



Abstract

In “Glory,” a young girl’s gaze is trained on her mother, who, in her desire to better their lives, takes on a series of questionable jobs as a secretary to rich men. Vilma is eventually employed by the pastor of a Christian church. She sees this as an opportunity for her daughter to make friends with the wealthy church children, thus giving her connections that might serve her well in the future. However, mother and daughter soon realize that they are not welcome in the church. Vilma loses her job and is forced to leave the church, but she refuses to go without a bang. Glory is a humorous story about religion, socioeconomic class, and the conflicted relationship between a daughter and her mother.

Keywords

women,
religion, class,
childhood,
humor

GLORY

INO HABANA

I HAVE A lot of things to say about my mother. Let’s start with her name, which is Vilma. She was named after Vilma Santos, whom my grandmother adored back when she was a teenager. Mama told me that Lola’s cabinet was full of Vilma Santos memorabilia—postcards, movie posters, magazine clippings, keychains, and Lola’s most treasured possession of all, a disintegrating vinyl cover of Vilma Santos’ *Sweet Sixteen* without the actual vinyl. Mama, on the other hand, didn’t care about Vilma Santos. To her, Vilma was just a name.

Mama had a lot of things to say about Lola. From as far back as I can remember, my mother always called my grandmother “provincial”—a term that I have come to understand as simple, contented, and, yes, poor. Mama spent her childhood in the unimportant town of Licab in Nueva Ecija, surrounded by rice fields and nothing else. My mother’s family lived in a squat house on a dusty street. By the standards of Licab, their family wasn’t exactly poor. They could afford to eat three meals a day and



had an owner-type jeep parked in their garage. But by the standards of Manila—that distant place Mama always longed to be in—their family was poor and blissfully unaware of their poverty.

Mama and I would visit Lola in Licab every now and then. Even without hysterical confrontations worthy of Vilma Santos, I could tell that the relationship between my mother and grandmother was strained at best. When Lola wanted this, Mama wanted that. I got the impression that Mama was purposefully being difficult to highlight the differences between them. I guess it was also to impress upon me—and maybe upon Lola, too—that she, a girl from Licab, Nueva Ecija, had managed to escape and was no longer “provincial.”

When she was younger, my mother liked to describe herself as a bird of paradise that was always flying to higher and higher heights. She was not one to be caged or to stay in one place for too long—“unlike *her*,” Mama would say, referring to Lola, whom my mother accused of having a chronic lack of ambition. If Mama was a bird of paradise, Lola, she often said, was a carabao, happily sunk in the mud of provincial Nueva Ecija. The description seemed accurate, but I wouldn’t go as far as describing my mother as a bird of paradise.

What infuriated Mama the most about Lola was the fact that they looked so much alike—the oval face, the button nose, the dusky complexion, and their chins slightly protruding. And of course, there was the hair. Three generations of women all had the same kind of hair, me included. We had *bruha* hair, a great mass of frizz that had the texture of straw. If left unchecked, our hair would explode all over the place.

From an early age, Mama taught me to keep my hair disciplined using clips and ponytails. She often bunched her hair in a ponytail, too, or sometimes braided it into a thick bolt. I got teased at school for having *bruha* hair, so it was a relief that by the time I was in high school, I discovered the wonder of hair straightening. Mama didn’t like having her hair straightened because the smell of the chemicals made her nauseous. Lola didn’t bother with her hair at all and just allowed it grow like a bramble of unruly weeds.

Just like the bird of paradise that she said she was, my mother packed her bags one day and flew away from the dusty streets of her hometown. She landed in the city, a provincial lass of seventeen, worrying Lola to angry, weeping pieces.

Mama first worked as a saleslady at a department store. She did the rounds of Manila’s many shopping centers, until she got her first big break



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care of a certain Jacinto Lim, the owner of a large plastic manufacturing factory. My mother worked as Mr. Lim's secretary. He liked his ladies oval-faced and dusky-skinned. It also helped if they had a waist small enough for him to grab with both hands, which he often did. My mother had all these qualities back then, and it was a bonus that Mr. Lim didn't really mind her thick hair. When I was old enough to understand, Mama said that she hated working for Mr. Lim. But she did it anyway—for the money and for her future, which I eventually figured in.

