



Abstract

In “Made in Hong Kong,” Sara, a young Pinay, goes to Hong Kong to work as a maid. She makes friends with a group of four other maids called the Palanggas, but Cherry’s employer tries to rape her, while Julie, the fiercest of them all, is burned. In the end, Sara decides to find a new employer, hopefully one who is more humane.

Keywords

OFWs, Hong Kong, gender-based violence

MADE IN HONG KONG

ISA LORENZO

IN HONG KONG, everything moved at breakneck speed—the buses, the people who walked like they knew where they were going. The skyscrapers loomed higher than the trees back home, blocking a clear view of the sky.

I didn’t get to see much of the city at first; I was too busy caring for the Fong siblings. The youngest, Patrick, was quiet and easy to care for, but the oldest two, Grace and Robert, were little monsters. They pinched me and pulled my hair. They said I smelled bad. They began to call me Stupid Sara. When I showed my bruises to Mrs. Fong, she said that she would talk to them, but the abuse continued.

Mrs. Fong was another problem. She was a penny-pincher, and she was always looking for ways to cut costs.

“You eat so much,” she told me after two weeks. “You should eat less





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rice.” I tried to limit my intake, but my stomach growled so much that it kept me up at night. Mrs. Fong said nothing about the dark half-moons that had begun to form under my eyes.

On my first day, she told me about the cameras they had installed in their house, the all-seeing eyes that watched me every second of the day. I had no respite, not even when I went to the bathroom.

“We want to make sure you’re doing a good job,” Mrs. Fong said. “We’ve heard so many stories of abusive maids.” She grimaced as she said it. I looked at her, in her pale pink pantsuit, with her perfect beige manicure and white high heels, and wondered how she thought I could hurt her children.

I did the best I could. I picked up after Grace and Robert, who scattered their stuffed toys, trains, and Legos around the house. I spent so much time with Patrick that he began to call me Mama. You should’ve seen the look on Mrs. Fong’s face when she first heard him. She tried to pry him from my arms. “I’m your mother, Patrick, not that—”

“Sara,” I said. I let Patrick go, but he howled and clung to my leg. Mrs. Fong frowned. She picked up Patrick and carried him away, even though he was bawling. I didn’t see him for three days. Patrick wouldn’t come near me at first, but after a week, things went back to the way they were. Only he called me Sawa now, not Mama.

Kristel, the friend of a cousin who told me such glowing stories about her five-year stay in Hong Kong, had lied. I didn’t get to go out whenever I wanted. I didn’t even have my own money. It took me six months to pay Mother Lily back for my airfare and what she called a recruitment fee. Six months before she returned my passport and I could finally breathe easy.

I found them on Connaught Road, along the footbridge that led to IFC Mall. One side of the bridge was walled off with bright orange posts and yellow electric tape. It was because so many maids had jumped from there. I was walking a few steps behind Mrs. Fong, pushing Patrick’s stroller, when I heard the first sounds of Bisaya, the language of home. I didn’t dare slow down, didn’t even turn my head as I passed them, but I vowed to come back.

The next Sunday, my sole day off, I navigated the bustle of the MTR and the midlevel escalator filled with gawking tourists until I heard them. There were gaggles of women, all of whom looked like me, with black hair and dark brown skin. I approached a group of women sitting on a



spread-out cardboard box. Their conversation slowed then stopped as they turned to look at me. I resisted the urge to squirm.

“What are you looking at?” someone asked.

“Nothing,” I said in Bisaya. I hung my head, but it was like I had said the magic word, because the air around me suddenly thawed.

“Kabayan! Have a seat. I’m Julie,” said the woman who had spoken. She was wearing a denim jacket over a gray shirt studded with rhinestones and pink leggings. Her nails were painted a bright red.

“This is Karen, Isabel, and Cherry,” she said, gesturing to the women around her. Karen had bangs and a tough, square-shaped face. Isabel had strong, capable hands. Cherry reminded me of a fawn; she looked delicate and shy. They all nodded at me.

Julie scooted over. “Here,” she said. “Have a seat. Did you bring anything to eat?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t know. This is my first Sunday out.”

