

THE BATTLE OF AYALA

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"Where it blinks," the plump woman in front said with suspicious authority. "Type where it blinks, everyone."

"Of course we type where it blinks," someone whispered. "That's the cursor."

"Who said that?" the woman barked, big racoon eyes dilating further.

The sniggers quickly subsided, and twenty pairs of hands surveyed the keyboards and started typing. Sensing perhaps a waning of her power, the woman unfurled her black leather trench coat as she turned around to write something on the white board. It made a whipping sound, which elicited more giggles.

"What?" she cried, executing a half turn to find poker faces tight-lipped in innocence. Facing the board again, she mumbled something under breath.

Anywhere else in Manila, the trench coat would have attracted perplexed stares. Here in the training room, in furiously maintained 12-degree weather, it would've been somehow understandable, except that it was worn as part of an ensemble of black tank top, leather pants, and knee-high leather boots.

"It's like Lara Croft on her third trimester," someone had remarked upon the trainer's scrunching entrance. But she was warm from all the leather—that much was clear. As for the rest

in the room, seven pairs of hands clung to sleeves of jackets and sweaters while one pair ran down the stretch of her bare brown arms, beyond the reach of her regrettably tiny tank top. From behind the tombstones of computer monitors, someone coughed with the inimitable threat of phlegm.

A joke was thrown about tuberculosis and wasn't it supposed to have been eradicated?

"To view their most recent bill, just hit F8," the woman in front said.

"Like polio? Smallpox? Beriberi?"

On the wide ochre wall, a row of identical monochromatic clocks announced the time in four different time zones, none of them Manila's, although Easter Standard Time, being 12 hours away, incidentally did. Here, it was two hours after midnight, and exactly eight pairs of eyes were drooping. One pair, belonging to someone who had a little too much to eat at lunch, had surrendered.

"—a wealth of information on how a customer uses his phone," the woman in front continued. "Always look for calling patterns. Do they call long distance a lot? Which country do they call? Do they need an extra line for—"

A strange sound, like the squelchy grumble of an ill-maintained air-conditioning unit, sprung from somewhere.

"Shit," someone gasped.

Urgent, frantic nudging rippled in the class en route to the man slumped in the backrest of his swivel chair, from whose open mouth the guttural intake of air was coming.

"Any questions?" the woman asked.

In the silence, the rhythmic snores became so loud that it was impossible to ignore. Hearing it, the trainer lost all poise and with it, her precarious accent, as if transported back to the neighborhood booze joint where, for months, as an unemployed fresh graduate of commerce she'd plop down in *daster* and short shorts. "What the fuck was that?"

The team in the plush room, an assortment of 23 ways to approach the "business casual" dress code for training, stayed quiet. They were on the third day of what the email blast—with an attached clipart image of a girl behind a lemonade stand—had called a "two-week refresher on the fine art of selling." Sales was to be added to their tasks, which meant that after resolving a customer's concern, they would need to "proactively offer" to them "a logical and/or complimentary service," like call waiting if they used the phone a lot or speed dial if there were idiots in the house.

The team was just happy to be away from the phones for two weeks. After being on the job for years, any respite from taking calls was as delicious and invigorating as that first, incomparable sip of coffee before shift, as rare as a day without a laborious 45-minute grandma call where every single thing had to be shouted.

Some hours later, three of them stood in front of their building, a hulking monolith of emerald green windows encircling 52 storeys. They were sipping the ubiquitous taho after shift, recounting the funny irrelevancies of the day, or night, awaiting the sun that would tell them that they had idled for too long and must now leave.

"The job's turning us into vampires," Karen said, slurping the last gobble of coagulated soy from her plastic cup. "Afraid of the sun."

“I want to zack yer blahd,” Philip, the snorer, said, before downing another cup of taho, his third in 30 minutes because Karen wasn’t in the mood for a “proper breakfast” of beer and sisig at Providence.

“I want to zack—” Alvin said.

“Jeez,” Philip said. “Way too early for a report of your sexual needs.”

