

HEAD-TALK

LYSTRA ARANAL

"I've got a confession," she says. Melissa sits across from me in this circle I subject myself to every week. We all have our confessions, gathering once a week while a man in a blue overcoat walks around us asking, "How does that make you feel?" I never know how it makes me feel. Every Wednesday at 8pm, when we've all had our fill of the free sachet coffee and day-old selection of corner-shop pastries and doughnuts splayed on a table laden with the juvenile scribbles from the mass of pubescent teens who occupy the room—the building—during the day, he would tell us, one by one, looking straight into our eyes, a clipboard under his arms, "How you feel is your body's way of telling you what you want." I reply by staring at the dregs of coffee at the bottom of my cup, really not wanting to talk, to be shown a picture and asked, "So what's in your head?" I know I'm next; first Melissa, then me, soon followed by a man who comes here once a month, always with a new name.

"What is it?" we all ask in unison—a habit now.

She tells us of a man she watched fall into the train tracks. How she woke up late one day, made to rush, forced to skip her morning shower, running to the station to stand breathless by the tracks in time to meet a man she's been dating for a week, to hold his hand and say "I hope you have a good day at work, honey" before giving him a peck on the cheek. We all nod,

knowing what comes next. There is a purse she drops on the floor—always the same pink purse with rhinestones that her mother gave her for her sixteenth birthday—just as the train appears in the distance. She never stoops to pick it up, always leaving it for the man whose face we never get a clear picture of, who bends down and trips just as the train approaches, falling head first into the tracks. Melissa stops there. The man in the overcoat has his left hand raised and we all say: “We understand.”

We’ve all gone through this. Melissa never looks down, taught to look us all in the eye as we continue to nod at her until the corner of a blue sleeve brushes past me, a tap on my shoulder. I am next.

“I have a confession,” I begin. I do not wait for the circle’s response. I tell them about my mother, of standing by the front door waiting for her to come home and how the bus is all I see—number 56. That same bus we took just last week, her hands wrapped tightly around my wrist, pulling me up the first step as if I’m still five and unable to get my legs high enough. I see the number 56 every time my mother leaves the house, how she walks two blocks to the bus stop, waiting five minutes for a ride that’s always on schedule. I know how mother counts her steps, one hundred thirty six steps away from our front stoop, her right hand clutching the loose change in her pocket. The bus stop is visible from beyond the door, but I always choose to stay still by the threshold. I tell them of a man getting on the bus right behind her, a splay of bullets—a cracked windshield.

The man with a new name—Santiago—goes next.

I’ve been coming here for a few months now, shortly after I shipped myself over. The man in the blue overcoat tells me not to use the term “shipped over” because it makes me sound like an animal, a dog mostly, locked in a box and thrown into

a vessel, only to be released in another part of the world. For the most part, it's true; but I've been taught not to talk about it much. Over here, I act like I'm someone else. Rolling, turning, slipping my tongue to shape words—taught to erase—how I've learned to order a slice of 'peet-sa' and not a 'peet-cha.' Small distinctions, though big enough to make a difference, for people to stop looking at me, asking how long I'm visiting for and if I'd like a T-shirt or a postcard bearing a slew of tourist attractions. I pass those attractions on my way to work, though I'm asleep most of the time, my head resting on the window of bus number 47—taking me five miles to a house where I answer calls and make coffee for my boss, a woman who spends her time hooked to a computer talking to someone on the other side of the world, screaming obscenities at each other whenever the screen bursts in red text—errors in codes. When she asks for coffee every two hours, I steal sugar sachets and bring them to my weekly meetings.

“Where the fuck's my coffee?”

“It's coming.”

“No it's not.”

“It is. Can you please wait—ma'am.”

“Don't you dare take that tone with me.”

“I don't have a tone.”

“There it is again.”

“What?”

“Watch your mouth.”

“With sugar?”

“What?”

“Sugar.”

“Two. Hurry the hell up.”

“You're almost out.”

“Of what?”

“Sugar.”

“Go to the store.”

“Okay.”

