

NEVER LAND

MO FRANCISCO

The day that Melanie and Dino flew out the window, Mrs. Garcia was at the market buying rambutan.

She knew how they loved to first play with the fuzz of the exterior, break the surface open with calculated, precise pinches, pop the gelatinous fruit into their mouths and scrunch up their faces in concentration as they scraped and liberated each fleshy mass from its seed. And then the final, satisfying spit. Mrs. Garcia chastised them, though they never listened, as they spat the seeds out, challenging each other with their prowess epitomized through the length, breadth and height of their seed projectiles. The children would study the seeds in flight with warped interest as they completed each trajectory.

It can be said that they were the seeds of Melanie's inspiration to take flight.

"Flying isn't hard," Melanie explained to Dino the morning that they jumped.

"All you need is a running start and to make sure your body is positioned like this to the ground," Melanie then lay down on a chair, her stomach on the seat, her arms parallel to the floor, her fingertips stretching as if grasping for something just out of her reach.

"But it has to be absolutely perfect, Dino. Your arms and legs have to be as straight as a plank."

“I can fly,” Dino said, glancing up from his PSP. “All I have to do is press these buttons.”

“That’s pretend flying.” Melanie said, snatching the PSP from his hands. He jumped to grab it back, but she held it above her head. She was still a full three inches taller than him.

“*Ate*, give it back!”

“I promise. After we practice.”

So they practiced the whole day, their bellies propped on the cushions of the dining room chairs, their arms and legs stiffly positioned.

They practiced flying straight, how to turn and how to avoid a flock of birds.

“When you go through a cloud,” Melanie said wisely, “it’ll be a little bumpy because of turbulence.”

Melanie knew this because one time on a plane to California to visit her grandmother, the plane had jerked up and down as it passed through a thick cloud. The thought of crashing had crossed Melanie’s mind, but the pilot’s voice had said that it was ‘just turbulence’. She had repeated the word like a chant. Its sound had soothed her.

“I wonder what clouds taste like,” asked Dino.

“Like cotton candy.”

They debated whether all clouds tasted alike, or whether nimbus clouds would taste like grape cotton candy and cumulous clouds would taste like strawberry. They realized that flying was hard work. Their arms and thighs ached too soon.

Mrs. Garcia saw her children balancing on chairs and smiled. It had been a long time since she last saw her children playing together.

Melanie was a practical girl. Some of her teachers would even say an intelligent girl if only she would stop staring out the window during class. Or reading fantasy books behind textbooks.

Practicality made her fill her pockets and Jansport bag with the essentials- a bag of Cheetos Jalapeño, two Hershey's bars, some pieces of *pandesal* with chocolate spread, Shakey's pizza slices leftover from dinner, a bottle of water and a change of clothes. She also packed her beat up, illustrated version of Peter Pan. There was an illustration of the second star on the right. But from her science classes, Melanie knew that the second star (and straight on till morning) could be a different set of directions given that she was coming from the Southern Hemisphere. She pocketed a picture of the constellations which she photocopied in the library. So if they got lost, at least she could always look at the map.

It wasn't quite dark when they jumped out, but Melanie wanted to leave before her mother arrived. She threw open the balcony door of their three-bedroom condo unit. Melanie turned to Dino who was standing behind her. She took his hand in hers, stepped close to the edge and said, "Let's go."

It was a good night to fly.

The air was cool and dry, there wasn't much wind resistance, so they made good time, soaring north of Manila, where Melanie said London was.

At first, it was hard to breathe. They kept yawning for lack of oxygen and from the exertion of their flight. But after they set a nice pace, Melanie was able to enjoy herself. She flew up, down, and upside down. She crowed, squawked and mooed. She sang

silly songs and songs that she made up. She kicked her legs like a frog, then like a dolphin and did the butterfly stroke.

Below, the landscape changed from tall buildings to *yero*-roofed homes crowded together.

Melanie's backpack felt heavy and her back was slick with perspiration from the effort of the load. Despite her earlier practicality, Melanie felt impulsive. She slipped her arms through the straps and released her burden. It fell long and silent into the cluster of shanties below. Melanie smiled, imagining the family below opening her bag. Like manna from Heaven.

