes. A scriptwriter having a vacation in Camiguin discovered her. At a gift store along the highway, the writer was picking which souvenir totems to take home when he spotted Marina pushing a cart of vegetables up the sloping road. Since then, Marina has appeared in three movies.

“I heard she’s saving up to start a grocery chain business,” Lilet says. “Smart girl. Thinking about life after porn.”

Selina couldn’t care less what her co-star’s, or anyone else’s, plans are in life. What matters now is this movie. She has carried this dream in her belly as she glided on stage in a bikini, pageant

after pageant, silently praying that among the audience a casting agent was watching, ready to pluck her from obscurity.

An older man walks into the set and begins chatting with Carlos. It takes Selina a moment to recognize him.

“Don’t make a scene,” Lilet says.

Dante del Fierro must have some nerve showing up here. He and Selina worked on a movie in which Dante played a degenerate priest. While shooting a scene together, he had pulled down the second underwear Selina was wearing. Good thing she’d worn a protective tape. He told her afterward that he was mortified, something came over him, and he was so sorry, but she knew it was bullshit. In fact, while she kicked and clawed at him, he seemed amused, stirred by the resistance. After a tense hour of arguing and pacifying, they did the scene over. The director agreed to cut the sequence short and Dante was told to play by the script.

Finally, Pax returns to the set, not offering an explanation or an apology. He appears to be wearing the same clothes he had on the previous day, striped metal-grey shirt, unevenly cut trousers. He tells Direk Nonong they should shoot what he calls the “more necessary” scenes, since the new film rolls haven’t been shipped yet. Pax’s nervous energy unsettles everyone. But Direk Nonong sets his irritation aside, buoyed by his cameraman’s sudden enthusiasm.

They shoot a montage of Selina doing a series of chores: fetching water from a shallow well the crew had dug at dawn; feeding swine and scrubbing the pigpen after; doing laundry by hand and paddle at the lake, then clipping the clothes on a wire line while a giant industrial fan thunders out of view. She performs these tasks in a spotless white camisole with nothing underneath but her red cotton underwear, which Direk Nonong specifically told her to wear.

At dinner, Selina finds a chance to talk with Direk Nonong while they queue around a buffet table set under a star apple tree. She's been trying to speak with him in private since day one, but the director has always breathlessly told her, "Later, Inday. Later nalang, ha?" She doesn't mind how Direk Nonong always adds the endearment "inday." She takes it as an expression of solidarity, since both of them share a first language, Cebuano.

"What is it this time, Inday?" Direk Nonong is holding a large plate of rice, beefsteak, pancit bihon, chicken wings, buttered shrimp, and inky-black squid stew. Through the late seventies and eighties he has worked with directors doing soft-core porn, otherwise known as "bomba," "fighting fish," or "pene-movies." Madam Lotus allowed him to take charge after he'd served Rado Films for years as a production assistant.

"Why is Dante here?"

"Inday—"

"Don't tell me, Direk, the news didn't reach you. It was not even a blind item."

"Inday, understand that—"

"Why is he here?"

"He is the new governor," says Direk Nonong firmly. His batik shirt and pillowy chest make him look like a large woman in her fifties.

"What? What happened to the other actor? The one I agreed to work with."

"Our first governor backed out at the last minute. Actually, just last night. He was booked for a pesticide commercial."

“He chose that over this?”

“We only had a verbal agreement, Inday. And the commercial pays more.”

“A pesticide commercial?”

“In Malaysia,” says Direk Nonong. “A soap opera he did some time ago was a hit in Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysians still recognize him.”

“I can’t work with Dante,” says Selina. “He is unprofessional. That scene must go.”

“That’s not my call.”

“You’re the director!”

“At the end of the day, Inday,” Direk Nonong tells her, “we’re all just doing our jobs.” He wobbles toward an empty table, not giving her a chance to respond.

“How did it go?” Lilet asks her when she returns to their table. “Are they going to remove it?”

“This is supposed to be your job.” Selina puts down an empty plate on the table. “How come you didn’t know about Dante? Why do I even trust you to accomplish anything?”