“Not now.”

“I know.”

“My coffee?”

“In a while—ma’am.”

I take four sachets of sugar for every cup of coffee.

The man in the blue overcoat passes pictures around the circle and we each get one. We’re supposed to talk about it, make it mean something even if we have no idea how to. Mine is Mickey Mouse sketched on a torn page of a notepad, the type of paper that splits when you write too hard. The paper is onion skin next to the decks of cards I see Melissa holding. Santiago has a picture of a rocket ship cutout from a cereal box. The man walks around asking us what it is we see. All I see is the woman next to Melissa hiding her picture in the pocket of her jeans. Her name is Cher—or Cherry. I always forget to ask. She stutters.

“Share with the group. How does that picture make you feel? What do you see?” the man has his overcoat completely buttoned-up even when the room is stuffy.

“I’d like another doughnut,” Santiago is waving his cutout around.

The man continues to circle, his hands in his pockets, “We’ve got 20 minutes left, c’mon let’s make the most of it.”

Melissa is staring at the ceiling; and the woman beside her has her arms raised, asking for another picture.

I look at the picture I’m holding, “I’ve got something.”

Santiago hugs his stomach.

“It’s a rainy day.” I tell them of a boy who used to live across the street from me, the one with the roof made of scrap metal. I was eight then. He was a few years older than I was, already in a school uniform when I was still being carried around in my father’s arms with ribbons in my hair. He used to fold paper boats, coloring them with markers stolen from school, racing them along the road whenever our neighborhood pooled after days of rain. He was always by himself, carrying four boats—always four boats—shouting “*isa, dalawa, tatlo*, go, go, go!” to no one. I would watch him from the window on the second floor, in the room we used to rent from a Chinese lady who’d visit every month with a purse full of coins. He’d chase his boats until they’ve all sunk, carried off into the sewers.

“Is that the first?” Melissa interrupts.

I nod, “Sucked into the sewers, the boats swirling around him.”

Santiago repeats his name and asks for the doughnuts.

Pinned on my desk at work is a script I’ve been given to read whenever a call at work comes in, something scribbled on a notepad after I came in for an interview for a job posting I saw stuck on the back of a bus seat. The woman had walked me out, muttering: “I guess you’ll have to suffice.”

Hello, you’ve reached Mr. Robinsons’ office.

(eh-low, youv reech-ed mist-er Ro-bin-sons of-fise)

What can I do for you today?

(what kan ay doo 4 you 2-day?)

I’ve never had to answer the phone once since working here and I have no idea who Mr. Robinson is. It’s always just the two

of us in that place: my boss screaming at the computer and me waiting by the coffee pot. I once asked her who Mr. Robinson was, sharing that I've yet to meet anyone with such a last name, that I've only ever heard it use in cartoons or movies. She told me to shut up. I don't push it any further. She hands me money in unmarked envelopes at the end of every week and that is enough—a collection of bills and loose change, changing denominations each time because I apparently don't look like I should have large bills in my wallet. I take what I can. It's the way I help with the rent of the apartment my mother and I have been staying in ever since my father had to go away. We keep pictures of him around the house and my mother still sets a table for three every night for dinner, placing a picture where he should be sitting.

“One day, *babalik rin sya*.” Mother scoops too much rice on my plate. She still thinks he'll come back; but I know he won't—can't.

“Ma, you know that's not possible.” I see my mother cringe, unaccustomed to the way I now speak.

“*Hay naku*, we cannot think like that! Must be positive!”

“I just don't want you getting your hopes up.”

“Don't worry, *anak*.”

This is how our conversations always start at home, after she comes home from another one of the odd jobs that I cannot keep track of. We are both paid in envelopes of cash—never checks—that we hide in a shoebox under the couch, taking it out once every two weeks to count. We're saving for another long bus ride; but until then, we stay here, learning to keep quiet about the work we're not even supposed to have.

