

END OF SERVICE

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My mother's final trip back to Manila was in a box.

Sudden cardiac arrest, said the nice lady from the Department of Foreign Affairs who had made the call. She met us personally in her office, and handed over a sheaf of official-looking papers stamped with the seal of the Philippine government. Dad barely said anything as he signed them. He had interviews with more people from the DFA and the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency. They gave me water and biscuits that tasted like cardboard while I waited.

The POEA had a child psychologist on their staff to help the children of overseas Filipino workers process the loss of their parents. He was mid-forties by the look of his beer belly and the smell of old cologne. "Do you want to talk about it, Aya?" he asked me in a gravelly voice. I stared at him while tucking my earphones into my ears. The whole world disappeared behind a drum and bass intro. He wrote down something on his pad, but I didn't bother reading his upside-down handwriting. I didn't have anything to say. What do you say to people you've never met about a mother you barely knew?

Even before she died, I think I had already lost her. She left for Jeddah as a housekeeper for a wealthy expat family when I was three, and, except for a handful of Christmas visits, I never saw her after that. I remember her as someone who tried to be stylish. She was always wearing lipstick and perfume even when we were just going to the corner store. She smelled of apricots and olives, sun and sand and heat, her warmth enveloping me whenever she came home.

The days when she had to leave again were terrible, as if someone had sucked all the light out of the room. She would go early in the morning, when the streets were empty and dark except for the occasional roar of a distant tricycle. We'd wait for a cab, all three of us. I hated standing in front of the gate, bundled up in a jacket and cardigan, with her and her luggage and three boxes of pasalubongs for her wards in Jeddah. They were kids who loved dried mangoes and durian candy and the salty dried fish in vacuum-packed plastic bags that was a staple in every Filipino home. Kids who got to have her full time instead of just for a few days. She would kiss Dad on the cheek and he would smile and tell her that he was proud of her and that he missed her every day, and then she would come over and hug me and I'd be squished against her, surrounded with her perfume. I really didn't want to let go.

But I always had to.

Mama told me that she was doing this because she didn't want me to be like her. She was fifteen, the same age as me, when she dropped out of high school and took her place in the wet market, along with her mother, who couldn't even write her own name, selling fish and vegetables. The only reason she was able to leave that life was because of my dad, who helped her go back to school and earn a diploma, who helped her find work in Manila. It was her decision to go abroad, because overseas Filipino workers made more money—double, triple, quadruple what she was making as an over-worked and underpaid nurse in a city hospital.

This was the only life I knew: we lived in a small two-storey townhouse in Quezon City, in a compound with nine other two-storey houses that looked exactly like ours. My dad worked in a government office as an accountant. Mama sent money every seventh of the month, and a new phone for me every year.

Sometimes, she sent me emails or Facebook messages, asking me when I wanted to talk to her on Skype. I always told her that I was busy, that I had schoolwork or group work or that the internet connection was weak and unreliable.

But really, I didn't know how to talk to her. How do you talk to someone you barely know? How do you bridge that gap of years and oceans and time? She was my mother because that was her name on the birth certificate, and that was her face, pale and smiling and sweaty, in that photo of when I was born.

She wasn't my mother in all the other ways.

We held a wake for her for nine days, as tradition required. The family Mama worked for paid for the funeral arrangements, but even though they were super rich, we were given the smallest chapel at the funeral home. There were people from the DFA and POEA crawling all over the place, ignoring the open casket and the trickle of people that had come to pay their respects to my mom, people who were bearing gifts of food and drink and flowers and story.

My dad sat at the pew closest to the casket, his hands folded over his lap as the government people inspected everything from the funeral wreaths to the cookie cutter crucifix that hung behind the coffin. The Christ figure looked benevolently at us even though his face was covered in painted blood dripping from a molded crown of thorns. I wrinkled my nose. I didn't like crosses that depicted the pain that Jesus must've experienced. Who could feel peaceful and holy if they were staring back at someone who always seemed on the brink of dying in the most horrible way possible?

