

# THE SAFE HOUSE

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From the street, it is one box among many. Beneath terracotta roof tiles baking uniformly in the sweltering noon, the building's grey concrete face stares out impassively in straight lines and angles. Its walls are high and wide, as good walls should be. A four-storey building with four units to a floor. At dusk, the square glass windows glitter like the compound eyes of insects, revealing little of what happens inside. There is not much else to see.

And so this house seems in every way identical to all the other houses in all the thirty-odd other buildings nestled within the gates of this complex. It is the First Lady's pride and joy, a housing project designed for genteel middle class living. There is a clubhouse, a swimming pool, a tennis court. A few residents drive luxury cars. People walk purebred dogs in the morning. Trees shade the narrow paths and the flowering hedges that border each building give the neighborhood a hushed, cozy feel. It is easy to get lost here.

But those who need to come here know what to look for—the swinging gate, the twisting butterfly tree, the cyclone-wire fence. A curtained window glows with the yellow light of a lamp perpetually left on. Visitors count the steps up each flight of stairs. They do not stumble in the dark. They know which door will be opened to them, day or night. They will be fed, sometimes given money. Wounds will be treated, bandages changed. They carry nothing—no books, no bags, or papers. What they do bring is locked inside their heads, the safest of

places. They arrive one at a time, or in couples, over a span of several hours. They are careful not to attract attention. They listen for the reassuring yelps of squabbling children before they raise their hands to knock.

It is 1982. The girl who lives here does not care too much for the people who visit. She is five. Two uncles and an aunt dropped by the other day. Three aunts and two uncles slept over the night before. It is impossible to remember all of them. There are too many names, too many faces. And they all look the same—too tall, too old, too serious, too many. They surround the small dining table, the yellow lamp above throwing and tilting shadows against freshly painted cream walls.

They crowd the already cramped living room with books and papers, hissing at her to keep quiet, they are Talking About Important Things. So she keeps quiet. The flock of new relatives recedes into the background as she fights with her brother over who gets to sit closer to the television. It is tuned in to *Sesame Street* on Channel 9. The small black and white screen makes Ernie and Bert shiver and glow like ghosts. Many of these visitors she will never see again. If she does, she will probably not remember them.

She wakes up one night. Through the thin walls, she hears the visitors arguing. She can easily pick out one particular uncle's voice, rumbling through the dark like thunder. He is one of her newer relatives, having arrived only that morning. All grownups are tall but this new uncle is a giant who towers over everyone else. His big feet look pale in their rubber slippers, a band-aid where each toenail should have been. He never takes off his dark glasses, not even at night. She wonders if he can see in the dark. Maybe he has laser vision like Superman. Or maybe like a pirate, he has only one eye. She presses her ear against the wall. If she closes her eyes and listens carefully, she can make out the words: *sundalo, kasama, talahib*. The last word she hears clearly is *katawan*. The visitors are now quiet but still she cannot

sleep. From the living room, there are sounds like small animals crying.

She comes home from school the next day to see the visitors crowded around the television. She wants to change the channel, catch the late afternoon cartoons but they wave her away. The grownups are all quiet. Something is different. Something is about to explode. So she stays away, peering up at them from under the dining table. On the TV screen is the President, his face glowing blue and wrinkly like an old monkey's. His voice wavers in the afternoon air, sharp and high like the sound of something breaking. The room erupts in a volley of curses: *Humanda ka na, Makoy! Mamatay ka! Pinapatay mo asawa ko! Mamatay ka rin! Putangina ka! Humanda ka, papatayin din kita!* The girl watches quietly from under the table. She is trying very hard not to blink.

It is 1983. They come more often now. They begin to treat the apartment like their own house. They hold meetings under the guise of children's parties. Every week, someone's son or daughter has a birthday. The girl and her brother often make a game of sitting on the limp balloons always floating an inch from the floor. The small explosions like guns going off. She wonders why her mother serves the visitors dusty beer bottles that are never opened.

She is surprised to see the grownups playing make-believe out on the balcony. Her new uncles pretend to drink from the unopened bottles and begin a Laughing Game. Whoever laughs loudest wins. She thinks her mother plays the game badly because instead of joining in, her mother is always crying quietly in the kitchen. Sometimes the girl sits beside her mother on the floor, listening to words she doesn't really understand: *underground, revolution, taxes, bills.* She plays with her mother's hair while the men on the balcony continue their game. When she falls asleep, they are still laughing.

The mother leaves the house soon after. She will never return. The two children now spend most afternoons playing with their neighbors. After an hour of hide-and-seek, the girl comes home one day to find the small apartment even smaller. Something heavy hangs in the air like smoke. Dolls and crayons and storybooks fight for space with plans and papers piled on the tables. Once, she finds a drawing of a triangle and recognizes a word: class. She thinks of typhoons and floods and no classes.

