

# STILL LIFE

## MO FRANCISCO

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The clouds move slowly.

The mountains of the Sierra Madre stand stoically against the horizon, as they must have for centuries. From Angela's window in Marikina, they are so constant that she often wonders if they still exist or if they are tricks on the eyes, like stars—shining still, thousands of years after their deaths.

Angela sits every day for hours on end, watching the scene from her window. Other times, she tries to count the *yero* roofs of the houses below, imagining that there are still people living in those houses. Imagining that she hasn't knocked on each and every door, waiting, with raw knuckles, for the sound of a lock unlatching or a knob turning. Even a shout to go away would have been welcomed. Anything to counter her growing certainty that she is, indeed, the last person in the world. But there is a stillness in the air, a loneliness in the sound of the land that tells her what she knows in her heart must be true.

At least the clouds move. At least the sun rolls over the landscape, turning obscure shadows into lush rolling hills. At least the mango tree behind her house still bears fruit.

There is still life in the earth.

But nothing that breathes or sighs, sings or speaks.

Angela has forgotten how to speak.

More precisely, Angela has forgotten how to speak well. It is as if her brain is a muscle that has atrophied with disuse. A perfectly normal side effect of being the last person alive.

When she forms thoughts, they are more like pictures in her mind. An image of water, a cup of rice, a can of tuna. Her mind deletes the extra step of trying to be understood because she doesn't have to be understood by anyone. Not anymore.

So when he arrives, tired and relieved to see another person, she opens her mouth and makes a sound that is a cross between a croak and a gargling of sedentary phlegm disturbed to life.

When she finds a word finally, it is “what”, and she coughs it out as if the word tastes like dust in her mouth. Her voice creaks like an old floorboard.

So there they are. Anatomically a potential Adam and Eve. But she is now past bearing children, and he is only thirteen—the same age that her son, Matt, would have been.

Everyone is gone now. They disappeared, one by one, quietly, wilting like flowers.

There was no epidemic, genocide, or righteous fire from the heavens. Just a unanimous decision to stop.

“I'm done,” her husband Richard put it simply. His laptop turned off with its familiar four-note melody. He shut it unceremoniously.

She had wanted to leave with Richard. But Angela also thought that her business wasn't finished. She did not hear the world whisper its end to her. Not the way her husband claimed to have heard it, declaring and standing up the way he had. Like he was closing up shop at the end of a particularly ordinary work day.

Her husband cupped Angela's face in his hands and held it there for a long time, his fingers so long and slender that they curled up to her temples. Angela watched him step outside, out of the shade of the house and into the sun. For a moment he had a boyish smile on his face. He gave her a slight nod, and then suddenly his eyes rolled back, his knees buckled, and he crumpled to the grass.

Angela walked up to the body—for, truly, it was just a body now—and searched for pulses. His skin was already cool to the touch, as if he had passed on hours ago, not a mere few seconds. By the time she had searched each pulse point, his body had already become brittle. When she set down Richard's arm, it crumbled into dust and the rest of his body followed suit.

Richard hadn't been completely good, or saintly—he was known to steal magazines at the dentist's office and on budget airline planes which outright requested guests to leave the copy for others to enjoy on succeeding flights. He was known to pilfer bond paper, red paper clips, and interestingly-shaped thumbtacks from the office.

So it wasn't really the Rapture that took him, but the Finality. Or the Decision. Different people were known to call it one or the other.

"What are you doing here?" Angela manages to ask.

"I heard music playing, so I walked here."

What Angela meant was what was he doing here, alone, in this dead world?

Chris eyes Angela's bowl of rice and canned tuna—one of many cans salvaged from her neighbors' houses, which she was eating straight out of, fork suspended in midair. "I was hoping that there would be some food here."

Angela looks at him, surveying him for the signs of the Finality, as if it were a sickness and she was a doctor who could make a diagnosis by spotting certain symptoms.

There was a certain look in the eyes that Richard had, a satisfied way he had let his shoulders drop.