The first home I ever knew was a townhouse with a small Japanese garden at the back. Mama was still employed at the plastic factory at that time. My father—whom Mama never really talked about—was a Japanese seafarer who considered moving to the Philippines at one point in time but eventually decided that the country was too dysfunctional for his taste. I have only two things from my father—the color of my skin, fairer than Mama's by several shades, and my name, Haru, which means spring in Japanese.

Each bedroom in the townhouse had an air-conditioning unit, a TV, and its own bathroom. I particularly liked the wallpaper in my bedroom, which was light pink and dotted with tiny embossed flowers. On some nights, Mama would lay in bed with me and run her hand over the wallpaper. She allowed her fingertips to linger on the white blossoms. "This is what spring looks like," she would say. She always looked sad whenever she said this. Back then, I had no idea why.

We stayed in the townhouse until I was around five years old. That was when Mama decided to quit her job at the plastic factory. More accurately though, I think she was asked to leave. Her waist was no longer as tiny as it used to be. Childbirth, I learned from Mama, changed a woman's body beyond recognition. I later on found out that the townhouse was actually Mr. Lim's. After we left, it was tenanted by a new secretary. She had no children and had a tiny waist.

From the townhouse with a Japanese garden at the back, we moved to an older house with aging wooden walls. The rooms had no wallpaper nor air-conditioning. The house wasn't even on a proper street but along a narrow *eskinita*. There was a kitchen and a living room on the ground floor and two bedrooms upstairs that shared a common bathroom. Mama and I occupied one of the two bedrooms, while the other one was occupied by Mama's friends, or sisters, as she called them.

Enter Tita Yvonne and Tita Carmi. Just like Mama, both ladies were also secretaries. They were tall, thin, and wore shockingly red lipstick. When



I first met them, I thought they were twins. Tita Yvonne smoked a lot and liked to pass the time doing her nails. Tita Carmi laughed in such an enormous way that her entire face seemed to turn into a giant mouth. It was from them that I learned about nail polish, eyeshadow, hairspray, and, best of all, shoulder pads. I loved playing with their shoulder pads. When worn on my shoulders, they made me look like a general. When I stuffed them underneath my shirt, they looked like a strange pair of boobs.

So it was me, Mama, and my two *titas* in the wooden house along the eskinita. Whenever I was asked at school who the members of my family were, I would say we were all girls. No boys allowed, because Mama said that boys were stupid and disgusting. She also said that they could be mean. There was some truth to this, as I would later on learn.

As working secretaries, Tita Yvonne and Tita Carmi were always in the process of packing their bags and moving out, only to come back a few months later with stories of how stupid, disgusting, and mean boys could be. Mama would always laugh at them whenever they returned. They would look disheveled from their short-lived stays in expensive houses, lavish hotel suites, or, in Tita Carmi's case, a mansion tucked away among the pine trees of Baguio. Then Mama would turn maternal, lying in bed with them as they wept copious tears. I envied Tita Yvonne and Tita Carmi for that. The last time Mama curled up in bed with me was when she would trace the tiny flowers on the pink wallpaper of our former home.

"Sisterhood!" Mama declared one night. "You'll understand when you get a sister. But don't count on it," she added, slurring a bit. "Nothing else is coming out of here!" she said, giving her belly a good jiggle. The ladies were drinking in the living room after one of Tita Carmi's abrupt returns. There was a bottle of gin on the coffee table—*quatro cantos*, to be exact—along with a bowl of peanuts. There were two more empty bottles on the floor, hidden behind the corner leg of the sofa—as if I couldn't see them.

Just like my two *titas*, Mama received offers to move out of the wooden house. But this was something we never did. It was good for me, because I had friends in the neighborhood whom I played *patintero* with every afternoon. I think Mama chose to stay in the wooden house because she knew that Tita Yvonne and Tita Carmi needed a place to accommodate their multiple returns. As it was turning out, Mama was becoming less and less like a bird of paradise and more like a carabao. Her sisters, I liked to believe, were those long-legged migratory birds that required a solid pair of carabao shoulders to stand on whenever



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they tired of their flights. Age was also making Mama look a lot more like Lola, but of course, she would never admit this.