Lilet is stung. He’s been the patient one, the giving one, the one who’s all ears. Last year, he got a call from Selina. “Sis, I need you,” she sobbed. “Don’t leave me, please.” Lilet cancelled a visit to his parents in Bansalan and endured instead several train rides going to Selina’s condo unit in Pasay on a Friday night. At that time, studios had been turning Selina down in favor of younger talents. They’ve been partners for almost a decade, since Lilet, then assisting Selina on her fiftieth or so beauty



pageant—Hiyas ng Mindanao—told her to quit her job at the Digos City Tourism Office and move to Manila, try her luck in showbiz. Back then Lilet was working in movie sets, and Rado Films was looking for a fresh face.

For their last scene of the day, Selina and Carlos slide into a roofless outdoors bathroom, which has a concrete floor and sheets of rusty corrugated zinc for walls. Through the half-closed door made from scraps of an old water tank, Pax peeps with his camera, taking in the sight of Carlos in his white undies, splashing water on his body with a plastic dipper, and Selina lathering his arms and shoulders and chest while her tongue darts into his ear, wiggles out onto his neck, and draws loops and circles all over his torso. After six takes, Selina wipes her tongue on a towel to get rid of the soapy aftertaste.

On the third day, boxes of freebies from the movie's sponsors arrive on the set.

“This wouldn't happen in a Sharon Cuneta project,” Lilet grumbles, pulling a plastic bag from one of the boxes. “Look at this trash!”

Selina pushes her sunglasses up her forehead.

“But what did I expect?” says Lilet. “A trip to Hong Kong? A living room showcase?” One by one he fishes out the contents of a goodie bag, showing Selina six sachets of anti-dandruff shampoo; a small bottle of rubbing alcohol; a tube of toothpaste; a pack of cotton balls; a carton of cherry gum; and the object that has earned his wrath, which he dangles with thumb and forefinger, holding it away from his body as if it stank: a cellophane packet containing about fifty grams of pulverized crystal deodorant.

Selina gets up from her nylon recliner, turning to see why Lilet has gone quiet.

“They told me you have the rest of the giveaways,” says Marina Arguelles, walking up to them. “Can I just have those? Sige na, you obviously don’t need them.”

Lilet gets up, dropping the last item back into the box.

“Sure,” he says. “It’s all yours.” He pushes the box toward Marina with his foot.

“Since no one wants these, I’ll just sell them at my little store back home.” Marina lifts the box to her chest and leaves.

Soon one of Direk Nonong’s assistants informs Selina that she’s needed. After Lilet retouches her makeup they walk to an area in the woods that resident farmers have burned. The crew has set up in a garden of ash, charred wood jutting out like spikes. Direk Nonong is talking excitedly to everyone, although some of them appear to have already tuned out. Selina makes her way to the set, careful not to step on live coal. Smoke and bits of ash rise from the ground as she passes. It turns out the director is upset and giving everyone a scold.

“Do we have the new rolls of film?” Direk Nonong is shouting, a deep vertical crease forming between his brows. “Punyeta, are they even sending us new film stock?”

None of them has seen him this angry. Since shooting began the director has kept a relaxed demeanor. Such was his display of calm in the last few days that his outburst terrifies them all.

Out of the knot of thick trees bordering the burnt piece of land, Pax emerges, his red t-shirt damp, his hair oily and caked with dirt, prompting Selina to wonder if he’s been crawling through a tunnel for the past hour. The astonished crew watches him.

“Please, Mr. Pacificar,” says Direk Nonong, “Please, enlighten us. Tell us how we can earn your respect.”

Pax steps back. “Sorry ha, what did you say?”

“You are not in charge here!” Direk Nonong cries, spraying a thread of spit on the flesh quivering around his neck. “You only got this job because Madam Lotus couldn’t say no to your father, who by the way is a better DP—a much better human being than you could ever be!”

“Relax,” Pax says calmly. “I don’t want you to drop dead in front of us.”

“If you don’t wise up,” says Direk Nonong, “so help me God, I will fire you!”

Pax drops on his right knee, Selina is thinking, bowing down to the director, until she sees that he is laughing. He tries to get up, but rolls to his side.

“Go head,” Pax says with tears in eyes, “find someone else to shoot your movie for you.”

Despite his largeness, the director suddenly looks fragile. His anger has deserted him, exposing a mild, open face, his natural state, the man all of them have known and worked with. Pax sits up and catches his breath. The scent of burnt wood hovers above them.

“It’s getting dark,” Direk Nonong says. “Too late now to shoot.”

