

UNDER ERASURE

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Is it possible for this not to be a story of disappearance?

- Conchitina Cruz, "Disappear"

Many years later, as he listened to one of his students read aloud the closing lines of her favorite novel, Mark would remember the day he first met Dina—a quiet November afternoon marked with the premonition of the coming December's chill. The day was made doubly memorable, for though it was not his first time to teach, it would be the first time he would do so with the honorably earned title of assistant professor. He arrived on time, as he was known to do, and Dina, as he would come to know her, was the only student sitting in the dim, poorly lit room the administrative staff at the English department exiled all his classes to.

She was bent over a book. Her left hand cradled her face, while the other moved over the page. Her lips moved faintly as she read these words to herself: *and once again she shuddered with the evidence that time was not passing, as she had just admitted, but that it was turning a circle.* Then she too shuddered. Not because of the weather, but because of the sudden realization that someone else had entered the room.

"Good afternoon," he said as he put his bag down on the table. There was a film of dust that accumulated on top of the teacher's desk over the short break. She looked up at him through her rose-colored eyeglasses and smiled politely, calmed by the sight of him. Dina slipped the book into her bag.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” Mark said. He thought then that she was *cute*, though he was the kind of person who would never use the word *cute* to describe anyone, especially not one of his own students.

But that was the only word that appeared in his head at that moment: *cute*. Not in the original sense of the word (“short, cross-eyed and bow-legged”) but in the now-common, everyday context: *attractive*. For Mark that meant that she was intelligent-looking, which in turn meant that she looked like she had a good head on her shoulders.

Cute: such a stupid, nondescript and generic word, he would write later that night on his blog. He would later realize what a callow and petty thing it was to put down even on a digital page, and he would delete the entry, as if those words had never been written at all.

Many years later, Mark would wish that memories could be erased like that, *without a trace*.

He would also describe the sky that November day in a masturbatory piece of prose poem he had published weeks later as *covered with wisps of dark clouds*. He would wonder if they were premonitions of something terrible over the horizon, perhaps a pathetic attempt of acknowledging that he was dangerously attracted to the girl.

“It’s all right,” she said, then took a small notepad and pen from her bag. She flipped through the first few pages, and stopped at the first clean sheet and began to take down notes. Mark believed then that her notepad were filled with notes for her classes. But months later he would read those words she had written down that day, and many other days after that, and would believe that everything that had happened between them was a thing of *destiny*—her own word, not his.

Mark sat and watched her scribble notes in silence, a curiosity in a shirt of Joycean greenness and jeans that looked like they had been washed one too many times. He did this until she looked up at him and smiled, once again in that way he would learn to love and fear all at once. "What's your name, again?" he asked quickly to cover up for, what he realized then, was a coveting gaze.

"Bernardina Amarante, sir. But you can call me Dina."

"I can see why," he nodded and inadvertently winked at her, a reflex that had caused him a few close calls with jealous boyfriends in the rare occasions that he went out with friends at bars. He then retrieved an index card from among his things and handed it to her; as she filled it out, another student ambled in to the classroom, and then another. Soon, she was just another student among other students. Or so he would tell himself.

But after that first day, despite his best efforts at propriety and sanity, he began paying more and more attention to her. He took notice of the way she pushed her eyeglasses against the bridge of her nose with her thumb, how she tucked her hair behind her ears meticulously, and how she scribbled little notes even when he said nothing particularly noteworthy.

In one class, a marvelous hour and a half spent talking about an enormously-winged old man who falls from the sky one rainy day, he noticed how her ears were unusually small. He recalled, with a clarity that would plague him later, the old belief that a person's lifetime corresponded to the size of one's ears. He felt a fear then, of the kind unknown to him until that late December day, a fear that would only be equaled later by the realization that he could never touch or kiss her again.

On that January evening when he first kissed her, he would remember this superstition when he brushed his hands against her ears. But he would say nothing until a few weeks later, when,

under the influence of a force greater than reason, he would tell her that he loved her through his fear of losing her.

Mark had known of love only through literature. He had had a few clumsy attempts at having a relationship, but they all failed because he was, in the words of the women he dated, *clingy*—a word that he did not appreciate at all.

With Dina, he had formed a belief about love not unlike that of the fictional author Maurice Bendrix who measured his love by jealousy—that one does not love someone until he fears losing that person. And his fear of losing Dina was such that he began giving his quizzes and exams on Tuesdays to make sure, at least in his mind, that she did not go out on the weekends on dates or on *gimiks* with her friends, and instead studied for the exams (and in the process, thought of him, even if in spite).

And even though the results of his Tuesday exams and quizzes were favorable to Mark's plans, he still held in his heart the fear that Dina went out anyway, for she was a brilliant *student*. Even then, he knew that she would be the most brilliant he'd ever have in his life. This only made him love her and despair all the more.