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I was ten years old when my mother first brought me to her office. I remember that day quite clearly. It was a Saturday morning, sunny and with a constant breeze. I wore my best clothes—a lemon yellow dress with ruffles at the hem of the skirt—and my school shoes, the most decent pair I had. My bruha hair was meticulously fastened to the sides of my head with big white clips.

We hailed a taxi that took us to a massive building in what looked like an expensive part of the city. The building was big and blocky and had a trimmed lawn up front. The taxi drove us up the building's looping driveway. Hand in hand, my mother and I got off the taxi and walked up the front steps of the building. At the top of the steps was a pair of automatic glass doors that politely moved aside as we entered. Inside was a large lobby with a red carpet and wood-paneled walls. From the ceiling hung six chandeliers, all of them glittering with light. I had never seen anything so majestic before. My mother and I walked underneath the chandeliers until we reached the counter at the far end of the lobby. A lady seated behind the counter waved at us as we approached. Behind her was a marble wall with a towering silver cross.

"So is this her?" the woman asked with a cheery grin.

My mother nodded and nudged me forward. "Haru," my mother said, "this is Miss Mila."

I smiled at Miss Mila. She crouched and gave me a hug while smoothing a stray frizz of hair that had escaped from one of the clips. "So pretty!" she said, before standing up. "Pastor James will be here in a while, but Senior Pastor Freddie is already inside. Is this Haru's first fellowship?"

I didn't know what a fellowship was, but Mama answered for me. "Yes," she said with a smile. "She'll love it, I'm sure."

Miss Mila gushed and clapped her hands. She then ushered us down a hallway. "It's very kind of Pastor James to allow Haru to attend Bible study for the kids. And for free, too!"

"Oh, yes." Mama replied. "Pastor James is a very kind man."

"Yes, he is. And you're doing wonders for him, Vilma! Before you came along, all his meetings were disorganized. He was supposed to speak in



Hong Kong one time but ended up in Tokyo instead! Things really get mixed up with his kind of schedule.”

Mama laughed. I knew that it wasn't a real laugh. “It gets confusing when you have so many things to think about,” she said to Miss Mila.

There was a pair of padded doors at the end of the hallway. When we reached the doors, Miss Mila looked down at me again and smiled. “So cute,” she said, pinching my cheek. I thought she actually meant it. Then she pushed the doors open.

We were met with a cold blast of air-conditioning. Behind the doors was a large auditorium with dark blue seats. The auditorium was filled with people. Some were standing in the aisles, some were seated, and some congregated in chatty little pockets. The stage was lit up with spotlights, and there, suspended in midair, were glittering styrofoam letters that spelled out JESUS!—exclamation point for added emphasis.

We made our way down one of the aisles of the auditorium. My mother waved and smiled at people, all of whom waved and smiled back at her. Everybody was dressed well and looked very pleasant. I didn't know my mother knew so many people and that so many people knew her. I also didn't know that my mother was religious.

“Mama,” I whispered to her as I tugged her hand, “do you believe in Jesus?”

“No,” she said under her breath. “But *you* have to. See all these people? Everybody here is rich, and they all believe in Jesus.”

We sat somewhere near the stage. It didn't take too long for the lights to dim and for the crowd settle. Then came a crash of drums that caused me to jump in my seat. A handsome man with salt-and-pepper hair walked onto the stage as applause erupted from the crowd. He was wearing a sequined black jacket and a pair of white sneakers. Halfway across the stage, he twirled and did the moonwalk. He moonwalked his way to the podium that stood in the middle of the stage, much to the crowd's whooping delight. My mother sat cross-legged in the seat beside me and clapped her hands. “That's Pastor James,” she said with a smile. “I'm his secretary.”

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I think I started to really hate my mother after my first fellowship meeting at the Christian Church of Glory. On top of the fellowship meetings, she



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also forced me to attend the twice-a-week Bible study sessions with all the church children. The boys and girls at Bible study would come to the blocky building in large cars that would later on fetch them at the church's parking lot. I would ride a taxi going home with my mother, after she was done with her work in the office of Pastor James. His office was somewhere in the upper floors of the building, which were off-limits to most people.