They postpone filming until the next day. The exhausted crew, hardly getting any work done, packs up and retreats with the actors to the lodge.

On the hike back to the van, Lilet tells Selina that he needs to take a piss. She’s waiting for him under a coconut tree when Dante del Fierro finds her, gesturing to Selina by slashing his neck with a finger.

“We haven’t even done my scene,” he says. “The producers can’t afford to hire a real director, what more a cameraman?”

When Selina glances at him, he takes it as a cue to come closer, placing his arm around her shoulders. “Kumusta?” he whispers in her ear. “We haven’t talked in a while.”

“You’re shameless,” says Selina, pushing Dante’s arm away.

“What?” Dante steps back, palms raised as if to say he didn’t do or touch anything. “Just being friendly.”

“Touch me again and I will crush your balls.”

Selina takes a big stride, but Dante catches her left arm and pulls her to him. His breath reeks of ash.

Selina bit her tongue. In the scene she’s asking producers to remove, her character gets raped. Her rapist: the governor.

Finally, Lilet arrives. Dante walks away.

“What was that?” says Lilet.

“Nothing,” Selina says. The smell of him doesn’t leave her.

In her last beauty contest, Selina was a favorite. She lit up the room during the preliminaries, cleared the swimsuit and long gown events with high scores, her years of joining pageants seemed to be paying off—she was on fire. At stake was the chance to represent Region XI in a national pageant that could have opened doors, including a shot at the international stage. All was well until the final interview when a banana plantation baron from the judges’ panel asked her, “Would you rather be rich, beautiful, or smart?”

How was it possible that after an hour and a half of waltzing through the competition, Selina entertained a moment of doubt? The split second of hesitation gave way to a mental hiccup that ruined what until that point was a flawless performance. Her mind, beginning to panic, skidded at a cliché, then spiraled completely into disaster. Selina thanked the judge, greeted the crowd, and declared, “I believe that beauty is in the eye of the tiger.”

She had meant to say, of course, “the beholder,” but before she could even pass it off as a joke, the convention hall had already folded in on itself with laughter. She gripped the microphone in horror, stammering through a follow-up that only became an afterthought to the night’s worst faux pas. It was hours after the event, after she had packed up her things, after she had lost, when Selina recalled that during the talent contest another candidate had demonstrated her knowledge of taekwondo to that blasted Survivor song.

Selina rehearses in front of a rectangular mirror in the bathroom. She studies her expressions, examining every emotion that registers on her face, every squint, quiver, glare, pout. “Kailangan ako ni Itay,” she tells the mirror, mustering every ounce of determination in her voice. “Itay needs me now more than ever!”

She studies herself hard on the mirror to see if her eyes emanate both vulnerability and toughness, keeping her jaws clenched as she tries to command a teardrop to flow from the corner of her left eye, without the aid of Vicks vapor rub. “My father needs me now more than ever! Kailangan niya ako ngayon.”

“Kailangan ka rin nila sa labas,” says Lilet, barging in. “They need you outside too.”

“Who’s asking?”

“Direk Nonong.”

“One minute.”

Lilet is about to join Selina in the bathroom when Carlos appears at the door. Clad in boxer shorts and a tight cotton tank, he asks Lilet if he can come in.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at Direk’s pep talk?”

“Nah,” says Carlos, striding into the room with palpable grace. “I’d rather be here. With you.”

Lilet tilts his head slightly, pretending to blush. When the actor sits beside him, he can’t help but gasp with pleasure.

“Maybe you could share some of that,” Carlos whispers.

“Some of what?”

“I heard Pax comes here for it every night.”

Lilet gets up. Glaring down at Carlos, he spreads his fingers on the sides of his head, his hands framing his jaw like a pair of fans. “Is this the face of a drug pusher?”

“How much do you want?” Carlos presses his palms against the mattress. “One of the grips told me you’re selling.”

Lilet’s eyes flare up.

“All right, all right,” Carlos whines. “You can suck me off. For three grams—up front.”

“What do you take me for, an easy girl?” Lilet says. “You can help yourself to some crystal deodorant. Wait. Marinara took them all.”

Carlos strokes his head. He stretches out his rosy arms, yawns, and reclines, planting both elbows on the bed. “Tell your friend to hurry up. She’s next.”

“I thought we’re not shooting our next scene until tomorrow?” Selina asks, stepping out of the bathroom.