Dino didn't say anything, didn't squawk, cheer or sing. He didn't even notice their provisions falling to the earth—his thumbs were busy flying over his portable console. For the moment, he was Jack, a katana-wielding magician, and he had a mission to fulfill, or at least a level to complete, before they landed.

The clusters of houses were then replaced by clusters of trees—the lights in the occasional house no longer strong and incandescent, but feeble and flickering. They flew low enough so that the branches of the tallest trees reached up to tickle their stomachs. Melanie laughed recalling the ancient memory of her dad hoisting her in the air and over his head while he made airplane sounds.

Flying through the clouds left her skin dewy, like morning flowers. She forgot however, to taste the clouds. But if she had, she would have realized that they did not taste like cotton candy. They tasted like nothing at all.

As the night deepened and became colder, they grew tired and decided to rest for the night.

For Melanie, the forest was wonderful. The trees were bigger and more awesome than any she had encountered in the Legazpi

Park, near their home. They settled down beside a tree that was bright with millions of tiny dancing lights.

“Look Dino,” Melanie said, “Christmas lights.”

“They’re stars, *Ate*.” Dino jumped up and down, trying to catch one in his hand, but he was too short.

“No, I bet they’re fairies.” Melanie said. “Let’s clap our hands.”

They counted to three and clapped as loudly as they could. The fairies danced, some slowly, others quickly as they wove in and out of the leaves, each of them with a rhythm of their own. But at the sound of the clapping, all of them shown just a little bit brighter.

They fell asleep to the fairies’ lights, more comforting than their own nightlight at home.

It was about this time when Mrs. Garcia came home.

She put the bag of rambutan on the table and placed some in the refrigerator. She called out to her children. There was no answer. Melanie’s school books and pens were scattered on the floor, her bag nowhere to be found (except in the shanty house, its contents long since devoured). The window was left open, its thin curtains billowing from the fan’s oscillation.

Mrs. Garcia told herself to stay calm.

She told herself not to wail. Or drop down on her knees. Or tear at her hair.

That’s what she told herself.

The police did not file Missing Persons cases for children who flew away. They laughed at her report, asking how sure was

she that they flew away? Wouldn't they walk out the door like normal runaways?

Normal runaways.

As if running away was a trend. Like skinny jeans or yogurt or Justin Bieber's hair.

Mrs. Garcia shook her head. She knew her children. She saw them practice flying. She heard them talking about the taste of clouds.

Well, did she at least know why they had left?

Mrs. Garcia knew. It was the Camp Incident.

Melanie had wanted to spend the night with her friends. Her best friend's brother was a mountaineer and he had organized a trip for his younger sister and her friends. Mrs. Garcia had said that she was too young to camp overnight. And no, she didn't care that all of Melanie's friends were going.

"You'll understand when you're a mother yourself." Mrs. Garcia had replied, dismissing the discussion the way she dismissed other things Melanie asked permission for. But Melanie would never be a mother, so she would never understand. Even more that she was only 11 and her friends would be roasting marshmallows over a bonfire, telling scary stories.

Melanie knew many scary stories and could spin them with the right amount of dramatic pauses, which made her friends scream from fear. She would have been the star of the camp.

There would be the usual stories about the *manananggals*, *aswangs*, *tikbalangs* and *sigbin*. But the stories she would have told would have been about the spirits that kidnapped children and turned them into trees and rocks. While the others would've

shuddered at the thought of being turned into a tree, Melanie would say, “It’s very environmental of them don’t you think? What with climate change and all, we need all the trees we can get.”

When it came to camping, Mrs. Garcia had heard her share of horror stories too.

There was the one about the flash flood that claimed the lives of experienced mountaineers in Zambales. There was the story about the Filipino botanist who was killed in an NPA-military crossfire. Not to mention the story of her sister’s friend who tripped on a root and jabbed her eyelid into a sharp branch freshly hacked by a *bolo*. She didn’t lose her eye, but it was close. Too close.