As Christmas vacation neared, Mark's anxiety of separation and loss were not helped by the appearance of a junior student named Bryan, who reminded him so clearly of the boy his high school girlfriend *left him for*. He often saw this character Bryan talking to Dina outside his classroom looking the part of gallant suitor, while he arrived looking like a *dork* carrying books and papers.

He imagined them engaged in the most *low-down* acts, in the seediest of places—a rundown motel in Novaliches overlooking a crowded public market, with electric lines crisscrossing the view of the horizon; an old cinema somewhere in downtown Manila, where the movies are awful and the floors are sticky

with spilled soda and semen. He hated Bryan that December for making him think of Dina in those unlikely situations.

When she missed two class days in a row, he feared the worst had happened (teenage pregnancy and a shot-gun wedding to boot) and sought out Bryan passively. Mark kept his faculty office door open so he could see the students passing by the hallway. While in class, he kept his eyes on the windows and doors hoping to see Bryan, and, while he did not know in what manner, confront him. But he did not see a shadow of Bryan.

Later, he would realize how childish he had been when Bryan told him what had really happened to Dina that week.

When Dina returned to class, she was not quite herself. She was sickly pale and kept quiet until the last few minutes when she objected to a comment thrown by one of her half-baked Marxist classmates that the end of literature was to paint a picture of real life, complete with all its hardships and injustice, and not authorial self-expression. Mark realized, as she asserted her position, that she had been sick, and not, as he had feared, on the way and hitched. The note from her doctor, which she handed him after the class, vague as it was, confirmed his observation.

He told her that he was happy to see her again, and put his hand on her shoulder as he handed her back the note. She lost her pallor and pulled away from him, and Mark knew that he had somehow crossed that unspoken line between the things a teacher could do and ~~things a teacher shouldn't do~~.

Those last few days before Christmas break started, Mark was anxious to the point that he had forgotten to give his classes any work to do over the break. But all his fears would be allayed, when in the last day of school that year, Dina, either intentionally, or by accident, ~~or an act of fate~~, left her notebook beneath the seat she always sat on. He saw the notebook even as it fell from her bag, but did not bother to point it out.

He stayed in the classroom for a few more minutes, hoping she would come back to find it. When she did not, Mark thought that she was afraid to be alone with him again. But the truth was that she would only realize the loss of the notebook days later, when she looked to write in it how she missed seeing Prof. Mark Buendia.

Mark picked up the notebook from the floor, and for fear of being caught reading it, headed to his office where he locked the door behind him, as a teenage boy with a copy of some lewd magazine would—excited, with just a hint of guilt. He opened the first few pages. There were doodles, the kind not alien to anyone who had to sit through classes one had no interest in. There were delightfully funny pages full of stick figures in compromising positions, most of them, surprisingly, not sexual. There were pages with what read like romantic movie lines, except for the parenthesized additions, like “You had me (hurling) at hello.” There were pages of unfinished form poems, the most appealing of which was a pantoum told in the voice of Gaston Leroux’s opera house ghoul. And there were the occasional revealing personal reminders like toiletries to be bought.

He flipped casually through the pages until he reached the part, where he assumed, she had written the first time he saw her. Written on the page were the date and the subject, a note that he took to be about him: *Arrived on time*. On the next line was his name and his contact information, and under all that, the same word that he had used to describe her, *cute*. He held up the notebook to his face, as if to try and make sure that what he was reading was real.

The notebook, the page, the ink, the words smelled sweet to him. Not the sweetness of an innocent morning when the papayas are in bloom, but of a perfume, a seductive French number, as he was to find out in a few weeks.

Reading that notebook, reading those words she had written about him, including a blue sonnet that, among many inappropriate lines rhymed *rock* with *cock*, *suck* and *fuck*, words too lewd for his Catholic school taste, made him feel like a school boy all over again that Christmas.

On the airplane heading home to his parent's province, his thoughts went back to those lines Dina had written about him over and over again. His thoughts eventually turned towards motivation and narrative because it was in his nature. Was the notebook left for him to find and read? Did she want him to approach her like a romantic lead would his partner—say a trite line, and then kiss her passionately?

Somewhere in the back of his mind another possibility lay, that it was all *serendipity*; they were simply players in a production not of their own writing and choice.

His thoughts were preoccupied with these things the entire festive season and everyone in the family, even his mother who did not subscribe to psychology or psychiatry, thought that he was *depressed*. “Perhaps all he needs is to do a little pressing against a woman,” his father joked over Christmas Eve dinner, to his mother's disapproval and his siblings delight. Had his father known what would follow, he would have realized how dramatically ironic his statement had been.