But in Chris, all Angela sees are the signs of his wandering—his shoulder-length hair, hastily tied up in the style of a Japanese warrior. He is too thin for his shirt, but not so much that it hangs on his shoulders like they were a glorified hanger, and his cheeks aren't quite hollowed by hunger. His arms are tan. Where a watch would have been, his wrist is pale, revealing his natural color. His nails are dirty, but whether from long travel or his being an adolescent boy, she isn't sure.

She blinks.

She pushes the bowl and the canned tuna in his direction.

Her mind recalls long-lost etiquette. She stands up, slowly forming the idea. She forgets to tell him to wait.

When she comes back with a new plate and utensils, she finds him swirling the last spoonful of rice in the tuna can, sopping up the sauce, pushing grains into the grooves of the can.

“Thank you *po*.” He seems embarrassed at his behavior, as if he knows that he had been taught to behave better than that.

Angela stops herself from wiping the corner of his mouth with a wet handkerchief. Matt had also been a messy eater.

Chris wipes his mouth on his watch-less wrist.

They sit in silence for a long time.

After being left behind, Angela grew used to silence and being silent.

Though once in a while, she would say random words aloud, as she would think them. So she would sporadically say “soap”, “ear”, or “ballpen”, out of the blue.

The sound of her voice would then startle her. It was a ghost sending messages from beyond, perhaps trying to tell her why she was left behind. Or why she couldn't leave.

“Thanks for the food,” Chris says, standing up. “I should go now.”

Angela stands as well. She grasps his arm with a hand that once held an orange. Chris looks startled.

“Stay.” She pauses, forms the words. “There's food here.”

So he stays.

Chris doesn't mind Angela's silences. Growing up, he preferred the quiet of his home, empty of parents who worked full-time and a brother who had extracurricular activities. Everything about him is quiet. Even his eyes have a stillness to them. They don't wander or dart in the direction of the tiniest sound or movement. Not like other kids his age who might stop in midsentence as a person walks by, or a dog barks, or a pebble falls.

He can sit for hours and let his mind go silent. And then he will take out a sketchpad and draw.

Not long after Chris decides to stay with Angela, he starts his still life project.

The old masters painted their scenes for their patrons who wanted to flaunt their wealth—boasting that they could afford the cherries, grapes, wines, cheeses, silverware, and ornate cloths that were arranged on the table.

Chris, on the other hand, wants to capture the life left on the cusp of the end of the world. Perhaps one day, someone, something will find his work and know what the last days of the world were like.

Chris starts with fruits. He collects mangoes that have fallen from the tree. He hides the spotted ones in the back of the bowl, putting the flawless golden ones in the forefront. He adds sprigs of *santan* flowers for contrast.

For his brush, he favors a round sable with a fine tip for detailing and bristles that can fan out wide for washes.

He leaves empty spaces on the paper, to serve as highlights that give the fruit their roundness. Through his sable, a golden color can transcend mere color and blossom into a fruit. He adds a blue gouache wash for the bowl, and a pinch of salt to create a crystallized pattern on the surface.

He takes great pains to paint within the lines and to keep the watercolor under control.

When he finishes, Angela takes the mangoes and, with a paring knife, slices them into thirds, cutting crosshatches on the mango cheeks and inverting them so the flesh spreads out like glistening yellow flowers. The spotted mangoes, which were placed at the back of the bowl, taste the sweetest.

Chris rummages through the house for things he can paint: an ancient Nokia 5510 (“That was my first phone”), an angel figurine (“Richard gave me that on my last birthday”), a pile of books (“Oh, I could never throw those out”), a pair of beaten-

up ballet shoes (“I danced once in Paris, you know”), and a red coffee mug chipped at the rim (“Oh”).

Each is placed in the same spot as the mango bowl was—on the table by the balcony, with the mountains as a permanent backdrop.

When Chris paints, Angela brings him iced tea and snacks. Usually fruits, crackers with cheese, and sometimes candied walnuts which she caramelized herself.

She looks over his shoulder, making comments about his work or changing the water in the rinsing jar when it turns from transparent to a deep mauve—dense with discarded paints.

Since he arrived, Angela finds herself having to touch Chris—ruffle his hair, pat his shoulder, or during meals when she passes him a plate, hold it a little longer to feel the force of him taking it from her hands—as if she still can’t believe that he’s real.