“You poor thing,” Karen said. “Here, have some spaghetti. Isabel made it.” I looked over at Isabel, who smiled. Her spaghetti was lovely, sweet with sliced hotdogs, just the way I liked it.

“It’s really good,” I said in between mouthfuls. “I’ll bring something next time.”

“I like KFC,” Julie said. And just like that, I was one of them.

Those Sundays became the bright light in what was becoming an increasingly dreary life. If only I had known what it was like in Hong Kong. I had gotten used to the hum of the city, but the constant squeal of tires and the raucousness of seven million people had begun to grate on me. I often thought of Uson, of the lullaby the waves made late at night as they ebbed and flowed against the shore. I missed Mama, Papa, and Jimmy. I missed having someone say “good morning” to me and smiling at me over dinner.

Patrick was a fussy eater. I had to devise increasingly elaborate games to get him to put food in his mouth. Airplane was only effective for a week. Now he was going through a ketchup phase; he globbed it on everything: eggs, spam, even fish.

“Sara!” Mrs. Fong would say every time he did it, even though it wasn’t my fault that

Patrick loved ketchup. If I took the ketchup bottle away, he would start screaming. Light cleaning turned into cleaning the whole house—three bedrooms, two bathrooms, the living room, the dining room, and the



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kitchen—once a week. Sometimes, I'd get too tired that I'd find myself falling asleep whenever I was supposed to be watching the kids.

Robert would wake me up with a sharp poke. "Get up, Stupid Sara. Play with me. Patrick's just a baby." And then of course Patrick would start to cry and I would have to soothe him, sometimes for hours.

It was enough to make anyone go mad.

But come Sunday, I could shed all of that and simply become Sara again. Julie, Karen, Isabel, and Cherry called themselves the Palanggas, and I soon became an essential fifth. We would meet at Connaught Road every Sunday morning at 8 o'clock sharp. Karen would spread out her cardboard box, Isabel would bring whatever she had made; she was the best cook out of all of us. This week, Julie had new pictures of her sisters.

"Look, look," she said, passing them around. "Doesn't she look like me?" She smiled, her white teeth glinting in the sun. Julie's youngest sister, who looked nothing like her, smiled shyly at the camera. Her smile was slightly crooked. I felt a sudden stab of pain. How long until I saw Mama again?

She was well, she said, whenever we Skyped. She was always well, even though I could see her eyes getting duller and duller and the slump of her shoulders becoming more pronounced. Mama had been tired for years, but she refused to see a doctor, even though I sent her enough money for a check-up. "It's just aches and pains," she told me. "Just aches and pains."

I didn't believe her, but I was a thousand kilometers away in Hong Kong. All I could do was ask Jimmy, my younger brother, to take her to the doctor. He promised that he would, but seven months had gone by and they still hadn't gone to see one.

The next Sunday, Cherry was missing. We waited for her for thirty minutes, then Julie began to frown. "Something's wrong," she said. "Cherry never misses a Sunday."

Isabel shifted uncomfortably on the cardboard. "I didn't want to say anything, but Cherry's been scared of her employer lately. Says he keeps looking at her. Nothing's happened so far, but I have a bad feeling about this."

Julie stood up. "Well, what are we still doing here?" she said. "Come on. We've got to see if Cherry's okay."

"She's fine," Karen said. "She probably just woke up late."

"She's not answering her phone," Isabel said.

Julie looked at me. Are you with me? her face asked. "Let's go," I said.



“I’ll stay here in case she comes,” Karen said. “Isabel, keep me company.” Isabel looked like she wanted to go with us, but she nodded. “Be careful,” she said.

Cherry worked for a rich family on Kennedy Street. We rushed to the MTR, got off at Central, then ran to her employer’s house.

I looked at the tall white gate. It was decorated with a fanciful design of curlicues. How were we going to get inside?

“Easy,” Julie said. She put one hand on a curlicue and her foot on another. “It’s just like climbing a tree.”

We got over the gate and dashed up the driveway. The house was starkly modern, made of adjoining rectangles of glass and steel. I kept waiting for a security guard to run out and accost us, but no one did.