"Why do I have to attend Bible study?" I asked my mother during one of our taxi rides going home.

"Because it's free," my mother said. "Those classes are expensive. I would need to rob a bank in order to afford them. But more importantly, Haru—connections."

I understood what free was but didn't know what she meant by connections.

Despite my protests, I became the newest unofficial member of the Christian Church of Glory Kiddie Chapter. After my first Bible study class, my mother took an annoying interest in my social life. She always asked about the friends I was making at church. This was strange, because she never once bothered about my friends in school or in the neighborhood.

"Are you friends with Pam Go?" she asked one night while we were having dinner.

"No," I replied. "She barely talks." For a minute, I even had to recall who Pam Go was.

"She's a nice girl. You should try to make friends her."

"Why do I need to be friends with her? She doesn't even talk."

"Just try," Mama said. "Her parents own a department store. A big one."

We were eating tilapia that night. We always had tilapia because Mama was cutting down on fatty dishes in order to maintain her figure, which was already fighting a hopeless battle against cellulite and gravity.

"I'm friends with Alice," I volunteered.

"Alice who?"

"Alice, the girl with glasses."

"Oh," my mother said with a sigh. "She's—okay. Normal."

"Normal?"

"Her father is a dentist. Now going back to Pam Go. You should try sitting beside her next time. Who knows, both of you might like the same things. I heard from Miss Mila that she also likes to draw."

I poked at the head of tilapia on my plate. "Can't I just be friends with Alice?"



Mama put down her spoon. It clattered on her plate. She looked at me and smiled. Somehow, I already knew her answer.

“But Alice is the only one in Bible study who actually talks to me.”

Mama continued eating.

“And what about Elsa and Rosemarie?” I asked, referring to my two friends at school. “They’re my friends, too, and they’re really funny. And then there’s Denden from across the street. And her little brother Potpot. Can’t I just be friends with them?”

“Obey your mother,” she said.

And that was that.

Upon my mother’s insistence, I sat next to Pam the following week at Bible study. I tried to talk to her, but she seemed perfectly happy just sticking to herself. I noticed that Pam had the straightest, shiniest hair I had ever seen. She used a clip with a tiny strawberry to keep her hair from covering her eyes. I liked her strawberry clip very much and thought of asking Mama to get one for me. As soon as this thought entered my mind, though, I quickly realized that Pam’s strawberry clip would look very different on bruha hair.

Aside from Pam, there were other kids at Bible study whom my mother wanted me to befriend. She went as far as writing these names down on a piece of paper, which she slipped into my hand right before Bible study one Wednesday afternoon. “*Kodigo*,” she said with a grin, “so you won’t forget.”

There were twelve children in Bible study—thirteen including me—but there were only five names on her list. It was only later on that I understood the pedigree of the children I spent Wednesday and Friday afternoons with. First on her list was Chester Ong, son of Jefferson Ong, owner of the country’s largest sugary drinks conglomerate. Second was Samantha Soriano, daughter of Governor Ernesto Soriano, whose money was invested in literal gold mines in Benguet. The third was Patricia Teves of fabled sugar money, now the sole heiress to the country’s largest steel manufacturing plant. Fourth was Brian King Jr., son of Brian King Sr., who was more popularly known by his moniker, the Pawnshop King. And last but not least was Melissa Uy, a concert pianist at the age of seven, whose family was awash with gambling money raked in daily from a nationwide chain of casinos. Everybody else at Bible study was “normal,” like Alice, the dentist’s daughter.

But just like Pam, every child in my mother’s list seemed perfectly happy keeping to themselves, even if I tried talking to them. I would tell Pam how



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nice her strawberry clip was. I would help Chester with all the arts and crafts they made us do. I would sit next to Melissa during film viewing sessions and pass her the tray of chocolates provided by the church. Despite these attempts to make friends, the children at Bible study would just smile at me and go back to whatever it was they were doing. Then they would inch away. What a boring bunch they were! No fun at all. Unlike Elsa, Rosemarie, and Denden, whom I considered my real friends.