Most nights, here's what I see in my sleep: dark figures standing at the end of an alley I used to walk down as a child on my way to school, a few blocks away from my grandfather's home in Santo Niño where my family moved to when I was eleven, just months after my father lost his job in Manila. It was a shortcut I'd take during the days when my mother allowed me to walk to school alone, sending me off with a handwritten map I'm supposed to follow. I don't. I go down this alley instead, the one between two decrepit buildings that I've seen other children in the same blue and white uniforms go through. A shop selling homemade popsicles lay at the end of that alley and I'd always buy two—a mango and an orange—finishing them both by the time I got to school. In my sleep, I'd never reach the end of that alley. Something would always stop me: a yank on my collar, told to go back.

The man in the overcoat always tells us that if we can just find the right connection we'd understand what those images really mean. Melissa thinks it's all rooted in trauma. The rest of us just nod. It makes sense, though I never got to ask her what's hers. Forty-five minutes is really too short for anything. No one lingers for chit-chat or after-meeting drinks. When the time's up, everyone gets up and heads out the door.

It was during one of those sugar runs for my boss when I noticed a flyer with detachable stubs tacked on the grocery store's bulletin board, the same place where I went looking when we needed a place to stay during our first night in this town.

Head-Talker Seeking Fellow Head-Talker!!!!

Are you a Head-Talker?!
Come gather with fellow head-talkers!!
Coffee and Snacks provided.
Every Wednesday, 8pm (except on holidays)
BHS, Room 108

I brought a handful of single-serve sugar packets my first night there.

“How about you, Santiago? We haven’t seen you in a while. What have you seen lately?” The man in the blue overcoat never sits down, always hovering around the circle, his eyes fixed upon the clock on the wall above a blackboard that still has the day’s lessons scribbled on it. Equations and a Venn diagram.

We all turn to look at Santiago. He is rubbing the cereal box cutout between his palms.

“I still see things.” He tells us about this morning, of him walking out of his apartment building. “I used the fire escape by the side of the building.” He slaps his right thigh. “There was a loud sound, like that.”

“Go on.”

“I thought I fell, you know, like when a plane flies overhead and you’re like, woah...and, I don’t know. I just saw myself falling... tripping over a shoelace—how easy it is break my head open three floors below, my brain splattered all over the street... all those metal steps, anyone can trip on those or fall through them—such huge spacing between each step...such cracks. Someone should seal those things. I could have slid through them.”

“Is that what brought you back here?”

“It’s supposed to be easier than this, you know. I’m not supposed to see things.”

The man in the blue overcoat has his hand raised again, and we all say: “we understand.”

I don't talk to any of them outside of this circle, though I did see Melissa once outside a store advertising a fresh shipment of adult DVDs and imported Asian candy. I waved from across the street and she looked past me. She was with a man, her arms around his waist. I wonder if he's the man she's been talking about lately and if he knows what goes on in her head when he leaves her to go to the bathroom or to run across the road real quick to get something from his car.

I've seen Santiago too at the local Home Depot. I had caught a glimpse of his uniform last month when he stuffed doughnuts in his pockets, so I dropped by one day after work, pretending that my apartment needed a bed frame. His name tag read 'Max,' so I called him 'Max'—"Hey Max!"—and he turned away and passed me off to his co-worker who soon realized that I didn't really need a bed frame.

All I wanted was to ask them if they've told anyone about what they see. I know I don't—and it's not as if I even have anyone to share this with. Maybe it's for the best. These things we see really should not be spoken of outside the circle. No one needs to know—much like how I haven't told anyone outside the circle about what I saw last week when I decided to take my lunch outside to the small rusted park across the street from the house where I work 8-7 every day.

There was a man jogging around the park. I've seen him before, but mostly once it had gone dark and the lampposts turn everything into shadows. He lives a few houses down with his family—those three young children who I've seen playing in the swings. I watched him turn a corner that day, a gray track suit and a black bonnet disappearing behind rows of scraggly trees, a blur in the distance. Ordinary—really.

But then I started to see his children flying out of swings pushed by no one, landing three blocks away in splatters, their screams silenced by the rustle of the leaves; and the man somehow just kept running, jumping over the blood pooling by the bodies, stride-by-stride he continued to make his way around the park, never looking back.