“Here,” Julie said. She found a small side door that was left unlocked. We hurtled inside.

We heard Cherry screaming as soon as we entered the house. We rushed up the stairs to the second room on the left. Julie twisted the doorknob. It was locked. The screams got louder.

Julie slammed her body against the door until it opened. We burst in; we could see his thighs, fleshy and absurd. Cherry was struggling as she cried.

“Get off her,” Julie said. She grabbed Cherry’s employer by the shirt collar and shoved him away from Cherry. He sagged against the wall, then, fumbling, began to pull his pants up. I was expecting him to shout at us, even hit us, but maybe he was too shocked to do anything. Besides, there were two of us and only one of him.

I wrapped one arm around Cherry. “There, there,” I said. “It’s going to be okay.” It sounded stupid, but I didn’t know what else to say. Cherry said nothing. She sagged against me. I helped her button her blouse and zip up her jeans. I could feel her tears seeping into the right side of my shirt.

We left before he could zip up. We walked for a few minutes until we reached Hong Kong Park. The trees sheltered us. Their leaves rustled protectively above our heads. We sat down on the nearest bench and sandwiched Cherry between us.

“He didn’t—he didn’t—” Cherry stammered.

“What, rape you? He would’ve. Come on, let’s get you to a hospital.” Julie said.

Cherry shook her head. “No hospital,” she said. “I’m fine.”



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“The police, then.” Julie said. “We need to file a report.” Cherry began to shake her head again, but Julie squeezed her thigh.

“Cherry, how else are we going to get your things? And what are you going to say when your new employer asks why you left your old job?”

“He hurt me,” Cherry said. “He hurt me.” I wrapped an arm around her.

“I thought he didn’t rape you,” I said. But Julie was already pulling Cherry’s shirt up. We could see the purple bruises that mottled her flesh.

“Ay, Pangga,” Julie said. “I’m so sorry.” We hugged her, two sets of arms enclosing what felt like a suddenly frail body.

After a while, Julie pulled back. “This is the second time you’ve needed to switch jobs in a year. You only have one more chance before they send you back home.”

“Okay,” Cherry said. She wiped her nose and eyes, took a deep breath. “Okay.”

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The Central Police District Headquarters was an imposing redbrick building with grand columns. Inside it was clean, well lit. Julie strode across the granite floor like she knew where she was going. We followed in her wake. I held Cherry’s clammy hand in a tight clasp.

“We’re here to file a police report,” Julie told a receptionist behind the counter. She was tall, with a harried air and strands of black hair straggling out of her neat bun. She made a note, then nodded.

“Please wait here,” she said.

After twenty minutes, a young policeman approached us. He was Rene’s age, serious, with a wide forehead. He was wearing a light blue shirt with “Police” printed in English and Cantonese on a label above his left shirt pocket. “Follow me,” he said. He led us to a small room with a table and four chairs. I took a seat and pushed my feet against the scruffy carpet.

The policeman waited until we were all settled in our seats. He took out a laptop and turned to Julie. “I’m Constable Angus Yang.”

“Julie Flores. These are my friends Cherry Sanchez and Sara Isidro.”

Constable Yang nodded and typed on his computer.

“Please tell me what happened.” Julie nudged Cherry. When Cherry remained silent, she gave her another nudge.

“My employer tried to rape me,” Cherry said. “Here, I have bruises.” She began to pull up her shirt.



“Have you been examined by a doctor?” Constable Yang asked.

Cherry shook her head. “You’ll need to go to one,” Constable Yang said. “The nearest one’s at the Red Cross on Harcourt Road.”

“We will, after this,” Julie said. She gave Cherry a look that said *don’t argue*.

“Okay,” Constable Yang said. “What did you do to provoke this attack?” Cherry shrank back in her seat. Julie slammed her hands on the table. I winced at the loud thud.

“What did she do? Nothing, Constable. He was the one who did this to her!” Julie’s voice began to rise.

“Calm down, Miss. Calm down.” Constable Yang straightened in his chair. He looked down at us from his superior height.

“I won’t calm down!”