There were other horror stories in the imagination of a mother. Especially for mothers with pretty 11- year old daughters who just got their first period.

What Mrs. Garcia did not know was that Melanie shared that same fear with her mother. It wasn’t her mother, nor the Camp Incident that made Melanie leave.

It was this:

She hated shaving her legs. It was a bothersome and eternal ritual. She’d shave them one day, cut herself in the process and two days later, she’d have to do it all over again.

Then those shaven legs would have to be crossed demurely at the ankle as she sat in class. Her favorite *bimpo* draped under her uniform, under her white *sando* was replaced by a flower patterned handkerchief, engraved at the corner with her initials M.G. embroidered in script. Its daintiness required her to fold them into quarters instead of the usual crumpled up ball that she stuffed in her checkered skirt pocket.

She hated her training bra which itched and bit into her rib area. She hated what it had to support—her breasts like growing tumors felt heavy and slowed her down on the track field.

She hated the sudden softness of her thighs, the blemishes on her skin and her sudden self-consciousness when a boy entered a room.

So naturally, inevitably, she wanted to fly away.

Melanie woke up with the taste of bile in her mouth and an unfamiliar emptiness in her stomach. The last time they had eaten was their *merienda* of pizza and mojos – the leftovers of which she had impulsively thrown away. She never thought emptiness could ache, but there it was, dull and constant.

Usually, her mother prepared breakfast on the table, ready to be consumed the moment she and Dino stumbled down the stairs. There was the mandatory cup of Milo, a saucer placed on top of the mug to keep in the warmth. There was always an equal number of marshmallows in Dino's and Melanie's mugs. They knew, they counted.

There was always rice for breakfast with *tocino*, *longganisa* or corned beef. A pleasant morning surprise was SPAM, cut so thinly and made so crisp that the edges curled seconds away from being burnt. Tomato ketchup for the SPAM, banana ketchup for Maling. Eggs, scrambled with milk and melted cheese for Melanie, sunny side up, the yolk *malasado*, for Dino.

All capped with a bowl of cereal with banana slices if they weren't running too late.

At that moment, Melanie would have been happy with just the bowl of cereal. Even without the bananas and the spoon of sugar that she always snuck in while her mother was busy ironing their school uniforms.

Melanie got up and saw that her legs were bleeding from scratching at mosquito bites the whole night. The raw skin was tender and tingling, begging to be scratched further. She bit her lips and instead slapped at her legs as an alternative. She shook Dino awake and told him to follow her.

There was a thin trail they followed for a while, the ground compact from use. Carabao droppings, gray now from being dried in the sun, littered the path. Dino kicked at one and it crumbled into a dusty pile. That's gross, she chided him like a child. Her foot itched to kick one herself, but she daintily navigated through the piles.

Dino sat on a rock and rested his chin on his knees, his arms dangling over the side of his legs, and began his litany of complaints.

"I'm hungry, *Ate*,"

"I want my Cheetos!"

"I'm itchy."

"I want to go home."

"Then go home, you baby." Melanie stuck out her tongue. "I knew you'd just whine and whine."

She stormed off. Dino paused for a minute before standing up and running after her.

They wandered for a few hours before stopping in another clearing. They split the Hershey's bar in Melanie's pocket. It was melted and deformed. They licked it voraciously off the wrapper. It momentarily satiated their hunger but aggravated their thirst.

“*Ate*, why don’t we just fly home?” Dino was miserable. He was tired and his PSP batteries had run out.

So they tried. They lay down like planks and thought happy thoughts. But the returning hunger in their bellies and the rawness of their scratched insect bites made it impossible to get off the ground.

That night, melanie was grateful for the light of the full moon. It led them to a clearing where they could rest.

But the light also meant that they could see the shadows creeping along the foliage, growing long and frightening with their imagination. Melanie suddenly hated her vast archive of scary camp stories. Remembering them now wasn’t helping her nerves.

Dino was too hungry to be scared, but didn’t say anything about it. Melanie, also hungry, refused to admit the emptiness in her stomach. When it growled, she coughed to cover the sound. She preoccupied herself by gathering leaves and making a makeshift cushion.