One afternoon, I came home with my shirt dirty and my scalp itching from sweat. Denden and I had been playing near the basketball court not far from our house. Elsa and Rosemarie were there, too. We were challenged by a bunch of mean boys to patintero, and after several hard-fought rounds, we beat the boys good. Denden's brother Popot acted as the referee even if patintero didn't really require one.

The front door of our house was open to let in the afternoon breeze. Tita Carmi was seated on the sofa, hovering over Mama's mass of hair with a comb in her hand. Mama was slumped on the floor, painting her toenails maroon. There were pieces of cotton sandwiched in between her toes.

"Where did you come from?" Mama asked as I walked by them.

"Playing," I said to my mother, "with my *real* friends." I put emphasis on the word *real*, which made Mama look up from her toes.

"Which *real* friends?" Mama replied, mimicking the way I said *real*.

I could feel my blood rising, but I couldn't understand why. Mama always had a way of agitating me. It seemed like she was taunting me—her own ten-year-old daughter—as if she wanted to pick a fight. "Denden, Rosemarie, and Elsa," I replied.

"Ah," my mother said, going back to her toenails. "*Them*."

"Yes," I said, getting riled up. "*Them*—the poor ones."

I expected my mother to flare up at the barb, but all she did was sit on the floor and look up at me with a smile. "Now that didn't come from me." Again, she had won.

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September 18 was the founding anniversary of the Christian Church of Glory. Everybody was busy preparing for the big day, especially my mother. For that year, Pastor John and Senior Pastor Freddie wanted to go bigger than ever before. In previous years, the church's anniversary



was just celebrated on the day itself. This time around, the pastors wanted an entire week of celebration. Glory Week 1988, they called it. Each day of the week would have a different set of activities, all culminating in a praise concert, complete with flashing lights, smoke machines, a mosh pit, and, best of all, Joshua's Creed, the biggest Christian rock band of the day, flown in directly from the United States.

Every self-respecting Christian knew Joshua's Creed and their repertoire of worship hits. I would sometimes hear their songs at the church, especially the most recent one titled "My Deeply Broken Soul." Being fairly new to the Christian world, I didn't know a whole lot about Joshua's Creed. I did know about their lead vocalist though, since his face sometimes appeared on TV. His name was Joshua, and judging from the band's cassette tape cover, he was a beautifully pale boy with longish blond hair and a pair of startling blue eyes. He played the electric guitar, wore a leather jacket, and had a morose, vulnerable look about him, like a misunderstood poet. There were four other members in the band, but nobody really cared about them.

When word got around that Joshua's Creed was coming to perform at our anniversary concert, every girl in church raised her hands in praise while battling the butterflies in her stomach. I knew this because I felt the butterflies, too. Pastor John said that the culminating concert would be called "The Big Night of Glory," and from the looks of it, the night would indeed be big.

Mama was put in charge of a lot of things for the concert—catering, logistics, security, and even the flights and hotel reservations for the boys of Joshua's Creed. I could see Mama hard at work whenever I attended Bible study. She was always multitasking with a pen and notepad as she ran off to inspect this thing or that. I had never seen my mother so busy before, and so focused. She threw herself—mind, body, and spirit—into the task at hand, so much so that even the mercurial mood swings brought about by her period were kept at bay.

It was the Friday before the official opening of the church's anniversary week when I watched my mother orchestrate the installation of a gargantuan sign above the church's entrance. I had just finished Bible study and was waiting for her to get off from work. Mama was standing in front of the church's canopy with a megaphone in hand. She told the carpenters to move the banner to the left, then to the right, then to the left again until they got it perfectly centered. Then she told them to smooth



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out the folds on the upper left corner, and to make sure that the same was done on the opposite side. The sign spanned much of the canopy's length and read "Glory Week 1988." It looked like any regular sign, until Mama ordered one of the janitors to turn on the spotlights. There, on the canopy of the church, my mother's sign sparkled to life. The letters were made of metallic blue and silver wrapping paper—a lot of it—all cut up into thousands of tiny little strips. In the darkening sky, her sign glittered like a river of stars. I remembered thinking to myself that if this was what secretaries did for a living, I wouldn't mind being a secretary myself.