“Julie,” I said. “Maybe it would be best if you waited outside. I’ll stay here with Cherry.”

She glared at me. “No,” she said. “I’m calm, I’m calm.” She leaned forward. She was clasping her hands together so tightly that I could see her fingers begin to whiten.

“We’re sorry, Constable,” I said. “Please continue.” Julie opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, I kicked her under the table.

Constable Yang let the silence hang for a few seconds before he spoke. “Okay,” he said, as he settled back into his seat. “Let’s begin again.”

Cherry’s employer didn’t go to jail. But he was fined four thousand Hong Kong dollars for attempted rape.

“It’s not enough,” Julie said the next Sunday. “That’s only a month’s salary for us. It’ll barely make a dent in his pocket.”

“Still,” Karen said. “It might make him think twice before attacking his next maid.”

“We can only hope,” Cherry said. “I’ve raised it all up to God.”

I looked down so that I wouldn’t see Julie rolling her eyes. She no longer went to church, had stopped going a year after she’d arrived in Hong Kong. The rest of us still went to anticipated mass on Saturday, 4:30 p.m. at the Catholic Center Chapel on Central. I’d learned to tune out the priest’s droning homily, but I still took comfort in holding Karen and Isabel’s hands while we sang “Our Father.”

Cherry still believed in divine intervention, but it was Julie who found work for her. We never found out what magic she worked, but a week after Cherry was attacked, Julie was able to find her a new job with a nice family.



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“Tell you what,” Julie said. “Why don’t we walk up Dragon’s Back next Sunday? Don’t you get sick of all this cardboard?”

“I’m on my feet twelve hours a day,” said Karen. “I don’t want to spend my day off walking.”

“This’ll be different,” Julie insisted. “It’ll be fun. We’ll get to see the view. Who’s with me?” she asked, when we all remained silent.

I could feel her eyes boring holes into my cheek. “Okay,” I said. “It’ll be good to do something new.”

“I’m in,” Cherry added.

When Isabel nodded, Karen threw her hands up. “Fine,” she said.

“But you’d better make mango ref cake, Isabel. I’m not coming otherwise.”

“We’ll all bring something,” Julie said. “It’ll be a picnic. We can eat at Big Wave Bay after our hike.”

The next Sunday, we took the No. 9 bus to Shek-O. Julie led the way to the second level of the double-decker bus. I had never been in one before, and the view was amazing. The city fell away as the bus began its steep ascent. There was only one mountain in Uson, Mount Uac, but it was so far away that I hadn’t even visited it. But in Hong Kong, we were climbing hilly terrain in less than thirty minutes. I held on to the edges of my seat every time the bus sloped up another curve. I began to feel a little bit dizzy; I didn’t know if it was from fear or exhilaration.

Julie laughed at me. “Wait till you see Dragon’s Back.”

We got off at To Tei Wan on Shek O Road. It was only nine o’ clock in the morning, and there was a sparse crowd of people on the trailhead.

“C’mon,” Julie said.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” said Karen.

Julie’s lips pursed, but she pointed the way to the reeking blue portalet. After twenty minutes, Karen was good to go.

We started walking, picking our way through rock and soil. Julie walked on and on, her feet swift and sure. I followed her as best as I could. Cherry scrambled after me. We had to stop several times so that Karen and Isabel could rest.

On the way, we passed groups of tourists speaking in a babble of languages. There were also native Hong Kongers, easy to pick out because of their designer sports clothes. The mainland Chinese wore cheap, ill-fitting jackets and lingered on the trail while the Hong Kongers marched ahead. I was glad that I bought cheap K-Swiss rubber shoes at Sneakers



Street the week before. They were a horrible shade of green, but they were 75 percent off.

Julie and I didn't talk on the way up. Instead, I kept my eyes on the ground before me, occasionally taking in the trees. It was good to be alone with the silence. From the moment I woke up, Mrs. Fong was always telling me what to do. "Sara, clean the kitchen. Fix lunch. Why is this table dusty?" She talked to me so much that I dreamt of her sometimes. I would jolt awake, sure that there was a chore I'd left unfinished. Here I could simply walk and listen to my heart beat.

