

SOMETHING NEVER WORN OR USED

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There was a particular dawn that Pau had deeply treasured. The attendant asked her to recall it as clearly as she could, so the machine would have a guide as to which memories are to be sold.

It was the dawn right before the start of Grade Two, and her family had just moved into a nearby condo, a few months after her father's new promotion. Then, the city had not yet been infested with skyscrapers, and one could see the day-sky in its entirety. It was dark-blue, and so was the light that filled her bedroom. The hour seemed to shimmer with uncertainty, as if it could not decide between night or day, and just settled upon a gentle in-between.

She looked at the pink Hello Kitty bag on the floor of her bedroom, the one filled with new ballpens and blank notebooks and pad paper, that her mother had happily given her the night before, proudly saying how *everything she needed* was there. Still, she was a bundle of nerves. For the past week, she had been worrying about the start of the school year, whether her class advisor would be too strict, or whether she'd end up shuffled into the same section as the school bully, who once pulled a chair from under her for not sharing some Oreos, and teased her for her wearing some shabby leather shoes. But then, sitting on her bed, so cool and comfortable, she felt a weightlessness, as if she were in a bubble that would float up to the sky. She walked up to the window. She found herself so high above the

city that she wondered for a moment whether God would be able to hear her. She looked down at the sprawl of houses in the distance, and thought that she saw their old house, the one with the single bedroom and the roof that leaked during the rain. She realized how similar they all looked: small, squat, square, painted in washed-out colors. The only view she ever saw outside their old bedroom was the sari-sari store and KTV bar across the street.

She watched the cotton-ball clouds drift slowly above her. She watched the streets starting to fill with people, watched them scurry out of their homes, small as ants. She watched the young sun chase away the last remains of the night, watched it travel above the horizon, slowly but surely, until everything was brimming with its yellow-white light.

The day seemed soft and bright with promise.

She remembered leaving her room when her alarm sounded, and finding her father outside flipping a perfect sunny-side up egg, accompanied by the sounds of sizzling bacon on the frying pan. On the counter was a mountain of rice, a pyramid of pandesal, and a row of skinless longganisa.

“Hey sweetie,” he told her. “Had a good night’s sleep?”

Her mother emerged from their bedroom, her curly hair spread out in all directions, yawning loudly and stretching her arms. A wave of fading air-conditioned coolness followed her, as she left the bedroom door open. She greeted everyone with a loud, cheerful “good morning”, and poured herself a glass of orange juice. She kissed Pau’s father on the cheek, and made a joke about how he looked like such a bear with his beard, all scraggly around his face. She ran up to Pau next, lifted her up, and gave her the snuggest hug in the world. Her mother’s arms were steady, and did not buckle under Pau’s weight. Her breath smelled of mint, and her face looked fresh as a peach.

They watched her father cook breakfast, teasing him about his cooking skills. Her mother grabbed a piece of pandesal, pretended to bite it, and then rubbed her cheek as if she had a toothache. Her father laughed, saying that he wasn't the one who baked them; he just bought them. After everything was done, they sat down on the table and started eating. Pau told her father that they were the best eggs and longganisa she'd ever eaten, and he pinched her cheek as a thank-you.

In the middle of breakfast, Pau sniffed the air. It smelled of coolness, and supermarket-bought food, and fresh soap and shampoo. It smelled of plenty.

Her father sat to her right. She remembered remarking how thick his beard was, and brushing her fingers through it, still greasy with longganisa, though he didn't mind. It was soft, like the fur of her stuffed animals. To her left was her mother, her curly hair still uncombed and unwashed, framing her head in a giant afro. It looked like a forest had grown on her head. Her own hair was kept short, after a bad bout with lice, and her face was smooth and hairless. She sometimes felt like she had such a boring face, compared to her parents. But whenever she said this, they would tell her how silly she was being, that she had the most interesting and endearing face in the world.

She couldn't remember exactly what they talked about that morning. Something about Pau asking her father what his new job was, and her father replying that he was the new head of something-or-another. She remembered telling her mother how fresh she looked, with her mother replying what a good night's sleep she had, how soft and sturdy their new bed was. She talked about what she wanted Grade Two to be like, while her parents talked about how excited they were to explore the neighborhood. She remembered her mother making a joke so funny that Pau choked on her orange juice. Her father gave her a few, strong pats on the back, as she struggled to laugh with juice running up her nose. When they were all finished, Pau's

mother had driven her to school. The first day wasn't as idyllic as she had hoped. She had gotten the dreaded Ms. Macapinlac as class advisor, infamous for her surprise quizzes and high-pitched screams at noisy students. But at least she found out the school bully had moved to the States.

“That's enough, Ms. Lagman.”