From afar he looked like my father.

I used to cut articles off the local newspaper when I was eight and stick them on this scrapbook with yellowed edges. I did that for months, chronicling an earthquake that shook Luzon into a stupor, carefully connecting each article to far-off places with a red marker. There's a thick red line linking that lady from Quezon City who lost her son miles away from her, to the article blaming low-budget infrastructures around the city. He had gone for a run, escaping the collapse of his hotel building, only to be caught under an unstable outer wall of a dress shop. Another red line linking whole groups of friends and families to a profile of those lost because of impromptu road trips, how one family was left inside their car, crushed by a tree they had just been under a while ago for a family picnic; and a thick red line linking a picture of my neighbor's car—taken on the day he came home bragging about his new red sedan—to a collection of rubble that lay just outside the perimeter of the distant city. The neighbor came home in scratches and that was enough for me to see how easy it is to lose someone.

“We are a resilient people.” My father sends me an email almost every day, bearing the same message of resiliency, told to keep my head up, to take care of things wherever we may be. He tells us that he’s okay, that he’s left Santo Niño, moving back to Manila to work as an engineering intern—it pays little but it’s better than nothing. “You’ll be able to come home soon.” He’s renting a small apartment on the fifteenth floor in the middle of the city with a few of his fellow interns, young boys fresh out of college. “I guess I’m now a father of three boys.” He signs off with love and a picture of the slice of *mamon* he had for breakfast. I visit the post office every Monday to send him money.

“Told you he’s finding his way back to us!”

I print the emails for my mother and she reads it over dinner, “He’s talking about bringing us home, Ma.”

“No, no, he wouldn’t do that. He knows we like it here.”

“Really? You like it here?”

“Of course!”

“You like this moving around? How we can never get a place of our own?”

“A few more years, Lara, and we’re set.”

“Aren’t you tired of this?” I ask her.

“Tired of what? This is normal. Everyone has to do this if they want to stay here for good.”

“How sure are you?”

“Look at your Tita Gene, her entire family’s now here, all together.”

“That’s ‘cause everything’s in order for them—”

“—a few more years, Lara,” Mother puts the email away, folding it in half and slipping it into a folder. She brings out a map. “Look here, oh. See that red X? That’s where we’ll go next. We just need to save a bit more.”

I don’t look at it—probably another small town where I’d need to canvass for a place for us to stay, somewhere that doesn’t require filling up of forms. We have no papers, just a lot of bus tickets.

“There has to be another way.”

“What do you all want?”

The man in the overcoat asks this every meeting and no one has ever given a satisfactory answer. A few weeks ago, Melissa told us about this pink skirt she saw displayed in a shop window, how it’s much too expensive for her. Cher—or Cherry—came to the meeting in a pink skirt the following week.

“What you feel—what you see—is your body’s way of telling you what you want,” he continues. We mutter the phrase along with him.

“So I want to die?” Santiago has his arm raised, “I want to fall off the fire escape?”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“That Melissa wants to push her new lover down the tracks and split his brain open?”

“Arth—Santiago, whatever your name is, cut it out.”

“That she,” Santiago points to me, “wants her mother shot?”

The man in the overcoat is hitting his thigh with his clipboard.

“He wasn’t here the last time,” I offer.

“Maybe he should be here more often so he can stop being stupid.” Melissa is shuffling her deck of cards.

“Seeing these things means you’re all on the cusp of losing something,” the man hands Santiago a sheet of paper from his clipboard before circling around us again. “What are you all losing? What are you afraid to lose?”

“It’s almost 8:45.” Santiago folds the paper into quarters and places it in his shirt pocket.

The blue was the first thing I saw when I stepped into Room 108 a few days after pulling a stub off the flyer in the grocery store: a man in a blue overcoat pushing a table to the far corner of the room, stacking it with boxes labeled ‘doughnuts,’ Styrofoam cups filled with coffee powder and popsicle sticks, and a clear plastic bag filled with things wrapped in newspapers.