We arrived at the summit after two hours. Karen and Isabel immediately flopped down on the wooden bench. Cherry looked for a nearby rock and sat down. Julie and I headed for the summit marker. She traced the yellow and white dragon on the sign with her finger. "I wish I could be as fierce," she said.

"You are."

"No, if I were really a dragon, I would tell Mrs. Hak to shove it and give me a raise. But I don't dare. She could easily get another maid." It was the first time that Julie ever spoke about her employer. I knew all about Mrs. Yao, who often yelled at Karen, and Mrs. Bing, who loved Isabel's *pancit bihon*. I'd also told the Palanggas about Mrs. Fong.

"Why don't you find another employer?"

"It's not that easy. Mrs. Hak works me hard, but she pays well, too. Gives me a raise every year. What can I say? I need the money."

We all needed the money. It was why we were here. "You were right, the view's gorgeous," I said. I didn't know what else to say. I resisted the urge to text Rene. He'd asked me out for the occasional date back when I was still in Uson. We'd been friends since childhood, but I didn't have any feelings for him. I was often lonely now that I was in Hong Kong. But I knew that if I sent a text, he'd take that as a sign that he still had a chance.

We sat with Karen and Isabel, looked at the isthmus of land peeking through the pine trees. It was only the parts near the sea that were dotted with houses. Much of inland Hong Kong was still covered with verdant forest.

"It's the same color as your sneakers," Cherry said as she leaned on the bench behind us. I lifted a foot and wiggled my toes. "They're ugly, 'no? But they were 75 percent off!"

"*Bagay naman, e*," Isabel said.

"Are you saying I'm ugly?" I teased her.



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“No, no,” Cherry said. “They’re really nice.” We all started to laugh.

“They’ll do,” Julie said. “Come on, we still have to get down.”

It took us another two hours to reach Big Wave Bay Village. We walked through picturesque blue and white houses until we reached the beach. Like the other Pinays, we retreated to the trees. Let the Hong Kongers broil under the sun. Julie smiled and reach into her backpack. “Look! I bought this last week.” It was a gray tarpaulin, perfect for sitting on.

“O, level-up *na sa* cardboard,” Karen said.

Isabel began setting out food. We feasted on pancit, KFC, pork barbecue, and mango ref cake. Julie had even brought a 1.5-liter bottle of Coke. How strong she was. I couldn’t imagine carrying a heavy bottle for four hours.

“I’m going to take a nap,” Karen said, after we were done putting the paper plates and plastic containers away. She stretched out on the tarpaulin and flung her arm over her eyes.

Julie and I left the others to walk into the waves. We took off our sneakers and rolled up our pant legs to the knees. The water was freezing.

“It’s nothing like home,” Julie said. “I miss the warmth of the sea.”

“Why are you here?” I asked. It was something I had never dared asked her before.

“Three sisters to send to school,” Julie said. “I’m the eldest. I did what I had to do.”

“Isn’t there anyone else who could help?”

“My mother sells fish at the market. My father was lost at sea. I started selling fish when I was six years old. But even then, I knew that it wasn’t enough. Not if I wanted a better life for all of us.”

I looked down at my toes, allowed the icy water to swirl around my calves.

“I thought I’d be going on an adventure,” I said.

Julie snorted. “Some adventure. But cheer up, Sara. At least we’re earning good money. I’m only doing this until my youngest sister Grace graduates from college. Only two more years.”

“What are you going to do afterward?”

“Go back to school. I’ll have saved up enough by then. And then I’m going to open a *carindaria*. Maybe I can convince Isabel to cook for me.” She grinned.



I looked out into the horizon, where the bright blue sky met the rolling waves. My future had once seemed as wide open as the sea. But my reality was here, bound within the four walls of Mrs. Fong's dictates.

"You'll be beating customers off with a stick if you do," I said. "But Julie, don't you want to get married?"

"So I can serve some man the way I serve my employer here? Not bloody likely. He wouldn't even pay me."

"Uy, bloody," I teased. "*Natakdan na ka sa imong amo.*"

Julie beamed. "She's not the only one who can speak English. Come on, let's go back. I can't feel my toes anymore."