“Get some sleep,” she told Dino as she curled up on her side of the leaves. Almost immediately, mosquitoes settled on her skin and she slapped them impatiently away but not quickly enough to evade their bites. These were the kind that didn’t itch but the kind that hurt and throbbed. She closed her eyes tighter, as if she could shut out the mosquito bites. She thought of how her mom always put OFF lotion on her arms and legs when they went out. She thought of how her mom had fixed her bed to look like a princess’ – with a mosquito net cascading down over the sides like a canopy. Tucking Melanie into bed, her mother would pull the sheer net around her, kiss her forehead and call Melanie ‘princess’. It was Melanie’s one girlish indulgence.

Dino was curled up in a fetal position, shivering and hugging his PSP to his chest like a pillow. Melanie took off her jacket and draped it over his shoulders. She thought to embrace him for warmth, but decided to turn to her side and curl her knees to her chest.

Mrs. Garcia still had not slept.

She spent the hours either staring out the window or at the empty beds of her children. But fatigue did not recognize grief and it took over her body. She dreamt a true dream.

The moon was bright and there was a clearing. Melanie was talking in her sleep the way she always did. She was still except for her leg which began to twitch. A wild dog was gnawing at her leg. Its ears were perked up, shaping themselves like horns as it tugged at Melanie's ankle. There was a ripping sound as a piece of dark silk came apart in its mouth. The creature disappeared into the forest with its prize. Later on in the night, it would grow bored of its new toy and leave it forgotten behind a pile of rocks.

Days after, Mrs. Garcia would see Melanie's shadow haunting the walls of her bedroom or laying on the sheets under the canopied bed. Or at the kitchen table as if waiting for a meal.

On her bad days, Mrs. Garcia would find that she would talk aloud to the dark shape of her daughter. Sometimes, it acted as if it understood her. But more often than not, it fled into the darkness whenever Mrs. Garcia came near.

The next morning, Melanie and Dino discovered that a few meters from where they slept was a rushing river which gave them clean, cool water. There was a mango tree beside and plenty of fish, snails and crabs for the picking.

Melanie found out that she knew, as if by instinct which plants were edible and which would make you have the runs for

days. She could also understand the murmurings and gurgling sounds of the river. They told her where the fish were or where the freshest spring was. She could interpret the whispering of the wind to the leaves who in turn would rustle their reply.

Without his PSP, Dino spent most of his time in the river. He soon discovered that he had a knack for catching fish. If he requested that they go into his open hands, they would oblige. The fish were kind to him, as was the river, though he could never quite understand their language as well as Melanie could.

Slowly, they lost their desire and cravings for Cheetos Jalapeño or Shakey's mojos and acquired a taste for raw fish and snail which they sucked straight out of the shell.

Neither of them found their newfound talents odd in the least. Neither was surprised at how their limbs suddenly hardened with muscle, their fair complexions darkened, Dino's voice deepened while Melanie's body softened and expanded in certain areas. They each grew secret hair which they suddenly grew ashamed of. Melanie no longer took a bath in the river at the same time as her brother. Not even when she bathed with her clothes on.

From time to time, they tried to fly out, but found they couldn't. The urge had disappeared, along with the print on the map which had been photocopied with cheap powder ink.

One morning, a few months after they left, Melanie stripped off her clothes for her daily bath in the river. The body revealed under her clothes was that of a woman, her breasts full and ripe, her stomach taut. Ebbing and flowing, the river lapped at her skin, promising that she would become the most precious drop in its body.

It embraced her as she submerged, getting into her eyes, mouth, ears, her womanhood.

Coming out of the river, she walked to the *balete* tree where she had draped her clothes. The tree was gone now and in its place was a man carrying her clothes in the outstretched limbs of his trunk. Melanie looked at him without shame, her eyes surveying him brazenly, her mind still retaining the innocent curiosity of an eleven-year old child.

But it was the stirrings of a young woman that made her appreciate the leanness of his body. She realized, now with a blush, that his color, the deep tan of tree bark, glistened bronze in the sun. The light breeze ruffled his hair so gently that the individual locks resembled wayward leaves.