But the universe was fond of playing tricks on us. One of those tricks came at the most unfortunate of times. On the very first day of the church's week-long celebration, Mama received a call from Miss Mila. The call was a surprise to her, since Miss Mila never really called our house. Mama cupped her hand over the phone's receiver, as if she didn't want anybody to hear the conversation.

When she had finished the call, Mama put the phone down with an audible click. She took a deep breath. I was sitting at the bottom step of the stairs, packing my things for school. I looked up at her with a notebook half-stuffed into my school bag. She looked at me and said nothing. There was a glazed look in her eyes. It was a look that I had never seen before. Then she picked up her purse and made her way up the stairs.

I walked to school by myself that morning. I did the same thing the following morning, and the morning after that. Mama didn't dress up to go to work. She stayed home and didn't even bother to change out of her pajamas. She was suddenly cold, and very quiet. Whenever we would go to sleep, she would turn to her side, face the wall, and curl up. I wanted to tap her on the shoulder to ask her what was wrong, but instead I just curled up to my side, too, and face the opposite direction.

After three full days of silence, I finally learned what the problem was. Tita Yvonne spilled the beans through her perpetual haze of cigarette smoke. She said it in as plain a manner as possible. "Haru," she told me after we had finished eating dinner, "you have lice."

I was puzzled. After she said this, I noticed a tiny itch on my scalp. It had been itching for quite some time now. I tried to understand how all of this related to my mother, but I didn't need to because Tita Yvonne volunteered the information. "Your Mama got fired from the church because you have lice."

I paused. Then it all came rushing back to me like a powerful wave that



couldn't be held back; my classmates at Bible study shying away from me while smiling their pursed smiles. There was always some space between me and them. They made sure of it—a seat that was always skipped, an arms-length distance that was always maintained, and the squeaky sound of shoes shuffling in the opposite direction whenever I got too near. I scratched my head. The guilty itch on my scalp started to bloom.

Then it began to sink in. I had wronged my mother in the most grievous way. She had gotten into trouble because of me. I felt the need to apologize to her, so with some hesitation, I climbed the stairs to our bedroom and opened the door. Mama was inside, reading a magazine as she sat in bed with her back leaning against the wall. Her hair was not braided. It was large and massive.

As I stood by our bedroom door, Mama put down the magazine and looked at me. I couldn't meet her eyes because I knew she was angry. I looked at my feet instead. Then I heard her say her first three words in what seemed like an eternity. "Take a bath," she ordered. Her voice was dry and monotonous.

And I did as I was told. I walked into the bathroom and turned on the tap. Then I shampooed my bruha hair, making sure to run my fingers through every inch of my scalp. But after shampooing, I could still feel the itch rippling through my head. I rinsed off the shampoo and scrubbed again. The itch persisted no matter how many times I scrubbed. I got so frustrated that I used a whole bottle of shampoo in one go, attacking my head with all the vigor I could muster. I dug my fingers into my scalp, hoping to bury the shampoo's chemicals as deep as they could go. My scalp started to sting from the damage done by my fingernails. I felt dirty—not at all deserving of all the pretty things in the world, like Pam's strawberry clip and the pink wallpaper in our former home. As shampoo suds gathered on my shoulders like tiny hills, I began to cry. I cursed the bruha hair that dealt us this terrible lot in life.

Then the bathroom door swung open. "Haru," came Mama's voice. "You're taking too long. What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said as I tried to compose myself.

My mother had her arms over her chest as she leaned against the side of the door. Her unruly hair was silhouetted against the light from the hall outside. It was a good thing my face was wet because I didn't want her to see my tears.

She unfolded her arms. "Okay," she said after a pause. "Stop being



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dramatic. Dry yourself up and go to bed.”