I didn't go to school that entire week. Normally, taking a break would be a treat, but as the days went on, I was actually looking forward to schoolwork and seeing my friends again. Some of

them did visit with their parents, and my homeroom teacher, Mr. Alcoreza, came with a giant card that all my classmates designed and signed, but I just wished everything would go back to normal.

Mama's parents came all the way from Abuyog, a small town in Leyte. They were so old they looked like they had tree bark for skin, and they curled into themselves, almost like snails carrying invisible shells. Cradling their hands in mine, I performed the *mano*, lifting one after the other, to my face and touching the backs to my forehead. They were so delicate, I worried I might break them. After my greeting, they hobbled their way to the casket, supporting each other, bony hands wrapped around one another's wrists.

"She looks beautiful," Lola mumbled as she stared at the open casket. There was an arrangement of flowers on top of the clear plastic sheet that protected the body from the outside world. Lola brushed the leaves aside to take a closer look at her face. I hadn't even looked at it yet; that wasn't my mother inside the casket, I was sure of it.

"She looks so young," said Lolo, draping a bony arm over Lola's bony shoulder. "I'm happy they got her like this."

"Her term of service wasn't over yet when it happened, right?"

"No. She has seven more years on her contract."

"That explains it."

This didn't make sense at all. Weren't they supposed to be hugging each other, weeping and sobbing, and wondering what happened to their daughter?

I wanted to ask them what they meant, but before I could find the words, they stepped down from the platform and hugged

me. They smelled of Tiger Balm and baby powder. “You are so lucky,” Lola said, cradling my cheek in her wrinkly hands. She kissed me twice on each cheek. Lolo simply winked at me, like we were in on a joke that he totally got and that I was still trying to figure out.

Because it was expected for relatives to stay and watch over the dead body all through the night, every night of the wake, the funeral home provided each chapel with a room containing a narrow cot, a fridge and sink, and a tiny bathroom. Auntie Delia took charge of our entire routine, making sure we had enough snacks to feed a small army, and that everyone was taken care of. At the end of each evening, when the priest had finished the Mass, she told my father to go home. He refused, though, so they would end up taking shifts, napping on the cot or sitting with the stragglers outside, reminiscing about my mother.

People told me what a brave girl I was, that I was such a good daughter, helping my dad and Auntie Delia, offering ensaymada and mamon and Styrofoam cups of instant coffee to visitors. But I didn’t feel like such a good daughter—all I really wanted was to lock myself in my room and scroll through stupid webpages that told me how to dye my hair fifteen shades of purple or to read stories about how Iron Man and Captain America were totally in love. And I didn’t feel brave either—I didn’t want to stay in the room when it was almost empty, knowing that I was in a building filled with open caskets in chapels, with dead people in dead people’s clothes.

I couldn’t even bring myself to step forward and look inside the casket that held Mama.

Would she still be wearing her favorite shade of lipstick? Did they put perfume on her? Did she look like those corpses on TV and in the movies, so lifelike that they seemed like they were still breathing? What if she were breathing inside and we never

noticed and it turned out that she weren't really dead and we ended up killing her ourselves?

On the last night of the wake, while we were having our pagpag at the twenty-four-hour Jollibee near our house, my dad leaned over the minuscule Formica table and asked me, "Have you spoken to your mother yet?"

"I'm not really in the habit of talking to dead people, Dad," I said, opening my burger to remove the offending slices of pickle inside the sandwich and discarding them on the tray.

"Don't be rude, Aya Katrina Villanueva. You're not too old yet to be spanked."

I looked out the window that bordered the fast food restaurant, watching the early morning traffic speed past us. A line of cabs stretched haphazardly in front of the Jollibee parking lot, the drivers smoking, or napping, rags and old t-shirts shielding their eyes from the glare of the industrial-sized street lamps.

"She'll be cremated tomorrow, and then we'll bring her to the memorial park. You need to say goodbye to her before she goes," Dad said, chewing on his French fries.

"Why is it so important that I talk to her? It's not like she's going to talk back."

Dad sighed and rubbed a hand over his eyes, which were red-rimmed and tired.