I placed the sachets of sugar next to the box of doughnuts. “Hi, is this the meeting for—” I looked at the stub I’m holding, “Head-Talkers?”

“Yes, yes, grab a seat, I’ll be with you in a second,” he pulled a chair towards me. “Must make sure everything’s all set, you know, this being the first meeting and all.”

I didn’t sit, helping create a circle of chairs instead, “So how many are you expecting?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“I placed flyers all over town, can’t keep track of all of them now, can I?”

I made a circle of ten.

“Wait, why a circle?”

“Isn’t this how it’s done?”

“Do what you want,” he shrugged, walking to the table to bring the plastic bag back to the circle with him.

I sat myself on the chair facing the door.

“I’m excited,” the man sat beside me, placing the bag by his feet. “This is my first time setting up anything like this—though I thought there’d be more.” He was fiddling with the buttons of his coat.

“What made you set this up, anyway?”

“I’ve always been a—”

“—okay, okay, I’m here, sorry I’m late,” a girl sat herself across from us, dropping a pink purse on the floor.

“Hi,” the man walked over to the girl to shake her hand, “and no, don’t worry you’re not late, we’re just about to start.”

“Great. So how does this work?”

“I thought that maybe we could introduce ourselves first and talk about Head-Talk and why we—”

“Sorry. Excuse me,” the girl had her hand raised.

“Yes, do you have a question?” the man asked.

“Not really. I’m just—you know—really excited about this thing.”

“Yes, and so are we.”

“—I know and I hope you don’t think me rude or anything, but if it’s fine, I’d like to go ahead and say something.”

“Yes, of course, go ahead,” he said.

“It’s just that I’ve needed a venue to let this all out.”

“Go on.”

“Right. So hello, everyone. I’m Melissa.” She told us about watching her father fall from a building he was cleaning in the morning. He had called just before breakfast, telling her about his new job cleaning the floor to ceiling windows of buildings forty-five floors high. She had told him to quit, to find another job closer to the ground; but he insisted that she had nothing to worry about, it’s routine...something about safety measures: ropes, pulleys, cleaning cages, those sort of things; but when the call ended, all she saw were the ropes snapping, cages overturning—her father unrecognizable on the ground five towns over.

“What was that?” The man turned to me. “Did you get that?”

I found myself nodding, knowing how Melissa must have felt then, how she must have wanted to run, to get to her father and make sure he’s okay; and how he must have called her hours later while having his lunch safe on the ground, perfectly alright—how she must have felt stupid, maybe even guilty, for what she had seen. “I completely get it.”

“Why wouldn’t she get it? This is what we’re here for right?” Melissa said.

“What?” The man had the first two buttons of his coat undone, his fingers stuck on the third

“This flyer?” she pulled the crumpled flyer out of her back pocket. “I saw it posted at the bus stop. Like you’re a shrink, but for free—I hope you’re free, ‘cause I really can’t afford a shrink right now.”

“What?”

“Like a support group for people who see things in their heads?”

“A support group?”

“Wait. Am I even in the right place? I am, right? You did say ‘Head-Talk’ earlier.”

“Yeah, he did.” I turned to the man in the overcoat. “Isn’t this what the group’s for?”

“You know what, if I’m in the wrong place, I’m going to get out of here,” Melissa said, reaching for the purse on the floor. “I’m sorry—”

“No, wait—stay,” the man buttoned up his overcoat, kicking the plastic bag by his chair away from the circle.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes. You’re both in the right place—totally in the right place... just lost my head there for a sec. So what else do you two want to talk about?” He had a big smile on his face.

Melissa stood and walked over to the snack table, opening the box of doughnuts. “Where’s your clipboard, anyway? Aren’t you supposed to have a clipboard to take notes and stuff? I hope you took notes earlier ‘cause I sure as hell won’t repeat myself.”

I was told to pack a suitcase, that we were finally going on a trip overseas to visit relatives I haven’t seen in years.