We turned around and splashed our way back to the shore.

I got used to the daily drudgery. I took care of the kids, cleaned, kept my head down amid Mrs. Fong's unceasing complaints. She was fond of running her finger along the windowsills, then poking it in my face if she found so much as a speck of dust.

"You don't have to put up with that," Julie said the next Sunday when I told her about it. "Find another employer."

"It's not that easy," I said, echoing the words she had spoken to me on Dragon's Back. "At least she doesn't beat me. She doesn't even yell. She just always finds something wrong with my work."

"If you ever want to find a new job, let me know," Julie said. "I got you." She did. All of us depended on Julie; she was the sun around which we revolved. Looking at her now, as she dug into Isabel's baked macaroni, I marveled once again at her strength. Did she ever cry when she was alone in her bed, late at night? I did, the first week I spent in Hong Kong. And then I stopped. I couldn't cry anymore.

Hong Kong no longer intimidated me. Now I stepped as smartly as the natives. I knew where to buy the cheapest apples, where the nearest Western Union was so I could send money home. I could sleep on the MTR and trust that I'd jolt awake just in time for my stop. I knew how to get around Central, but I still didn't feel at home. Home was Uson, with its whispering waves and the scent of the sea. Even after six months, I still felt like an alien sometimes. I'd learned to move faster, but walking at a brisk pace still tired me. I wanted to meander, to take my time, to explore the hidden pockets of the city I knew were waiting for me.

After Dragon's Back and Big Wave Bay, we went back to our spread-out square of cardboard on the Connaught Road footbridge. I kept waiting



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for Julie to propose another outing, but she'd been preoccupied these past few weeks.

"Is there anything wrong, Julie?" Cherry asked one Sunday, when we were all sitting together.

"Just Mrs. Hak giving me shit," Julie said. "Said that I don't work hard enough and I talk too much. I just stay silent and keep my head down. She's been in a bad mood lately. Hope it blows over soon." I couldn't imagine Julie being anything else other than how she was with us—loud, boisterous, funny. I squeezed her shoulder. She looked at me and smiled.

"It'll be fine," I said. "It'll be fine."

Julie didn't show up the next Sunday. I arrived at Connaught Road to find three worried faces looking at me.

"She never misses a Sunday. None of us do," Isabel said. Sundays were our lifeline, the only thing that kept us holding on to our sanity. I got my phone out, dialed Julie's number. No answer. I tried three times, let the phone ring ten times during each call. Still no answer.

"Maybe she just fell asleep," Cherry said.

Karen snorted. "Julie? Fall asleep? Remember when we walked up Dragon's Back? She called all of us at six in the morning just to make sure that we would all be on time. That girl doesn't sleep, not if it's important."

A fist began to squeeze my heart. "Let's go," I said. This time, I didn't have to ask who was with me. We all stood up. Karen folded her cardboard, and then we were off. It was like we were playing tag. We ran so hard I thought my lungs would burst. But there was a palpable fear that kept my legs pumping.

We reached Burrow Street in record time. None of us had been there before, but Julie had given all of us her address, just in case we needed to find her. Mrs. Hak's family lived on the second floor of an apartment. I pounded up the stairs and rushed down the hallway. I skidded to a stop, so abruptly that Karen slammed into me.

"Ow!" she said. But I barely heard her. My eyes were focused on the small, still figure that was slumped outside the door.

"Call 999," I said. I didn't dare touch Julie. She was curled into her side, huddled into a protective ball. The right side of her face and her right arm were burned black. Her purple leggings were drenched. A hundred dollar bill lay softly on her face. "Julie," I said. "Julie," but she gave no sign that she heard me.



“That bitch!” Cherry said. She was so angry that she was shaking. She raised her fist to bang on the door.

“Don’t,” I said. “We know her. We know where she lives. She won’t get away with this.” I wanted to kick and scream, rage against the white wall, the dark gray door where Julie was slumped against. There was a window box of bright pink bougainvillea growing on the opposite wall. They were so pretty. I wanted to rip them to shreds. But none of that would help Julie.