When she isn’t watching him paint, Angela sits at the window, looking out at the world, listening to sounds of more life. Ever since Chris arrived, she’s rekindled the dormant hope that they aren’t the only ones left in the world. She sporadically calls to Chris, with every noise that she hears.

At the sound of a metal door creaking in the wind, “Listen, Chris—was that a baby crying?”

Or “Chris, quick, someone’s knocking!” at a branch tapping the window.

It is between these moments, as Angela sits, still as Whistler’s mother, her hair tight in a bun, her breathing slow, her only movement the occasional toe point of her right foot—an old dancer’s muscle reflex, like a twitch—that Chris tries to paint her profile.

She has the sharp features of a *Kastila* without the sharpness of tongue. Her hair is predominantly black, though shocks of platinum streak the hair near her temples. She is not quite old, but she carries herself with a dignity that seems, to Chris, to age her drastically.

First he works on her outline with a 2H pencil—her aquiline nose a barely-there lead line. Then he begins to fill the negative space around her, using the other end of his brush to scratch crosshatches into the drying paint.

Still, no matter how he tries, he cannot capture that imperceptible shadow that a hidden sorrow casts on her face, her eyes, and in the labored way that she moves.

He cannot paint her agony. He cannot perfect her sorrow.

His name was Matt.

He looked more like Richard than Angela. They had the same perennial mischievous grin on their faces, the same natural tan. But unlike Richard, Matt was a ball of pure energy which no one could keep up with. He never walked, he always ran ahead of his parents. When they called him back, he would either double back or jog in place, waiting for them to catch up.

In stores, cafés, and houses he would climb every chair, shelf, or table and launch himself off “just like Superman!” He would crawl through every small space, or leapfrog over footstools, monobloc chairs, and fans on the floor.

Once, he outran Buster, the neighbor’s beagle who, after thirty minutes of chasing Matt, with tongue hanging out, whimpered and collapsed on the grass in exhaustion.

For all his restlessness and boundless energy, when it came to playing hide-and-seek, Matt could stay still for hours on end

in one hiding place. He was undisputedly the best player in his kindergarten class, one time hiding for so long and so well that his teacher panicked and reported him missing to the school principal.

It turned out that Matt—who was small for his age—had in fact curled up in his stroller bag, which was lying by his own desk the whole time.

One day, Angela brought Matt with her to Quiapo church. She held his hand as they wove through the underpass full of stalls and vendors, with their wares on the floor, spread out on cloths. As they surfaced, Matt began to squirm in her grasp.

“Mommy, let go, please.”

“Ay, Matt, you always run off,” she said distractedly, as she navigated him through the people milling around in front of the church, by Hidalgo Street. She had often discussed the prospect of putting Matt on one of those leashes, but she and Richard had agreed that Matt was not a dog, and would not be treated like one.

Still, as Matt squirmed and whined to walk on his own, Angela wished for one.

“Matt.” She jerked his arm. “*Wag. Kang. Makulit.*”

Matt widened his eyes and nodded, his lips pursed tight suddenly.

A vendor called to Angela, “*Ganda*, you want some oranges?”

“How much?”

“For you, thirty-five pesos only.”

Angela rooted in her bag for coins, letting go of Matt's hand for a moment. She paid the vendor and turned to Matt, her orange fist extended.

But he had decided to play hide-and-seek.

Angela spent the next hours seeking for her hiding son, frantic and tear-streaked. Her husband joined her, relatives followed, and the police pretended to join the search, though they were content to linger in the background and talk among themselves or interview, once again, the buxom vendor of oranges for her statement.

Historically, it was proven that no one had ever found Matt Espaldon when he was determined to stay hidden.

After matt disappeared, Angela stopped dancing. She stopped humming. She stopped tapping her feet to her favorite songs.

“The world is over,” she once said to Richard. She said it simply, factually, as she sipped coffee from her favorite red mug, the one that Matt had written a wobbly ‘Mama’ on with fabric glue.

“Angel, don't say that.”

“But it's true,” she said, as her teeth cut into the mug's rim, breaking it with the strength of her loss.