“So exciting!” my mother was sitting squat in the middle of the living room in Santo Niño, packing boxes of *pasalubong*—a selection of gifts to remind our relatives of the home they left years ago: *polvoron*, *sampaloc*, *pastillas*, *Choc Nut*, *pili tarts*, and *ube jam*.

“How long will we be there for?” I was sorting through my closet for appropriate clothes to bring.

“Two weeks. Just a short vacation. You’ll be graduating soon, I

don't want you missing too much school." Mother was wrapping the bottles of *ube jam* in old newspapers she made me collect from the shop across the street. "Don't forget the clothes we bought yesterday. I want all of us to look great over there."

I surrounded myself with piles: jeans and sweaters in a corner, the plastic bags from yesterday's shopping in another. "Will we have enough space for all these?"

"Don't worry so much. Everything will fit. Just make sure to pack properly."

"Where will we stay?"

"With Tita Gene, she has room to spare."

I couldn't imagine how Tita Gene—or anyone—could have a spare room.

"That's nice of her to offer," I finally said, rolling the clothes instead of folding them, making everything as small as possible, my father's new blue and white striped long-sleeved button-up shirt indistinguishable from the *pang-bahay* I was bringing along, the old t-shirts and shorts we've been wearing for years around the house.

"Your father will look so handsome! Where is he *na ba*? I hope he gets home soon, I want to see the tickets Tita Gene sent over. It must still smell like abroad!"

The circle is quiet. It gets like this when it's the last five minutes, like it's the first time we're meeting and no one knows what to do with their hands.

"I think we did okay today," the man in the overcoat unbuttons his collar. "Lots of progress."

We all nod.

“Always good to have Santiago back.”

We prepare to leave.

“Wait. Homework.”

Santiago is already at the snack table.

“I want all of you to take note of everything you see this week: the time, what you were doing, where it happened...I want details,” the man has his hand raised.

“Okay,” we all say.

“Great,” the man turns his back to us and begins to write on something tacked to his clipboard. “You can get more snacks if you want and I’ll see you all again next week.”

When there's nothing to do at work and I've answered all of my father's emails of “How are you?” / “Be safe.” / “Don't get caught!” / “Have you sent mail?” I read the news from back home, of the car robberies around the city and the ferries on their way to the various island-towns overturning midway in the sea, or some gun fight in the forest with hostage takings and beheadings. It seems that's all the news agencies over here ever seem to report.

“We're so lucky to be over here,” my mother always says after reading the latest news articles I print for her to read at home. “We don't have to worry about those things.”

I always just nod. I try not to worry, to not think about probabilities—of proximities—of how it's so easy for my father to be one of the people mentioned in the news. I sometimes wait for that, anticipating to read his name on print somewhere within the body of a news article. It's what distance does.

Everything, and anything, becomes possible—a crazed paranoia of the myriad possibilities lurking in every corner, creating these images in my head, really how I gather confessions every week.

“Be careful. It hides in corners.”

The meeting is over and I am pulling the tables to the center.
“What does that even mean?”

The man in the overcoat is stacking chairs when he should be placing them in rows.

“It’s a song.” He sings it.

“Never heard it before, I don’t listen to the radio much.”

“You won’t hear it there.”

“Oh, okay,” I clear the snacks off the table by the corner. Santiago has left crumbs and a half-bitten doughnut.

“So—what do you think of this circle so far?”

“I like it. It’s good to get everything out, to have a place to talk.”

“And not have people think you’re strange, I bet.”

“That too,” I un-stack the chairs and line them in rows. “Do you ever see anything like we do?”

“Nope.”

“Then how come you always seem to know what to say?”

“I don’t always know what to say.”

“I think you do.”

“It’s mostly the Internet.” The man stops stacking the chairs and unclips a page from his clipboard, flashing the page at my direction. “See?” A printout from mayoclinic.com.

“Well you’re good at browsing the net then.”

He laughs, “I am. I’m really good at that.”

“Since you don’t see what we see,” I stop un-stacking chairs and sit down. “Does it ever weird you out?”

“Does what weird me out?”

“You know, the things we see.”