The visitors keep reading from a small red book, which they hide under their clothes when she approaches. She tries to see why they like it so much. Maybe it also has good pictures like the books her father brought home from China. Her favorite has zoo animals working together to build a new bridge after the river had swallowed the old one. She sneaks a look over their shoulders and sees a picture of a fat Chinese man wearing a cap. Spiky shapes run up and down the page. She walks away disappointed. She sits in the balcony and reads another picture book from China. It is about a girl who cuts her hair to help save her village from Japanese soldiers. The title is *Mine Warfare*.

It is 1984. The father is arrested right outside their house. It happens one August afternoon, with all the neighbors watching. They look at the uniformed men with cropped hair and shiny boots. Guns bulging under their clothes. Everyone is quiet, afraid to make a sound. The handcuffs shine like silver in the sun. When the soldiers drive away, the murmuring begins. Words like insects escaping from cupped hands. It grows louder and fills the sky. It is like this whenever disaster happens. When fire devours a house two streets away, people in the compound come out to stand on their balconies. Everyone points at the pillar of smoke rising from the horizon.

This is the year she and her brother come to live with their grandparents, having no parents to care for them at home. The grandparents tell them a story of lovebirds: Soldiers troop into their house one summer day in 1974. Yes, *balasang ko*, this very

same house. Muddy boots on the bridge over the koi pond, strangers poking rifles through the water lilies. They are looking for guns and papers, they are ready to destroy the house. Before the colonel can give his order, they see The Aviary. A small sunlit room with a hundred lovebirds twittering inside. A rainbow of colors. Eyes like tiny glass beads. One soldier opens the aviary door, releases a flurry of wings and feathers. Where are they now? the girl asks. The birds are long gone, the grandparents say, eaten by a wayward cat. But as you can see, the soldiers are still here. The two children watch them at their father's court trials. A soldier waves a gun, says it is their father's. He stutters while explaining why the gun has his own name on it.

They visit her father at his new house in Camp Crame. It is a long walk from the gate, past wide green lawns. In the hot sun, everything looks green. There are soldiers everywhere. Papa lives in that long low building under the armpit of the big gymnasium. Because the girl can write her name, the guards make her sign the big notebooks. She writes her name so many times, the S gets tired and curls on its side to sleep. She enters a maze the size of the playground at school, but with tall barriers making her turn left, right, left, right. Barbed wire forms a dense jungle around the detention center. She meets other children there: some just visiting, others lucky enough to stay with their parents all the time.

On weekends, the girl sleeps in her father's cell. There is a double-deck bed and a chair. A noisy electric fan stirs the muggy air. There, she often gets nightmares about losing her home: She would be walking down the paths, under the trees of their compound, past the row of stores, the same grey buildings. She turns a corner and finds a swamp or a rice paddy where her real house should be.

One night, she dreams of war. She comes home from school to find a blood orange sky where bedroom and living room should be. The creamy walls are gone. Broken plywood and planks

swing crazily in what used to be the dining room. Nothing in the kitchen but a sea green refrigerator, paint and rust flaking off in patches as large as thumbnails. To make her home livable again, she paints it blue and pink and yellow. She knows she has to work fast. Before night falls, she has painted a sun, a moon, and a star on the red floor. So she would have light. Each painted shape is as big as a bed. In the dark, she curls herself over the crescent moon on the floor and waits for morning. There is no one else in the dream.

Years later, when times are different, she will think of those visitors and wonder about them. By then, she will know they aren't really relatives, and had told her names not really their own. To a grownup, an old friend's face can never really change; in a child's fluid memory, it can take any shape. She believes that people stay alive so long as another chooses to remember them. But she cannot help those visitors even in that small way. She grows accustomed to the smiles of middle aged strangers on the street, who talk about how it was when she was *this* high. She learns not to mind the enforced closeness, sometimes even smiles back. But she does not really know them. Though she understands the fire behind their words, she remains a stranger to their world. She has never read the little red book.

Late one night, she will hear someone knocking on the door. It is a different door now, made from solid varnished mahogany blocks. The old chocolate brown ply board that kept them safe all those years ago has long since yielded to warp and weather. She will look through the peephole and see a face last seen fifteen years before. It is older, ravaged, but somehow the same. She will be surprised to even remember the name that goes with it. By then, the girl would know about danger, and will not know whom to trust. No house, not even this one, is safe enough.

The door will be opened a crack. He will ask about her father, she will say he no longer lives there. As expected, he will look surprised and disappointed. She may even read a flash of fear before his face wrinkles into a smile. He will apologize, step back. Before he disappears into the shadowy corridor, she will notice his worn rubber slippers, the mud caked between his toes. His heavy bag. She knows he has nowhere else to go. Still, she will shut the door and push the bolt firmly into place.

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