Today, Angela cleans the living room. She *tsks* affectionately at how one teenage boy—a quiet one at that—can create such a mess. She wipes water stains from the wooden table, using her nail occasionally to pick at clumps of dried paint. She uses a wet cloth to rub off the sticky residue left by masking tape. She washes the old mayonnaise jar that he uses to rinse his brushes, scrubbing cheerfully at the paint ring left behind.

She lightly taps the surface of each painting to check if they are

all dry, and lines up Chris's paintings by the window, a time montage of his stay with her.

The mango bowl was the first, created the day after Chris arrived, like a gift at her doorstep. Like a lost puppy that found its way home, or one that has come out of hiding. She hums a song, one that has been forgotten.

Her arms stretch, her fingers curl, her limbs unfold in fluid motion.

She knows the steps, the toe points, the slow sweeping gestures that call out to the world. They seem to say, Hello world. I'm still here.

Chris arrives, wiping sleep from his eyes. Angela is standing with her arms outstretched and eyes closed. The morning sun washes her face with gold, revealing the few freckles and emerging age spots on her otherwise clear skin.

Chris brings out his paints. Hastily, he brushes the paper with water until it's almost soaked through. He stretches and fastens it to the table with masking tape. He blots the excess water with the sleeve of his hoodie.

Forgetting his pencil and his putty eraser, he dips a thick brush hastily in the different palettes of color, myriad colors bleeding into each other. First is the shape of her head, her elegant neck which slopes down to broad shoulders and a prominent clavicle. There is too much to capture to bother with precise strokes and perfect lines.

There is the swirl of her dance, the drop of her head. There is the bun that was a dancer's, unraveling into a curtain of black and white.

Her muscles respond hesitantly to memory. The old aches are

remembered too, like her weak right knee, and newer aches make themselves known in her lower back, her neck, her rheumatic fingers.

Once, she danced Swan Lake, and saw Richard in the audience. It was him and not the pirouettes that made her dizzy that night. It was him that gave her consecutive mornings of dizziness and sickness. It was him that gave her a lost child.

The toe of Chris's sable brush grazes the canvas as lightly as Angela's toe grazes the floor. His wrists flick rapidly, creating loose, free brushstrokes.

Her dance ends as abruptly as it started. She bows, when she realizes that Chris has been watching, and goes to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

Her hands touch her now-flushed cheeks, and she glimpses, in her reflection in the water pitcher, the brightness of her eyes. She muses how this young person has resurrected her from her gray existence.

Chris steps back from the painting. Pinks mix with greens, reds bleed into indigos. Careful black ink outlines run down the canvas like mascara from a weeping woman's eyes.

It is a mess.

He follows Angela to the kitchen. Chris opens his mouth, and Angela freezes. She knows that look. She grabs his wrist, then shakes her head very slowly.

"Thank you," is all he says.

The words barely have time to die in the air when Chris's eyes roll back slowly, his body grows limp—his knees, his arms, his neck, simultaneously. His torso sways ambivalently, choosing

carefully—the way he used to do everything—its final resting place.

Angela drops her mug and runs to catch the body. It collapses in her arms, heavy like a bag of sand that progressively lightens, disintegrating the way sand recedes under the caress of a wave.

Angela sits, the broken pieces of her mug embedding themselves in her bare sole. The earth becomes cooler, such that she wraps a shawl around her shoulders, now slumped low.

In front of her, the mountains of the Sierra Madre shrink, eroding so quickly and silently that their disappearance is almost imperceptible to the untrained eye. But Angela knows each blue outline, she has given names to each of them.

They were all named Matt. Perhaps one can now be named Chris.

Angela only notices the change when the numerous hazy blue outlines in the distance start to disappear.

The earth begins to collapse, gradually and deliberately, the way Chris's and Richard's bodies had.

But for a moment—right before the earth folds into itself and the clouds stop moving—the sun shines more brilliantly than a supernova in its last gasp of life. The streaks it leaves in the sky as untamed as the lines in Chris' painting.

Angela opens her mouth, her voice calm and clear, but her brow raised in mild surprise.

“I'm done.”

And if she said anything else before she crumpled into her chair,  
the roar of the dying earth must have drowned out the sound.

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"Still Life" was first published in *Philippine Speculative Fiction 8* (2013).