I focused on chewing my food. I didn't want to deal with that familiar look of disappointment he got when I did something he didn't approve of. He was a pretty lenient dad, all things considered: I could decide when to sleep, as long as I was awake in time to go to school; there were no restrictions on TV or the internet or my cell phone; I could stay over at my friends'

houses during weekends. The list of things he didn't approve of was actually pretty short.

"Your mother loved you very much," Dad said, resting his elbows on the table and steepling his fingers together. "She was happy to give you everything you asked for, even though I told her that she was spoiling you already. She always said that you were the best thing she's ever had, and that someday, when she came home for good—"

"But she's not coming home anymore, is she?" I was surprised at how loud my voice was, how much anger colored my tone. "She's dead, she's not coming back, and even if I wanted to talk to her, I can't."

Dad looked at me for a very long time, as if I was a complicated math problem that he was trying to solve in his head. "You should still say goodbye. This might be your last chance to talk to her."

We didn't talk to each other at all on the way home. The cab driver had his radio tuned to an AM station, and the drone of the newscaster's voice lulled me to sleep. Dad shook my shoulder slightly to wake me up when we arrived.

I'd never felt this exhausted, even when I pulled an all-nighter to cram for my economics exam.

Without even taking off my dress, the seventh black one of the week, I slumped in front of my laptop and flicked it open. There was something comfortably mindless about scrolling through social networks, checking on how my friends were doing. My Facebook page was full of people leaving messages of condolence. I was scrolling through and clicking "Like" on each one when the Skype notification came. It was from my mother's account. I clicked "Accept", wondering if I was going to talk to one of the rich expats she worked for, but when the video screen

came up, the image was a familiar face—a face that I thought I would never see again.

“Hi Aya,” said the woman on the screen. “I’m so glad you have time to talk to your old mom.”

I stared at the screen for an endless moment, fighting the urge to scream. Then I closed the Skype window, and for good measure, I turned off the wi-fi signal, and closed my laptop, too.

Then my smartphone rang.

My heart raced and my whole body trembled. I ran into Dad’s room, and showed him the phone, too freaked out to even talk.

“That’s not your mom,” Dad said, without even blinking. It was like he’d been expecting this.

“Then who is it? Was that a ghost? You said as long as we performed the pagpag there wouldn’t be any ghosts following us home!” I flapped my arms uselessly, trying to expend the extra energy. My heart was still hammering in my chest.

“Aya. Anak. Listen to me.” He sat at the edge of the bed, hands resting gently on his thighs. “That was not your mom, but a sort of echo. She’s fulfilling the end of her service.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded. “Dead people can’t finish contracts. That’s impossible.”

Dad took my hands in his. “Aya, I’ve been trying to find the right way to tell you. Because she wasn’t done with her contract yet, they made another version of her to finish the job. The copy has her same set of memories. She’s the same in all the ways that Maricar Villanueva was Maricar Villanueva, but she’s not her.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Mama’s still alive?”

Dad sighed. “No, anak. Your mom really did die of a bad heart, but according to the Bagong Bayani Treaty, copies of dead workers can be deployed when a sanctioned, recorded, serialized OFW is unable to finish his or her contract. Your mom signed up for twenty years, and her employers want the same caretaker for the whole term. That’s why they paid for the funeral, and why we can still have Mama’s income.”

“So that was why the DFA and the POEA were at the funeral?” I asked.

“And why they asked me to sign off on so many contracts. We’ll still receive the same amount from your mother, even the pension, as long as she finishes her service.” He reached out and patted me on the knee. “It was what she wanted.”

“So does she know? The one in Jeddah, I mean. Does she know she’s Mom 2.0?”

Dad shook his head sadly. “We can’t tell her, Aya. She has to think that everything’s exactly the same. To make her aware of her condition as a copy would destroy her. Literally.”

Our house was quiet except for the ambient sounds of the outside world filtering through the windows. The city is never really silent, I realized: the hum of the electricity surging through the street lamps, the quiet fall of early morning rain, the buzz of nocturnal insects that moved through our small front garden.