“No, not us,” Carlos says. “You’re with Dante today. They told me to get you.”

Lilet turns pale. “Why don’t you go ahead, Carlos,” he says. “Selina will be out soon.”

“They’re not taking it out?” Selina asks.

“I only read my parts.” Carlos lifts his hands.

“I can talk to Direk Nonong,” Lilet says. “Maybe we can still—”

“And they want me to do it with that animal?” Selina’s voice cracks.

“He’s going to run after you in the field,” says Carlos.

“You’re not helping!” Lilet shoves him off the bed.

“But that’s what Dante told me!” The actor looks up at them.

Selina turns to Lilet, who is pale and horrified. Somewhere in that expression lies remorse, but Selina doesn’t bother to look for it. She bolts out of the room without her shoes on.

Everyone is getting ready when Selina walks into the set. Direk Nonong beams when he sees his lead actress in a crisp, freshly washed camisole and—perhaps wanting to really impress this time—walking barefoot. They’re on the edge of the vast cornfield near the beach where they shot their first footage. Dante del

Fierro sits on a woven cot, absorbed in a tabloid. Standing next to Direk Nonong, the lighting technician adjusts a tripod.

“Pax won’t be working with us anymore,” the director tells Selina. “Good thing Jestoni here knows how to operate a camera. He’s our new DP.” He has no clue where Pax went and he couldn’t care less, so he asked the lighting technician to take over. The lighting technician waves at Selina but keeps one eye peering into the camera’s viewfinder.

“There’s another way we can do this,” Selina tells him. “We don’t have to show them. When he catches me, you can turn the camera away. Make it look somewhere else. The cornfield. The sky. The audience is not stupid. They’ll get it.” Her hands are shaking.

“Inday,” Direk Nonong says. “This is what our audience wants.”

Selina’s cheeks prickle. She searches for Lilet, but she only finds crew members installing lights and reflectors, tossing at her a screen of blinding hot light. Her first impulse is to scream. She wants to ignite the ends of the field with her voice.

“What’s the matter?” says Direk Nonong. Cautiously, he moves closer to Selina and rubs her shoulders. She winces at the touch.

“Diyos ko, Inday!” the director says. “We only have three days left. If you don’t want this job, it is easy to replace you.”

For the last time, Selina looks for Lilet but doesn’t find him. She sucks in her breath, wipes her cheeks with the back of her wrist. It’s past eleven. The tall stalks of corn stand motionless in the simmering noon.

“I’m ready,” she finally says.

“You want to go over the script first?” says the director.



“No need,” Selina says. “I know what to do.”

In the scene Selina had wanted removed, the governor sends his men to pick her up. After a struggle, which involves her mother swatting a goon with a washbowl, they bring her to the governor who, at the moment, is surveying his estate while riding a pale-skinned horse. Selina falls before the animal’s hooves and looks up with molten scorn at her captor. The governor addresses her with tenderness so amplified it could only be ridicule.

She screams at him until her throat hurts, but the governor and his men laugh at her. They laugh at her, at her poor family, at the pointlessness of fighting back in a world built from the urges of wretched men.

He alights from his horse and walks toward her. She can smell the leather of his boots. She jumps and retreats into the field of corn. He runs after her, the camera trailing them, but her legs are frail, her body unwieldy and slow, says the script, so she trips on a sharp rock, and before she can blink, he’s holding her down as if her body were made of paper and string. He will fuck her for all of them to see.

But Selina has played this game for too long. She waits for him to tilt slightly to the side, unbuttoning his jeans to release a tiny prick, bald and wrinkly as a stillborn chick, before she twists her free leg in a difficult angle and, at a precise instant, uncoils the joints of her hip, the weight of her knee springing onto Dante’s exposed groin. Something came over her, she could tell them that later. No, she won’t. Dante swallows a whimper and drops beside her on the ground.

Cut, the director shouts, cut, cut!

Selina has already risen, slapping dirt from her dress, stepping out of the burning hot field.

“What have you done, you woman?” Direk Nonong asks. “What have you done?”

She thinks of the roles that will not come, the movies that will screen without her, the life she will never have. The medic runs past her, production assistants shouting, and Lilet, deeply worried, comes to her, the only one who bothers asking if she’s fine, if she’s hurt. No, she tells him, she’s not hurt. In truth, as performances go, she gave it her all.

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