The attendant's voice jolted her awake. It took her eyes a little while to adjust to the brightness. She found herself in the Memory Bank's small, sterile operating room. The whiteness of the walls and floor startled her. She was sitting on something that resembled a dentist's chair, which leaned all the way back. She saw the red-and-black wires, snaking their way from the nodes attached to the cap on her head, to the large, humming computer terminal that stood ominously nearby. The screen showed a schematic of a brain, with certain parts highlighted in cherry-red. The other patches of the brain glowed different hues, and the reds and yellows and greens all started moving and shifting to different areas, making the brain look like it was swimming with fiery fishes of color. In front of it all was the attendant, sitting on a monoblock chair, wearing blue medical scrubs, right underneath the light-bulb which filled the room with more whiteness. The attendant wore no name tag.

“Is there anything I forgot?” Pau asked the attendant.

“No, it's all here,” she said. “Even if you don't actively try to remember something, the machine will fill in the gaps. It won't miss a single second.”

Or I won't be left with a single second, Pau thought.

“It'll take a few moments for the machine to sort everything out,” she said. She walked to the computer terminal, and spent some moments typing something. She came back to the monoblock chair with a clip-board in hand.

“Pauline, right?” she said, after writing something down.

Pauline sounded so much nicer, coming from her.

“Yeah,” she replied. “But you can call me Pau.”

Pau glanced at the computer screen. She could make out a number of images, which looked an awful lot like their old condo. The images changed to another set of images, and another, making it seem like an ultra-fast slideshow. At the bottom of the screen was something like a loading bar.

“Pau,” the attendant repeated. “Are you a student?”

“Yeah,” she said. She gave the name of her university. The attendant's face registered a look of recognition.

“My brother goes there,” she said. She gave Pau a name, and she said she didn't know him.

“I applied there, when I was younger,” she said. “I wanted to be a psychologist. But my exam scores didn't make it. But still, now, I still get to poke through people's brains.”

Pau made a sound, something similar to “Awwww”, to show her concern and amusement. The attendant smiled, and told her that she was over it. Her hair was done in a pulled-back ponytail, and was streaked with dyed-brown strands. She had large, round glasses that covered up too-much of her face. When she smiled, dimples appeared on her cheeks. Pau thought she'd look better with smaller glasses, not that she didn't look too bad right now.

Am I still plugged into the machine? Pau thought. *Fuck, I hope it doesn't pick up on thoughts.*

The computer led out a loud “ting”, like a microwave oven.

“That means it's almost ready to eat,” she said. “Aw shit, that was a terrible joke, I'm sorry.”

Pau watched her sit in front of the computer terminal, typing away. She cursed quietly that the machine didn't take a longer time to process her memories. If only she had to sell all the things that invaded her dreams. If only she could sell all the hospital-visits, the sounds of the dripping IV, the nights she spent guarding him, helping him limp to the bathroom when she felt the faint tapping on her wrist, and then wiping away the puke on the sides of his beardless mouth. The processing would take weeks. She looked at the part of the screen unobstructed by the attendant's figure. She glimpsed a timestamp that said “00:45:31”.

Forty-five minutes. That's how much she would lose. Still, it was a lot of money for half an hour. Four times the daily salary she made as an assistant at their university's library, and with none of the annoying students trying to return water-damaged or coverless books.

Her mother had been against it, when Pau had called her at work to tell her. Even when she came home from her shift at three-in-the-morning, she still found the time to scold Pau.

“What if this is some scam?” she asked. “What if you show up and it's some kidnapping ring that steals half of your memories and leaves you in a ditch to die, not even knowing your name?”

“This is legit, ma,” she said. She had found the ad on rememberme.ph, the most reputable online site for memory buyers and sellers. She had already visited the Memory Bank, which recorded a mental-video of the dawn and family breakfast, and showed it to the buyer. A few days later, she got a call from the Bank, saying that the buyer was delighted, and would like to purchase all

the memories she was offering. She could have done the entire thing in secret, but she felt too much guilt at hiding something from her mother. They had been alone together for the past few years, and could not afford any breach of trust.

She had told her mother that what few relatives they had had already stopped returning her calls, with the final call coming from Tita May, who told her that “they shouldn’t have lived so big for so long”. She said, in her softest voice, that they were a few thousand pesos short of her tuition, as she stared at her mother in the sallow light. Her hair was cut short, like a school-boy’s, because the call center told her that her frizzy afro was unsuitable for an office environment. Her face looked wrinkled and worn, like paper that had been written on, over and over again. After she was done explaining, she noticed her mother looking around the room. She looked at the water-stained walls. She looked at the door to the bathroom, which was opened, to reveal the toilet that wouldn’t flush. She looked at Pau, and burst into tears. Her sobbing seemed to fill the entire house. Then again, it did not have much to fill.

“They’ve taken everything,” she said in between sobs, as Pau cradled her head. “And now they’re taking a part of you.”

She had let her go, in the end, because they really did need the money, and it was really good money. Before she left for the Memory Bank, her mother wondered absentmindedly whether the buyer was a pervert who got-off on those kinds of memories. Pau was horrified for a moment, and her mother laughed a laugh you made to show surrender. She’s just tired, Pau thought. She’s always tired

“Who is he?” Pau asked the attendant, referring to the man who put up the ad. Who’s the man who’s going to take my father’s stubble, my mother’s forest?