When he handed the notebook over to her after their first class meeting of the New Year, Dina—pale once again as if stricken by anemia—took it from him and said nothing. He too, said nothing and watched her leave. That week, he noticed that she had drawn back again; that she had ceased to offer her opinions or engage her classmates during the occasional discussions about the sorry state of Philippine fiction in English, and what they could do to redeem it.

She sat sullenly and nodded in agreement, when she would have protested to high heavens, when Francis, a cynical undergraduate who would later write a story about a doomed teacher-student affair, said that there were no longer any original stories to be written. He said writers are there only to retell old stories again and again. When she did speak in class, her voice was measured and terse, and never did she once address him.

Dina would point out months later that Mark had exhibited the same resignation and evasion that he characterized her as suffering from that week. He refused to call upon her during class discussion, even when no one else could answer the question he asked—a question, she said, he knew she could easily answer.

A week and a half passed before she even dared to look directly at him again, even if fleetingly, and another week went before he approached and talked to her.

They had just discussed the English translation of the novel *Cien años de soledad* and as her classmates filed out of the classroom, he asked her how she found the novel. She answered, quite honestly, that she didn't get the point of it all, even though she had read it before.

He laughed nervously, and asked her why she didn't say anything during the discussion. She shrugged and then looked at him for the first time with an intent and purpose he would later recognize to be desire.

How he found himself kissing her later that night, inside the safety of his office, he would only fully comprehend and piece together weeks later as he wrote the event into a work of fiction. He had told her that day, as they walked out of the classroom that they could talk about the novel anytime she wanted.

That night, holding her in his arms, he would realize that as a character, his dialogue at this moment in the narrative could be read in two ways. And on that day, while he meant exactly what he said, Dina had heard the subtext that was there, but that he, as author, was not conscious of—the same thing any sensible reader would discern from such an utterance by a professor to a student whom he desired, and vice versa.

When Dina showed up outside his office past class hours and he let her inside without any reluctance, everything was simply just a matter of time.

She asked him immediately to explain what it was all about, the novel about the family, and the small town whose *destiny* seemed to be entwined with theirs. He told her that she should say first how she had understood the novel, and she told him about the *incest*, the repetitions of names, and of the seeming inescapability of things, especially in the end when Melquíades' parchment was finally deciphered.

When he spoke of it, he gave her what he had heard from his own professors who, perhaps, in turn heard it from their own professors. He told her that the novel is about cycles, how the Third World is caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and corruption. He felt like a record player, blindly repeating what has been said before over and over again.

“But most of all,” he added quickly, “The novel is about how we undo our own achievements, how at the end of it all, we never progress, especially if we are left to solitude to pursue our own dreams.”

“I still don't understand,” she laughed and ran her fingers through her hair. “You need to explain it to me, more.” Here, he would realize later, was where it all began and ended. For surely with each beginning there has to be an end, and in the

beginning she stood up to leave and he followed her to the door, which he had locked unconsciously against his own policies concerning student consultations.

Does it matter that he stood too close to her? It helped, he thought. But it didn't matter in the end. Does it matter who kissed whom first? It didn't matter in the end, it didn't matter that he took her by the shoulders, turned her to face him and kissed her.

Writing of that night, he would find himself using the word *magic* repeatedly. Another one of those words, he believed, that are used so often that they have lost their *magic*.

But he could not help himself. He called their first kiss a *magical* experience. He described feeling as though he had taken off the ground for a second or two, as in a story of the magic realist vein. He glossed over the fact that he, in his haste to free her of undergarments, ripped them off—a very earthly thing to do.

The next few weeks were strange for Professor Mark Buendia, whose idea of a regular day consisted of going to class, checking papers, watching TV or a movie and preparing for class the next day. He found himself doing the most absurd things like staging numerous *bump-intos* with Dina, a term he found forced but used anyway; arranging meetings in obscure restaurants in Pasig; or making reservations at a lodge in Antipolo for a long weekend.

It would be at the end that he would realize that she had, in a manner of speaking, allowed him to experience a semblance of a dangerous life; a life that he had imagined he would be living when he was a boy, sometimes as a cowboy, an astronaut or a spy.

On that most important February night, he put his cupped hands, over her ears and asked her if she had ever heard the old

superstition about life spans and ear sizes. She looked at him as though he had lost his mind. Then she smiled and told him that yes, she had heard of the superstition, and thought it was ~~cute~~ that he worried so much about her.

Another night, his face pressed against the inside of her thighs, he asked what her perfume was. She answered Chanel No. 5, and then laughed in a dark and dangerous voice he would never forget. She told him playfully that he was turning out to be as typical as the next ~~guy~~, cataloging information about her as though she was a specimen. He did not take well to being called a guy or the realization that other men had asked her the very same questions that he was asking her.

