

# BITTERSWEET HEARTS

MO FRANCISCO

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*Some stories are real. But all are true.*

1.

Today, her phantom limb remembers.

It remembers a time when she could walk the whole day with him.

His hand in hers.

It recollects the feel of grass between her toes.

It recalls, even, the persistent itch of a mosquito bite.

Today, his phantom heart remembers.

It remembers the time he sat beside her as they cut off the infection.

Her hand in his.

It recollects the strength in her posture, the strong set of her jaw.

It recalls the persistent fear of another unpaid bill in his hand.

Today, a phantom limb and a phantom heart sit together.

The space between their hands close.

As to whose hand is in whose,

only they will know.

2.

In a room in Vancouver, an 87-year old man packs his bag, preparing for his trip to see the woman he couldn't marry.

His ticket was for the Red Eye. It would bring him to Manila on October 5, 9:40AM in time to personally greet her on her birthday, like he does every year. He doesn't know that she had passed away, a month shy of her 86<sup>th</sup> birthday.

3.

Every morning, she wakes up, her bare feet landing on the wood floor, made cold by the winter's unforgiving frost. They don't spend anymore on heaters-- the money goes to his medicine now.

"Ning." John's hand reaches for hers, steadfast and trusting as an infant's. John has forgotten many things now- his age, the school he graduated valedictorian from, even the names of his children. Everything but his wife.

"Ning." He says again. And holds on.

4.

It took 12 hours on a crowded double decker bus to get from Laos to the Tay Trang border of Vietnam. It would be another 12 hours to get to Hanoi, the city that was celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was the city that he had dreamed of visiting since he was 9.

At the border, a Vietnamese official shook his head, pointed at her Visa.

She had to go back to Vientiane, where they had come from.

He looked at his passport- the stamp was still fresh.

Without a thought, he closed his passport and turned his back on Hanoi.

5.

They don't talk about it.

About how every month, like clockwork, her moon blood would flow.

How desperation somehow made the sex better, but still left her unsatisfied.

They don't talk about that baseball onesie he bought 'just in case.'

It now rests in a box, behind dusty Christmas decorations.

They don't talk about how she would stand naked in front of the mirror, bloat her stomach and imagine it a baby bump.

They don't talk about that one time, when they were too young,

when he stood there as a doctor reached inside her and sprayed salt solution in her fertile womb.

They don't talk about things like that.

6.

She gets horny when she gets high.

One smoke out, there was a guy with a wicked smile and double dimples. She didn't resist a tryst in that *duyan* by the beach. When she came home, her husband did not close the door.

Today, the door stays open—for her and their son who looks up at the only father he knows, with twin dimples that brightens his smile.

7.

And so it happens every 75 years.

Tungkung Langit, Pillar of the Sky, Maker of the Universe, visits Alunsina, The Lonely One, The Creator of the World—his wife—riding on the tail of Halley's Comet.

And like all conversations of estranged lovers, they talk about politics—which *datu/ gobernadorcillo/ general/ president/ artista* is in power.

They talk about the weather- when the next Ice Age, Great Flood, Continental Shift would take place.

Everything that could be discussed over one cup of coffee.

But not the things that really mattered:

: when Tungkung Langit would retire from his duties in the sky

: when Alunsina could leave the Earth to its own devices

: how they could never touch, lest he bring all the suns, moons  
and planets crashing down on the earth.

: the indefiniteness of Forever

He drains his coffee 'til he gags on the dregs,

she polishes off every pastry crumb,

and together,

they wash the dishes before he leaves for the emptiness of the  
sky.

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