“I don't really know,” the attendant said. “The boss really didn't say much about him. I heard some of the other attendants say he's a congressman who lost both his parents in some political bombing, and he's trying to make up for stolen time.”

“Stolen time,” Pau muttered to herself. “What a strange way of making up for it.”

“Hey, I'd buy a few happy family memories if I could,” the attendant said. “But it'd be cheaper to take them out to a real five-star buffet.”

“I'm done identifying the content and length of the memories to be sold. The machine will soon look through your mind for the corresponding ones,” the attendant said, switching back to a matter-of-fact voice. “The extraction will start soon. Just lie back and relax.”

She closed her eyes, and leaned back. The attendant counted down from ten. For a moment, she remembered the night when they moved back into the house on Remedios street, smaller than their old house, the one before the giant condo. In the middle of unpacking her things, her father called to her. She went to him, and he showed her a newspaper article about the first Memory Bank in the Philippines. She explained to him the process of buying and selling memories, and he told her that if he could, he'd sell all his happy memories, just so that she and her mother didn't have to be begging for cash all the time. She told him to stop being silly, and hugged him as tightly as she could. She put her hands on his back, and was surprised to find how much weight he had lost, as she could already feel his ribs. Until then, the most noticeable change had been his hair, or lack of it. When she heard the attendant reach two, she tried banishing the memory from her mind, worried that it would be accidentally taken.

It felt like a needle pricking her skin. The memory rushed out of her, like blood to a syringe. When it was over, she breathed a sigh of relief. She felt as if she had forgotten something, but couldn't remember what it was, and let it go.

“That hurt more than I thought it would,” she said.

“Oh god, I'm so sorry,” the attendant said. “For some people, the extraction process can be a bit of a pain. It wasn't so bad, was it?”

Pau shook her head, though her body felt like shaking from the experience. She looked at the screen, to see if the memory was projected there. All she saw was a schematic of her brain.

“Would you like a remembrance of this visit?” the attendant asked her, and she nodded. The attendant went to the computer terminal and a few moments later, she could hear something being printed.

“Here you go,” the attendant said, handing her a card. It looked like part of a wedding invitation, with a curlicued flowery border around the card and the name “Casa Santa Memory Bank” printed on top, flanked by sunflowers. The text was done in a fine, cursive script, as if it were celebrating something. “A childhood dawn, and breakfast with family,” it said. Pau knew it was important, because she remembered thinking of how important it was before and during the visit to the Memory Bank. But when she tried traveling back to that dawn, she could only find a blank.

The attendant walked her to the lobby. At the administrative counter, she was given a check for her payment. The attendant smiled at her again, and told her to call the clinic if there were any problems. Her pony-tail bobbed up-and-down as she talked, making her seem so much bubblier. Should I do it? she

thought. She tried to think of what her father would have told her, but couldn't bring anything to mind.

“Are you busy tomorrow evening?” she asked her. “There's this great restaurant just near here. They serve the best ramen. Cheap, too.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” she replied. “I have to pick up my girlfriend from work.”

Shrinking would be a good superpower right now, Pau thought. Or invisibility. I wonder if anyone is willing to buy some fuck-up failing to ask out a girl on a date. When she turned to leave, she saw that the lobby was empty, save for a middle-aged man in a blazer and slacks. He had a receding hairline, and Pau wondered if this was the man who had bought her memories. The attendant walked her to the exit, though Pau had wanted to be alone.

“Thank you for choosing Casa Santa Memory Bank for your extraction,” she said, offering her hand for a goodbye. Pau took it, and shook it limply.

There was a strong, balmy wind outside the building. It was cool and surprising, as the previous days had been sweltering with the heat that only Manila could bring. She checked her phone. During the extraction, her Tita May had texted her, apologizing for her behavior over the phone. She said that she and Tita Ruth had pooled together some money to tide them over until her mother's next paycheck, and that Tito Kiko had some writing jobs lined up for her, if she were willing. Pau could do nothing but laugh. She laughed until her belly hurt, until tears came out of her eyes, until she realized that a few strangers were staring at her. They looked at her with shifty, suspicious eyes, and then turned their gaze to the Memory Bank. Those Memory Banks, they probably thought, they just mess up your mind. Not worth it.

She hailed down a nearby jeepney, and squeezed herself among its many passengers. She had a paper due the next day, which she hadn't started yet. She also had to stop by the university's cashier office, to finally pay-off her student loans, and then go to an interview for an internship with a writer's collective, as the final requirement for a class. She also needed to prep for the interview. Her mother would not be home yet, and she told herself to prepare some dinner. Her mother was probably starving from her shift. She felt a grumbling in her stomach, but ignored it, because she would soon be home. The jeepney hit a speed-bump, and she almost hit her head on the roof.

She wouldn't be able to sleep tonight, she realized, with what she had to accomplish by the morning. At least she would see the sunrise.
