

# MANO PO

LYSTRA ARANAL

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Mother pulls on Emily's skirt during breakfast, and I hear my daughter say: *"don't lah, later you pull and pull then I have no more skirt to wear to school, how? You want me to walk around in my underwear is it?"* But Mother pulls nonetheless and I go wipe the vinegar and soy sauce spilled on the table as Emily's plate is filled with more garlic rice and the dried fish Mother calls 'daing'. *"I don't want anymore, I so full already."* But Emily eats what Mother has given. It is always like this. Emily keeps eating and Mother keeps pulling on her skirt. I think she wants the hem to touch my daughter's ankles, like that picture I keep in the living room of Mother in her old school uniform. *"So ugly. If I go to school like that, people sure laugh at me one."* I tell Emily that her skirt is fine; and Mother tells her to try the hot chocolate, placing the mug in my daughter's hands as if my daughter is incapable – as if I am incapable. Emily and I are just not used to a heavy breakfast in the morning. *"The hawker center food downstairs more yummy. This one so weird."* Emily likes kopi-o and fried dough for breakfast, not this daing that Mother tells me to fry. Mother wants a home-cooked meal every morning and we have to set the alarm forty minutes earlier. *"You know hor, I usually don't wake up this early. Now for sure I no choice will fall asleep in class one. Got exam some more later."* Mother visits us in Singapore every few years, flying in from the Philippines where she lives – where I was brought up. She does not know that Emily studies past midnight, even if there are no exams to take. *"Ma, can drive me to school today or not? Damn sleepy lah."* I tell Emily that she is big enough to take the bus; and Mother slaps my thigh, turning to tell my daughter

to eat more of the daing so she won't be so tired. Emily brushes her teeth instead. "*Eww. I don't want to smell like fish lah.*" But I notice how Emily is starting to smell like the kitchen I grew up in – the oil and the vinegar, and the tablea tsokolate melting in hot water every morning – and it is only five thirty. I will have to check later if Emily still has her favorite strawberry-scented shampoo in the bathroom. Mother sometimes replaces it when she visits with the coconut shampoo a neighbor back home sells which smells like nothing. So I tell Emily to spray some of my perfume on her uniform and get her things ready; and I see Mother wait for the 'mano po' – for Emily to press the back of her hand against Mother's forehead before she leaves. "*So mah fan, later then I do lah.*" Emily does it anyway, and Mother pulls on her skirt again. "*Aiyah, leave it alone. Everyone wears their skirt like this here. You never see before meh?*" When Emily shuts the door and runs for the bus, Mother asks why her skirt is so short. I tell her that I hemmed it that way because that is how girls wear their uniforms here. But Mother still tells me to buy Emily new skirts – longer skirts – and I do nothing but fill my mouth with my daughter's leftover daing.

There is a pot of water simmering on the stove beside the cheesecloth and the bag of coffee beans Mother has brought over. Kape Barako. I watch Mother pour water into a mug filled with beans she has crushed with the side of the knife I use for chopping vegetables. She never asks to borrow the coffee grinder or the French press I keep on the kitchen counter. She asks for a 'mangkok' instead, a bowl she can place the cheesecloth over and filter the coffee she has left to steep for five minutes. She drinks it black, with a touch of honey. "*Remember Aling Nina, the one who lives down the street from us?*" I have to skip work and listen to her talk about people I haven't seen in years. "*The one with the mole on her face! I'm sure you remember – the one who always sells things. Ano ka ba, I sent you her picture, one time.*" I tell her I do not remember. She does not know how the pictures and letters she sends over gets lost in the apartments

Emily and I keep moving from. *“Ay nako, don’t be silly. Anyway, Aling Nina knows a woman, whose sister-in-law is dating a real estate agent. She can get you a good price on a house. It’s a good investment. And you can visit more often.”* Mother still stirs her coffee the same way, moving the teaspoon back and forth, left and right in the mug. I offer her the pastries I bought from a bakeshop by my office; but she asks for Pan De Leche or Pan De Sal even though she knows I do not have any. *“You can get a house in a good subdivision. Not like this place, so small. And you’re always moving. Not good.”* I tell her that Emily doesn’t mind moving around, and she tells me to finish Emily’s leftover cup of hot chocolate before it gets cold. Mother knows I do not like the taste of her coffee, always made too strong, ‘matapang’ – as she says. *“Of course she will tell you she doesn’t mind. She’s just a child.”* Emily is not a child. She started Secondary Four this year. Mother does not know because I forget to write letters back home, or send pictures. *“At least get a bigger place next time. Jeffrey can afford it.”* I stand and offer to refill Mother’s cup, crushing the beans the way I know how from watching her when I was a child.

I used to tell Emily a story every night before bed when she was growing up, which goes like this:

*When the earth was new and everything was still trying to find its place, people hung their possessions on the sky. The sky was still low enough for that – for children as old as five to poke the sun and the clouds with sticks, and for the mothers to hang their pots and pans alongside the tools the men used to till the fields. But as the years went on, the sky got lower from the weight of things, and soon, no one had to tiptoe because everything was within reach. The men appreciated the convenience, no longer needing to straighten their backs to grab their tools as they worked the fields. But the mothers hated how low the sky was becoming.*