“Yea. All of you get really detailed sometimes.”

“Why’d you form this group then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh come on, I’m sure there must be a reason.”

“For fun—maybe.”

“Yeah, right. That can’t be it.”

“Probably is.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I just had extra time on my hands.”

“So you formed a group ‘cause of that?”

“Sure—why not?” The man has his head down now, busy scribbling something on the pages of his clipboard.

“Come on. Tell me. I won’t tell anyone.”

“I just had time. That’s all.”

“Lame.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is.”

He looks up. “Fine. You really want to know?”

“Yes, I do.”

The man walks over to the bag he brings with him every meeting. “Come here.”

I walk over to the table at the front of the room.

He pulls a thin, square package from the bag, “here.”

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

I peel the tape from the corner of the package.

“Wait. Not here. Not in front of me,” the man adjusts the buttons of his overcoat and gathers his things. “Just don’t tell the others, okay?” He says goodbye and walks out of the room, leaving me with a mess of stacked chairs, a clipboard left atop one of them. Attached to it are scraps of paper filled with nothing but doodles of the buildings around town.

“I’m sorry but you can’t stay here anymore,” Tita Gene had already placed most of our luggage out by the front door when we woke up a few days after missing our flight back. “It’s not safe for us. You can’t stay here. Please leave.”

I was told to stay in the room and help my mother pack the rest of our things. I could hear my father out in the hallway. “You can’t do this to us. Where are we going to go?”

“That’s not my problem anymore, is it?”

“But we’re family!”

“Still not my problem.”

“How can you say that? After all we’ve done for you?”

“I will not risk everything for your silly plan.”

“We all just want what you have—you know. Come on. Think of Lara!”

I watched my mother empty the contents of the cabinets into a bag—a mess of clothes and items that weren't ours—before being told to quickly bring the bag out front with the rest of our things and keep my head up. It was quiet when I got there, my father already standing outside the opened door, luggage in hand.

I am always the last to leave—tonight, leaving a little later than usual—my footsteps too loud along the corridors of lockers and chained doors. I keep the wrapped package in the pocket of my coat as I push through the door leading to the parking lot. Nights here are different, a certain chill that pervades the bone, different from the nights spent on the patio in the house in Santo Niño watching mosquitoes circle around the blue glow of the mosquito lamps, a woven fan made of dried *buri* leaves keeping away the flies that circled my head.

I head towards the nearest bus stop, three blocks down the road, a corner past the grocery store where I buy milk on discount and where I first spotted the flyer tacked on the store's bulletin board. I don't usually pass through here. The lampposts are dim and the houses spaced too far apart; but it's a shortcut that'll get me to the bus stop a lot quicker. The light from the grocery's neon sign illuminates most of the street and I catch a glimpse of the man in the blue overcoat, standing by the advertisements plastered on the swinging doors, smoking a cigarette and talking to a woman wearing the grocery store's employee apron. He is laughing, doubled-over, gesturing wildly in the air, the buttons of his coat undone. Underneath is a shirt with "**Quality Fresh Produce...It's in the BAG**" printed in bold letters atop a logo of the grocery store.

I turn away and count my steps, keeping in time to my watch, not wanting to miss the bus, to have to hail a taxi and spend the

cash I'm supposed to throw into our little shoebox under the couch—but somehow I'm a few minutes too late.

"Come in, come in! How was your flight?" Tita Gene asked us from her front door, keeping it open as she watched us drag our suitcases up four floors to her apartment.

"The flight's okay," my father said, catching his breath in the middle of the living room, ignoring Tita Gene's attempt to escort him towards the guestroom. "I didn't realize sitting for hours can be so tiring."

"At least you're here now." She pronounced words differently now, like her tongue's constantly rolling. "You really should consider moving here. It's much nicer here."

My mother just smiled, continuing to walk around the apartment looking at all the pictures hung on the walls. "Your children are so big already! Do they speak Filipino?"

Tita Gene laughed. "No, no, Gordon doesn't like it, he thinks it's useless."