I skipped school the following day upon my mother’s orders. After a silent breakfast, I went through my usual chore of washing the dishes, pausing to scratch my head every now and then. When I returned to our bedroom, I saw Mama sitting at the edge of our bed with a comb in her hand. She held it like it was medical instrument of sorts. Using the comb, she motioned for me to sit on the floor in front of her. I sat where she had directed me to sit—right in between her legs, where she could get a clear view of the top of my head

I felt Mama parting my bruha hair with her hands. Then without warning, the teeth of the comb bit into my scalp and raked through the roots of my hair before getting snagged in one of its innumerable knots. Mama tugged at the comb, causing my head to jerk. It was painful, but I didn’t make a sound. Every time the comb emerged, my mother examined it and flicked the lice that the comb had extracted into an open magazine that lay on the floor next to me. I watched the tiny creatures slide down the glossy pages of the magazine into the crevice of its spine. Then Mama repeated the process. I winced and closed my eyes with every tug. But soon enough, I could feel the knots in my hair coming undone. As I watched the tiny colony of lice grow in the magazine’s spine, I could feel the comb starting to move through my hair with increasing ease. Before long, the ordeal started to feel strangely soothing. We spent most of the morning like that—just me, my mother, and my bruha hair. I wanted to lean my head against Mama’s leg, but I didn’t.

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Friday was the night of the big concert. It would start at 7:30 p.m. with a few words from Senior Pastor Freddie. At 8:00 p.m., the concert would open with a few local bands, and at exactly 9:00 p.m., Joshua’s Creed would take the stage.

We had dinner that night as we usually did. Tita Yvonne was out on a date, so it was just Tita Carmi, Mama, and myself in the house. As I washed the dishes in the kitchen sink, Tita Carmi walked up to me and whispered with her big mouth, “Get ready, Haru. Your Mama has something planned.”

Mama still wasn’t talking much, so I didn’t know what Tita Carmi meant.



About an hour later, my mother emerged from our bedroom and called my name. She was dressed in a glittery red dress that was cut so dangerously low around her chest and so dangerously high above her knees. The dress hugged her body, which in turn bulged in all the most unflattering places. The hem of the dress had tassels, which shimmered whenever she moved. She was also taller thanks to a pair of sky-high stilettos. I had never seen my mother dress like that before. It caused me to gasp for air. Then she picked me up by the wrist and led me outside the house. My mother hailed a taxi on the street. We were going to church. I was still in my pajamas.

As we approached the church, I could see the spotlights swirling by the entrance. My mother's sign was standing tall and proud against the sky. We got off the taxi and marched straight through the automatic glass doors. One of the security guards saw us as we entered the lobby. "Miss Vilma," he said. It seemed like he wanted to say something else, but my mother waved a hand in his face and smiled. "Hello, Mang Eric," she said. "Great concert, right?" And we marched on.

When we got to the auditorium, my mother pushed open the doors. The concert was in full swing—music, flashing lights, smoke machines, and the entire church, jumping in worship and praise. From the ceiling of the auditorium unfurled several banners that read *Glory!* in sparkling letters. It was dark in the auditorium, save for the stage that turned green, then blue, then orange, then red. Joshua's Creed was on stage, and Joshua was front and center, dressed in his signature leather jacket. At his feet, the mosh pit was packed. My mother pointed to it, and I knew that was where we were headed.

We squeezed our way through the auditorium until we reached the foot of the stage. There was a cordon around the mosh pit with a sign that said VIP. My mother undid one of the velvet ropes and pulled me in with her. Everybody was jumping and dancing. I felt like a tiny cell swimming in a sea of other cells that formed part a larger organism that compelled me to move against my will. I tried to stay as close to Mama as possible for fear of getting crushed in the crowd. She pushed and shoved her way until we were somewhere in the middle. We were so close to the stage, and so close to Joshua. He looked beautiful in the flashing lights—Joshua with his guitar, his leather jacket, and his dreamy face that I couldn't help but be drawn to, closer and closer—until I was abruptly distracted by something my mother was doing.

Beside me, I saw Mama reach behind her head and undo her braid of



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bruha hair. Like a lion, she shook her beastly mane free. Then with the next crash of drums, she kicked off her stilettos and began to dance. I had never seen Mama dance before. It was a shimmying, floppy-looking dance. I think she was trying to look sexy. I looked on in horror.

Then the first guitar riffs of “My Deeply Broken Soul” sent electric shockwaves through the crowd. People started to scream. I could feel the crowd’s energy growing. Everybody was jumping, and I felt obliged to do the same. But Mama was moving to her own beat. She moved in circles, flailing her arms about as she glittered like a red disco ball. Then she started to shake and gyrate and push up against random people. The startled crowd stood aside to give her room to wiggle all she wanted. They inched away from her, just as my classmates at Bible study had inched away from me. With more space to work with, my mother danced even harder. She whipped her hair in all directions—up, down, left, and right—whipping it straight into the offended faces of all those around her.