She thought he was beautiful and he knew that she would, for that was the form he had chosen to take.

He pulled her toward him. His arms like vines coiling around her body. Her skin was alive, as if each hair on her body was a blade of grass and she could feel each sway in the breeze. His tongue pushed down her throat until she thought she would choke from the pleasure. His limbs stiffened around her, sinewy lines of muscles deepened into the grooves of a *balete* trunk.

Enveloping her in his embrace, he petrified around her, reverting to the form of a tree, enclosing her in his skin, his bark. She made a sound – it could have been a scream or a moan, but no one could know, his mouth was pressing down hard on hers, locked in an eternal kiss.

Dino, who was fishing down the river, witnessed what happened. Knowing that Melanie was somewhere that he could not follow, Dino stroked his beard thoughtfully and decided that it was time to go home.

On the way home, he passed the tree with the fairies. Dino reached up—he was tall enough now—and caught one in his hand. As he opened his cupped hands, the greenish light died

and Dino could see that it was nothing but an insect that he held in his hand.

AFTER the children left, Mrs. Garcia kept the window always open. She still bought the rambutan. Had she known that they were what inspired her children's flight in the first place, then maybe she would not have religiously purchased them. She would not have been so sentimental. Maybe she would have smashed each and every fruit with a mortar, or a hammer.

But she didn't know.

Her husband threw himself into his work. He got two promotions in less than two years. They were now sufficiently well off enough to buy a flat screen TV, invest in a two bedroom condominium in the Fort, a new car, and, if he chose to, a mistress or two.

When he comes home, he picks his wife off the floor where she waits by the window. Sometimes she is asleep, sometimes she's awake, no longer crying but eating rambutan at an alarming rate, the seeds weighing heavy in her stomach.

In bed, he tries to open her up, but she is always closed to affection.

His grief is aggressive and listless. Her grief is quiet and vast.

She would forgive them, she knew. That was the role of a mother. They would never admit their fault. That was the role of a child. But for now, she set aside their gifts for her in a box. Mother's Day and birthday gifts made of uncooked macaroni, drawings and letters were sealed away. Their past affections stored away for the day they returned.

Mrs. Garcia was gazing out the window when she saw a man walk up to the house. He was almost her age, but he had a boyish spring to his step. She thought, vaguely, *I know him*. But she could not place his face.

The doorbell rang and Mrs. Garcia hesitated. She was alone, her husband was still at work. She was not a young woman, but she still had a lovely face, her body kept trim by her diet of rambutan. Still, she knew that this man would not harm her. It was maternal instinct.

She opened the door after the second doorbell. The man was in tattered clothes, his skin was dark as coal, his lips chapped and bleeding, his skin scabbed like the bark of a tree, but he was clean. His long hair was tied in a ponytail.

“Mom, it’s me Dino.”

Mrs. Garcia frowned, afraid of the cruelty of a prank, afraid of the cruelty of her imagination. Because you see, she had dreamt of this moment every day since the day he left. His jaunty step, the PSP hanging from his right hand, like an extension of his arm.

But his eyes were glistening, and he still had his childish habit of bouncing on his heels when nervous. A habit she had always hated, but now was glad of. She finally nodded, and opened her arms. “Yes. Yes you are.”

Dino's PSP was cracked and weathered with age, though he had been gone for less than a year. Mrs. Garcia fed him *sinigang*, and he wondered what boiled snail *sinigang* would taste like. He imagined he would enjoy it more. For dessert, she served a bowl full of cold rambutan. Dino was quiet. He was not used to talking anymore. He cracked open the rambutan with his palms. His hands dwarfed the fruit.

There was grief on Dino's face too. So she did not ask about Melanie. She would someday, but not yet. That could wait. There was time for that grief. But there was also time for this happiness. She held his hand. He rolled the rambutan thoughtfully around his mouth. He scrunched up his face and spat the seed out the window.

He watched the seed make its sleek arch, but only now realized that all seeds, with no exception, came down to land in the mud.

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