Often, during those weeks of calculated yet reckless abandon, he wondered whether or not anybody had taken notice of the changes that were certainly taking place in his demeanor. This turned him into a nervous and paranoid wreck; he would look at crowds of three or more people suspiciously, wondering if they were talking about that professor who seduced his student. He avoided eye contact with most of his colleagues for fear that they would see the glimmer of illicit sex in his eyes. It would be a year later, while reading a story one of his students wrote and with the entire affair all over and done with, that Mark would realize the impossibility of exhibiting joy with guilt hanging over one's head.

He called those three months with Dina the best months of his life, and the April that followed them, the cruelest.

On that first foolish day of April, she read him lines from a story that she was writing, about a student who seduced her professor. He asked her if she meant to have "The Notebook," as she called the story, published. She told him that yes, she did. When he told her that he was writing a story similar to hers, and that it was probably a good idea that he stopped writing his version (if only to avoid arousing suspicion, for they both subscribed

to the idea that a writer writes about what he or she knows) she proposed that they instead collaborate on a how-to book about the joys and hardships of student-teacher relationships.

“The book will be our first-born,” she added over his objections, then giggled ruthlessly. He felt the fool.

It was at that moment that he felt the powerful certainty, perhaps even the need, of losing her. The disembodied giggle’s youthful pitch didn’t fit the figure he had been so familiar with by then, Dina with her delicate slopes of breasts and the earthly delight of navel. Over the phone she was just a young girl who later in the conversation asked him to marry her because she was pregnant, not only with an idea for a book but a baby, only to take it back and excuse the horror she caused him because of the day.

Looking back, Mark would see this as his character’s moment of irony: how the character who measures his love by his fear of loss leaves love behind. Shortly after their separation, he wondered if Dina herself had wanted out of the relationship, for the way she behaved that night over the phone was not like her. He even wondered if she ever truly saw their affair in terms of love, as he did, or if she was only being kind to him.

But on that day, these things did not matter to him, nor did they cross his mind. There was only an enormous discrepancy between the childish giggle, the signifier, and what it signified, Dina.

He thought for days how to tell her that he had come to the decision that he wanted out—that their relationship had reached the point when it would be, to borrow from one of his brothers’ work-day repertoire, *beneficial for them to terminate their relationship* (A sudden change of register never did not bode well, either in fiction or real life).

Mark was convinced that was he was doing right. Yet he fell into a mood of melancholy, perhaps brought on by the uncertainty of Dina's reaction or the realization that he would never touch or kiss her again afterwards. And so during those last days, he took every little detail of her in—the way her lips looked when she gasped, the way her fists looked like doves in his cupped hands, and even the formless sounds that came out when she talked in her sleep.

When it finally happened, the goodbyes were said in his room, where they had, in a manner of speaking, begun. But it was not he who told of his reasons of abandonment, but her. Dina said them in the kindest way, for she knew of his anxieties. She told him that she never expected them to go beyond that semester, though she was surprised that they did, but that she had to leave now to go to the States to join her family.

Mark did not hear then, when it could have helped tremendously, the giggling young girl over the phone, only Dina, the pragmatic woman he had been having a relationship with. "Think of it this way, Professor Buendia," she said after shaking his hand, as if a business deal had been ended instead of a relationship. "We had roles to play. Every semester this story is played out in one university or another. This semester it was this university's turn," she smiled. "Just be thankful, that this story is the kind where both professor and student were in it for love."

The next day, he saw her in the library alone reading a novel by Graham Greene about a forbidden affair's end. He smiled at her and she greeted him as if nothing had happened, as if the last few months had been nothing but a vivid continuous dream now ended.

The news of her death many months later reached Mark through Dina's friend, Bryan, who unknown to Mark knew of his relationship with Dina. The now-senior student Mark had been so fiercely jealous of told him that Dina had succumbed

to the blood-borne disease she had left the country to fight. Mark remembered then the absences, the pallor, the silence he mistook for shyness, and her ears—touching them, and the fear that they had provoked in him, the fear of loss that was now completely realized.

When he found himself sitting in that same room where he met Dina years earlier, listening to a student—a girl of nineteen with bright eyes and small ears who in her long lifetime would write a book of stories entitled *Premonitions*—reading the last pages of *Cien años de soledad*, he remembered that fateful January night and the sonnet that rhymed *rock* with *cock*, *suck* and *fuck*. It was then that Mark wondered what, if anything he had learned from Dina, and what she learned from him.

He confirmed then that there were certain things that defied the articulation of words, and usually these were the things that mattered. But most of all, in that state, he remembered how much he wanted to forget Dina and the best months of his life.

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