I felt ashamed for Mama. She was making a fool of herself as she shimmied all over the place. I noticed Pastor John standing at the edge of the circle with a drink in his hand. I couldn’t quite make out the look on his face as he watched my mother jiggle about in a dress that was barely keeping everything together.

Above the noise, I heard a cry coming from somewhere behind me. There were hoots and jeers—or were they cheers? I heard someone call my mother’s name. “Vilma!” that person cried. It was echoed by another person, and another. Soon, people were chanting my mother’s name. The crowd was cheering her on as she danced all over the place. Upon hearing her name, Mama danced even more. She danced up a red, sparkly storm until she had the entire crowd dancing her sexy dance along with her. They cheered even louder. “Vilma! Vilma! Vilma!” they cried. It was thunderous. Everybody was calling her name. Even Joshua seemed to skip a beat when he noticed the spectacle at the foot of the stage. For that moment, all eyes were on my mother—Joshua, the pastors, myself, and the entire church.

Much as I wanted to save Mama from further embarrassment, something prevented me from running to her side and knocking some sense into her. It was like there was an invisible circle around my mother, a sacred space that nobody could trespass. I didn’t dare approach. I just stood there and took in the sight of it all—my mother, a plumpish, middle-aged woman, dancing large and galactic in her circle of power,





like an angry star about to explode with joy.

It didn't take too long for one of the security guards to place a hand on Mama's shoulder and take her aside. There was a brisk discussion that I couldn't hear. Everything happened so fast. Before I knew it, my mother and I were being escorted out of the concert by the church's security. She didn't even have time to collect her shoes.

About a week later, the Christian Church of Glory circulated a notice with my mother's face on it. The notice declared that she was no longer connected to the church in any way. A photocopy of the notice was tacked onto a post in the church's parking lot. Mama took it down only to tape it on our bedroom door like a wanted poster. She said it would make for a good souvenir.

So my mother got fired from her job. This was following an outbreak of lice that fell upon the church like biblical plague, leaving all the wealthy churchgoers scratching their heads in a furious attempt to banish such a shamefully plebian condition.

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We could never keep a straight face whenever we talked about that infamous night. While we found it funny, Mama's unemployment put us in a limbo of uncertainty. This was marked by skipped meals and an ever-increasing list of debts. It took a couple of months for my mother to find a new job. Again, she worked as a secretary. It would be the first in a quick succession of different secretarial jobs. I didn't know the names of any of Mama's bosses because she never told me. I also never asked.

One Friday afternoon, my mother came home with a large brown envelope full of papers. She laid the envelope down on the dining table with a kind of gentleness I had never seen before. I was seated in my usual place at the table, busy doing my homework. Mama slumped in the chair beside me and heaved a long, exhausted sigh. She sidled up next to me and, for a minute or two, rested her head on my shoulder. I didn't know what was going on. In a tiny voice, my mother whispered, "I'm no longer going to be a secretary." Then her arm reached across me in an embrace I didn't know I was waiting for all this time.

I have a lot of things to say about my mother. One of them is that she has never bothered me about my social life since we were dishonorably discharged from the Christian Church of Glory. But looking back on my





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free Bible study classes, I must say that there is some truth in the lesson my mother was trying to teach me. Indeed, it is difficult to make it in this world without surrounding oneself with rich connections. Difficult, but not impossible.

On my desk is a framed picture of three women. I am one of those women, and the other two are Mama and Lola. The picture was taken during my graduation a few years back. That day, I decided to wear my hair big and unruly. The picture sits next to a stack of blueprints, bearing my annotations on the size of a window and the slope of the roof. The plans are for a client's house, soon to be built in one of those fancy new villages. The plans for our house sit somewhere in the bottom drawer of my desk. Although still a long time coming, there will be a special place in our house, like a wall perhaps, or even just the inside of a cabinet, where a small patch of pink wallpaper will always remind us of spring.