Gordon: the man who Tita Gene used to bring over to our house in Manila years before we moved to Santo Niño. They met at a street corner by a night club Tita Gene would go to on the weekends, dressed in skirts that my mother would rush to cover with her apron whenever Tita Gene walked past me. He was introduced to us that same night, walking into our house hand-in-hand with Tita Gene, locking themselves in the room that was supposed to be mine. He soon developed a habit of visiting a few nights at a time over the course of a year. The last time he came over, Tita Gene's belly had grown and he gave her a ring.

“How about Lara? How’s her English?” Tita Gene directed the question towards my mother, her eyes glossing over me.

“It’s okay. She’d be better if we were back in Manila. But you know, it’s so expensive there now. We had to move away.”

“So stay here instead! She’ll be a lot better here. My kids are doing so well here.”

“I know,” my mother had her arm around Tita Gene now. “Everyone always says it’s better here. We’re so jealous of you! Right, Lara?”

I didn’t respond.

“Lara, don’t just stand there being silly. Come help me with the bags,” my father dropped a bag by my feet and opened the door to the room Tita Gene had pointed us to earlier.

I hear the blare of the television as I climb the steps leading up to our rented apartment in a building with leaky ceilings and moldy wallpaper. My mother is sitting on the floor in front of the television, a box of tissues on her lap. “Lara, Lara, come see this!”

I don’t go over right away, pulling the shoebox out from under the couch first, counting the loose change at the bottom of my coat pocket. I put my coat away and take the wrapped package the man in the overcoat gave me earlier, peeling the tape from its corners. It comes loose. A CD case with a cover that reads: *‘Head-Talk: The Incursion Offspring.’*

“Never mind that, come here, come here!”

I go over and sit cross-legged beside her, flipping through the lyrics printed on the album sleeve. I spot the song the man had

sung earlier: track 9. “What are you watching anyway?” The commercials were on.

“Wait.” She passes the box of tissue over to me.

I place the box on my lap just as the news anchor comes back on. At the corner of the screen is a satellite feed of a typhoon over Luzon. The woman on screen reports about flooding, how 80% of Manila is now submerged in varying degrees, and how experts are now predicting the path of another typhoon that looks set to bring more rain and devastation to the area. Images of entire towns swept away by floods flash right beside the woman’s face: animals hanging on electrical posts, people on rooftops, mudslides...the woman is looking straight into the camera, telling the people of a country miles away to brace themselves. It is almost 10 p.m. I think about how she’ll be done with her shift soon, heading back home to sleep under covers she’s bound to call duvets.

“*Ay Diyos ko, Lord!*” My father’s cellphone is unreachable. “Look, Lara! Look at what’s happening! I can’t believe this is happening! Look, oh! Look!” Her thumb is stuck on the redial button, turning white from the pressure.

All I see is my father on the roof of his apartment building with a pail, scooping away the water pooling by his feet, yet the water continues to rise and he has nowhere to go, left to swim towards a wave that drags him out to sea, sucked into the bottom of an upturned vessel, bubbles everywhere. I think of the time he threw me into a river as a child—a way to teach me how to swim—and how I eventually found myself at the bottom scratching my feet on rocks. It took him a while before he came to get me, pulling me onto the riverbank where he sat and watched me spit the water pooled in my lungs.

“*Diyos ko!* I don’t know what to do, Lara! Tell me what to do!”

I run to my room to pop the CD into the player by my bed, setting it to track 9, to that song about corners. I keep the song on loop and take notes.

There was a phone call a few weeks after we left Tita Gene's house, telling my mother and I to stay put, to wait a couple more days before catching a bus to where he was. "Just wait. Stay where you are and wait. Don't ask so many questions," my father said when we asked him why. He had gone ahead and we were supposed to meet him once he had found accommodations and a job. We found out two weeks later through an email forwarded to us by Tita Gene that he was back in Santo Niño, deported after turning himself into the authorities for overstaying his visa, leaving us in a country where we're forced to keep moving, to keep sending money back home because his slice of *mamon* is never enough.