“What did Candy say again?” Karen asked, referring to the trainer whose real name is Dulce but didn’t want the association with the eponymous fleshy singer. “That we ought to be thankful for our jobs? Thankful?”

“Here we go,” Alvin mumbled, looking at Philip.

“Fuck her,” Karen said, “fuck her hard.” Philip smiled weakly at the middle-aged woman next to them who had tried in vain to quickly cover the ears of the little girl she was with.

At the discovery that her lessons had not been as riveting as she had thought, Candy’s jovial energy had turned into an infuriated assertion of moral ascendancy.

“You know,” she had begun softly, while Philip finally woke up and looked around, confused. “These are great jobs. Great jobs.”

Some of the people in the class nodded earnestly, in an attempt to appease the offended and put a stop to what appeared to be a droning, positively depressing lecture.

“Sure, the hours are tough. It’s hard to get out of bed at night. It is stressful. And every now and then, you get an earful from a customer, a little racism. But really,” she said, with another unfurling—no giggles this time—of her trench coat, “a lot of people would kill to sit where you guys are sitting right now.”

Philip had looked at Karen, whose eyes were transfixed at the trainer while squeezing the poor, innocent smiley stress ball in her hand.

“Think about that,” Candy said, followed by a thoughtful pause. She suddenly winced in pain, “Ara!” and touched her right cheek. “What the hell.”

Philip was sure that was Karen’s phantom fingers digging into Candy’s rotund jaw line.

“What’s up her ass?” Karen asked now, to which Philip and Alvin laughed, too heartily, all of a sudden afraid of their friend.

“Do you have family in Siquijor?” Philip asked her, before quickly hailing a passing cab.

“What, you’ll just leave?” Karen shouted.

After getting in the backseat, he rolled down the window, “Don’t hex me.”

“What?” she asked just as the cab sped away. “OK, I think I better go, too.” She waved at a slow-moving jeepney, then to Alvin, who was always the last to leave for some secret early morning assignation.

With barely anyone on board, Karen’s jeepney traversed the empty avenues of the financial district in haste, periodically stopping where people in jackets congregated. She eyed with bored interest the people getting on, idly wondering about their stories, how they got here and why they stayed. Alone, she started to feel it, the mist in her eyes, the slowing down of her breathing.

Even after all these years, she never got used to this type of schedule; sleeping while the sun was up remained close to

impossible. She tried all the tricks in the book. To simulate night time, she had covered all openings where sunlight crept in. She had played jazz music in loop. Popped a pill or two. Nothing worked.

She could then use the two-week break, to gather herself and maybe keep the migraines to a minimum. Just thinking about it gave her a nice feeling. Imagine, Karen, she had rallied herself, two weeks without the spiels so memorized that she could recite them in sleep.

“Thank-you-for-calling-UTelCo-My-name-is-Karen-how-can-I-help-you?”

“For-verification-can-I-have-the-last-four-digits-of-your-social?”

“This-call-may-be-monitored-or-recorded-for-quality-assurance-purposes.”

Two weeks away from the calls that queued without foreseeable end, outside the range of Big Brother-like ears that heard everything, the slightest miscue in accent, the tiniest hint of impatience. Yes, the robotic expectations were the worst. Those, and agents who inexplicably cannot rectify the p-f thing. “Oh why yes, I am Pilifino. Please hold.”

The jeepney reached its destination without a hitch. She got off and headed for the train station above EDSA, then a lethargic six-lane convulsion of buses and cars and motorcycles with a death wish.

Her train was nearly deserted. Her path was northward while most headed for the south of the metropolis in the morning, to disappear into the labyrinth of skyscrapers, to join the self-important rush to catch the too-few elevators, to perform the Starbucks-in-every-corner dream.

When the train doors hissed open, the scarce few poured into the coaches and took seats so far from each other that you'd think they didn't live in Manila, where households shared thin walls and illegal cable TV subscriptions, where eavesdropping on conversations was as physically inescapable as smelling the adobo cooking next door.