I switched on the TV to distract myself from the thoughts running round and round my head. A late-night cooking show was on, and I left it there, watching a British chef demonstrate the finer points of deboning a chicken.

At the commercial break, the bright yellow intro of a government ad filled the screen. Animated characters jumped up and down, showing different jobs around the world: an

engineer in Tokyo, a nurse in Singapore, a doctor in Canada, a sailor in South Africa, a domestic helper in the Middle East. All of the animated characters were dressed in the uniforms of their trades, their animated smiles stretching from ear to ear. Then there was the classic *ka-ching* sound of money as the animation showed the salary difference between working in the Philippines and working abroad. You can send your children to school! Pay your parents' hospital bills! Pay for a car, a condo, a house! Your problems will be solved forever!

This was followed by a pre-taped spiel from the president, his hair styled from two years ago, his eyes obviously looking past the camera and focusing on a teleprompter. "Filipinos can be found in almost every part of the world, from down under in Australia to the icy glaciers of Reykjavik. Do your country proud and be one of the new heroes of the republic! Be an overseas Filipino worker and show the world what the Filipino spirit is made of!" The ad ended with the hotline numbers for the POEA and the helpline for the DFA's application process.

Was a commercial like this what made my mother leave? Was this what allowed my dad to let her go into the arms of the government and leave the country, to take care of another man's children and live on another man's land? I had classmates whose parents were also OFWs, who also worked in Tokyo and Toronto and Kuala Lumpur. Did they also know that their parents might not actually be their parents anymore? On the TV screen, the British chef chopped up the chicken on his cutting board, cleanly severing the wing from the breast from the thigh. One stroke of his butcher's knife, and the chicken was no longer a chicken, just the sum of its parts.

I HAD SEVEN missed Skype calls while I was asleep, all from Mama's account. I cleared the notifications and then headed to the shower to get ready.

Today was the day that my mom would be cremated. There would be the last Mass, conducted at the funeral home's chapel, and then Dad and I and our relatives would head to the crematorium to watch her body turn into ash. Dad had already selected an urn: a coral-blue affair, the gradations of color moving from sand to sky.

The priest talked about life after death. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and all that stuff. My mom was dead. There wasn't anything he could say to bring her, the real her, back.

"Many people would say that talking to the dead is the act of a crazy man," the priest said to a rapt crowd of family and friends. I thought of the missed Skype calls. Did the priest even know that there was another woman who bore my mother's face, running around right now, alive and well?

"But I say, talk to the dead," the priest continued. "Remember them in life and in death. Tell others what you remember about them, what you remember of them. Pass on their stories." I looked around. My mother's sisters and brother had stories to tell about her. My grandparents could trace her back to the day she was born. Her friends had their tales of school and friendship and growing old. My dad could find the deepest truth of her. But I had nothing.

When the Mass ended and everyone gathered around my dad and grandparents, I slipped between the well-wishers and made my way to the raised platform. There was nobody near her now.

I stepped towards the head of the casket and peered inside. She was wearing her favorite lipstick, and a stylish forest-green dress that reached to her knees. Her eyes were closed and her lips were pulled up in a small smile, as though she had a delicious secret that she wanted to share.

My phone vibrated, so I pulled it out of my dress pocket and looked at the screen.

It was her again.

I swiped my thumb across the screen and lifted the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Aya!" My mother's voice was cheerful on the other end of the line. It was the voice of a dead woman. It was the voice of a woman who was still alive.

I kissed the tips of my fingers, and then pressed them against the hard plastic surface that separated the world of the living from the dead. "I love you, Mama," I said.

"Oh, anak, I love you too."

"I know."

"Where are you, anyway? It sounds noisy over there."

I looked over my shoulder as I walked away from the casket, the people that surrounded us, the pale funeral wreaths and the sad Jesus, and Auntie Delia distributing the last of the pastries. I pressed my phone against my ear. Copy or not, the woman on the other end of the line, pressing her phone to her ear, was still my mother.

"Oh, it's nothing, Mama," I said. "Sorry, the reception's just bad. Can I call you again?"

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