“How could she do this?” Isabel asked. “How could anyone do this?” None of us answered. We sat down on the floor, formed a rough half-circle around Julie. Cherry reached out to hold my hand. On my left side, Karen clasped my hand so tightly I could feel her nails digging into my palm. But I embraced the pain. It was nothing compared to what Julie was feeling. We waited in silence until the ambulance came to take her away.

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Julie, my beautiful, quick, bright Julie, as strong as an Amazon, as fierce and cunning as a fox. I couldn’t reconcile my image of her with the battered body now before me. The hum of the machine keeping her alive was louder than her breathing. I could tell that she was alive only by the slight rise and fall of her chest and the heart rate on the monitor that rose and fell in a continuous jagged line.

Her body was almost mummified in white bandages. I knew that there were burns beneath them, but it hurt me to think of red novas marring Julie’s beautiful brown skin.

Isabel, Karen, and Cherry kept vigil with me. We stayed silent for the most part, like we were at a wake. No one dared to speak what we were all thinking. What if Julie died? She was the center of our group, the piece that held us all together. We all basked in her sunlight. What now?

Cherry began to weep. “She went with us to the doctor. She helped me find a new job. Who’s going to help me now?”

“How can you think of yourself when Julie’s like this?” Karen said.

“Karen—” Isabel began to speak.

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Shut up! Just shut up!” They all looked at me in shock.

Everyone that is, except Julie, who continued to lie motionless on her bed.



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“Arguing isn’t going to help. Neither is crying,” I said. “Sorry, Cherry.” Cherry sniffed, but she nodded. “Julie would want us to do something,” she said.

“What?” Isabel asked.

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “But there’s got to be a case that we can file. Mrs. Hak isn’t going to get away with this.”

It took months for Julie to heal. I held her hand and fed her ice chips, then soup. Finally, she grew strong enough to eat solid food. I used to admire the curves of her arm muscles, but her limbs had grown weak, wasted. I didn’t know this woman, the one who was silent and quiescent, who only nodded when I spoke to her. Her light had dimmed.

“*Punyeta*, Julie, what am I going to do?” I told her. “You need to make a statement in order for them to file a case.” Julie merely shook her head.

“What about Cherry? At least her employer was fined for attempted rape. If you don’t say anything, Mrs. Hak’s just going to do it again.” Julie showed no sign that she heard me. She merely looked down on the blanket.

“I think she just needs to go home,” her doctor told me. “There’s nothing more we can do for her.” She was my age, with wispy bangs cut across her forehead, but she spoke with an air of confidence that I could never emulate. She spoke like Julie once did.

Julie had insurance, which covered her hospital bills. We found a nongovernment organization for overseas Filipino workers, Binhi, which paid for half of Julie’s ticket home. The other Palanggas scraped together the rest of the money. I will never forget the look on Karen, Cherry, and Isabel’s faces as they handed me an envelope.

“Here,” Isabel said. “Just add twenty dollars and it’ll be enough. I told my sister I couldn’t send any money home this month. All of us did.”

“Julie’s our sister,” Karen said. “Take care of her.”

Cherry reached out and gave me a hug. Her once frail body was now supple and firm. “I’ll be back,” I said. “I just need to take Julie home.”

It was raining when we landed in Manila. We rode on a bus for twenty-one hours to reach Masbate. I’d forgotten how cold it was on air-conditioned buses; I didn’t bring a jacket, so I shivered for most of the trip.

Julie lived in Mobo, almost two hours away from my hometown. I immediately knew which house was hers; just like Kristel’s, it was the biggest house in the barangay. It was painted a soft shade of blue, the color of the dawn sea.



I kept an arm around Julie as I knocked on the door. It was opened by a woman who had her forehead.

“Inday!” she cried. She wrapped her arms around her and began to weep. “What happened? You’re so thin! Haven’t you been eating enough? What about all those packages I sent you?”

Julie allowed herself to relax into her mother’s hold but remained silent.

“Inday, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

“Nothing, Mama,” Julie said. “I’m just tired.” She gently detached herself from her mother and stepped inside.