Karen surveyed the faces of the other passengers. Morning people, like aliens—hair dripping wet from the morning bath, clothes proudly advertising their recent foray under the flat iron.

She got off the station in Cubao and wished that she could just let the noisy crowd carry her, corpse-like and floating above open palms, to the next train's platform. On the way there, the horde got denser and more ominous. If Makati had calm, nicely dressed people who came in little spurts, here, in the bowels of Quezon City, people rushed. They pushed and shoved. They were agitated, unafraid to offend.

Shielding her nose from the fishy waft that blew from the farmer's market beside the station, she collided into bodies. Apologies were offered, unheard.

Her supervisor had told her something about saying sorry.

"Karen," Eric had said, weeks ago. "What did we talk about? Really, this anger issue of yours—"

"Eric," she said, invoking with her narrowed eyes a solidarity, the fact that they had joined the company at the same time, when it was just a fledgling operation of 54 seats in a cramped floor of a four-storey in a Makati side street three years ago.

"Fine," he exhaled. "So just pretend I'm coaching you and I'm telling you new things. Blah di blah, blah. Did you know that Alvin the newbie is dating a white guy?"

“How can he stand them?” her face had crumpled. “I mean, here—”

“OK, now nod. Quick. Brock is watching,” he whispered. “I said nod, goddamnit.”

She rolled her eyes while nodding enthusiastically and watching sidelong for any sign of the operations manager.

“Seriously, just do it. Smile and shit. It’s all about willingness.”

“Tell that to my pyromaniac brother.”

Eric sighed. “You’re acting like a freaking amateur, Karen. You know what to do, right?”

“Take a deep breath.”

“Yes and?”

“Curse them with the mute button toggled on.”

“There you go,” he said, face still devoid of expression.

Karen put her headset back on, like a helmet. “Here we go,” she sighed, closing her eyes, taking a deep breath, and toggling the mute button. She smiled.

“Thank-you-for-waiting-Mr.-Cabot-Once-again-I-do-apologize-for-the-inconvenience-this-may-have-caused-you-Like-I-said-we-are-doing-our-best-to—”

She toggled Mute again when she was cut off, a stern “No, you listen to me,” blaring in her ears, “whatever sweatshop in the boondocks you’re calling me from.”

Alvin, who was new to the job and had sat beside her, turned to her, startled at the hushed torrent of fuck's and shit's and delightful putangina's that sweetly poured from Karen's fake-smiling lips.

Boondocks, where did she hear it before? Funny word—it had crept up in a long-ago history lesson from high school about an incident in Samar. A lot of Americans were killed in a surprise attack by the “natives” and the whole island, to the last banana tree in the farthest boondocks, was burned to the ground in retribution. The town's bells were taken as war bounty. Boondocks—wait a minute, there's such a word? her class had asked. You mean from “bundok?”

Karen's smile did not disappear as Mr. Cabot proceeded with an angry monologue on what was wrong with America these days, how this god-forsaken era of outsourcing was eroding the spirit of hard work that had built this great nation, and could he now speak to someone in the US, not you, certainly not—?

“I'll-see-what-I-can-do-sir,” she said, then, toggling Mute, added, “just-admit-you-can't-pay-your-fucking-bill.”

She closed her eyes now, chastising herself for thinking such unhappy thoughts. She inserted her ticket in the turnstile at the train station.

Happy thoughts, she mumbled, happy thoughts, just as a nice-looking fellow in a white crisp shirt and slacks walked by. There you go. She herself was in two-inch heels and a skirt that was on the playful side of corporate attire, and she twisted her right leg to admire its illusory length. Not bad, and the stockings hide the blisters.

Her class was visited earlier by a white guy who explained the change in the company dress code. They worked in Makati, he reminded them, the financial capital. You are a pro-fes-sional,

and you get paid more than these corporate s-laves you see on the streets of E-ya-lah. Ready to burst out laughing, Karen looked at Philip, still awake then, and Alvin, who was new and so still gave a damn. She was eager to make fun of this man's accent, the so-called "proper" one that entailed, it often felt, a rearrangement of gums and tongue and pesky molars inside the mouth. Neither had returned Karen's look.