*The sky bruised their elbows, their arms unable to get their pestles high enough to pound the spices to throw into pots ready by their side, and supper was always delayed. One day, when the mothers finally grew tired of their husbands growing grumpier and their children getting more fidgety in their hammocks with every minute that supper was delayed, they got together and devised a plan to lighten the load of the sky. With their husbands out tilling the fields and their children fast asleep in the hammocks, the mothers went around with sticks on fire and poked holes in the clouds, chanting “leave us be, sky, and we will leave you be!” When there were enough holes, the mothers lowered their sticks and waited for the sky to burst into rain – for the possessions of the people to fall back down on the land. The mothers all cheered: “Look! I can raise my pestle up now!” “Look how quick I can chop and stir and get food on the table!” But in their haste to poke holes in the clouds, they had forgotten to untie the hammocks of their sleeping children hung on the sky, and up the children went. Fortunately, the mothers were quick – as they always are – to grab hold of their children’s ankles and were hoisted up onto the sky with them, leaving behind husbands out in the fields, still bent over, struggling to find the tools that were once just right beside them. Until today, the men have kept working, waiting for their wives to holler from the homes that supper is ready, not knowing that their wives are now the stars that twinkle in the night, kissing to sleep the children who have awoken to ask for their fathers.*

For a while, I would watch Emily hide under tables drawing constellations on colored paper she’d leave on their undersides, waiting for her to say: “Look Ma, the sky’s so low!” That is my cue to pick her up from the floor and swing her around, planting

huge kisses on her cheeks. She hasn't asked for this story in years, and I sometimes find myself rearranging the glow-in-the-dark stars stuck on the ceiling of her bedroom.

Jeffrey has not come home. He does not know where Emily and I live. I tell Mother that he is away on another business trip knowing she will not cross paths with him. "*Hay nako, your man ah, always so busy. At least it's all for you and Emily.*" I do not argue and keep my back faced to where Mother is seated. I measure coffee beans and crush them in pairs. "*I don't even know why you're working. Jeffrey provides everything anyway. Better for Emily to have you stay home. That is what a good mother should do.*" My office is a train and two buses away from the apartment. I have a car, the one Jeffrey gave me years ago for my birthday, but gas is expensive and my paycheck barely covers rent, so I circle cheaper apartments in the rental section of the weekend paper and make calls to landlords during my lunch break at work. "*Careful, not so much.*" Mother is watching me pour water over the crushed beans. She likes things done a certain way, like Jeffrey who no longer sends money. He brought me here. Loved the honey of my skin in contrast to his, told me that he had to have me, that he will take care of me. I just wanted a way to see the world. Then, I had Emily. "*Just a teaspoon of honey, anak. Don't like it too sweet.*" I stir in the honey the way Mother does, back and forth, left and right, and remember how Mother likes that Emily has Jeffrey's skin: pale and yellow under the sunlight. My daughter: Emily Lim. Or Lim Xu Lin, Emily – as written on the report cards she brings home from school. Not Emily Bañaga-Lim as I had once hoped it to be. "*Do you know when Jeffrey comes back from his trip? Maybe I can wait for him.*" It's been a few years, and Emily and I no longer wait for him. We've moved on from the condominium where Emily grew up, to HDB apartments near her school – near my budget. "*He's such a nice young man. Look at your life now, so nice, so comfortable.*" I earn by the hour, photocopying and typing documents for men and women in suits and will not be paid for missing work today.

I will have to adjust the month's budget later when everyone goes to bed. "Good thing I taught you to be friendly. I told you no one can resist a Pinay who has charm." Mother takes a sip of the coffee and does not make a face; and I know I have prepared it right. I do not tell her that Jeffrey has found another who is of a darker shade of honey – that I am still Sheryll Bañaga, that I am here only because Emily is here – and his.

Because this is all Emily knows, I learn. Like when she says "Aiyah Ma, don't be so backwards lah and just hem my skirt, can?" I do not argue and take the needle and thread from the cupboard and sew my daughter's skirt to the length she desires. Or when I serve the food I grew up on for dinner – adobo, sinigang, and kare-kare – and see Emily barely touch anything on her plate, I do not cook them again. And when she returns from school and tells me about the plate of Hokkien Mee she had for lunch, I know to head down to the hawker center and order a plate of noodles fried in prawn stock for dinner; but just until I learn how to cook it. And when Emily says "Ma, your hokkien mee so sedap!" – I no longer pretend to have understood. 'Sedap': yummy. I know, only because I asked our Malay neighbor down the corridor from our apartment. I do not worry that my daughter is nothing like me, or that she knows nothing about the country of my birth – the place where I met her father – because when she does not ask, I do not have to tell.

Mother wants to wait for Emily downstairs at the void-deck, and I go with her. We sit by the cluster of benches facing the bus-stop. I tell her that Emily sometimes gets home late, depending on whether she has after-school classes to prepare her for the 'O' levels she will be taking in a few months. I do not think Mother knows what 'O' levels are for, but she nods anyway and nibbles on the fried dough I bought her from the hawker center around the corner. I know how she worries. So when we see Emily finally descend from a bus, I stop myself from asking Mother to not wave the fried dough around.

"Hello," my daughter greets us. I give her a hug and whisper 'po', a word of respect I've been trying to get her to use around Mother, but Emily does not hear. "Aiyoh, leave it alone lah." Mother is still pulling on my daughter's skirt, saying how no school back home would ever allow a student to wear skirts this short. "But this is my home, what. Everyone wears skirts like this here." Mother narrows her eyes at me. I think she expects Emily to regard the Philippines as home, like I do; but my daughter has never been to the Philippines. "So the 'youtiao' nice or not? Told you it's nice, right?" Emily has noticed the fried dough that Mother is holding. Mother smiles and takes another nibble. It is nothing like the rolls of Pan De Sal bought from bakeries down the street from the house where I grew up. "Nice right? But it's better dipped in kopi-o." Mother nods. I know which she prefers and do not say anything even when Emily offers to buy more sticks of youtiao, running to the hawker center ahead of us. I turn to tell Mother that it gets better, that I will prepare more coffee upstairs so Emily can show her the best way to eat it. But Mother has quickened her pace, shouting after Emily to not run so fast, to keep her skirt down. I grab my mother's hands and ask her to stay, just as Emily turns a corner and disappears. #

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