Her mother finally noticed me standing off to one side. “I’m Sara,” I said. “I met Julie in Hong Kong.”

Julie’s mother smiled. “I’ve heard all about you. I’m Nilda.” She moved forward, allowed her cheek to graze against mine. She smelled of fish, wet and salty. I used to hate that smell, but now it reminded me of home.

“Come in,” Manay Nilda said as she stepped back. I took off my shoes and socks and carefully wiped my feet on the floor mat before I followed Julie and stepped inside. The floor was bare concrete, swept clean. The living room was painted white. Three pictures of girls in graduation gowns hung above the TV.

“Julie put all of her sisters through high school,” Manay Nilda said. “Our youngest, Betsy, is a sophomore. She’s going to be a civil engineer. Can you imagine?”

I could. I wanted to tell Manay Nilda that I, too, once had dreams. Getting out of Uson and seeing the world. Meeting and marrying a rich, handsome man. But those dreams had become subsumed in a life of daily drudgery. At least I was sending Jimmy to school, slowly rebuilding our house.

Manay Nilda took me to the largest room. It was painted the rich aubergine of an eggplant. Julie was already lying down on the bed, curled on her side, facing a wall. Manay Nilda talked over her daughter’s silence.

“I told her, Inday, the color’s so dark. But she had her way, like she always does. I’ve never seen her back down once she set her mind to something.”

I let Manay Nilda chatter on. There was something hard and bright in her eyes, a stiffness in her posture. I knew that she wouldn’t let herself weep until she was alone, late at night, in her own room. She reminded me a bit of Julie.



SHORT STORY

“She was a dancer. Did you know? She was so good that she got a scholarship to the Philippine High School for the Arts. But she didn’t go. Said there was no one else who would look out for her sisters. Their father died young, you see. He was lost at sea.”

“The sea?” I said.

“Yes. You can’t see it from here, but it’s only ten minutes away. Would you like to look at it? You probably need some fresh air after that long trip.” I needed to leave her alone with Julie, so I went.

Hong Kong was an island, surrounded by the sea, but you barely felt its presence once you were in the heart of the city. In Mobo, the sea was a tangible thing. I looked out into the deep blue vastness and felt a peace I hadn’t felt ever since I had left Masbate.

I stood on the beach and let the waves wash over my feet. The same waves washed against the shore of Uson. Mama was probably preparing dinner right now. Jimmy would be on his way home from school. He would be the first in the family to graduate from high school. I wanted to visit them so badly, but I didn’t dare. They’d expect *pasalubong*, and I didn’t have any money or gifts to give them.

If I went home, I knew that I would never leave. I could stay in Uson, sell fish at the market, maybe even marry Rene, who still sent me the occasional text. But no one else could send Jimmy to school. What if I went to Manila? There was nowhere in the city where a high school dropout could make as much money as I did in Hong Kong. Plus Mama was still sick, and our house still needed a new roof. Two years ago, I’d been so excited to leave. Now all I wanted to do was stay. But I couldn’t.

Instead, I would stay overnight in Julie’s house, tell her sisters and Manay Nilda all about Dragon’s Back and Big Wave Bay. I’d tell Manay Nilda what happened to Julie before I left.

And then I would ride a bus, go straight to the airport, get on a plane, and go back to Hong Kong. Mrs. Fong only gave me a week’s leave when I told her about Julie. Still, she paid for a roundtrip ticket for me to Manila. “I feel sorry for your friend,” she’d said as she handed it over.

“What about me?” I wanted to ask. I knew what Mrs. Fong didn’t believe that she was like Mrs. Hak. She would never burn me, only chip away at my spirit, bit by bit, until there was nothing left.

I could change things, though. When I got back, I would ask Binhi to help me find another employer, one who would let me live out instead of making me stay inside their house. I would stop buying small trinkets,





save my money so that I could perhaps visit China, see another foreign country. Maybe in a year.

It would be different when I returned. I would no longer be shy, silent Sara. I couldn't be Julie. I wouldn't be her, curled like a comma on her bed, shutting out the world. I couldn't even be as she once was; I would never have that kind of courage. But maybe, just maybe, I could become a little stronger.