The man offered the class his profuse thanks for staying with the company despite all the changes and even more profuse apologies for the unbearable nippiness in the room. He himself preferred this sub-zero weather, he said, but he grew up in Wisconsin, and winters there were unforgiving, oh boy, yes they were.

Her teammates and, occasionally, she fawned over the white guy for being so nice and endearing in that Robin Williams type of way.

She now ran her fingers through her long hair, pacifying the permanent dent caused by the headset that clamped at her scalp for eight hours a day. She reached the platform of her second train. This one, dashed purple but with no intent to be whimsical, got a little more crowded in the morning; it went to Manila's university belt and her trip home coincided with the exodus of students for their first classes.

While waiting, she noticed an old Caucasian man a few meters away from her. German? Aussie? Canadian? She couldn't tell. The guy wasn't wearing an Americana but a loose Chinese-style barong and white cotton pants, how her gay philosophy professor in college dressed. He carried a bulky black laptop bag on his right shoulder and a black binder brimming with paper in his arm. His free hand occasionally pushed his thin glasses up the bridge of his steep nose.

Another Robin Williams, she thought. This guy looked genuinely nice though. With an air of calmness about him, almost an invisible halo.

When the train came and the doors opened, she and the white man headed for the same entrance. As there were no empty seats, she stood near the door and held on to a cold, gleaming pole, which the white man also clutched. As they were wont to, he gave Karen, the local, a somewhat tentative smile.

Onward, the train went, buzzing with cheery early morning conversations as it steadily flew above one of Manila's busiest boulevards.

She fixed her gaze outside the window. In the horizon, Makati's skyline looked pristine under the clear light of the October morning, the luminous outlines of chrome and glass and concrete. Without much effort, she quickly spotted the familiar emerald green skyscraper, on the 32nd floor of which her blue swivel chair was empty and her headset was clipped on the spine that divided the stations.

Closer to the train, a spread of shanties and grimy structures loomed, one after another, before her eyes. The white man looked at the same parade of poverty and neglect, on his forehead a minute but unmistakable furrow. Karen watched as he bowed his head in what she guessed could only be pity.

Out of habit, she imagined this man to be one in the legions of faceless Americans calling up their 1-800 number. But what would he call about, this one? He seemed like the doesn't-know-what-he-wants type, easy-going, and a little naïve. He'd call in to try to get a wireless for his granddaughter but wouldn't know what she'd want.

The train kept a steady pace even as it neared Gilmore station, named after a former governor-general. The more animated of

the passengers wrinkled their noses and arched their eyebrows, wondering why the train, indeed, was not slowing down as it was supposed to. When it did at the last possible second, those who were standing were thrown forward in a daze, more so those who did not hold on to a pole or held on too weakly.

Half-asleep but with the alertness of youth, Karen managed to steady herself after the initial jolt.

The white man, whose pink, wrinkly hands gripped the same pole with less vitality, was thrown to the floor in the center aisle, where there was suddenly enough space for his big frame. The loud thud caught everyone's attention, as did the sheets of paper that exploded in a directionless fountain.

A token apology issued garbled via the PA system.

Shaken and on his elbows, the Caucasian lay helpless for a few seconds, until he started to grope around for his things. A pre-recorded voice announced the station's name, while an electronic bell belatedly signalled the train's arrival.

In a trance, Karen imagined that the ringing triggered a stampede that caught everyone off guard. Trapped, the white man was thrown around as everybody hurried to the suddenly narrow exits, to the windows that were shattered in panic. A hundred brown feet, wearing cheap rubber slippers and ten-year-old sneakers, trampled the leathery face of the man, who couldn't even shout for help. Karen, transfixed, went against the imaginary flow of people and readied her tired, blistered foot.

Outside the window, the belfry of a church loomed into view, its bell loudly, joyfully tolling.

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